WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS — "A MIRROR OF MODERNITY"

A STUDY OF PATERSON

AND THE COLLECTED EARLIER POEMS

OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

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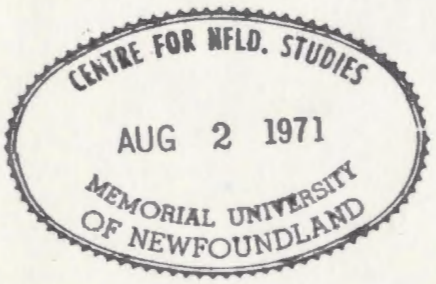
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by

CLYDE ROSE

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This thesis has been examined and approved by:

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an attempt to write a study of some of the poetry of William Carlos Williams.

Williams's career as a poet has been eclipsed by the brilliant careers of two of his contemporaries, Eliot and Pound. The latter was a life-long friend whose poetic talents Williams admired. It is apparent from the increasing number of scholarly works on Williams in the past decade that he is being recognized as a major figure in contemporary literature.

His career was a dual one; he was both a very active physician in Rutherford, N.J. and a prolific, versatile writer. His books, of which there are forty-nine, include poetry, novels, plays and literary criticism. Paterson, his long epic poem, is his most impressive work. As demonstrated in the latter half of this thesis, it and some of the books which make up The Collected Earlier Poems were undertakings of no ordinary rank in twentieth century literature.

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PREFACE

In the best long American poems - Leaves of Grass, The Cantos, The Waste Land, Four Quartets,[1] and The Bridge - the subjects have not been individual characters of Shakespearean stature involved in great moral struggles. Instead, these poems have had many characters, many people, who have metamorphosed into voices that tell us of the agonies of mankind. Writing with brilliance, sympathy, and experience, Whitman, Pound, Eliot and Crane have shown us in their poetry a brutal world of inequality, suffering, disorganization and impending tragedy. Williams has shared their concern for mankind and written with comparable brilliance and sensitivity.

Williams's writings focus on America, continuing a tradition begun by Whitman who influenced Williams's early poetic career. Everything that is America - its myth, size, language; its evil and its good - becomes the material for Williams's poetry. In the streets and saloons of America he saw the pathetic and tragic conditions of his countrymen. In writing of the pathos and tragedy in his own locality he was acutely aware that the deplorable conditions there

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[1] T.S. Eliot frequently appears in anthologies as an American writer.

reflected the tragic state of the whole of mankind. In Williams's poetry, then, we have "not the tragedy of the outcast but the tragedy of our civilization."[2]

He began his poetic career by imitating the English Romantic poets but soon abandoned these ineffectual imitations for a chance to make a "local assertion."[3] At ease with the modernist painters, and other artists of his time, he acquired from them the belief that the place he knew best should provide the material for his art. So we see him proclaiming early in his career his interest in "poking into negro houses / with their gloom and smell! / in among children / leaping around a dead dog."[4]

In the first part of this study I shall chronologically trace those poems in the Collected Earlier Poems of Williams which show that his poetry mirrored the age in which he lived. In the second, I shall deal with Williams's longest poem Paterson, selecting from it passages which reflect the perverse confusions, separations and the breakdown in communications in this age.

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[2] Robert Lowell, "Paterson," The Nation, CXCVI (June 19, 1948), p. 694.

[3] The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 138.

[4] Williams, Collected Earlier Poems (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1951), p. 118. (Henceforth cited as CEP.)

A new direction is evident in the art of Williams. This new direction can be seen in his choice of subject matter, his frequent use of the vernacular, his innovations with metre, and his inventions of new form for poetry. What I intend to stress, though, is Williams's consistent concern for man in the twentieth century. His art proclaims a new life - a sensible substitute for the despairing and frustrating one which faces modern man. In studying Williams's work I have given only secondary concern to his technical achievements in form, metre and language. I have chiefly attempted to investigate his primary concerns which were the recognition of the state of and a desire to better the lot of his fellow man. Only the poet, Williams believed, can divert the energies of life from destruction to creation. Because the poet has the ability to articulate he can "rescue men by giving them the language through which they can posses the land where life grows and fulfills itself."[5] It is clear from Williams's work that he places considerable emphasis on the role of poetry in redeeming man from the savage conditions of the times. He writes:

> The ocean of savage lusts in which the wounded shark gnashes at his own tail is not our home, it is the seed that floats to shore, one word, one tiny, even microscopic word, is that which can alone save us.[6]

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[5]James Guimond, The Art of William Carlos Williams, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968), p. 3.

[6]John C. Thirlwall, ed. The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams, (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957), p. 292.

CHAPTER I

THE EARLY PERIOD - A RECONCILIATION

> Keats, during the years at medical school, was my God. Endymion really woke me up. I copied Keats' style religiously, starting my magnum opus of these early days on the pattern of Endymion. [1]

Williams's "magnum opus" was a disappointing effort for him; though no copy of the poem remains, Williams has given us a good description of it in his Autobiography. He tells us there that like Endymion it was a narrative in "that vague area of thought that associated itself with a romantic past."[2] It had a medieval setting with the usual castles, kings and princes. Keats's influence could be seen in the prologue, which was, in fact, a Keatsian sonnet. Following the prologue was an "Induction", which recounted in blank verse a tragic story.

Briefly, the story concerned a young prince who was to be married to a chaste and lovely lady of his choice. At the wedding banquet, before the marriage was consummated, a plot to poison the royal family was executed. The motive,

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[1] Autobiography, p. 53.

[2] Ibid., p. 59.

Willaims tells us, was unclear. All died, except the young prince who was miraculously saved by his ancient nurse. In a drugged state, the prince was abducted and taken to a foreign country. There he recovered from the effects of the poisoning and then faced the difficulties of learning a new language. A more severe problem was that he could recall nothing of his past. The rest of the poem relates the wanderings of the prince through the many strange forests of this foreign land in search of his home. The details of these wanderings were inspired by the works of Keats and Spenser. The script of this poem grew voluminous, with all its poetic descriptions of nature, trees and primeval forests. Finally, Williams tired of his "heroics", as he calls the poem, and burnt it.

This detailed account of his first poem is significant because it shows the notable impression that Romantic poets, particularly Keats, made on Williams. This impression is confirmed by evidence scattered throughout Williams's work.

The first critic of Williams's work (the Endymion-like manuscript) gently admonished him for it. Williams took the manuscript to Arlo Bates, a Professor of English at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His purpose was to seek from Bates advice on whether or not he should "quit medicine and write or go on with medicine."[3]

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[3] Ibid., p. 54.

Bates's critical judgement was that Williams had done some "creditable" imitations of Keats and had shown a "sensitive appreciation of John Keats's line and form."[4] His final advice, however, was that Williams should continue his medical studies.

Thematically, this poem anticipates "The Wanderer" which although it is the first poem to appear in The Collected Earlier Poems is not Williams's first published work. In 1909, before "The Wanderer" was completed, Williams published his first book of poems. This book, called Poems, was privately printed in Rutherford by a printer who had little experience of setting up such works. Williams viewed its appearance in a paper-covered pamphlet as "a disastrous first issue".[5] Most of the copies were later burned. It is certain that the young poet was embarrassed by his first, abortive, attempt. The only thing of value in it, he writes in his Autobiography is the "intent".[6]

It was his friend, Ezra Pound, who encouraged Williams to read widely and directed him, particularly, toward the American poets. Whitman, at the time of the publication of the first little volume, was familiar to Williams. In fact, during the Endymion phase of his writing

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[4] Ibid., p. 54.

[5] Ibid., p. 107.

[6] Ibid., p. 107.

career, he reserved Whitman for his private thoughts and received from his readings relief from "turgid obsessions".[7] It is not surprising, then, that there is in this first volume some bad Keats and "bad Whitman too."[8]

Williams is his own best critic of his early work. His style, he is aware, is largely imitative; his forms stereotypes; and his rhymes inaccurate. These first poems are "full of inversions of phrase" but, as he humbly admits, it was "the best that I knew."[9]

Thematically Poems is concerned with "simplicity" and "innocense".[10] Commenting on the work much later in his life, Williams says that the themes were "typical" of his first work; that the "form", rhymed couplets, was learned from Milton; that the poems should be classified as Romantic sonnets with a definite Elizabethan influence; that the poems were "obviously young, obviously bad."[11] John C. Thirlwall's description of Poems as "juvenilia" seems apt.[12]

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[7] Ibid., p. 53.

[8] Ibid., p. 107.

[9] Ibid., p. 107.

[10] William Carlos Williams, I Wanted to Write a Poem, ed. Edith Heal (London, 1967), p. 8. "Innocense" (Sic).

[11] Ibid., p. 18.

[12] John C. Thirlwall, "William Carlos Williams's Paterson", New Directions 17 (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 252.

Williams's "Wanderer" shows an over-all coherence that indicates the young poet's developing talent. The poem embodies ideas and feelings about ordinary life presented through fantastic situations. Primarily, the poet's theme is humanity and the poem is concerned with revealing the truth about us.

Specifically, "The Wanderer" is a fantastic poem describing the novitiate of Williams's poetic spirit. It is an overelaborate treatment of the poet's search for a way to be "a mirror to this modernity." Central to this baroque work are the figures of the grandmother, the river and the child, who is the poet's persona. Guided by the grandmother, the child wanders for nine days and eight sleepless nights. Both child and grandmother are invisible. At the end of their wanderings, in a florid ceremony on the banks of the Passaic river, grandmother, child and river are united. Nature and humanity are harmoniously brought together through the power of imaginative poetry.

Williams's theme is that man must be made to see, through the example of the natural beauty around him, the beauty that is within himself. But there is an important addition to this theme: man must be prepared to accept that all is not new, not beautiful, but that all can become so. As "The Wanderer" illustrates, "All so old, so familiar - so new now / To my marvelling eyes...." Through the power of his imagination the poet transforms those things which

are not normally pleasing to his senses. An example of the imagination's power to transform the ugly to the beautiful is seen at the close of the poem. There, Williams describes the river bank, with its "deep foliage", "thickest beeches", "tallest oaks and yellow birches", "birds paradise", and the "most secluded spaces / for miles around, hallowed by a stench / To be our joint solitude and temple;". Williams's diction here, as elsewhere, is important. "Hallowed" makes that which is offensive seem holy. Similarly, in an earlier part of the poem, he speaks of the people whom he had observed in a hunger strike as having "faces all knotted up like burls on oaks". Literally, the faces are anguished and show despair but the inner strength of the characters is suggested by the comparison to "oaks".

For an early poem it shows a remarkable integration of diverse materials. Despite its division into seven sections, each corresponding to a different thought unit, the poem conveys a sense of cohesiveness. The consistent pattern of images largely contributes to this unity. Most of these images, in the first part of the poem at least, are related to flight. The poet's grandmother, for instance, is seen as a "young crow" flying above the tree tops with her mind "reaching out to the horizon." The child emulating her example, follows. Williams's imagery gives us a sense of increasing height as the two proceed on their wanderings:

And as the woods fell from her flying
Likewise they fell from me as I followed
So that I strongly guessed all that I must put from me
To come through ready for the high courses.

Mobile imagery enhances the sense of movement in the next stanza which begins with "But one day, crossing the ferry / With the great towers of Manhattan before me." While at the prow wearying many questions he suddenly observes a swimming figure beckoning to him "from the white wet in the midst of her playing!" Then, just as suddenly, the figure vanishes:

And with that a great sea-gull
Went to the left, vanishing with a wild cry -
But in my mind all the persons of godhead
followed after.

Throughout this section Williams has made wide use of participles - "reaching", "straining", "flying", "crossing", "blowing", "playing", "vanishing" - all of which contribute to a sense of movement, appropriate, of course, to the poem's thematic material.

In the second part the mind of the poet is seen, imaginatively, flying off seeking her "in whom age in age is united." Again as in the previous section the image of the poet as a bird in flight is continued. This time, however, it is "As gulls we flew and with soft cries." The metamorphosis also applies to the grandmother figure, who though "mighty" and possessed with the power to recreate the whole world condescends to take on human form before the poet's eyes. Momentarily she is

That high wanderer of by-ways
Walking imperious in beggary!
At her throat is loose gold, a single chain
From among many, on her bent fingers
Are rings from which the stones are fallen,
Her wrists wear a diminished state, her ankles are bare!

As the poetic spirit in flight swerves downward to seek the image, he is struck in mid air by "the edge of a great wing." Stunned by the impact he sees as through misty eyes an image of depraved humanity, and then, among them, he really sees for the first time her, whom he is seeking. In contrast to the imperious figure of the previous image she is now,

Ominous, old, painted -
With bright lips, and lewd Jew's eyes
Her might strapped in by a corset
To give her age youth, perfect covered
In her will to be young she had
The godhead to go beside me.

From this omniscient, divine being, who appears as a "horrible old woman" the young poet beseeches the power to serve; so that "these toilers after peace and after pleasure / May turn to you, worshippers at all hours!" Because she knows "all fires out of the bodies / of all men that walk with lust at heart", she attracts many men, particularly, the youth, to her. But she aspires for transcendence and wishes to be lifted "Up from before the death living around me -".

His novitiate not yet complete, we find the young poet in the next section, wandering the streets of the city, Paterson. He is directed by the fierce old grandmother

whose "old eyes glittered fiercely" and who "hovers in rags." These images are consistent with those in the previous section. Out in the streets of Paterson, the young, sensitive wanderer is moved by the brutality and depravity of the people. In his descriptions of the people, Williams makes effective use of direct, precise language giving us one of the few glimpses of reality in the poem:

> The flat skulls with the unkempt black
> or blond hair,
> The ugly legs of the young girls, pistons
> Too powerful for delicacy!
> 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!

An image, such as "pistons / too powerful for delicacy!" suggests that the young poet had closely studied his fellow man. The image also illustrates a view of Williams's that was to characterize much of his work: that the imagination can elevate the ugly and mundane. Williams's comparison of "ugly legs" with powerful "pistons" clearly does this. To show the helplessness of the sensitive poet among the virulent crowd, Williams gives us this image:

> Ugly, venomous, gigantic!
> Tossing me as a great father his helpless
> Infant till it shriek with ecstasy
> And its eyes roll and its tongue hangs out!

Important to an understanding of these lines is the meaning of the word "ecstasy." So far the poem has been concerned with the poet's wandering in search for inspiration. Among the moiling masses of the city he is transported to a

rapturous state, in which, mystically, at least, his rapture should be accompanied by inspiration. The poetic inspiration is revealed in the next section of the poem where the young poet shouts enthusiastically:

> Waken! My people, to the boughs green
> With ripening fruit within you!
> Waken to the myriad cinquefoil
> In the waving grass of your minds!
> Waken to the silent phoebe nest
> Under the eaves of your spirit.

"the myriad cinquefoil / in the waving grass of your minds" is an elaborate image used to show the potential beauty which plentifully abounds in the garden of man's mind.

Williams's baroque style culminates in the next section, in which the grandmother asks the young child to "Behold yourself old." Old age is described in a series of elaborate images which has the effect of creating a polyphonic pattern of sounds and independent melodies. The whole is further enriched by blazing visual images accompanied by alliterative effects which create a sense of swift movement: "Leap then from forest into foam! / Lash about from low into high flames." The contrapuntal pattern seen in the leaping and lashing movement is also evident in the auditory images which describe the wind that "Stills birds / Shakes the leaves in booming polyphony." All the various sounds, "the knocking of boughs", "the din and bellow of the male wind", "the female chorus", are united in a beautiful arrangement of musical counterpointing.

The novitiate finally ends on the ninth day by the Passaic River. There is a great sense of empathy between the river and the young man as the old, worn spirit of the grandmother surrenders the youth to it.

> And the river had found its level
> And its last motion had ceased
> And I knew all - it became me.

The river lives on in luxuriance now that the son has been given to it. One detects some Biblical undertones in Williams's closing lines, though whether they are intentional or not it is difficult to say:

> Live, river, live in luxuriance
> Remembering this our son,
> In remembrance of me and my sorrow
> And of the new wandering.

"The Wanderer" depends for its success on an imaginative treatment of language and the creation of a great variety of sounds and movement. It is a unified work.

CHAPTER II

THE TEMPERS

This book, which contains nineteen poems, was published in 1913 as a result of arrangements made by Ezra Pound. Pound was the most eminent poetic figure in a loosely associated group called the Imagists. His "three principles"[1] determined more than anything else the direction of the Imagist movement. Basically, these principles demanded that the poet remain aloof from the poem; that there be no attempt to be "poetic" and that in his choice of a natural object the poet be aware of the need to present the thing for what it is and not have it symbolic of something else. Williams was undoubtedly influenced by the Imagists, as his frequent use of free verse shows. There is, too, an economy of language in much of the work of this period. The most significant feature of his work is seen in his departure from standard rhyme and capital letters. For though he was influenced by Pound and other Imagists, he did, nevertheless, create a poetic style that was unique.

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[1] Ezra Pound, Literary Essays, ed. T.S. Eliot (Norfolk, Conn., 1954), p. 4.

In this chapter I shall examine a number of poems from this period which illustrate his unique style and language.

"Peace on Earth", the first poem in The Tempers, is concerned with a fantastic situation: While the gods are hunting in the heavens man enjoys a false sense of peace on the earth. The principal images in the poem relate to hunting. A number of allusions are made to mythological figures: Orion, (with his "arrow" and his "glistening sword"), and the Pleiades, ("The Sisters" who "lie with their arms intertwining").

Repetition is effectively employed in this short poem. The refrain, "Sleep safe till tomorrow", occurring as it does at the end of each of the three stanzas, gives the poem an overall mood of tranquility - on earth. The repeated use of "Sleep!" in two of the stanzas enhances this mood, while the soft alliterative sounds of the sibilant and the long vowel sounds in "Sleep safe till tomorrow" help lull the reader into lethargic tranquility. In contrast to the tranquility on earth, there is in heaven a mood of ominous expectancy. Williams's diction conveys this feeling of urgency through such words and phrases as "Wake!", "The Eagle is screaming", and "The Serpent writhes."

Imagery, diction, contrast and alliteration are fused to create an atmosphere of temporal peace on earth while the mythological gods hunt in the heavens.

A similar preoccupation with mythological figures can be seen in Williams's "Postlude". This poem effectively captures the mood which follows ardent desire. The title suggests an atmosphere of calm supplemented by music. Images such as "Temples soothed" and "O, prayers in the dark!" recall the title. His allusions to mythological figures and places are used mainly for comparison. The quiet, peaceful mood of the lovers, for example, is likened to the "Calm at Atlantis." Altogether this poem with its references to remote figures and places and its theme of love suggests that Williams's art belonged in the Romantic tradition.

The poem "Homage" clearly shows that Williams had not begun yet his concentration on the American idiom. The language of this poem, particularly the verbs, ("goeth", "maketh", "melteth" and "leadeth"), is literary and old-fashioned. His images are clear and precise, as in "Elvira, by love's grace / There goeth before you / A clear radiance." The light from vain souls compared to her radiance is as "Candles when noon is." The directness of his diction and imagery evokes a sense of grace and dignity.

Many of these early poems are strong expressions of the poet's personal emotions and sentiments. Their songlike qualities are implied in titles such as "The Fool's Song", "From 'The Birth of Venus', Song", "An After Song", and the "Sicilian Emigrant's Song". In form these early lyrics are characterized by stanzaic divisions, a regard for conventional punctuation (though Williams tends to overuse the exclamation mark), and the employment of traditional English meter. Frequently, his poems are addressed to abstractions as in "Immortal"; "And thy Name, lovely One, is Ignorance" or as in "Crude Lament" in which his address is made to "O Mother of flames, / You who have kept the fire burning!"

As we have seen there are frequent allusions in these lyrics to classical mythology, which is for Williams, as it is and has been for many other poets, an invaluable source of abundant imagery. Williams, however, is aware of the strangeness of the link between the ancient and the modern world. In "An After Song" he gives us the romantic image of Apollo clad in "purple garments", held by the "yellow-haired Clymene" breaking in on the poet's peace and quiet. The splendor of this imaginative scene causes Williams to wonder: "This is strange to me, here in the modern twilight." Our modern age is contrasted with the age that Apollo in his splendour represents. It is a contrast in which the poet has skillfully shown light, usually a symbol of

knowledge, against dark, a term frequently used to represent ignorance.

A contemporary theme, the concern for middle-class affluence and waste, is seen in Williams's poem, "Hic Jacet". The chief feature of this poem is its irony. In stanza one Williams describes the "coroner's merry little children" who laugh despite the fact that the mother is in no wise "jocular" nor the father "gay". A sense of wonderment is created in the final line, ("Laugh so easily"), which leads us on to the second and final stanza. Here the tone changes. We learn that they laugh because they "prosper". Affluence surrounds them: "Fruit for them is upon all branches". Williams's ironic tone intensifies in "Lo! how they jibe at loss, for / Kind heaven fills their little paunches." The innocents of stanza one are metamorphosed into little beasts. Williams clinches his ironic tone with the repetition of "It's the coroner's merry, merry children / Who laugh so easily." The poem makes clear Williams's feelings of disgust for moddle class affluence and extravagance, particularly when exhibited by children.

The poem's overall unity is seen in the way the title is linked to the content. "Hic Jacet" literally translated means "here lies", which are the words that commonly introduce tombstone epitaphs. The coroner's duty is to investigate the cause of deaths not clearly due to

natural causes. Williams's irony is made all the more effective by the realization that those who appear to be so prosperous that they can jibe at the losses of others are in reality not "merry" at all.

"The Revelation" is a compact poem neatly organized into three stanzas, each expressing a different phase of the poet's total experience. Primarily, the poem expresses the idea that dreams make revelations which affect real-life situations. Stanza one conveys, then, a mood of strangeness in which the poet, half awake, tries to reach "across a gap" to a girl who was "reaching out to me -". Awake, he remembers that the girl is one "Whom I knew well" who leaned on the door of his car and stroked his hand.

Stanza three anticipates how the dream will affect their future relationship:

> I shall pass her on the street
> We shall say trivial things
> To each other
> But I shall never cease
> To search her eyes
> For that quiet look -

Appropriately the poem ends with a grammatical dash which suggests that an action or a thought has not been completed. One is left to wonder whether the poet is not withholding some of the truth from us which the dream revealed or whether he himself knows what the "quiet look" conceals. Though the title suggests the former, Williams hesitates to make his meaning fully explicit.

Noticeable in Williams's work of this period are his innovations in prosody. He was undoubtedly influenced by the free verse principle of the Imagists, which directed poets away from the counting of syllables to a search for a musical line. Williams, however, says that Yeats was responsible for some of the innovations in recent verse. He writes:

> Surely if Yeats teaches anything that can be learnt - that is, anything that it would not be copying to take to one's self - he teaches what can be done with the three syllable foot by dropping the last syllable in the foot every time but once or twice in the entire poem. [2]

His attempts at innovation stemmed from his belief that the traditionsl poetic line had grown stodgy and thus a new measure had to be found. His unique discovery was the "variable foot" which will be alluded to subsequently.

His experimentation is evident in the poem, "Peace on Earth". Here he has compensated with long vowels for dropped syllables:

> The Bears are abroad!
> The Eagle is screaming!
> Gold against blue
> Their eyes are gleaming.

It is apparent that the first and the third lines are shorter by one syllable than the second and fourth. The balance is maintained in the shorter lines by the long

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[2] William Carlos Williams, The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams, ed. John C. Thirlwall (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957), p. 24.

vowel sounds. In other respects the poem is traditional: Williams has used rhyme; his rhythmic units are divided on the basis of sentences and he has made use of such diacritical marks as capital letters, periods and exclamation marks. Early in his career he abandoned many of these traditional practices:

> With Whitman, I decided rhyme belonged to another age; it didn't matter; it was not important at all. You can see the exact spot in the early poems where I quit rhyme. I began to begin lines with lower-case letters. I thought it pretentious to begin every line with a capital letter. These two decisions, not to rhyme and to begin lines with lower-case letters, were made very early. The decision lasted all the rest of my life. [3]

Williams was disturbed by the early poems. He felt they were "too conventional, too academic".[4] His greatest problem, as he saw it, was "dividing a poem into what his lyrical sense wanted".[5] Very early in his career he recognized the value (that is, both the absolute and the relative values) of American English and how it could help solve his problem in shaping the pattern of his poetry.

Remarkably absent from The Tempers is the use of elegant language. Williams was reluctant to use elegant language in his poetry because he felt that elegance was not

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[3] I Wanted to Write, p. 26.

[4] Ibid., p. 26.

[5] Ibid., p. 27.

a part of the culture which he reflected. In the poetry of Eliot and Pound the language is often erudite and frequently elegant and exotic. Williams's language has a character of commonness about it. His is a Wordsworthian attempt to employ in his poetry a language that would appeal to the common man. Williams knew that elegance in his poetry would have had a limited, aristocratic appeal, whereas the language of America brought it closer to the Whitmanesque democratic ideal. This is not to say that Williams has achieved any more popularity than Pound or Eliot. It is doubtful whether he is read more widely than they. However, he is more realistic and perhaps more truthful.

Williams wished to make it easy for those for whom he spoke to identify with his poems. Though the poem might appear conversational and spontaneous it should have, Williams thought, a form and structure which would make it memorable and significant. His poems become organized projections of his world. In effective verbal designs they project a portion of the stimuli of his environment. His contacts with the people of his locale were many and intimate. No doubt total involvement in his environment demanded of him a high price in emotional suffering. His suffering was alleviated by his creative drives. He wrote, feeling that his work was the true expression of his experiences. The only bitterness he experienced was

directed against the academicians, especially Eliot, whose pious formality and imitations of the traditional kept them from the real thing. Williams wrote about the things of the world - dirty rivers, garbage cans, red wheelbarrows glazed with rain, cold plums stolen from iceboxes, Queen Ann's lace, leaf buds bursting over muddy roads, and splotched bodies with babies in them - in a quiet, undisturbed way, which many other poets might envy.

CHAPTER III

AL QUE QUIERE

Williams's work, during the twenty years after the publication of The Tempers, is associated with general Imagist principles. In 1917 he published Al Que Quiere A Book of Poems in which we find the beginnings of his metric experiments. These poems focus upon the things before us, the acceptance of these things, and the joy which follows this acceptance. Many of the poems are in the form of addresses in which the poet contrasts the prominent with the obscure. On the whole attention is drawn to those things which the poet thinks are less obvious but which have as much or more value than the traditionally prominent. Pursuing the trend evident in the previous poems, Williams continues to concentrate on diction, avoiding extensive use of figurative language, and attempting instead to capture colloquial speech rhythms in his verse.

Of interest is Williams's interpretation of the phrase Al Que Quiere, which was taken from the Latin American playwright, Rafael Arevalo Martinez. Williams writes:

> My translation of the phrase Al Que Quiere! is, 'To Him Who Wants It!', and I have always associated it with a figure on a soccer field: to him who wants the ball to be passed to him.... I was convinced nobody in the world of poetry wanted me but I was there willing to pass the ball if anyone did want it. [1]

The opening poem, "Sub Terra", sets the mood for the whole book. Imaginatively the poem's setting is "under the soil." It is spring and the earth is "giving birth to a new crop of poets." Williams's poets are seen as "grotesque fellows," who, the poet insists, must have "earthy tastes" so that they will follow when they are asked to come with him (Williams), "poking into negro houses / with their gloom and smell!" The poet is disappointed that his "band" does not materialize for "the simple truth is / that though I see you clear enough / you are not there!" Williams may have been disappointed by the few of his fellow poets who followed him in his quest but he was not deterred.

Williams's courageous effort paid off as the quality of his work illustrates. More than any other American poet he was able to show that the rhythms of speech and colloquial idioms belong to poetry. Williams's poetry, with its roots in the language as it is used, broadened the extent of poetic resources. He replaced traditional rhythms with the rhythms of colloquial speech.

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[1] I Wanted to Write, p. 30.

Robert Creeley makes the point that Williams's poetry is concerned with the facts of experience, that is, the reality of today not the plans of tomorrow. He writes:

> What we have been told too often to care for in our lives are the plans, tomorrow's solutions, what we can look forward to; no one speaks of what is here to be seen, right now. But that is what there is, to speak of. Against the confusions which come of a blindness to that fact, Dr. Williams puts the things he sees, feels, knows, in the life given him. He has said for a long time that he means that no man or woman can hope to avoid what they literally are, or, equally, the reality of which they are a part. We live just as and where we are. [2]

Creeley's is one of the more satisfying explanations of Williams's oft quoted statement, "No ideas but in things." More significant though is the fact that Creeley has recognized in Williams's work the breadth of the poetic experience. In making the reality of life ("What there is") the subject matter of his poetry, he has brought poetry to an area not extensively explored. Poetry, then, functions for Williams as the preserver of life's experiences. This view is illustrated by the following poem:

> The rose fades
> and is renewed again
> by its seed, naturally
> but where
> save in the poem
> shall it go
> to suffer no diminution
> of its splendor.

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[2] "The Fact of His Life", The Nation, CXCU (October 13, 1962), p. 224.

Williams was "determined to make his poetic world a replica of the actual because the poem must be useful."[3] His concern with the actual world is clearly seen in "Pastoral", which shows us Williams as the poet of the street, "admiring the houses / of the very poor". In his observations of the slums of America represented by specific things such as, "yards cluttered", "old chicken wire, ashes", he introduces a note of sadness, sadness that "no one / will believe this / of vast import to the nation."

Many of the other poems in Al Que Quiere show his widening interest in his locality. The poem, "Sympathetic Portrait of a Child", is a sensitive psychological study as well as a social indictment. The child is "the murderer's little daughter" and the language of the poem effectively portrays her tragic situation. Such powerful phrases as "She crushes her straw hat / about her eyes," "As best she can / she hides herself" and "her cordy legs" which beneath the "flowered dress look bare" intensify the pathetic situation of the youngster. In the closing lines the poet involves himself as he asks "Why has she chosen me / for the knife / that darts along her smile?" The total effect of the poem is to impress on the reader a sense of responsibility in the guilt created by the child's

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[3] Alan Ostrom, The Poetic World of William Carlos Williams, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966), p. 22.

tragedy. Similarly in the poem "The Old Men" the guilty conscience of society is evoked. In this poem Williams sympathizes with the old men, who like the spiritually impotent of Eliot's "Gerontion" are "cut from touch / by the perfumed music - ". As a detached spectator he feels shame that the old men have been cut off by society. In an effort to compensate them he proposes the toast "Old men / the peaceful beer of impotence / be yours!" These and many other poems in Al Que Quiere reveal the pathos of people caught in tragic situations.

Frequently, Williams made use of the soliloquy in his writing. Other devices were intimate speeches, public addresses and portraits. Often in his portraits he depicted moods of depression, pain and bitterness. He developed the mood of bitterness in the poem "Portrait of a Woman in Bed." Here, Williams has made use of laconic American speech, which forces us to listen to the woman's shocking statements. A witness to her despair, the poet is compelled to hear her out. Though he is silent throughout the whole harangue, "The country physician / is a damned fool / and you / can go to hell!", one senses his compassion for this dejected human being. Her remarks, "I won't work / And I've got no cash. / What are you going to do / about it?", epitomize the caustic attitudes of the underprivileged and unfortunate in American society. Sick

and tired of the outside world the woman shuts the door on it and resigns herself to her fate. Appropriately the closing lines of the poem depict her feelings: "You could have closed the door / when you came in; / do it when you go out. / I'm tired."

His concern for the people of America and his desire to direct their attention to the things of value around them can be clearly seen in the poem, "Tract". Like many other poems in Al Que Quiere, "Tract" is written in the form of an address. The poet is the speaker. He castigates the "townspeople" on the unnecessary extravagance of a bourgeois funeral. He advises them to use something plain, simple and economical. Instead of an expensive hearse, they might use "a farm wagon" which is well "weathered". He derides the elaborate accessories of the bourgeoisie - "upholstery", "glass", "black" mourning clothes, and "silk hats" - in sharp colloquial terms, such as "phew!" "Knock the glass out", "for Christ's sake", and "for heaven's sake". His most derisive terms are for the pretentious figure of the silk-hatted driver, the "undertaker's understrapper" whom Williams dismisses with "damn him!"

His poem "Gulls" is like "Tract" in that it begins with an address to the "townspeople". It is a didactic poem in which the poet attempts to teach his people to

observe a harmony in Nature which is more impressive than the one they strive for through their traditional Churches. Williams uses birds - three gulls and an eagle - as symbols of natural harmony. A striking contrast is evoked between the eagle "circling against the clouds" and one of their "principal churches". This contrast is further amplified by the setting, Easter, and the literal image of the three gulls, which he saw on that beautiful Easter day "flying slowly seaward", while the eagle circled above. Their movement is free, harmonious and symbolic of "true music", while man's hymns, though laudable because they invoke "some great protector", are discordant. Men, unlike the inhabitants of the natural world, are too eager "to leap at each other." Williams's didacticism is directed toward making his people aware that "it is not necessary" that they act as they do. The gulls after all move seaward "very quietly".

"Hero" is a poem addressed to the "fool" who seeks his adventures in "female flesh" and not in those things which "break ships -". The tone is one of moral condemnation as seen in the emphatic opening line "Fool,". Williams urges man to let his mind reach out beyond the physical for his adventures. His imagery captures the atmosphere of intellectual enlightenment:

Let there pass
over the mind
the waters of
four oceans, the airs
of four skies!

The rewards of such flights into metaphysical realms are seen in physical terms, (he will "return hollow-bellied / keen-eyed, hard!"), thus recalling, by contrast, the images in stanza one. The ultimate reward for the intellectual adventurer is expressed in the final stanza:

Little girls will come
bringing you
roses for your button-hole.

This final delicate touch amplifies and gives sense to the title. An overall unity in the poem is achieved through the consistent pattern of images, which are interrelated to suggest a likeness between physical and metaphysical adventuring.

Many of Williams's poems in this period were characterized by precise images related to a domestic atmosphere. In "Love Song", for example, he refers to the elm tree "scattering / its little loaves / of sweet smells". Such an image has the effect of linking the fresh, familiar odours emanating from the kitchen to the fragrant emanations of Nature.

Williams's "The Young Housewife" subtly captures the feeling of sexual frustration. The housewife feels trapped in her suburban house. By constantly referring to

her as a "housewife" Williams creates that feeling. Through the use of the word "house" rather than home and by his reference to it as being not her house but "her husband's", Williams conveys the impression that she is deprived of much needed affection. The poet thus visualizes her moving about in "her negligee behind / the wooden walls of her husband's house." In stanza two she is seen calling, innocently enough, to "the ice-man, the fish-man", standing "shy, uncorseted, tucking in / stray ends of hair," reminding the poet of a "fallen leaf". The poet feels empathy for her and as he passes by he greets her with a bow and a smile.

Written in free verse this short lyric makes use of run-on lines. The language is simple and direct, uncluttered by excessive metaphor. One precise image predominates: the image of the "fallen leaf".

It is clear that Williams felt his task of uplifting and directing the common people of America a rather lonely one. In the brief poem "El Hombre" we have a self-portrait of an artist aware of the immensity of his task and the accompanying loneliness:

> It's a strange courage
> You give me ancient star:
> Shine alone in the sunrise
> toward which you lend no part.

One might interpret the poem like this: The star, suffused

by the sunlight, stands alone and shines even in the face of inevitable extinction. From the action the poet derives a "strange courage". The central visual image shows the strong light of the sun coming closer whereas the cold light of the star survives. Essentially there is a contrast here between the bright hot sun and the cold light of the star. The imperative statement, "shine alone" may be regarded as a memo not only to the poet but to anyone who reads it. The poem also illustrates Williams's auditory sensibility in employing the rhythms of common speech.

Another self-portrait is seen in the poem "Danse Russe". In it is revealed the artist in bourgeois domesticity. The mood of the poem is a mixture of humour and sadness. The poem begins with a hypothetical statement: "If when my wife is sleeping / and the baby and Kathleen / are sleeping," and ends with an interrogative statement in which the answer is implied. Structurally the poem is held together by the preposition "if", which repeatedly introduces the hypothetical situations. The self is emphasized by the frequency of the pronouns "I" and "my". The domestic atmosphere threatens to suppress the "self" while Williams tends to impress upon us the importance of expressing it. Thus, the "naked dance" before the mirror becomes a significant Dionysian expression of the release of latent desire. Line four of the poem, "and the sun is

a flame - white disc", suggests with its preciseness of description the influence of the Imagists. Within the poem is the song, "I am lonely, lonely. / I was born to be lonely, / I am best so!", which typifies Williams's lyrical ability and introduces the note of sadness to the work. There is a striking similarity between the visual image in "Danse Russe" of the poetic figure in dance, "waving his shirt around his head" and the old man in "Canthara" who recalled seeing in his youth, "six women dancing / a set dance, stark naked below / the skirts raised around / their breasts." As he told his story to the poet his gestures "swished with ecstasy to / the familiar music of / his old emotion". So, too, in "Danse Russe" is there a release of emotion that has been suppressed for too long. Williams refused to divorce the "serious" from the amusing as is evident in "Canthara" and "Danse Russe" as Ostrom observed:

> He is not stuffy about poetry; it is a part of life in the here and now, not something sacrosanct, possessed of an innate self-seriousness. For him it is too important to be merely serious. Perhaps that is why he refuses to talk about poetry and insists upon talking about poems. [4]

In Al Que Quiere Williams made wide use of the pastoral technique. In fact, three of the short poems in this book were entitled "Pastoral". There is a definite

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[4] Ostrom, Williams, p. 17.

contrast in the technique and the subject matter. While the pastoral connotes elegance and refinement the subject matter of these poems is the vile and dehumanized local environment. The particular effect and probably the most important reason for Williams's use of the pastoral was to transform, through the power of the imagination, the things of which he writes. Ugly vile things are transformed into their opposites. This state of pure beauty is evoked through the subtle elegant design of the poem. What Williams wanted to say, but never did overtly, is that man even in the most depraved condition shows a potentiality for beauty and virtue.

Along with his belief in the potential beauty of man was a driving conviction of the worth of each life which often lay under a guise of bitterness and vituperativeness. In his role as a physician he had come to know intimately many of America's poor, from Negro labourers to Polish immigrants. As we saw in "Portrait of a Woman in Bed", to try to help was to invite trouble, particularly since the physician was often regarded as a "damned fool." Williams was greatly concerned with finding a way to express the callousness and bitterness of these people, whose hardness is captured in this stanza:

> my two boys?
> - they're keen!
> Let the rich lady
> care for them -
> they'll beat the school

or
let them go to the gutter -
that ends trouble.

There seems little doubt that Williams fully comprehended the things and people of which he wrote. Without exception he cherished the uniqueness of each moment and each individual. Mainly this was achieved by his amazing power to project his total personality into the object of his contemplation. Through this empathy we are able to appreciate more fully the deep feelings of the individuals in his poems. Their particular problems become more real and more poignant because of the power of poetic projection.

A good example of the poet's power to project his imagination is seen in the poem, "Ballet". "Ballet" is an ironic treatment of man's use of symbols to perpetuate the memory of his God. Williams focuses upon the most eminent symbol: the "weary, / great gold cross". His repetitious use of the interrogative, "Are you not weary?", conveys the ironic tone. Contrast heightens the irony. While the cross remains rigid and "frozen with / a great lie", the natural things surrounding it are in motion but, at the end of the day they, like the sun, go to their rest. The cross remains "rigid as a knight / on a marble coffin". The allusion to the "knight" conveys the poet's feeling that the cross belongs to a bygone day while the words "frozen" and "rigid" suggest that the symbol is sterile. Williams's

view is that death is a vibrant reunion with nature and not a confinement to a marble coffin:

> Here in the middle
> of the roadway
> we will fling
> ourselves round
> with dust lilies
> till we are bound in
> their twining stems.

His use of the word "fling" is apt in conveying a sense of rhythmical movement which recalls the title, "Ballet", and prepares us for the image of the "twining stems".

In the final stanza Williams gives us a unique view of death. The vibrant conversion to "dust lilies" that takes place sees them "fall exhausted" in the middle of the roadway. There, the "astonished stars" who have pushed "aside their curtains" will look on as

> Wheels and
> the pounding feet
> or horses
> will crush forth
> our laughter.

"Crush" is effectively used as it captures the sounds of the wagon wheels on the roadway whereas "laughter" connotes the joy and vibrancy with which Williams associates death, thus robbing it of its traditional solemnity. It is the difference between a ballet and a funeral march.

Williams offers his art as the redemptive and healing power for those whose sufferings he describes.

Not only does he describe their sufferings, in a sense he takes on himself their burdens and pains and enters imaginatively into their vileness and corruption. It is the poet's hope, though, that those whose evils he has absorbed will be enlightened and brought to a realization of their potential beauty.

CHAPTER IV

SOUR GRAPES

In 1921 Williams published his next book of poems, Sour Grapes. Between the publication of Al Que Quiere and Sour Grapes Williams had published the "unique" Kora in Hell: Improvisations, a book that contains much of his poetic criticism and which he "enjoyed referring to more than any of the others."[1] In the Prologue to Kora Williams expressed his strong reaction to Eliot's "betrayal" of America. Partly from envy of Eliot's success, Williams began to write more vigorously.

> When I was halfway through the Prologue, 'Prufrock' appeared. I had a violent feeling that Eliot had betrayed what I believed in. He was looking backward; I was looking forward. He was a conformist, with wit, learning which I did not possess. He knew French, Latin, Arabic, God knows what. I was interested in that. But I felt he had rejected America and I refused to be rejected and so my reaction was violent. I realized the responsibility I must accept. I knew he would influence all subsequent American poets and take them out of my sphere. I had envisaged a new form of poetic composition, a form for the future. It was a shock to me that he was so tremendously successful; my contemporaries flocked to him -- away from what I wanted. It forced me to be successful.[2]

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[1] I Wanted to Write, p. 38.

[2] William Carlos Williams, Kora in Hell: Improvisations (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1962), p. vii.

In Sour Grapes Williams continued his studies of local culture; studies which were more probing and inclusive than the previous ones in Al Que Quiere. His Prufrocks were the lonely and despairing souls of the American streets. He wrote too of people in pain, as in the poem, "Complaint":

> Here is a great woman
> on her side in the bed.
> She is sick,
> perhaps vomiting,
> perhaps laboring
> to give birth to
> a tenth child.

In most of the poems in Sour Grapes Williams appears as a detached sympathizer. "Complaint" ends, for example, on this compassionate note: "I pick the hair from her eyes / and watch her misery / with compassion." Flowers and trees were common subjects in this book of poems. Such titles as, "The Tulip Bed", "Primrose", "Daisy", "Spring", "Winter Trees", "Blizzard" and "Willow Poem" reflect his interest in the natural world. Wallace Stephens remarked that "no one writes more exquisitely of flowers"[3] than Williams. It is true that Williams's poems in Sour Grapes evoke the beauty of the natural world. In "Daisy", for example, the lines, "The crisp petals remain / brief, translucent, greenfastened, / barely touching at the edges: /

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[3] "Rubbings of Reality", Briarcliff Quarterly, (October 1946), p. 202.

blades of limpid seashell" show the poet's sensitive and delicate touch. Often man and nature are contrasted. In "The Disputants" the contrast reveals the "frail", "loud" and disarrayed nature of man, while nature, represented by the flowers, remains beautiful and "composed."

Several of the poems in Sour Grapes are written on the theme of old age. In Al Que Quiere Williams treated the theme of old age with considerable subjectivity. In Sour Grapes he is more objective and aloof. A poem which illustrates his treatment of this theme is "To Waken an Old Lady." The simple language of this poem is characteristic of his direct style; his oblique attitude toward his subject is also characteristic.

Old age is
a flight of small
cheeping birds
skimming
bare trees
above a snow glaze.
Gaining and failing
they are buffeted
by a dark wind --
But what?
On harsh weedstalks
the flock has rested,
the snow
is covered with broken
seedhusks
and the wind tempered
by a shrill
piping of plenty.

This poem endorses Williams's statement, "I try to say it straight whatever is to be said."[4] No alien or irrelevant images are introduced. There is direct concentration on the "thing" ("a flight of small / cheeping birds"). It is clearly an Imagist poem which attempts to define the abstract - old age. Whitaker was impressed by the 'delicate balance' of the poem and thought that it might be "set beside Keats's 'To Autumn' as a later and more thinly resonant phase of the organic cycle."[5]

Another poem in Sour Grapes which reveals his tendency to close description of the concrete and continues the theme of old age is "The Widow's Lament in Springtime." Again, by tying the poem to or equating it with the familiar, Williams effectively concretizes an abstraction.

Sorrow is my own yard
where the new grass
flames as it has flamed
often before but not
with the cold fire
that closes round me this year.

At the time when this poem was written Williams was struggling for exactness. He also stressed the importance of the image to the poem and, in fact, equated the image with the poem:

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[4] Williams, I Wanted to Write, p. 21.

[5] Vivienne Koch, William Carlos Williams (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1950), p. 57.

> To fit the words so that they went smoothly and still said exactly what I wanted to say. That was what I struggled for. To me, at that time, a poem was an image, the picture was the important thing. [6]

"The Widow's Lament in Springtime" is a poignant poem dedicated to Williams's widowed mother. The poignancy is effected by contrasting her barren nature with the fertility of the natural surroundings. Her lonely and empty life is seen against a background of blossoming flowers and new life in the yard:

> but the grief in my heart
> is stronger than they
> for though they were my joy
> formerly, today I noticed them
> and turned away forgetting.

On the whole the poems in Sour Grapes illustrate Williams's developing skill. Also evident is a mood of restlessness. Routine work and domesticity might have been the sources of that restlessness. "I was very late, very slow," he confesses, "to find out about the world. This book is all about that sort of thing."[7] The book was an attempt to find the truth, "ugly truth as well as beautiful truth."[8]

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[6] Williams, I Wanted to Write, p. 46.

[7] Ibid., p. 45.

[8] Ibid., p. 45.

"Complaint" is a lyric with a narrative strain. Briefly it relates a nightly episode in the life of the country doctor. Through language that is direct and precise Williams captures the atmosphere of the mercy mission. The directness and matter-of-fact attitude is conveyed in the opening line: "They call me and I go." That his midnight journey is a cold one, is suggested by the image of "a dust / of snow caught / in the rigid wheeltracks." His arrival is described in the brief, dramatic statement, "The door opens." Noticeable in this poem, as in many other poems of this period, is Williams's economy of line. Entering the door he smiles. One wonders whether he smiles, not because he wants to - certainly the occasion, the cold night and the long journey, do not demand it - but because it is expected of him. His repeated exclamation, "Joy! Joy!", to the discovery that he has just helped this woman give birth to her "tenth child" suggests a tone of irony. In the image which follows, "Night is a room / darkened for lovers," Williams makes clear that he would prefer to be doing other things. He effects a beautiful contrast in his description of the night that ends for the lovers and the night that ends for the doctor. For the lovers, the sun comes in, they get up and go home. But, for the doctor, the sun reveals him ministering to his patient.

In Sour Grapes Williams has given us a number of poems which, in their forthrightness, simplicity and directness illustrate some of the best features of modern poetry. Many of these poems, though short, show an unusual intimacy with individuals of the workaday world. There is, for example, the brief poem "The Young Laundryman" in which the poet identifies himself with the statuesque and dignified figure of the young Chinaman who washes shirts for those who are much less dignified than he:

> Ladies, I crave your indulgence for
> my friend Wu Kee; young, agile, clear-eyed
> and clean-limbed, his muscles ripple
> under the thin blue shirt; and his naked feet, in
> their straw sandsls, lift at the heels, shift and
> find new postures continually.
>
> Your husbands' shirts to wash, please, for Wu Kee.

In another brief poem, "Thursday", he expresses an insouciant awareness that the individual life cannot, in this time at least, aspire to the proclaimed ideals of the age.

> I have had my dream - like others -
> And it has come to nothing, so that
> I remain now carelessly
> with feet planted on the ground
> and look up at the sky -
> feeling my clothes about me,
> the weight of my body in my shoes,
> the rim of my hat, air passing in and out
> at my nose - and decide to dream no more.

In "Time The Hangman" Williams is concerned with the theme of mutability. A pensive, conversational tone, which pervades the whole poem, is revealed in the opening

line "Poor old Abner, poor old white-haired nigger!" This line also introduces a contrast, which is initially one of colour but as the poem unfolds becomes one between youth and old age. The neck that in youth defied the strength of rope is, in old age, bent and broken by time. Williams's simple, colloquial language and his conversational tone are effective in portraying time as an awesome but brutal figure.

The clear, simple statement, "When I am alone I am happy", is the opening line of Williams's lyric, "Waiting", and this line effectively establishes the mood of the poem. By implication the poet reveals that he is unhappy when he is not alone. His solitary happiness is atmospheric: "the sky is / flecked and splashed and wound / with color." Stanza one is devoted to a full description of this atmosphere. In the second stanza the poet's mood is questioning. He wonders why he is "crushed" by the happy shrieks of his children and whether he is not being "stupid" in having more regard for his vegetative world of "crimson phalloi" and "sassafras leaves" than he has for them. He confesses his wretchedness: "Sorrow / has tripped up my heels." Williams ends this dramatic poem on a note of suspense:

> Let us see, let us see!
> What did I plan to say to her
> when it should happen to me
> as it has happened now?

As he awaits the arrival of his wife he tries to think of a pragmatic solution to his emotional dilemma.

Paraded before us in Sour Grapes are the doomed souls who reflect the values, or the lack of values, of the twentieth century.

> Well, Lizzie Anderson! seventeen men - and
> the baby hard to find a father for!
>
> What will the good Father in Heaven say
> to the local judge if he do not solve this problem?
> A little two-pointed smile and - pouff! -
> the law is changed into a mouthful of phrases.

The woman in this poem typifies those who lack all moral perspective. Notable, too, is the ineffectiveness of our society to deal with such cases. It is interesting to see that Williams entitled the poem "To a Friend" which suggests he aligns himself more with the woman than the court. It is only when the artist identifies with his subjects that he can truly begin to communicate with them. It is not through flattery that the identity is achieved. Rather, it comes when the artist is candid and honest and describes the situation as it really is. In the poem "The Poor" we see how the "School Physician" (probably Williams) gets to be the friend and adviser of the 'poor,' whose children, he constantly reminds them, have lice in their hair. The initial response of the parents of these children is hatred, which is transformed into familiarity and then into friendship. Illustrated in this poem is the fact that

the artist is capable of communicating with the suffering masses. Not only that; he can also aspire to the enviable state of being a friend and adviser.

> By constantly tormenting them
> with reminders of the lice in
> their children's hair, the
> School Physician first
> brought their hatred down on him.
> But by this familiarity
> they grew used to him, and so,
> at last,
> took him for their friend and adviser.

The poem "Paterson", which anticipates Williams's epic, Paterson, has as its subject matter the common people. In this poem Paterson is a writer, or more precisely, a philosopher who, when he is not writing, wanders among the people wondering who they are. Through the frequent use of the interrogative, particularly the line, "Who are these people?" Williams conveys the feeling that he is searching for answers. Paterson the philosopher is puzzled, perhaps, because no easy answers can be supplied to his question. His perplexed state is shown by phrases such as "how complex this mathematic", and "the equation is beyond solution".

The philosopher's magnificent mind is aptly described in a technological image: his mind has "the grace and detail of / a dynamo -". The people, in contrast, can find no solutions to their lives, so they fall back upon "cheap pictures.... poisonous gin, scurvy and toothache."

Williams focuses his attention on the actual things which make up their lives. He observes, for example, that "the actual, florid detail of cheap carpet .... upon the floor" is "paid for / as no portrait ever was." There is a beauty in these things; but he implies that the philosopher, with his "concepts," may miss it. The decorous and simple thoughts of the philosopher seem pale beside the fact of "geraniums in tin cans spreading their leaves / reflecting red upon the frost."

"An Early Martyr" is a poem which cries out against social injustice. In what might be called a narrative-lyric we have the story of a young man who has been victimized by corrupt social institutions. His crime is a petty one: "he stole from / Exclusive stores." Because he provoked the police by sending "postcards" inviting them to come and get him ("if they could"), he was not allowed to testify in court to give "reasons why he stole." Consequently, he is "railroaded" (a colloquialism aptly used) to an asylum for the criminally insane.

Williams's image of the asylum as a "prophylactic to madness" effectively conveys his disgust. Frustration and despair push the young man close to "the edge". This colloquial expression as it is used by Williams connotes a fear of impending madness or suicide.

At this point the tone of the poem becomes ironic. The young martyr is released not from any humanitarian

motives but because the institution is "overcrowded." He is held in the custody of a relative and told to "remain / Out of the state -". Williams clinches his ironic note with "They 'cured' him all / right"!

The remainder of the poem is a plea - a plea to the rational minds in society. For though the youth is now released the "set-up" remains. Williams clearly supports the youth for he sees him as the voice of rationality:

> Let him be
> a factory whistle
> that keeps blaring -
> sense, sense, sense!
> So long as there's
> a mind to remember
> and a voice to
> carry it on -

His final plea is for people to "Never give up / Keep at it!" until the "bought courts" become trustworthy institutions.

"A Portrait of the Times" is essentially a contrast between the vulgar and the beautiful people of our time. The vulgar are represented by "Two W.P.A. men";[9] the abbreviation "W.P.A." stereotypes them. They are standing in a "new" sluiceway overlooking the river. One is "pissing" while the other with his "red / jagged face" is standing like an "immemorial tragedy / of lack-love." Nearby walks

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[9] Williams is probably referring to the Work Projects Administration: a federal agency (1935-43) charged with instituting and administering public works in order to relieve national unemployment.

an "old squint-eyed woman" who is clutching to her "fatted bosoms" a bunch of fresh chrysanthemums. They abuse their new surroundings while she, though old and unattractive, complements Nature with her flowers. In such a situation it is difficult for the poet to refrain from self-righteousness. Williams does refrain from doing so. Without a murmur of disgust the old woman very simply turns "her back / on them / at the corner."

This particular poem is a convenient example of Williams's style during this period. He eliminates all but a few capital letters. Punctuation is limited to one dash, which is used to effect a pause. Order is maintained and sense observed in the rigid formalization of the stanzas, each of which has three lines, a pattern widely used by Williams. The very precise images throughout the poem are interrelated. The flow or movement from one stanza to the next is achieved through the frequent use of enjambment. This running over of his sentences from one stanzaic unit to the next occurs in seven of the eight stanzas of the poem. Thus, the over-all effect is one of unity.

"The Raper from Passenack" extends the loss of self respect for others, prevalent in this age, to an insane cruelty. The speaker of the poem is the rapist's victim. She expresses her disgust and her "hatred of all men." The prevalent images, which help create the feelings

of hatred and disgust, relate to disease. We find, for example, these references: "Only a man who is sick, she said / would do a thing like that.", "No one who is not diseased could be / so insanely cruel.", "But if I get a / venereal infection", and "But it's the foulness of it can't / be cured."

Literally the poem comments on a society in which one can be so desperate for human contact that he resorts to rape. Ironically, the rapist wants to be remembered. In his desperate need for affection he expresses a perverted sort of "kindness". For example, he consoles her with "I took good care of you kid" (juxtaposed to this line in Williams's ironic observation, "What a mess she was in"), and then he drives her home. His wish to be remembered is conveyed in the lines "You'll never forget me now." What the poem emphasizes is not the act itself, though the rape is indeed cruel, but the mentality of the rapist. The implication is that society has grown so vile that diseased minds, such as the rapist's, are common. As Williams wrote in a later poem, "To Elsie", the vileness of the times makes "The pure products of America go crazy."

CHAPTER V

SPRING AND ALL

Spring and All, his next book, was published in 1923. At that time the poems were interspersed with prose; however, in The Collected Earlier Poems only the poems appear. Williams intended the prose, which was a mixture of "philosophy and nonsense," as a "travesty" of typographical form, at a time when form was being widely stressed. His printing of chapter headings upside down and numbering chapters out of order is reminiscent of the eighteenth century novelist Sterne. Though he frolicked with his prose, however, he kept his poems pure.

This volume of Williams's poetry was dedicated to his lifelong friend, the painter Charles Demuth. It is interesting to see how these men influenced each other in their respective arts. Though impressed by the international art movements of Cubism and Imagism, Demuth had followed an individual course. Much like Williams's in poetry, Demuth's uniqueness as a painter lay in his skillful attempt to adapt the "new" techniques to American conditions. Williams, we recall, had been attempting a similar thing in adapting the Imagists' techniques to local culture. There is little doubt that the two artists influenced each other.

As Guimond writes, "Demuth's art and his attitude toward life - sophisticated, sharp-witted and irreverent - corresponded to Williams's taste."[1] A similarity exists in their choice of subject matter. Demuth's paintings, for example, capture the quality of the commonplace - the barns, water towers and chimneys of America. In his portrayal of these objects Demuth is vivid, lively and precise. Williams, too, chooses the commonplace as the material for his art. In Spring and All such poems as "Rapid Transit", "Flight to the City", "The Eyeglasses", "The Right of Way", "The Red Wheelbarrow" and "At the Ball Game" illustrate his interest in the tawdry, workaday world. However, an interesting metamorphosis occurs in Williams's handling of his drab material. Ordinary things with which we are familiar are elevated from the realm of experience to the level of imagination. His own poetic lines best describe the process:

> Out of such drab trash as this
> by a metamorphosis
> bright as wallpaper or crayon
> or where the sun casts ray on ray on
> flowers in a dish, you shall weave
> for Poesy a gaudy sleeve
> a scarf, a cap and find him gloves
> whiter than the backs of doves.

Williams, it seems, is not afraid to include in poetry the

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[1] The Art of William Carlos Williams, p. 43.

ugly with the beautiful. Such words as 'drab', 'trash' and 'gaudy' illustrate his preoccupation with the ugly. To a lesser extent the choice of words, 'wallpaper', 'crayon', 'gloves', indicates Williams's interest in what Wallace Stevens termed the "anti-poetic." What williams relied on for refining, clarifying and intensifying the objects in his poetry was the imagination. But he recognized the virtual impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose.

Included in Spring and All are poems which bemoan the loss of values in modern America. The poem "To Elsie" is probably the best illustration of this theme. Particularly effective is Williams's image of the "driverless car" which represents the illness of American society. What his country lacks, he seems to say, are "peasant traditions to give it / character." Lust and savage sex have replaced love so that people now succumb "without emotion." Elsie is a kind of "Yeatsian Crazy Jane."[2] With her "broken brain" she expresses "the truth about us." The truth is that the earth, as represented by his locale, is a degenerate place and man has become a frustrated creature:

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[2] Vivienne Koch, William Carlos Williams (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1950), p. 55.

as if the earth under our feet
were
an excrement of some sky

and we degraded prisoners
destined
to hunger until we eat filth.

In the midst of this universal frustration man is further hindered by his inability to communicate.

Another poem which portrays the loss of values and degradation of character in Williams's locale (and by implication on the universal scene, as well) is "Horned Purple". In this instance, Williams focuses on the youth of the country, "boys fifteen and seventeen." They are the ones who, "let their hair grow long" and wear in their caps "lilac blossoms" which the poet metamorphoses into the horns of satyrs. These blossoms have been stolen and the bushes broken apart, and mounted on the head the bushes resemble horns. Cursing the owner as they stole the flowers, the youths later gather on the corner to "sneer." Indicating as well the preoccupation of youth with lust and promiscuity, through his use of the term "dirty satyrs", Williams views the scene as one in which "vulgarity has been raised to the last power."

The world which Williams describes in Spring and All is a thoroughly familiar one to the modern reader. It is a world which needed 'looking at' with fresh vision. Wallace Stevens expresses this view in his statement on

Williams's work:

> It is easy to see how underneath the chaos of life today and at the bottom of all the disintegrations there is the need to see, to understand: and in so far as one is not completely baffled, to re-create. This is not emotional. It springs from the belief that we have only our own intelligence on which to rely. This manifests itself in many ways, in every living art as in every living phase of politics or science. If we could suddenly re-make the world on the basis of our own intelligence, see it clearly and represent it without faintness or obscurity, Williams's poems would have a place there.[3]

As is clear in the controversial poem "The Red Wheelbarrow", much depends on the way we see colour, shape and relationships in the world of reality. Hopefully, through enlightened vision, we may transcend limitations and communicate with one another as human beings. Aesthetic potentialities exist in the ordinary things around us. What concerned Williams was the indifference and insensitivity of people to those potentialities. Another problem which he recognized was the absence of a "language" by which people could communicate that beauty to one another. In Spring and All he continues his search for the redeeming language. His poem "At the Ball Game" shows him playing with language with no end in mind "save beauty / the eternal." Here, then, the ordinary is linked with the eternal. He juxtaposes colloquial expressions

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[3] Wallace Stevens, "Rubbings of Reality", Briarcliff Quarterly, III (Oct. 1946), 202.

such as "The flashy female with her / mother, gets it - / The Jew gets it straight" and statements of his aesthetic, "It is beauty itself / that lives / day by day in them / idly." Thematically Williams suggests in Spring and All that the human sensibility must be awakened. As the poem "On the Road to the Contagious Hospital" states, there lies beneath the surface of decay and lifelessness a vital surging life force. A "profound change" takes place when that life force is awakened:

> Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
> dazed spring approaches -
> .....
> Now the grass, tomorrow
> the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
> one by one objects are defined -
> It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf
> But now the stark dignity of
> entrance - Still, the profound change
> has come upon them: rooted, they
> grip down and begin to awaken.

In this period Williams tries hard to cling to the new mode of writing and to abandon much of the old. The difficulty inherent in this is suggested in these lines from his poem "The Black Winds":

> How easy to slip
> into the old mode, how hard to
> cling firmly to the advance -

He feels frustrated with the work he has done and rejects much of it. "Everything," he writes, in the poem "To Have Done Nothing", "I have done / is the same." He becomes concerned with reconciling the poetic and the anti-poetic.

A large number of his poems in this book reveal his experimentation. Basically this involved juxtaposing the old with the new. In "Young Love", for example, we see these beautiful lyrical lines (with the incongruous note at the end):

> Once
> anything might have happened
> You lay relaxed on my knees -
> the starry night
> spread out warm and blind
> above the hospital -

followed by the exclamatory "Pah!", which clearly indicates his dissatisfaction with what he has written. Normally a poet would confine such attitudes to his work sheet but Williams incorporates it into his poem. This poem is unique in many ways. The colon is used in a peculiar way to set off strange patterns of imagery:

> I: clean
> clean
> clean : yes ... New York
>
> Wrigley's, appendicitis, John Marin:
> skyscraper soup -

The dash, too, is used widely (in fact, Williams uses it twelve times) in this short poem. And there are questions, such as "What to want?" which syntactically are illogical. But behind this unusual pattern there lies an implied narrative of young love as beautiful as any traditional story of love:

but I merely
caressed you curiously
fifteen years ago and you still
go about the city, they say
patching up sick school children

In this period he becomes preoccupied with the universality of things. Poems like "The Eyeglasses" and "The Black Winds" portray this interest. He shows an increasing concern for the "things" around him and the ideas that these things inspire. In "Shoot it Jimmy!" he catches the syncopated rhythm of the American vernacular which he feels is inimitable. He mocks the traditionalists in the line, "That sheet stuff / 's a lot a cheese." His images are drawn from vernacular speech as in "Our orchestra / is the cat's nuts -" Overall the poem is effective in recreating the jazz-like rhythm of American vernacular. There is a frequent use of elision (' 's ', 'gimme', ' 'em ') which helps give the poem its ragtime beat:

Man
gimme the key
and lemme loose -
I make 'em crazy
with my harmonies -
Shoot it Jimmy
Nobody
Nobody else
but me -
They can't copy it

Many of the poems in Spring and All have such candour that they may be said to be typical of much of the poetry in this age. Coupled with this candour is an emphasis on

morbidity. Modern poets have taken us down to the doorways of filth and degeneration and have allowed us inside to see the horror and depravity. They have taken us through city streets and given us their smells and odours - cigarettes, steaks, cheap perfume and whatever - where even the moon, that long-standing symbol of beauty for poets, is seen as a dirty old whore (Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night"). The reader of Williams's poem "To an Old Jaundiced Woman" is spared no detail in the poem's candid description of this woman's condition:

O tongue
licking
the sore on
her netherlip

O toppled belly

O passionate cotton
stuck with
matted hair

*elsian slobber
upon
the folded handkerchief

I can't die

- moaned the old
jaundiced woman
rolling her
saffron eyeballs

I can't die
I can't die

* This metaphor, it seems likely, is drawn from the poem, "To Elsie", in which the character, Elsie, personifies the filth and degradation of America.

As we saw in "To Elsie" Williams gives us a sick vision of life. His poetry explores the nightmare that is the world - that is, the real world as it is seen by most people, not the illusory world of commercial ads and writers of escape fiction. The characteristic reaction of the people in Williams's poetry is to succumb without emotion to the demands made upon them. They succumb without any emotion except numbed terror. Such poetry can be too easily classed as pessimistic and negative. But it is not entirely so. Behind the depressing subject matter of his poetry lies an inherent good faith in the future of man. From the drab and depressing details of human life Williams creates an artistic structure. This creative process in itself affirms the poet's belief in the ultimate possibility of human betterment.

CHAPTER VI

COLLECTED POEMS

A temporary barren period occurs in Williams's poetry after the publication of Spring and All. In 1934 his Collected Poems was published, containing the poetry that had been written between 1921 and 1931. In these poems "Williams was seeking a more inclusive structure that might render his sense of community and history, and also a new loosening and a new precision of measure."[1] The consequence of this search was an experimentation with prose fiction. Such works as The Great American Novel, In the American Grain, A Voyage to Pagany and The Knife of the Times and Other Stories were the result. Though he was not prolific as a poet in this period, in the poems that he did write he was directly concerned with the world about him. Poems such as "New England", "The Dead Baby", "Hemmed in Males" and "All the Fancy Things" have subtle social implications. During this period, as he recalls in I Wanted to Write, Williams was concerned with the suffering of the poor during the depression years:

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[1] Guimond, p. 91.

> I was impressed by the picture of the times, depression years, the plight of the poor. I felt it very vividly. I felt furious at the country for its lack of progressive ideas. I felt as if I were a radical without being a radical. The plight of the poor in a rich country, I wrote it down as I saw it. The times - that was the knife that was killing them. I was deeply sympathetic and filled with admiration. How amusing they were in spite of their suffering, how gaily they could react to their surroundings, I would have done anything for them, anything but treat them for nothing, and I guess I did that too. [2]

The Collected Earlier Poems had been gathered together by Louis Zukofsky and some other contemporaries of Williams. All of them were associated with the Objectivist Movement. The influence of the Objectivists can be seen in a number of Williams's poems in this period. The main feature of an objectivist poem was an impersonal tone. The objectivist poet "strives to express his emotions and judgements through the presentation of specific, concrete details."[3] In the poem "The Yachts" the author's tone is unequivocally impersonal. Basically "The Yachts" is concerned with the diverse elements in modern society and particularly the great gulf that lies between the rich and the poor. The Dantesque picture at the end of the poem presents us with the damned "grasping", seeking "to clutch at the prows," but the bodies are "cut aside" as the sleek,

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[2] Williams, I Wanted to Write, p. 61.

[3] Guimond, p. 97.

swift yachts sail over them. Williams poignantly expresses the despair of those who are "broken, beaten, desolate." A symbolic relationship exists between the personified skillful, successful yachts and the defeated "watery bodies." The primary artistic motive of the poem is to throw profound light on the commonplace. What Williams has done is to focus his whole attention on the object (the yachts) allowing no irrelevant images to intervene. Following the Objectivist tradition he presents his object without any undue comment. "The Yachts" is a condemnation of man's interests in the materialistic while he drowns in despair. Williams often described the conditions of depressed humanity through the use of objects or concrete details:

> Where a
> waste of cinders
> slopes down to
> the railroad and
> the lake
> stand three children
> beside the weed-grown
> chassis
> of a wrecked car.

The effect of this little poem is achieved through simple presentation of the objects and by placing the children among these objects.

In his introduction to <u>The Collected Earlier Poems</u> Wallace Stevens had used the term "anti-poetic" to describe the passion of Williams:

> His passion for the anti-poetic is a blood passion and not a passion of the inkpot. The anti-poetic is his spirit's cure. He needs it as a naked man needs shelter or as an animal needs salt. To a man with a sentimental side the anti-poetic is that truth, that reality to which all of us are forever fleeing. [4]

Apparently Williams was "nettled" by the use of the term "anti-poetic."[5] But it is clear that Stevens was praising the work for in a later article Stevens wrote of the need to get to the bottom of the disintegration of the modern world and he praised Williams for his ability to clearly represent that world. Actually, his intent in that article was to clear up Williams's misinterpretation.

The Collected Earlier Poems sums up the distinctive features of Williams's sensibility up to 1934. Very effectively he reveals the benefits of his Imagist, free verse and Objective disciplines. Included in this collection are a number of poems which deal with the theme of domesticity. In these Williams exhibits his gift for portraying homely detail in a language which is clear and uncluttered. Most important, for this study, are those poems which spring from an examination of the facts of modern life.

Like Eliot, Williams wrote of the "gross odors" which characterize modern society. Eliot's lady with the

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[4] Williams, I Wanted to Write, p. 64.

[5] Ibid., p. 65.

gramophone becomes Williams's lady in "In the Sconset Bus" whose yellow hair is "struck with celluloid / pins / not quite matching it." Williams sees an indecency in the appearance of this woman whose artificial make-up, "hooks / piercing the / flesh -" and dyed hair, "two shades / darker / at the roots" betray her real nature. On the modern landscape lies the litter of humanity, symbolized by the frequently occurring image of the "broken bottle." Nature it seems acts as a kind of cleaning power amidst the modern debris. In "The Winds" Williams presents the wind blowing "crusts / from scabby eyes, scales from / the mind and husbands from wives." The apparent contradictions in these lines can be resolved in this way: Nature is at work attempting to clarify man's vision, while man himself, in his personal relationships, increases the confusion.

It is in the poems of the thirties that Williams's greatest disillusionment with modern man is shown. His "An Elegy for D.H. Lawrence" expresses the tragedy of the sensitive artist in the calloused modern society:

> and Lawrence no more in the world
> to answer April's promise
> with a fury of labor
> against waste, waste and life's
> coldness.

Lawrence is depicted as an artist whose attempts to create beauty where decay existed are futile. He becomes, "Poor Lawrence / worn with a fury of sad labor / to create summer

from / spring's decay." Constant reference is made to the "coldness" of the society in which the artist is "unwanted."

"Impromptu: The Suckers" is a poem in which the poet addresses the people of America and condemns them for their complacency and, consequently, the ease with which they are taken advantage of by the "autocratic backwash." The caustic tone is evident in the initial lines: "Take it out in vile whiskey, take it out / in lifting your skirts to show your silken / crotches." Williams views the people as "scapegoats" for the establishment, who are no more than "pimps to tradition." It is the people, he feels, who will be used "for the glory of the state / and the perpetuation of abstract justice." The language of the exhortation is in the vernacular. Such phrases as "You ain't supposed to ask for details", "like hell they were!" and "why in hell" are direct attempts to communicate with the masses. The poem has prose-like qualities. These are revealed in its arrangement of long lines like sentences and stanzas resembling paragraphs. The poem makes use of rhetorical questions ("You've got the cash, / what the hell do you care?") and ironic rhetorical statements which have chauvinistic undertones: "My Country right or wrong!"

Williams's ironic treatment of traditional American leaders is most effective. Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin and George Washington are described in these diminutives:

"Tommy Jeff.... Ben Frank ... Georgie Washing." The exhortation ends with the poet dismayed that the common man, "Nature's nobleman", in his complacency has allowed the ideals on which his country was founded to be treated as a joke. "No one can understand", Williams writes, "what makes the present age what it is."

A similar expression of the indifference which pervades society is in the poem "The Sun Bathers", where we have "a tramp thawing out / on a doorstep." The poem is made all the more poignant by the fact that he is a "young man" dressed in rags, "an old army coat," and diseased, "wriggling and scratching." Above the young man, leaning out of a window, is a fat negress who "yawns / into the fine weather." Not only does Williams write of tramps and vagabonds but of the thousands in America whose lives are spent serving the rich. "The Waitress" contains a caustic commentary on the benefits of poverty:

> The benefits of poverty are a roughened skin
> of the hands, the broken
> knuckles, the stained wrists.

By justaposing images of beauty, "O unlit candle with the soft white / plume" and images of ugliness ("Sunbeam Finest Safety Matches"), Williams effectively embodies the contrast between the poor and the affluent.

Much of Williams's poetry describes in harrowing detail the tragic aspects of our lives: the cultural

wasteland in which we live; the confusion and absence of values and the violent, misdirected use of passion. In the midst of the gloom we find the poetic spirit struggling to free itself from the complexities and confusions that affect mankind. In its attempt to struggle free the poetic self is undeniably heroic. The struggle may take many forms. Yeats, for example, sought refuge for his sensibility in pursuing the mystery of sexuality and in applying mythology to contemporary conditions; Eliot found his refuge in Anglo-Catholicism; and Williams resorted to studying the commonplace, hoping to life the details of ordinary life to the level of art.

In the poems "Adam" and "Eve" Williams describes the deaths of his father and mother, respectively. The poem "Eve" is of a confessional nature as it expresses the very personal feelings and thoughts shared by Williams and his mother. It is addressed to his mother who is now "old .... without subtlety" and "defenseless." Thematically, the poem confirms the preciousness of life, even to those too old and too weak to enjoy it. It is written in free verse with the arbitrary lines based, for the most part, on a clausal pattern. The stanzaic units conform to changes of mood. In the first unit there is expressed a feeling of shame that the world should see this "Somewhat infantile creature." In her defenseless state she is kept in an

institution "in the name of protection." The poet feels guilty that he keeps her "imprisoned" though he knows that she wildly wants to escape and "leap into chaos / (where Time has / not yet begun)." Her reaction to his father's death, Williams recalls, was not a common one. Instead of grieving she was like a "demon, fighting for the fire / it needed to breathe / to live again." His feelings are mixed: there is the "horror or my guilt" for having one who enjoys the life force confined to a sickbed and, secondly, the "sweetness" of her acknowledgement of his efforts, for as stanza one asserts they have not been close. The next stanza relates the embarrassment which results from her increasing senility. Williams's clear, simple diction is particularly effective in describing the situation:

> Trembling, sobbing
> and grabbing at the futile hands
> till a mind goes sour
> watching you - and flies off
> sick at the mumbling
> from which nothing clearly
> is ever spoken -

The observer becomes as sick as the observed. He is shamed by her and he wants to spare her the humiliation of a slow defeat. He pleads with her to forgive him for "I have been a fool - / (and remain a fool)." He is moved by her durability and wonders why one so old is not "reconciled with Time" instead of "clawing at Him / that way." Williams's personification of time as a male figure

is most effective in intensifying the struggle that ensues. Though defenseless, she struggles to keep from "Him" that body which is now a "wasted carcass, crippled / and deformed, that ruined face / sightless, deafened - / the color gone." Her end is seen in terms of a struggle to hold on to "every accoutrement / which He has loaned" until they are torn from her grasp. Even then, when she is exhausted, a kind of "hypnotic ecstasy" enables her to squeeze the hand held out to her with "unwonted pressure." This final act is deliberately ambiguous. It may symbolize either her last effort to retain the life force or it may be a gesture to her son that he is forgiven. Possibly it is both.

There is an interesting contrast in Williams's descriptions of his mother's and his father's deaths. In a poem entitled "Adam" he describes how his father grew up on a sunny island in the tropics and how he was "driven" from this Paradise to America. Williams describes him as a man who "kept a cold eye always / on the inevitable end / never wincing." His father's impassive manner in meeting death contrasts with his mother's impassioned one:

> coldly
> and with patience -
> without a murmur, silently
> a desperate, unvarying silence
> to the unhurried last.

In his own unique way he reacted against the poetry of the past, especially the classics. Like other Imagist

poets he felt that such literature had a dry hardness which dissatisfied both modern poets and modern readers. Williams rebelled, too, against the drug-like effect of Romantic poetry. As an Imagist he believed that the great aim in poetry was accurate, precise and definite description. Above all, he felt it necessary to prove that beauty may exist in small, dry things. His "The Red Wheelbarrow" is an apt example of preciseness in the description of the beauty inherent in the ordinary things around us.

Not unexpectedly such poems as "The Red Wheelbarrow" made excellent bait for his critics. For some such a work indicated an inability to cope with the strain of a sophisticated and complex world. Imagist poets were branded as childish. The movement was considered by some to encourage the inexperienced, the untutored and the unthinking to participate in the literary arts. Williams, like the Imagists who influenced him, was not deterred by that kind of criticism. Instead, he accepted it for what it was worth, fully realizing that the Imagist movement was nothing more than the perfecting of a technique which was to aid poetic development.

Williams learned much from the Imagists. In his use of the language of common speech he acquired an exactness in choosing not merely the most decorative word but the most expressive word for the occasion. He learned to create new

rhythms - as the expression of new moods - and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. It was Williams's belief that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free verse than in conventional forms. He insisted upon the necessity of drawing the poem's materials from the familiar world and so he frequently turned to nature as his source. Particularly memorable are those poems which describe the delicate scents of beautiful flowers - daisies, Queen Ann's lace, violet, mullen - and those poems in which he mentions the birds and animals found in and about cities. Then there are those other things which seem to most of us to be ordinary - the cars, boats, bridges, wheelbarrows and broken bottles - which Williams, through the sheer force of his imaginative power, lifted to the level of art. He believed passionately in the artistic value of modern life and so he used in his poetry those things which belonged to it.

"History", one of the longer poems in this early phase, is a didactic work stressing the ephemeral nature of life (a common theme in literature). The poem tells of a Sunday afternoon visit to the museum. His ironic tone evident in "Oh, Sunday, day of worship!!!" is emphasized by the repeated use of the exclamation mark. His observations of the people he meets are also ironic: "Men? Women? / Simpering, clay fetish-faces counting /

through the turnstile." His attention is caught by a granite sarcophagus which contained the body of "Uresh-Nai, priest to the goddess Mut." The poet observes that this chiselled granite tomb, symbolic of the spirit of the pagan priest, has arrogantly defied death and endured. All about him in this "northern scenery", which is not the Nile, he sees nothing but "tired people" who obviously have not endured. His final image, seen in "The world is young, Surely! Young / and colored like - a girl that has come / upon / a lover!"/suggests a note of hope, hope that there will be a vitality and vigour somewhere in our society to counteract the pervading tiredness and decay.

In "The Wind Increases" Williams questions the role of the poet in this age. Is he not, Williams asks, "a man / whose words will / bite / their way / home?" This poem imparts the sense of an imminent devastation, symbolized by the increasing wind. Already, "The harried / earth is swept" and fragile beauty, "the tulip's bright / tips", is being tossed aside. Through alliteration and assonance in "Loose your love / to flow / Blow!" Williams effectively captures the howl of the wind, particularly in the long vowel sound of the 'o', and this is intensified by the perfect rhyme in "flow" and "Blow!" With the atmosphere set, the poem reverts to an enquiring note: If poets exist, their effectiveness is measured by the way their words

convey actuality. Their words have only the "form of motion"; they must be "new" to give freshness to "the tortured / body of thought" (symbolically, the tree bent by the storm), and "grip the ground", the source of their strength.

CHAPTER VII

PATERSON - BOOK ONE

Paterson, Williams's great epic, shows his continuing interest in the failure of communication, the divorce of art from life and the corruption of society. In this "complex and mythic five-part personal epic"[1] the emphasis is on the search for a redeeming language. Equally emphasized in the poem are the people who represent the whole of mankind. He had already shown his ability to write about natural things. Now he wished to write with intimacy about the people close to him and "to know in detail, minutely what I was talking about - to the whites of their eyes, to their very smells."[2]

Among the particular details of the place and the people he knew he hoped to reveal truths that would apply to all men. He was to discover that the local was the "only universal" and it is upon that that all art builds. In art, then, lay the key to life.

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[1] John C. Thirlwall, p. 253.

[2] Autobiography, p. 391.

The symbol which Williams chooses to use is the city. There exist, Williams observed, many resemblances between the city and the mind of modern man.

> The thing was to use the multiple facets which a city presented as representative for comparable facets of contemporary thought, thus to be able to objectify the man himself as we know him and love him and hate him. [3]

The city which he chose was Paterson, New Jersey, mainly because he knew it more intimately than any other. That there is a difference between the Paterson of the poem and the "real" Paterson is obvious; for Williams's Paterson transcends the real and is many things. Paterson becomes a protean image of man and for man:

> Paterson is a man (since I am a man) who dives from cliffs and the edges of waterfalls to his death - finally. [4]

Williams demands that the reader also accept a metamorphosis, for Paterson is "not only the hero, but also the heroine, not only a city but also cliffs and a waterfall."[5] In the headnote to Book One, there is a list of eighteen phrases, any of which could describe the poem:

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[3] Thirlwall, p. 254.

[4] Thirlwall, p. 254.

[5] Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, The Metamorphic Tradition in Modern Poetry (New York: Gordian Press, Inc., 1966), p. 89.

> a local pride; spring, summer, fall and the sea; a confession; a basket; a column; a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands; a gathering up; a celebration; in distinctive terms; by multiplication a reduction to one; daring; a fall; the clouds resolved into a sandy sluice; an enforced pause;
> hard put to it; an identification and a plan for action to supplant a plan for action; a taking up of slack; a dispersal and metamorphosis.

Book One expresses basically a theme of conflict between life's communications and possibilities. Williams felt that there was a lack of communication among men because the language had broken down. It is the waterfalls in the poem which represent the power of language. But only the poet can interpret the tumultuous power of the falls. Williams blames the university, with its "knowledgeable idiots," for doing little to assist in restoring the language to men. Instead of "devising means" to eliminate the gulfs in communication, the university "blocks the release / that should cleanse and assume / prerogatives as a private recompense." (p. 46) Concerned about the roots and sources to which man must return for communication Williams realized that communion among men is <u>not</u> to be found at the university for it perpetuates the divorce in communication from the commonalty of mankind. The "no language" motif and the "separate worlds" motif keep recurring throughout the poem. Much emphasis is placed on the fact that our sources are not known to us. Since "Everybody has roots," the poet feels we must return

to the sources to restore some meaning to life. We can expect no help from those at the university for they are "spitted on fixed concepts like / roasting hogs, sputtering, their drip sizzling / in the fire." The language is bold and harsh but in line with Williams's attitude:

> Williams's attitude toward language is thus consistent with his various other conceptions of the nature of the life of the mind. It is his belief that ideas change, associations change, attitudes change - only things in themselves remain (or can remain) unchanged. [6]

Realizing that men were divorced from words he attempted to build from the common, crude language a more refined, poetic language:

> To make a start
> out of particulars
> and make them general, rolling
> up the sum, by defective means --
> (I, i, 11)

Language was the only means by which contact could be restored between men.

In his choice of a city to represent the mind of man, Williams had been influenced by Joyce. Paterson was to Williams what Dublin was to Joyce. The Passaic Falls became the symbol of incomprehensible language, whereas the river was equally important as a mobile symbol:

> I took the river as it followed its course down to the sea; all I had to do was follow it and I had a poem. There were the poor who lived on the banks of the river, people I had written about in my stories.

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[6] Ostrom, p. 158.

He was not concerned about the form of the poem, since that "could take care of itself." Setting the pace for the poem would be the colloquial language, "my own language." Included in the poem were many things of topical interest - even scandal is included. Other material consisted of carefully chosen documentary reports. Written in prose, these passages, which deal with Paterson's past, are "not original at all but are merely taken verbatim from William Nelson's History of the City of Paterson and the County of Passaic."[7] The prose passages enhance the function of Book One which was to give "the elemental character of the place."[8] In mixing prose with his poetry Williams was inviting the bewilderment of his critics. Inherent in his form were the dangers of fragmentation and unintelligibility but these are "part of the modern epic."[9] The purpose of his "composition" is never clear. A rationale for his method is seen in his statement that he sought "to discover the new in art forms."[10] Whatever the case, it is

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[7] Quinn, p. 93.

[8] I Wanted to Write, p. 84.

[9] Whitaker, p. 131.

[10] Williams, Selected Letters, p. 238.

"essentially a way of language - both a process and a path."[11] Throughout the five books which make up Paterson Williams attempts to express what it is to exist in the present world.

Paterson begins with the image of a giant figure, "externally asleep." This image of the sleeping giant changes so that we see Paterson, the man, walking about the city where he sees "a thousand automatons" walking aimlessly "outside their bodies." Caught up in a materialistic swirl they have "no ideas but in things." Williams's image of the lifeless, unroused, urban man recalls a similar treatment by T.S. Eliot in The Waste Land.* With its introductory image of the sleeping giant Paterson begins in a style reminiscent of the epic. The sleeping giant represents the vast unrealized potential of modern man. His "stone ear" on which "butterflies settle" is an image that suggests man's imperviousness to beauty. As Williams sees it the problem is that "beauty" is "locked in the mind past all remonstrance." What is missing is a "common language" to prevent them from dying "incommunicado." Thus the emphasis throughout Book One is on language:

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[11] Whitaker, p. 132.

* Selected Poems (Faber, 1954), p. 53. I have in mind the passage from "The Burial of the Dead" beginning: "Unreal city, ..." and ending: "and each man fixed his eyes before his feet."

The language, the language
fails them
They do not know the words
or have not
the courage to use them

- girls from
families that have decayed and
taken to the hills: no words.
That may look at the torrent in
their minds
And it is foreign to them.

They turn their backs
and grow faint - but recover!
Life is sweet
they say: the language
is divorced from their minds,
the language . . . . . the language!
(I, i, 20)

Much of Paterson is concerned with the vices and perversions of humanity, which are found not only in the streets and back rooms but also in places where such things are least expected. Near the end of Book One Williams speaks of the "Convent" of the "Little Sisters of / St. Ann." Located in the suburbs of Paterson, it is "an offensively red brick building." His simile is particularly harsh: the convent is as "red as poor-man's flesh." Inside, the occupants spend their time pretending a mystery. Impersonality characterizes the convent: the windows are "sharp edged" and "curtainless"; no faces are seen; and into the convent only "birds and insects look or / the moon stares, concerning which they dare / look back, by times." To Williams the convent appears to be no more than a mere extension of vulgar streets. He speaks of the

"mathematic calm" that surrounds the "mete architecture" and the place. In such a "controlled" environment human beings are mere automata with "the same blank and staring eyes."

Emptiness and ugliness pervade the general scene. Agony and misery are everywhere. Despair is evident in the figure of the man who contemplates "a photograph - holder with pictures of himself / between the two children, all returned / weeping, weeping, - in the back room / of the widow who married again." To Williams the modern world was an industrial wasteland: "Half the river red, half steaming purple / from the factory vents, spewed out hot, / swirling bubbling. The dead bank, / shining mud." (I, iii, 48) A striking similarity exists between Williams's lines and those of Eliot in The Waste Land:

> The river sweats
> Oil and tar
> The barges drift
> With the turning tide
> Red sails
> Wide
> To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.
> The barges wash
> Drifting logs.
> Down Greenwich reach
> Past the Isle of Dogs. [12]

Williams shows us a generation of children who show little regard for the natural beauties around them. He witnesses

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[12] T.S. Eliot, Selected Poems (Feber, 1954), p. 61.

the "ravished park, torn by / the wild workers' children tearing up the grass."

The rich are responsible for much of the decline in moral values. Williams portrays them as being indifferent to the general state of mankind. In a time of "general privation" they keep their mansions operating at considerable expense, using them very little. Flowers bloom in their heated greenhouses during the winter but are left "to droop on the stem, not even / exhibited at the city show." The swimming pools are "empty" and are "buildings / covering an acre kept heated / winter long (to conserve the plumbing)" (I, iii, 45). The situation is perpetuated by those who have "special interests" and make it profitable. Others are at fault because "they do nothing."

Modern man, devoid of values, seeks a refuge in sex. Here again Paterson and The Waste Land are similar. Williams's "man" is seen heading for an "obscene rendezvous" making his way through the back streets, "up hollow stairs among acrid smells." Like Eliot, Williams emphasizes the "smells" of modern life. Little satisfaction follows the sexual encounter which is related in The Waste Land. Rather, there is an atmosphere of boredom and fatigue. Eliot's lade gives her departing lover "a final patronising kiss" when it's over, then, "hardly aware" that he is gone, she puts a record on the gramophone. Williams's lovers exhibit a similar indifference and this is expressed by anatomical images of a "great belly / that no longer

laughs but mourns" and an "expressionless black navel." Deceit characterizes their love and they flaunt "desire."

Elsewhere he sees beautiful women vulgarized by the demands of modern life:

> They fail, they limp with corns. I think he
> means to kill me, I don't know what to do. He
> comes in after midnight, I pretend to be asleep.
> He stands there, I feel him looking down at me,
> I am afraid!

"Because the imagination demands refreshment from the sordid assault of the present"[13] Williams presents us a picture of a fecund and vigorous society:

> I remember
> a Geographic picture, the 9 women
> of some African chief semi-naked
> astraddle a log, an official log to
> be presumed, heads left:
> (I, i, 22)

Sitting there on the log they symbolize potent sexuality:

> Foremost
> froze the young and latest,
> erect, a proud queen, conscious of her power,
> mud caked, her monumental hair
> slanted above the brows-violently frowning.
> (I, i, 22)

There is among these women a deep sense of pride and a firm belief that the vitality which was present in the eldest will be "rekindled" in the youngest:

> and then ...
> the last, the first wife,
> present! supporting all the rest growing
> up from her - whose careworn eyes
> serious, menacing - but unabashed; breasts
> sagging from hard use ...
> (I, i, 23)

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[13] Koch, p. 123.

Whereas the uppointed breasts
of that other, tense, charged with
pressures unrelieved
and the rekindling they bespoke
was evident.

(I, i, 23)

Williams has presented a record of descent and shown the exceptional vigour of these African women while in contrast most modern women are devoid of such vigour. In our society marriage has, he says, "a shuddering implication"; modern woman instead of being "charged with pressure" is seen to "shiver" and "wilt."

In Paterson's history Williams records instances of various individuals who responded to the vital "pouring language." Sam Patch the local hero who came to fame by jumping falls was successful until he attempted a jump from a falls outside his local area. Then the language failed him and Sam met his tragic end. Williams's meaning is clear. A society without roots lacks necessary vigour and is doomed. One is disturbed by the hopelessness with which he characterizes modern life but one cannot question Williams's accuracy in his reading of the times.

CHAPTER VIII

PATERSON - BOOK TWO

It is in Book Two of Paterson that Williams's natural sympathy for the common man wells up particularly strongly. Called "Sunday in the Park", it contains "some of the best poetry in the entire work."[1] Walking about the park is Paterson, who signifies both the poet and the historic shade of the place. Among the rocky paths in the late spring afternoon he sees about him the depressed citizens and workers of the town with their "wild children", to whom Williams briefly referred in Book One.

Interviewed by John C. Thirlwall, Williams remarked that the basis of Paterson Book Two is the "reaction of a sensitive person to the show of force."[2] Williams was referring to the use of force by the ruling classes in suppressing the masses. He had been particularly concerned with the 1913 silk workers' strike in the industrial city of Paterson. In that strike, twenty-seven thousand workers walked out in protest against the introduction of the

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[1] Thirlwall, New Directions 17, p. 256.

[2] Ibid., p. 259.

automated multiple loom, which threatened their jobs. They received instant sympathy from Williams. Difficulties arose when the union which originally represented the workers failed to organize the strike. Determined, the workers found support in the International Workers of the World, a union which moved in to replace the original one. It has been determined that the leaders of this new union were surprisingly literate. Their literary tastes included Shelley and Browning. Naturally, having learned this after one of the union leaders was arrested for carrying seditious literature, Williams was doubly drawn to their cause. A bitter war followed in which the workers were pitted against their employers, their former union and the police. Much of the action which followed in which police brutally attacked the workers, breaking skulls and picket lines with equal abandon, reflects some of the more recent horrifying events in American cities.[3] Writing in "The Wanderer" Williams described the forces opposed to the workers as a group united in "brutality." Sensitive to the pain and sufferings of the workers, he expressed his sympathy for them in his poetry. His position was unique in that he had

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[3] I have in mind the many riots and demonstrations that took place in American cities and on American campuses during 1970; in particular, the events associated with the Chicago Convention and the demonstrations on the campus of Kent State University.

been "separated from the commonalty of mankind by his sensitive disposition, his abiding interest in music and the other arts, but his sympathies had remained with the common people, whose lives he shared in his medical practice."[4] A great social gulf existed between the artist and the people. This gulf was probably created by "the decay of the middle class" which made an "impossible moat between the high / and the low." (I, iii, 46)

Certainly it is true that he was looked upon with some suspicion by the bourgeois citizens of Rutherford, his home town for many years. Sensitively, however, he aligned himself with the poor and the underprivileged, particularly the humble Italian-American workingmen and the negroes who worked as servants in middle class homes. Many of his poems express his admiration for their dignity and basic humanity. So in Book Two, "Sunday in the Park", he praises the beauties of:

> 3 colored girls, of age! stroll by
> - their color flagrant,
> their voices vagrant
> their laughter wild, flagellant, dissociated
> from the fixed scene.
>
> But the white girl, her head
> upon an arm, a butt between her fingers
> lies under the bush
> (II, i, 66)

His admiration is similarly aroused for the Italian workers

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[4] Ibid., p. 261.

who picnic in the park. One of them in particular, an old woman, catches his attention. She feels the stir of spring in the air and leaps up to dance. While the rest eat and drink she

> -lifts one arm holding the cymbals of her thoughts, cocks her old head and dances: raising her skirts:
>
> La la la la!
> (II, i, 73)

She is intoxicated by her memory of the old cultures - her roots. She is "the old, the very old, old upon old, the undying." In her dance she represents the timeless primitive quality of fertility. In contrast to her vital, moving figure there are the others whose minds are "beaten thin" by waste. Apparently among the working classes "some sort / of breakdown / has occurred." They lie "semi-roused" exposing themselves beneath the sun "in frank vulgarity." Only a pathetic sort of contact is made in their sexual union as "their pitiful thoughts do meet / in the flesh."

In his Sunday walk through the park Paterson becomes aware of the disturbing fact that beauty, with few exceptions, is smothered by the deformed present. What is needed is some sort of invention to counteract the break-down. As he observes this "multiple and inarticulate crowd" the poet is moved by a powerful feeling of pity. The people, or the "great beast", as he calls the crowd, have

become victims of a pervasive vulgarity. They are "denied beauty because of its costliness"[5] and they attempt to find compensation in their aimless pursuit of pleasure.

Approximating an act of love and resembling at the same time the failure of love is the encounter with the ranting evangelist. He is "an amusing but sentimental caricature of 'religion'".[6] In this section Williams continues to explore contemporary problems. Many of the prose passages deal with anti-usury and anti-credit topics which are "reminiscent of Ezra Pound's polemics on these subjects."[7] In his sermon the ranting evangelist tells how be became financially successful in America but gave up all his money to follow the Lord when he discovered that he was not happy.

> And His blessed truth descended upon me and filled me with joy, such joy and such riches as I had never in my life known to that day and as I said to Him, Master! (II, i, 76)

No one heeds the preacher's words. His only audience is the "leaves in the patient trees." But in the background Williams etches the sad and weeping figure of the gentle Christ.

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[5] Guy Davenport, "The Nuclear Venus: Dr. Williams's Attack upon Usura," Perspective, VI, No. 4 (Autumn-Winter, 1953), p. 187.

[6] R.W. Flint, "I Will Teach you my Townspeople," The Kenyon Review, XII (Autumn, 1950), p. 540.

[7] Koch, p. 139.

Paterson is disappointed in his search for beauty in the park. Beauty has been "blocked" from the vision of the "great beast". Over their world lies a dullness which Williams describes as "orchestral". In their rejection of Klaus Ehrens, the evangelist, Williams finds them contemptible. Alexander Hamilton, one of the country's founders, felt a similar contempt for the people. He viewed the people of his country as a "great beast" in whom he could place no trust. His grandiose plans included the harnessing of the overwhelming power of the Passaic Falls and the setting up of a "National Manufactory" in Paterson..

> Even during the Revolution Hamilton had been impressed by the site of the Great Falls of the Passaic. His fertile imagination envisioned a great manufacturing centre, a great Federal City, to supply the needs of the country. Here was water-power to turn the mill sheels and the navigable river to carry manufactured goods to the market centres: a national manufactory.
>
> (II, ii, 87)

His plan failed. But Hamilton was also resonsible for "America's elaborate system of banking (usury to Williams and Pound) to keep its population from possessing their country and ruining his plans."[8] A legalized plan of exploitation whereby the people paid "tribute to the money racketeers on every dollar earned through hard work" resulted from the introduction of "usury". (II, ii, 91).

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[8] Guimond, p. 185.

From the beginning then the flower of morality had begun to wither. Hamilton initiated the decay which prevails in the present society. Section Two of Book Two closes on a note of pessimism, found in a letter from a woman writer. She bemoans a lack of "personal identity" and desires to communicate in "the most personal of ways."

Section Three begins on a note of nullity which changes to hope. Still filled with contempt for the townspeople, the poet, Paterson, feels unable to communicate with them. The poet listens intensely but in the "confused uproar" he misses "the sense." Paterson's despair gives way to "a new awakening." Leaving the park to the "guilty lovers and stray dogs" Paterson, now in the guise of Faitoute, the giant, moves out. Discounting his failures he strolls off to the debased city, characterized by "its garbage on the curbs, its legislators / under the garbage, uninstructed, incapable of / self instruction." (II, iii, 99). All about him are images of decay:

> - flowers uprooted, columbine, yellow and red,
> strewn upon the path; dogwoods in full flower,
> the trees dismembered; its women shallow, its
> men steadfastly refusing -
> (II, iii, 100)

He mourns, too, the lack of an erudite atmosphere and particularly the loss of:

The language. words
without style! whose scholars (there are none)
or dangling, about whom
the water weaves its strands encasing them
in a sort of thick lacquer, lodged
under its flow.

(II, ii, 100)

The "new awakening" drives the poet to seek a reconciliation with his world. Having known the degenerate world the poet feels that he must now ascend "from that base, unabashed, to regain / the sun kissed summits of love!" It would seem for a moment that the answer to the poet's despair lies in love. "But as if to confound prognostications, and adding an anti-climactic note of mockery, there is a postscript in the form of a six-page letter (begun earlier in the book) from the rejected woman."[9] She accuses Williams of being interested only in a "woman's wretched position" in society as long as what he said about women was of literary interest. She felt betrayed because the poet in whom she had confided and upon whom she depended for material and emotional aid had divorced literature from life. Writers like Williams, she felt, are "so sheltered from life in the raw by the glass-walled conditions of their own safe lives" that they are insensitive to the artist whose values in life are consistent with the values he expresses in his work. As a result of his indifference to her she has become

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[9] Koch, p. 143.

emotionally sterile. Book Two ends on a note of "irresolute paradox."[10] On the one hand there is the expectant potency of love, "Now love might enjoy its play / and nothing disturb the full octave of its run." (II, iii, 105), while on the other there is the stinging rebuke and despairing emotional sterility of the letter.

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[10] Ibid., p. 143.

CHAPTER IX

PATERSON - BOOK THREE

A large part of the intellectual content of Books One and Two concerns the themes of divorce and blockage and the failure of communication. Williams includes many letters to aid in the development of these themes. "Whether authentic or an artifact, the letter corroborates a view of Williams himself and of contemporary man."[1] In Book Three, called "The Library", Williams continues his exploration of the problems of contemporary man. Using the library as a focal point Williams continues to develop his themes. Prominent among them are the search for expression, a language; the difficulties of writing poetry in an industrial civilization; and the particular difficulties of the poet himself. "The Library" may suggest a "symbolic freedom from isolation, the world of books."[2] In fact the whole of Book Three is based upon a symbolic structure. Each of the three books is dominated by a symbol: wind, fire and water, respectively. Having gone unsuccessfully to the Falls and the Park in his search for language,

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[1] Ralph Nash, "The Use of Prose in Paterson", Perspective, VI (Autumn 1953), p. 193.

[2] John C. Thirlwall, New Directions 17, p. 303.

the poet now comes to the Paterson Public Library. Wind, fire and flood have attacked Paterson, the city and the Library are doomed.

The city in Book Three can be regarded as a "second body for the human mind," that is, if we follow the implication of the epigraph to Book Three, which contains a few lines from Santayana's The Last Puritan. As a result of his own indifference to common things the poet feels that the city, that is, his own mind, must be destroyed. The action here, of course, takes place in the poet's mind, which is first led away by the wind.

> Drawn from the streets we break off
> our mind's seclusion and are taken up by
> the books' winds, seeking, seeking
> down the wind
> until we are unaware which is the wind and
> which the wind's power over us
> to lead the mind away
> (III, i, 118)

Williams, apparently, is here seeking "a key to that awareness that would make all life transcendent."[3] In the library is "desolation, it has a smell of its own / of stagnation and death" (III, i, 123). Within the stale walls are confined "dead men's dreams" which seek an outlet. The images of staleness become more and more intense.

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[3] John Malcolm Brinnin, "William Carlos Williams", University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, no. 24. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), p. 40.

> The place sweats of staleness and of rot
> a back-house stench . . a library
> stench
>
> It is summer! stinking summer
>
> Escape from it - but not by running
> away. Not by "composition." Embrace the
> foulness.
>
> (III, i, 126)

In embracing the "foulness" the poet is immersing himself fully in destruction. But countering all the staleness is the "Beautiful thing" which is represented by a young Negro woman. In the midst of all the vulgarity she shines through as a nameless thing after which the poet seeks. She may also be considered a "local symbol of universal beauty, the only antidote against death and divorce."[4] Repeatedly the poet cries out "for the Beautiful Thing which men strive to destroy." "This destruction of beauty is another constant theme, providing some of the poem's most fascinating complexities."[5]

Beauty, the only antidote against death and divorce, is feared "more than death" in the modern world. Everywhere, as Book Three illustrates, beauty is being destroyed. Modern man tries ceaselessly to kill, or at least mutilate, beautiful things.

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[4] Thirlwall, p. 303.

[5] Quinn, p. 112.

> . . . The first example of this occurs in Book One when pearls are ruined through being boiled; others are: the brutal capture of huge sturgeon; the wholesale killing of eels from the bottom of the drained lake; the chase of the mink in Clark's hardware store; the shooting of the last wolf; the burning of Sappho's poems; the battle against the great 1902 fire; the death of the little dog who never harmed anyone; the treatment of the girl in the white lace dress; the murder of six-months-old Nancy Goodell by her father. As a matter of fact, the ugliness of the crime of murder is heavily underscored throughout the entire poem. Besides Nancy Goodell, Williams presents the discovery of a corpse in 1875 by Leonard Sanford; the shooting of John Joseph Van Houten; the fate of a woman in love with a Fort Bragg soldier (though this is only hinted to be a case of homicide); Kieft's massacre of the two Indians; the murdered woman whose killer had served four years of his sentence; Jonathan Hopper, Revolutionary hero slaughtered in bed by ruffians; the slaying of the elderly Van Winkles.[6]

These are some of the particular instances of trampled beauty which have left their impression on the sensitive poet. In the modern world "beauty is feared and therefore bought, debased, raped."[7] So too the poet's "Beautiful Thing," the young woman whom he worships at the end of Part Two, is "drunk and bedraggled" and "smells like a whore." The specific corruption points to a general corruption, "a world of corrupt cities, / nothing else, that death stares in the eye, / lacking love." In the holocaust which follows, the beauty of "The Beautiful

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[6] Quinn, p. 113.

[7] Monroe K. Spears, "The Failure of Language," Poetry, LXXVI (April 1950), p. 40.

Thing" surmounts the world because the vulgarity of beauty "surpasses all perfections." The fire which sweeps the city and the library is a transforming fire, since it also represents the poetic spirit. Books and the library are destroyed because they incorporate little of the beauty originally in the poet's mind.

> Dig in - and you have
>
> A nothing, surrounded by
> a surface, an inverted
> bell resounding, a
>
> white-hot man become
> a book, the emptiness of
> a cavern resounding
>
> (III, ii, 149)

Following the fire is the flood, which is the dominant symbol of Section Three. It takes with it a load of "cultural debris"[8] toward Acheron. In this descent is indicated the cost of beauty in the modern world-which is the primary theme of Book Three. The "purgatorial mood"[9] of this book is sustained through the use of wind, fire and flood, until the apocalyptic end:

> Loosen the flesh
> from the machine, build no more
> bridges. Through what air will you
> fly to span the continents? Let the words
> fall any way at all - that they may
> hit love aslant. It will be a rare
> visitation.
>
> (III, iii, 169)

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[8] R.W. Fling, "I Will Teach You my Townspeople," The Kenyon Review, XII (Autumn 1950), p. 540.

[9] Ibid., p. 540.

Book Three concludes on a note of affirmation. The poet is not content to spend his life looking into the past, nor in the future is there any answer, rather,

> . . . I must
> find my meaning and lay it, white,
> beside the sliding water: myself --
> comb out the language - or succumb.
> (III, iii, 173)

CHAPTER X

PATERSON - BOOK FOUR

Book Four was at first intended to be the last book in Paterson. Williams described Book Four as "the river below the falls, ... reminiscent of episodes - all that any one man may achieve in a lifetime."[1] He intended the river to end "in a sea of objectivity, of indifferent men: bring it finally back to that."[2]

Using candid vernacular, Williams immediately introduces a note of modern degradation: "Look, Big Shot, I refuse to come home until you promise to cut out the booze." This book is "indeed full of perverse confusions and separations."[3] An incongruous effect is achieved in the opening section by Williams's use of the pastoral genre. In the first section, which he has called an Idyll, we are introduced to Corydon, a decadent New York Lesbian, and Phyllis, a beautiful nurse from Paterson. We also meet Paterson the married man who has been metamorphosed into a "suburban Prufrock."[4] The similarities to

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[1] "Author's note," Paterson, p.4.

[2] New Directions 17, p. 304.

[3] Quinn, p. 118.

[4] Guimond, p. 193

Eliot's work here are evident :

> Oh Paterson! Oh married man!
> He is the city of cheap hotels and private
> entrances. Of taxis at the door, the car
> standing in the rain hour after hour by
> the road house entrance.
> (Paterson IV, i, 183)

In Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" we have:

> Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
> The muttering retreats
> of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
> And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
> (4-7)

Paterson also recalls lines from The Waste Land:

> At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
> Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits,
> Like a taxi throbbing waiting,
> (ii, 215-217)

and:

> And if it rains, a closed car at four.
> (ii, 136)

Williams's view of the modern city has the despairing tone of Eliot's. Commenting on Paterson IV he writes:

> If you are going to write realistically of
> the conception of the filth in the world, it can't
> be pretty. What goes on with people isn't pretty.
> With the approach to the city, international
> character began to enter the innocent river and
> pervert it; sexual perversions, such things that
> every metropolis ... houses. Certain human
> elements can't take the gaff, have to become
> perverts to satisfy certain longings. 5

In the sea of filth, which is the modern city, some seeds of virtue remain afloat. In Book Four the character who best

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5 I Wanted to Write, p. 49.

represents surviving virtue is Phyllis, the young nurse. Though she is plagued from all sides (Corydon, the lesbian, and Paterson, the married man, try to seduce her, and her drunkard father to whom she is still attracted prevents her from living at home) she retains her virtue. Because of her strength and firmness of purpose she attracts the depraved and the weak. Having her roots in the country, removed from the city, she has within her those values and strengths which can be associated with the traditional woman. Her knowledge of these simple virtues enables her to ward off the corrupting influences of the city. Her counterpart in Part Two is Madame Curie, the modern feminine exemplar of knowledge and invention. In her journey through the urban mire Phyllis, like Pamela, preserves her virginity for the ultimate reward, marriage. In her encounters she exposes much of the disunity and frustration in modern life. There is the "broken-home" situation of Phyllis and her father caused by the latter's drunkenness, and the frustrating existence of Phyllis's employer, Corydon, who seeks but does not find satisfaction in homosexuality. A similar feeling of frustration is evident in the character of Paterson, the married man, who obviously, in his pursuit of Phyllis, indicates his failure to find complete satisfaction in marriage. One recalls Williams's statement that "What goes on with people isn't pretty." Perhaps Corydon's poignant statement summarizes

better than any other the prevailing mood of Section One:

> Oh I could cry!
> Cry upon your young shoulder for what I know.
> I feel so alone.
>
> (IV, i, 196)

In Section Two we meet two prominent figures: Allen Ginsberg and Madame Curie. Having been born in the actual city of Paterson, Ginsberg knew well the "gastanks, junkyards, fens of the alley, millways, funeral parlours, river visions - aye! the falls itself" of which Williams wrote. (IV, ii, 204). As a young poet Ginsberg intended to carry on searching for Williams's goal which was to get to know the world through a specific and intense study of the local. Madame Curie, who discovered radium while she was pregnant, was important for several reasons. First, she proved that man was able to transmute the elements. Secondly, though she established herself as a woman of considerable genius she did not lose her feminine appeal. "Her presence in the poem indicates that invention and discovery will no longer be purely male prerogatives; and men like Curie and St. Joseph may buttress the woman so she may create more than infants."[6] Perhaps the most important point that can be made about Williams's inclusion of Madame Curie and her invention is that through her discovery there was made available a tremendous power which may be used for the

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[6] Guimond, p. 196.

betterment or undoing of mankind.

Williams ends this section on a note of condemnation in which he blames usury for creating the many slums, a social evil which plagues our civilization. There seems little doubt that Williams was influenced by Pound who recommended "Local control of local purchasing/power." (IV, ii, 218). Such a social-credit economy would make the "Difference between squalor of spreading slums / and splendor of renaissance cities." (IV, ii, 218)

In the third and final section of Paterson IV the poet recalls the many loves he has known. Some remain precise and clear in his memory while others are lost in a blurred piteous spectacle:

> Others - half-hearted, the over-eager
> the dull, pity for all of them, staring
> out of dirty windows, hopeless, indifferent,
> Come too late and a few, too drunk
> With it - or anything - to be awake to
> receive it.
>
> (IV, iii, 225)

A second concern in this section is the social lust for murder. Williams recounts the murder of an elderly couple by a man by the name of John Johnson. For his inhuman butchery Johnson was hanged. His hanging, a legal one, was witnessed by the citizenry. Johnson, who had doubtless killed for money, did not get it. Those who lust for blood also fail to get satisfaction. War, too, is a self-defeating thing. Williams's lines warn us that only vain regrets can result from individual or national

participation in blood lust.

You come today to see killed
killed, killed
As if it were a conclusion
- a conclusion!

a convincing strewing of corpses
- to move the mind

as tho the mind
can be moved, the mind, I said
by an array of hacked corpses:

War!

a poverty of resource . .

Twenty feet of
guts on the black sands of Iwo

"What have I done?
- to convince whom? the sea worm?
They are used to death and
jubilate at it.

Murder

- you cannot believe
that it can begin again, again, here
again. here
Waken from a dream, this dream of
the whole poem. sea bound,
rises, a sea of blood

- the sea that sucks in all rivers,
dazzled, led
by the salmon and the shad.

Turn back I warn you
(October 10, 1950)
from the shark, that snaps
at his own trailing guts, makes a sunset
of the green water.

(IV, iii, 233-34)

Man does not belong in this ocean of "savage lusts."[7] Book Four closes on a note of hope as we see the lone figure of a man emerge from the sea and accompanied by a dog [the symbol of his thoughts] move inland, there to invent a new world.

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[7] Williams, Selected Letters, p. 292.

CHAPTER XI

PATERSON - BOOK FIVE

The first four books of Paterson constitute a "devastating comment on every phase of our life, though a comment relieved by momentary oases of perceived or envisioned beauty, and they end modestly and familiarly as they began in the midst of things, in the midst of predicament."[1] In Book Five Williams continues many of the themes found in the previous books. Prominent among these are his conception of sexual confusion and the need for communication; the divorce of the artist from the masses; and the great separation among men caused by suffering and brutality. By referring in Book Five to many great works of art (a play of Lorca's, a Breughel Nativity, and a great Flemish tapestry displaying the hunting of the Unicorn) he seems to suggest that through art alone does the imagination survive.

> So through art alone, male and female, a field of
> flowers, a tapestry, spring flowers unequalled
> in loveliness
> through this hole
> at the bottom of the cavern
> of death, the imagination
> escapes intact.
>
> (V, i, 247)

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[1] M.L. Rosenthal, "Salvo for William Carlos Williams," The Nation, CLXXXVI (May 31, 1958), p. 500.

Paterson Book Five may be regarded as an epilogue or coda since it is written in a "reminiscent mode that served to recapitulate and bind together all the foregoing poem."[2] In recapitulation it explores with considerable authenticity an awareness of the facts of "deformity, demonic desire, and impending death," none of which can be dissociated from modern chaos. Williams, in Book Five, sketches little portraits of the horror of mass murder and individual indifference to death:

> I saw love
> mounted naked on a horse
> on a swan
> the tail of a fish
> the bloodthirsty conger eel
> and laughed
> recalling the Jew
> in the pit
> among his fellows
> when the indifferent chap
> with the machine gun
> was spraying the heap.
> he had not yet been hit
> but smiled
> comforting his companions
> comforting
> his companions. (V, i, 249)

Rather than reopen the issues in the Fifth Book, Williams "refocuses" them.

> The transforming and saving power of the aesthetic imagination is played like a brilliant light over old archetypal motifs and symbols - sexuality versus chaste love, realtiy versus the ideal, the virgin and the whore, the hunted-down Unicorn pictured, in a famous tapestry now at The

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[2] Louis Martz, "The Unicorn in Paterson: William Carlos Williams," Twentieth Century Views, ed. by J. Hillis Miller (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1966), p. 71.

> Cloisters in New York, amid a setting both natural and courtly. Such themes and images do the refocusing, placing the poet's perspectives in sharper relation to the bedeviled perspectives of the culture at large. 3

One of the bedeviled perspectives of modern culture is the social distinction between the moral woman and the immoral, between the virgin and the whore. In Book Five Williams brings to a climax his discussion of sexual confusion and lack of communication. His ideas are unquestionably liberal. Casting aside the traditional value placed on virginity he boldly asserts that it has little relevance when considered in relation to virtue. Thus, "No woman is virtuous / who does not give herself to her lover / - forthwith." In Williams's view of life, "the coldness of a contriving virgin was like the enveloping sea from which Paterson had returned, a representation of the world's major evil - man's indifference to man."[4] By attempting to achieve virtue man would eliminate the indifference which sets him apart from his fellow man. Williams felt that virtue could be achieved only through "selfless attempts to do one's best in some type of creation; and that, of all the monuments to humanity, 'A World of Art' is the most lasting."[5]

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[3] Rosenthal, p. 500.

[4] Wagner, p. 108.

[5] Ibid., p. 108.

- the virgin and the whore, which
most endures? the world
of the imagination most endures:

Pollock's blobs of paint squeezed out
with design!
pure from the tube. Nothing else
is real . . .

(V, i, 248-249)

Near the end of Book Five we get a last glimpse of the virgin and the whore as they are seen "preserved" in a fine work of art, a tapestry. To Williams the two figures appear as an identity; this suggests that the artist does not condemn as quickly as others do. Ridding himself of artificial social distinctions Williams designed his own personal criteria for determining what was "good."

In Paterson Williams was forced to present a picture of modern man in a state of degeneration. To do otherwise would have been dishonest. But his view of man was not totally pessimistic. Writing in "The Golden Goose" in 1951 Williams defined a poet as a man who "believes in his world, he believes in his people, and that's the reason he's a poet ... basic faith in the world."[6] Paterson represents a full statement of Williams's life. It expresses his deep faith in man and an abiding belief in the fact that the human situation was redeemable. He felt that men must learn "to tolerate each other and be generous

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[6] "Symposium on Writing," The Golden Goose, Series III, no. 2 (Autumn 1951), 90-91.

minded toward each other."

In his role as a poet Williams saw himself as a part of the present, surging, immediate life. Because he is a part of all that he meets, he is truly a "representative man sustained by and sustaining a living society, an agent of its culture." The poet in Paterson has a sense of obligation to the society of which he is a part. Aware of the many shortcomings of his culture he writes with the intention of eliminating them. His poetry acts as a means of redemption.

> a poet of culture (all that immediately environs us) is one who in his art responds to the living needs of his time and tries to make his art a force in the situation of his time. [7]

It is this role which makes Williams unique among poets. In his view of the relationship between art and society, Williams is very unlike Pound and Eliot.

> Eliot, Pound and Williams try to do this; all are poets of culture. But Eliot and Pound offer culture as a solution to the problems of culture; and each has a doctrine, the one religious, the other economic. Williams, however, offers only poetry: the imaginative action of men in contact with their environment. [8]

In Paterson we are constantly reminded of the "divorce" that exists in life. Not being able to communicate

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[7] Sherman Paul, The Music of Survival (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968), p. 34.

[8] Ibid., p. 116.

men become isolated from society, each other, women, creation, and consequently life. One of the central concerns of Paterson is to find a means of union which will bring men together. Language, Williams thought, might be an answer if man were not caught up in a swirl of meaningless words which replace the articulate speech necessary for communication. Realizing that the printed word was equally ineffective, Williams turned to "physical relationships and, finally, to a poetry which borrowed much from graphic art as his means of expression."[9]

Thus the whole point of Paterson is not the search for the "redeeming language" which too many critics stress. Rather it is a search for that harmony which can bring men together. Williams finds that harmony in the world of the imagination. To the artist and to any man who is truly alive the imagination is a primary source of existence. Modern man can escape from the depressing conditions of the world about him to a fuller and more satisfying world of the imagination.

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[9] Wagner, p. 115.

CONCLUSION

> The poet does not give you a full and accurate picture of the world nor a full and accurate picture of himself, but he gives you an amalgam which, if successful, represents truthfully his own relation to the world. This is a valuable function, for we are all concerned with our relations to our worlds, and the odds are that we have much in common with the poet and our world with his.[1]

In that poetry of Williams which we have studied, we have had a valuable if not "a full and accurate picture of the world." Poetry may be called valuable if, as entertainment or criticism, it enriches the experiences of its readers. In many of his poems, as we have seen, Williams has thrown new light on everyday experience and everyday things. In Williams there is no gulf between the particulars of his poem and the universal truths which are implied. In giving us the timeless truths based upon his own local experience, Williams may be called a classical writer. For the classic to him was the local fully realized, "words marked by a place." It was Williams, not Pound or Eliot, who chose the native materials of America and managed to make them poetic. The literary works of

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[1] Louis Macneice, Modern Poetry (Oxford, 1968), p. 199.

Pound and Eliot have a cosmopolitan flavour. They were successful in merging American data into an international complex.

In contrast to their cosmopolitanism we can see in Williams's work a more limited, partly philosophical nativism. As one writer puts it, "Any number of American writers have tried to make grails out of ashcans."[2] It is in his treatment of the things of America that Williams distinguishes himself from the others. "One of the basic national economies of Williams is the confidence with which he has been able to look at an ashcan, or hear a sparrow, and yet recognize their potential."[3]

> The little sparrows
> hop ingenuously
> about the pavement
> quarreling
> with sharp voices
> over those things
> that interest them.
> But we who are wiser
> shut ourselves in
> on either hand
> and no one knows
> whether we think good
> or evil.

Williams's ironic comment on man's wisdom recalls the theme of Paterson Book One. There, he unequivocally expresses

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[2] Norman Holmes Pearson, "Williams, New Jersey", The Literary Review, I (Autumn 1957), p. 29.

[3] Ibid., p. 29.

his disgust for man who keeps locked within himself a great potential beauty. The grail for which Williams searched was the beauty in man. In the Preface to Paterson Book One he writes: "Rigor of beauty is the quest. But how will you find beauty when it is locked in the mind past all remonstrance?" In his long industrial-age epic poem Paterson, he dramatically pulls together the disparate "things" of his locality so that the compressed details of his poem apply not only to America but to the world.

Williams struggled for an intense vision of the things which made up his locality. He endeavoured to articulate the organic relationships between the "things" and the "place" showing their complexity and tensions as well as their congruence. Realizing that there could be no poetry without formalism he invented formal structures which, rather than being superimposed, artificial and traditional, were based upon the nature of things. The method which Williams adopted in Paterson closely resembles the formal method used by Pound in The Cantos. But whereas Pound takes us out into the world stream Williams brings the world home to the door. In Paterson all the many features - the man-city, the mountain-woman, the river which flows between them, the sense of marriage and divorce, the juxtaposition of the things of history and the things of nature, of men in picnic and prayer - "strain and unite like

the features of the century itself."[4] Williams worked with the materials which surrounded him. As a physician he was intimate with the real world of suffering and pain. As an artist he passionately worked to elevate, through the sheer power of imagination, the drab materials of his world to the level of art.

To Williams nothing was "anti-poetic." Wallace Stevens coined this epithet and thereby angered Williams. Williams argued that the materials of poetry were unrestricted and unlimited. Anything - the commonplace, the tawdry and the sordid - could be used. These things needed only the elevating power of the poet's imagination. They were to be found in the immediate surroundings of the poet - what Williams called the "genius of place." By concentrating on the things and the language of his locality the poet learns his craft. The locale becomes the centre of his poetry for it has both a specific and a general nature. It is only when a poet understands his immediate place that he can extend his understanding to the world. It does not work the other way around. "The centre of the poem is the locale", Williams wrote, "the province of the poem is the world."

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[4] Pearson, p. 36.

"At the intellectual center of Paterson" is Williams's "concern over the breakdown of language."[5] In his poems he was especially concerned with the meanings of words and with their syntactical arrangements. If the poem was a ship, words were the engine that ran it. Words, Williams felt, must generate feeling and inspire the imagination. Words as they are used in poetry go beyond the use expected of them in prose. And because of this, Williams did not feel bound to use conventional grammatical structures, since grammar is an inherent part of prose structure rather than of poetic. In his poems, Paterson particularly, there are many grammatical aberrations. Far from detracting from Williams's work, these aberrations are very effective. Because similar aberrants exist in the actual world it was natural, in Williams's view, to reflect them in his poetry. By so doing he honestly portrayed the actual world. This, he felt, was a vital function of the poet. As Williams said, "it was a question of producing a clear indication that like the physical world, the world of his poem was a complex of distinct parts performing, in the poem's structure, their function in making up the whole."[6]

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[5] Ostrom, p. 137.

[6] Ibid., p. 138.

Though Williams's work was devoted wholly to the betterment of humanity, many of his critics argued that humanity in the mass could not possibly appreciate those intricacies, refinements and difficulties which made up his art. Besides, they argued, the ordinary man does not need art; the need being restricted to the rare mind possessed of sensibility. Williams felt that the literate, refined man perhaps did excel the ordinary one in his appreciation of art but not in his need for it. The man in the mass may not know he needs art but the poet does and while the need exists the poet cannot rest.

> He doesn't know he lacks and needs it but I know he needs it. I know what he needs better than he and I cannot ignore it....
> .....
>
> That is the source of aspiration, a need which the poet sees and devotes his small life to find and to delineate. You know, He watches the sparrow fall. Everything happens within everything else. There can be no satisfaction for the poet otherwise. What can he be without the mob? [7]

Left free, the artist becomes the most truthful scribe that society can find. He functions also as

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[7] Williams, Selected Essays, pp. 192-93.

society's preceptor and his success is judged not by the purchasers of his work but "inexorably by society - by society as a whole, the great being great only as society accepts and enthrones them."[8] The poet, clearly, is to have absolute freedom in the expression of his talent. He is "answerable to no one before the act but to his own conception of the truth."[9]

His creation of a poetic structure is, for Williams, affirmation of the fact that there is a better world. Life that is here and now as Williams sees it is a timeless thing and it is his job as an artist to embody that view in a work of art. Art, because it does not change, preserves the timeless quality of man's lives. The "reality" that Williams strives for is a sensual one, since the world of the senses is the only world which exists for the artist. He is a "universal man of action"[10] whose work it is to make compact that which is general and timeless. His treatment of his materials is not symbolic but direct. Thus he cannot become dissociated from his world and time. His work is a sensual, realistic expression of the world. What Williams means by the

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[8] Ibid., p. 194.

[9] Ibid., p. 195.

[10] Ibid., p. 197.

universality of the local is clearly seen in these lines:

> Being an artist I can produce, if I am able, universals of general applicability. If I succeed in keeping myself objective enough, sensual enough, I can produce the factors, the concretions of materials by which others shall understand and so be led to use - that they may the better see, touch, taste, enjoy - their own world differing as it may from mine. By mine, they, different, can be discovered to be the same as I and, thrown into contrast, will see the implications of a general enjoyment through me. [11]

Art, then, increases man's understanding of the world and himself. It can bring men together and show the world at one with itself. Every masterwork does two things: it frees man from the mundane and the ordinary while at the same time "it draws the world closer in mutual understanding and tolerance."[12] Because of its compactness art is not, at its best, a mirror to nature; rather, Williams says, it is life - "but transmuted to another tighter form."[13] In the art of William Carlos Williams a man, different from him, can discover Williams's love of humanity, which is the quintessence of his poetry, and delight in the knowledge that he and others can share in the general joy.

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[11] Ibid., p. 198.

[12] Ibid., p. 199.

[13] Ibid., p. 198.

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