

William Carlos Williams

Edited by
Charles Doyle

The Critical Heritage



WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

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WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

Edited by

CHARLES DOYLE



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General Editor's Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

To Colin Partridge

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Abbreviations

AQQ	'Al Que Quiere!' (Boston, 1917)
'Autobiography'	'The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams' (New York, 1951)
'Bibliography'	Emily Mitchell Wallace, 'A Bibliography of William Carlos Williams' (Middletown, Conn., 1968)
BU	'The Build-Up' (New York, 1952)
Buffalo Collection	Williams' papers and manuscripts in the Poetry Room, Lockwood Memorial Library, State University of New York at Buffalo
CCP 1906-38	'The Complete Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams 1906-1938' (Norfolk, Conn., 1938)
CEP	'The Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams' (Norfolk, Conn., 1951)
CLP	'The Collected Later Poems of William Carlos Williams' (Norfolk, Conn., 1950; revised 1963)
CP 1921-31	'Collected Poems 1921-1931', with a preface by Wallace Stevens (New York, 1934)
DM	'The Desert Music and Other Poems' (New York, 1954)

xix Abbreviations

FD	'The Farmers' Daughters' (Norfolk, Conn., 1961)
GAN	'The Great American Novel' (Paris, 1923), included in 'Imaginations' edited by Webster Schott (New York, 1970)
IAG	'In the American Grain' (New York, 1925; revised 1966)
IM	'In the Money' (Norfolk, Conn., 1940)
IWWP	'I Wanted to Write a Poem', edited by Edith Heal (Boston, 1958)
JL	'Journey to Love' (New York, 1955)
'Kora'	'Kora in Hell: Improvisations' (Boston, 1920), included in 'Imaginations', edited by Webster Schott (New York, 1970)
ML	'Many Loves and Other Plays' (Norfolk, Conn., 1961)
P	'Paterson [Collected]' (Norfolk, Conn., 1963) and the separate Books of the poem, published respectively in 1946, 1948, 1949, 1951 and 1958
PB	'Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems' (Norfolk, Conn., 1962)
SA	'Spring and All' (Dijon, France, 1923), included in 'Imaginations', edited by Webster Schott (New York, 1970)
SE	'Selected Essays' (New York, 1954)
SL	'The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams', edited by John C. Thirlwall (New York, 1957)
VP	'A Voyage to Pagany' (New York, 1928)
WM	'White Mule' (Norfolk, Conn., 1937)
Yale Collection	Williams' papers and manuscripts in the American Literature Collection, the Beinecke Library, Yale University

Introduction

'Before meeting Ezra Pound is like B.C. and A.D.' William Carlos Williams' often-quoted remark in 'I Wanted to Write a Poem' (1) locates precisely the beginning of intelligent critical response to his poetry. During the academic year 1902-3 Pound and he, both students at the University of Pennsylvania, were introduced to each other by a common acquaintance who felt that Pound would like to meet Williams because each was writing verse. (2) When Williams showed his work, Pound was not impressed. Williams recalled that 'He was impressed with his own poetry; but then, I was impressed with my own poetry, too, so we got along all right' (IWWP, 5). At that time Williams was reading Shakespeare, Palgrave's 'Golden Treasury' and the romantic poets, particularly Keats. Among the more contemporary versifiers he expressed approval of James Whitcomb Riley, sentimental Hoosier dialect poet, and the influential Canadian poet of 'Vagabondia', Bliss Carman. To earn pocket-money from his father, he read Darwin's 'The Origin of Species' and 'The Descent of Man', but in the three-volume illustrated family set of Dante's 'Divine Comedy' he got no further than Gustave Doré's engravings, admitting later that 'The text escaped me'. (3) Characterizing his verse-writing of these early years, Williams recalled two very different kinds, the first - 'More Whitmanesque than Keats' - being 'My quick spontaneous poems, as opposed to my studied Keatsian sonnets!' (IWWP, 5).

In 1954 Williams wrote to Pound that he had 'deeply influenced my formative years', (4) but to Edith Heal somewhat later he observed that 'I always kept myself free from anything that Pound said' (IWWP, 6). As a young man Williams was very versatile. He began training in dentistry but settled on medicine as a working profession, and his long career as a general practitioner in his home town of Rutherford, N.J., had considerable

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influence on his writing and became an important part of the Williams 'myth'. Settling upon an avocation proved more difficult, since he possessed (or believed himself to possess) some measure of talent in music, painting and acting. Before he met Pound, however, he had already decided to concentrate on writing. What Pound did for him, Williams sums up in 'Letter to an Australian Editor', more than forty years later, when he says, 'I am deeply indebted to him for much of my early knowledge of the problems faced by a writer.' (5) Where Williams read Carman and Richard Hovey, Pound then and thereafter attacked his reading, pressing upon him in the early years such works as 'Longinus on the Sublime'; at a later period, he was responsible for Williams finding a key book such as Brooks Adams' 'The Law of Civilisation and Decay'. At first Williams found Pound's verse anarchic in substance and did not wish to be influenced by it, but within a few years Pound's sense of 'the problems faced by a writer' had begun to shape the work of his fellow-poet, both in theory and practice.

Reception of Williams' books by reviewers over the years is both a contrast and a complement to the reception of Pound. Pound's early work was reviewed in England by such writers as Edward Thomas, Rupert Brooke, F. S. Flint and Ford Madox Ford (first in 1915, when he was still Hueffer), whereas Williams was virtually unknown, although his earliest magazine-published poems, apart from those in 'Poetry' (Chicago), appeared in 'Poetry Review' and the 'Egoist', both based in London. As far as public reputation is concerned, Williams was long a-borning, never genuinely secure until the last fifteen years of his life. Pound's reputation, on the other hand, tended to undulate: greeted with early enthusiasm, his stock in London had declined by the middle of the First World War and thereafter, much complicated by his political involvements, it was in both Europe and the United States to suffer from alternating neglect and notoriety before the renown of his last years.

The present collection of reviews and comments on William Carlos Williams' work and career has been culled from a much larger body of material, but one aim kept clearly in mind has been that the selection should represent adequately the actual trends of critical response. In a surprising number of cases nuances and suggestions are provided by ephemeral reviews, which add to the standard critical materials. Few excerpts or essays have been taken from books, which are generally quite widely available, but in some instances such items have been included as crucial either for filling a gap or for summing up

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Williams' reputation at a given stage. A small number of the selected reviews may appear superficial, or downright foolish, but they have been included as part of the pattern of significant response to the successive volumes of Williams' work.

WILLIAMS AND POUND

Williams and Pound each had his first book printed at his own expense, but by the time Pound's 'A Lume Spento' was published in Venice in 1908 he was already in Europe, and had become an instance of 'the permanent expatriate type'. (6) Williams settled into his lifelong home town of Rutherford, N.J., and from there launched his official career as poet with 'Poems' (1909). Pound's response to Williams' book was devastatingly blunt (No. 2) and includes copious advice as to what 'Dear Billy' should read. Williams apparently had been equally frank in commenting on 'A Lume Spento'; Pound had thanked him for giving the work 'long enough consideration to know what he really thinks' (7) and had proffered a list of objectives for the poet, which included 'To paint the thing' as he sees it and 'Freedom from didacticism'. Candid criticism remained one of the good features of the writers' lifelong friendship.

On holiday from Leipzig where he was furthering his studies in medicine, Williams visited Pound briefly in London in 1910. This was the milieu described by Richard Aldington in chapter VII of 'Life for Life's Sake', where 'to get in at all you had to know the passwords - Omar, "Vita Nuova", "Aucassin"', (8) requirements very likely sponsored by Pound himself. Williams, in his 'Autobiography', suggests that he had already discovered 'Aucassin and Nicolette' (which was to have formal effects on his own work) in Philadelphia student days through his friendship with Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) ('Autobiography', 52) and had also read 'Vita Nuova' (probably at Pound's suggestion, 'Autobiography', 66).

These years between 'Poems' and 'The Tempers' (1913) are probably the period when Pound's influence on Williams was most formative. He was obviously impressed with Pound in the poet's role as is suggested by Orrick Johns' account of one of Williams' visits to Grantwood: (9)

He described Pound's appearance to us, his silky beard, long flowing hair, and unconventional clothes, and his contagious, crusading earnestness. There were books on Pound's bed, and floor everywhere, in five languages,

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as another friend reported to me, and Ezra could really read them all.

Pound was back in the United States in the latter part of 1910 and Williams saw a great deal of him. Through Pound's personal influence Williams' poems were published in 'Poetry Review' (London) in 1912; that same year, in October, Pound became overseas correspondent for the new Chicago magazine, 'Poetry', and through his suggestion the June 1913 number of the magazine included a group of Williams' poems. Pound arranged with Elkin Mathews of London for publication of Williams' 'The Tempers', wrote the introduction and then reviewed the book in the 'New Freewoman' (No. 3). The poems themselves show Pound's influence, candidly acknowledged by Williams, although he adds with a touch of irony that they were influenced 'even more by Palgrave's "Golden Treasury"' (IWWP, 16).

Harriet Monroe, in 'A Poet's Life', provides a glimpse of Williams' positive response to criticism in those days. Writing to accept the group of poems which were to appear in the June 1913 issue of 'Poetry' she offered detailed technical suggestions, for revising one poem and modifying another, and she chided him: (10)

In Proof of Immortality you are using a fixed iambic measure to which the fourth and sixth lines do not seem to me to conform. They are both a syllable short. Will you please consider this point? I do not care much either for the title of this poem. Wouldn't The Immortal be better, or something else which you may think of?

Williams replied: 'I am startled to see that you are fast gravitating to the usual editorial position'; however, he followed most of her suggestions, but demurred on a point of metrics:

Your suggestion The Immortal is permissible in the place of Proof of Immortality, but not so amusing. As to the meter in this piece, if you wish to judge it as a fixed iambic measure you are dogmatically right as to the disturbing fourth and sixth lines; but why not call it some other kind of measure?

Proof of Immortality appeared in 'Poetry', but in 'The Collected Earlier Poems' (1951) it is titled Immortal.

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KREYMBORG, STIEGLITZ AND THE VISUAL ARTS

While the young Williams had seen Whitman as a model, Pound as early as 1909, from the vantage-point of his 'world'citizenship', said of Whitman, 'His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but it *is* America.' (11) To this America Williams had committed himself, and that commitment included a continuing consciousness of Whitman's importance as may be attested by the blurb of 'Al Que Quiere!' (1917) advertised (in Williams' tone) as 'a book in which, we venture to predict, the poets of the future will dig for material as the poets of today dig in Whitman's "Leaves of Grass"' ('Bibliography', 12). Pound, a year or two earlier, had seen signs of an artistic and cultural awakening in the United States and, in his essay 'The Renaissance, in 'Poetry', 1914, had laid down prescriptions for fostering this awakening. Again he was in the position of advising from afar, but none the less his reaction to Williams' developing localism (contained in a letter included almost in its entirety in 'Kora in Hell' (1920)) firmly reminds Williams, whose father had brought the family to Rutherford from the West Indies in 1881, of his background: 'And America! What the hell do you a bloomin' foreigner know about the place? Your pere only penetrated the edge ...' (No. 6). (See also Williams' letter to Pound of 23 March 1933, at which point in time their squabble about 'murika' still continued. SL, 139-40.) By 1917 Williams indeed knew and felt a great deal about 'the place'. Although Pound continued to help get Williams' work published, in magazines such as the 'Egoist', and in the Pound-edited anthologies 'Des Imagistes' (1914) and 'Catholic Anthology' (1915), Pound's direct literary influence on Williams from that time on was replaced by that of such poets as Alfred Kreymborg, Maxwell Bodenheim and Mina Loy. Other artistic forces were also at work upon him.

As he mentions in the 'Autobiography', Williams was one of the many American artists to feel the impact of the 1913 Armory Show, the International Exhibition of Modern Art, which provoked an uproar of citizen outrage and artistic exhilaration in New York City, and which revealed to the American public masterpieces of Cubism, Futurism and other modernist painting styles. Reminiscing fifty years later Williams still felt the excitement of the time: (12)

In Paris, painters from Cézanne to Pissarro had been painting their revolutionary canvases for fifty or more years but it was not until I clapped my eyes on Marcel Duchamp's 'Nude Descending a Staircase' that I burst out laughing from the relief it brought me! I

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felt as if an enormous weight had been lifted from my spirit for which I was infinitely grateful.

By late 1915 Williams had become much involved with Kreymborg's 'Others', and the group which was centred on the artists' colony at Grantwood, N.J.; besides Kreymborg and Mina Loy it included, among others, Marianne Moore, Duchamp and the young photographer Man Ray. Many of these artists found a creative focus in '291', the New York gallery of the photographer and editor Alfred Stieglitz, who like Williams was a first-generation American and intensely Americanist, and who had an extensive and sophisticated knowledge of contemporary European art and had been instrumental in setting up the Armory Show. From the pages of Stieglitz's magazine 'Camera Work' and, later, '291', Williams could discover in the theoretical pronouncements of artists such as Gleizes, Picabia and Kandinsky, attitudes and perspectives which undoubtedly affected his own work. (13) Through Kreymborg, also, Williams met Walter Arensberg, the financial backer of 'Others', and joined the crowd at his New York studio; it was a group which consisted mostly of painters and writers influenced by Stieglitz and which gave access not only to Duchamp and Gleizes themselves, but to paintings, drawings and sculpture by Picasso, Duchamp, Gleizes and Brancusi. Stieglitz's awareness of European art was made to serve American purposes. Williams' view, first extensively presented in 'In the American Grain', that the American's failure to sustain contact with his immediate environment would need to be overcome by the American artist's attention to the objects near at hand, was in fact Stieglitz's view and its implications were developed by members of the Stieglitz group such as Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld and the painter Marsden Hartley.

From 'Personae' onwards, Pound's work attracted considerable notice. Williams had to wait until publication of 'In the American Grain' (1925) before he gained any extensive critical recognition, but during the 1920s he earned the attention of several perceptive critics, particularly Marianne Moore and Kenneth Burke, both of whom became lifelong associates and commentators on his work. D. H. Lawrence provided a penetrating review of 'In the American Grain' (No. 17) and Gorham Munson's William Carlos Williams, a United States Poet (No. 19), a chapter of Munson's 'Destinations: a Canvass of American Literature Since 1900' (1928), was the ablest overview to appear in the first long phase of Williams' career, although Paul Rosenfeld's 'Port of New York' essay (No. 13) has the special significance of placing Williams in the context of

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the Stieglitz group.

Pound had provided a potential critical term for use in considering Williams' poetry when he said 'The thing that saves your work is *opacity* ...' (No. 6); presumably this is approval of Williams' denotational use of language, whereby (to cite Pound's essay, Cavalcanti) 'a term is left meaning one particular thing'. (14) Very much apropos Williams' important phrase in the 'Kora' Prologue about 'seeing the thing itself without forethought or afterthought but with great intensity of perception' (SE, 5), Pound's term is also relevant to a much later comment of Williams' where he allies a drawing by Stuart Davis, which was included in the first edition of 'Kora', with the Improvisations themselves, suggesting that both are 'an impressionistic view of the simultaneous' (IWWP, 29). Not only Kandinsky's definition of 'Improvisation' but also his definition of 'Impression' is to the purpose here. (15) Marianne Moore seems highly sensitive to such possibilities when, after quoting from 'Kora', she says: 'Observe how, by means of his rehabilitating power of the mind, he is able to fix the atmosphere of a moment' (No. 7). In this convergence we have the link between two of Williams' own later dicta: 'No ideas but in things!' and 'Only the imagination is real'. Not without point does another reviewer of 'Kora' (No. 8) speak of its 'colossally nice simplicity' and guess at 'something partly eastern about it'. Considerably later, in her review of 'Collected Poems 1921-1931' (1934) (No. 30), Marianne Moore perceives Williams' 'wide-eyed resignation' and his 'abandon born of inner security', observations which Williams responds to as 'overwhelmingly important', telling her that his 'sudden resignation to existence' had occurred when he was about twenty years old. All this is the beginning of the long background to a key perception in 'Paterson' (xx, 12):

...an identity - it can't be
otherwise - an
interpenetration, both ways.

Or, as J. Hillis Miller sums it up in his fine Williams chapter in 'Poets of Reality', 'After his resignation there is always and everywhere only one realm. Consciousness permeates the world, and the world has entered into the mind.' (16)

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THE 1920s

In the Preface of 'Paterson', Williams declares it his aim 'To make a start, /out of particulars'. Long before, in an extended review of 'Sour Grapes' (No. 10), Kenneth Burke had noted pithily that 'what Williams sees, he sees in a flash', and he described Williams as 'engaged in discovering the shortest route between object and subject'. Burke draws our attention to the notion which was, in effect, masthead of the first series of 'Contact' magazine (1920-3), jointly edited by Williams and Robert McAlmon. A sense of the need in life and art for 'contact' (of which Burke offers that succinct definition: 'man with nothing but the thing and the feeling for that thing') became paramount to Williams at this time. He asserts that for the artist, contact, 'intensity of perception', is essential in achieving the 'vividness' which it is his task to achieve. (17) Both his emphasis on 'immediate contact with the world' and his Americanism chime in with McAlmon's views, but they also owe much to Stieglitz and to the writings of Hartley (whose 'Adventures in the Arts' was first published in New York in 1921) and Rosenfeld.

Rosenfeld in 'Port of New York' (1924) (No. 13) provided the earliest overview of Williams' work. Despite what Lewis Mumford described as Rosenfeld's 'lyric wisdom', his airy and over-written impressionism, the Williams essay, and indeed the book as a whole, is still valuable, both as a source of the cultural texture of the early 1920s (when Rosenfeld himself was a leading critic) and in relating a number of artists to what he perceives as the central United States 'myth', the failure of man's search for the 'sacred mountain', the Earthly Paradise, a quest in which (18)

America had interposed. America had made an end of the divine delusion. There was no Earthly Paradise. The earth was everywhere what it was in the Old World, no Hesperidean garden of luscious fruits and dreamy skies and endless summer afternoon, but a realm submitted to suffering and age and death, where men had to labour in the sweat of their brows.

Summing up Rosenfeld's sense of the outcome of Columbus' most important voyage of discovery, these words occur in his fine opening essay, on Albert Pinkham Rider, of whose artistic limitations he says: 'But Rider could not bring his whole man into contact with the object' ('Port of New York', 15). Later he judges of Marsden Hartley that 'The object is never visible to him as an integral portion of

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the chain of which he himself is a link' (p. 93). Perhaps because Rosenfeld wrote more firmly about painters and composers his essay on Williams lacks the thrust and density of some pieces of 'Port of New York', but he rightly sees Williams as concentrated on the reality of the American experience, and values his poems for 'the signal of imminent habitable land they give' (p. 114). Published in the year between Lawrence's 'Studies in Classic American Literature' and Williams' 'In the American Grain', 'Port of New York' relates to those two works as a pioneer exploration of the 'new ground'.

Towards the end of the decade Gorham Munson offered his own overview of the 'United States poet' (No. 19), which even by its title shows clearly that he saw Williams' work in a nationalistic context. Six years previously, in an early number of his magazine 'Secession', Munson had declared, 'The act of Ezra Pound in 1908 need not be repeated. The young American can now function in his home milieu.' (19) In the same essay, attacking the genteel tradition, stultifying good taste and 'hazy vague states of mind' then prevalent (Rosenfeld is among his targets), he sees the necessity for replacing these with the 'stark hard definition ... [and] ... accurate rendering of immediate sensations' which he feels is particularly characteristic of Williams' writing. Perhaps for this reason, in 'Destinations' Munson undervalues 'Kora', seeing it as 'a detour'. After an instant in which he seems to give positive significance to Pound's term 'opacity' he proceeds to make it a synonym for 'obscurity'. Nor does he see point to Williams' cult of 'the new', which had come to 'Kora' via Marcel Duchamp's view of the nature of art.

Munson regards this 'United States poet' as 'unmistakably a man who has been pressed upon continuously by American sociology', (20) suggesting that the 'Kora' improvisations derive not so much from Rimbaud as from a youthful phase of the exotic background of Williams' mother, spent in Paris as a painting student under Carolus Duran. In contrast, the one European critic apart from D. H. Lawrence to make a significant contribution to Williams criticism at this time, tends to overestimate Rimbaud's influence.

'Musical' and 'verbalist' qualities, and the 'objectivized vision' promoted first in American poetry by Ezra Pound, are related back to the French symbolist poets by René Taupin in 'L'Influence du symbolisme français sur la Poésie Américaine' (Paris, 1929). Seeing Williams as one of the American group of writers influenced by symbolism and recognizing the importance of 'Kora' in his general

development, Taupin considers that Williams has the most clearly American sensibility among these writers, but he concludes none the less that the American poet has not given his country an indigenous poetic technique. Apposite here is a much later comment made, soon after publication of a new edition of 'Kora' by City Lights Books in 1957, by Kenneth Rexroth: 'the only important prose poems in America are to be found in William Carlos Williams' "Kora in Hell", a sort of prose "Vita Nuova" which shows a familiarity with Max Jacob and Farge'. (21) Apart from his Leipzig period, Williams had as a child attended a French-Swiss school and later added to his first-hand experience of Europe by spending a six-month 'sabbatical' there in 1924, chiefly in Paris. In Europe again in 1927, he did not follow the example of the expatriates, who seemed to have settled there. 'Nothing from abroad would have the reality for me that native writing of the same quality would have,' he declared in 'Contact', IV (1922), (22) but evidence of his mind's availability to the influences of European writing and painting may be found, for example, in his observations on Matisse and Juan Gris, his translations of Soupault and, later, Yvan Goll and René Char. Nevertheless, he was always clear about his priorities, which are central to his long-standing quarrel with Eliot (begun on Williams' side in the Prologue to 'Kora', shortly thereafter to be explicitly supported in Rosenfeld's 'Port of New York'). Eliot himself had virtually nothing to say directly about the quarrel, but Hugh Sykes Davies in the July 1932 'Criterion' greeted Williams' new series of 'Contact' with somewhat heavy irony: 'nearly every contributor succeeds in being unlike his idea of a European writer'. Long engaged in the issue, Williams had written for Pound a Sample Critical Statement, published in 'Contact' in 1921, where he denied insisting that the American writer should ignore Europe; but he did assert that a writer's work must begin in 'the sensual accidents of his immediate contacts'. A possible further dimension to these considerations is added by a comment in Bryher's recent autobiography, 'The Heart to Artemis'. Of Williams' 1924 Paris sojourn she says 'his apparent hatred of his native land startled even us'. (23)

Apart from Taupin's essay, there was virtually no response to Williams' work in Europe before the Second World War, although the 'Times Literary Supplement' reviewer found 'A Voyage to Pagany' 'an interesting curiosity' (No. 22). F. R. Leavis, in 'Scrutiny', reviewing Pound's 'Active Anthology', remarked casually that Williams' work had already become outdated and

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irrelevant. (24) Only Pound's friend and disciple Basil Bunting, among British commentators at that time, responded to Williams' poetry positively and with understanding, in the American 'Westminster Magazine' (summer 1934) (No. 32). Such neglect was not suffered by Williams alone, however; of the major American poets only Eliot and Pound, the expatriates, received substantial attention. Conversely, the 'Dial', which during the 1920s became the most influential magazine of the arts in the English-speaking world, published the earliest English translation of Rilke and featured cultural reports from such figures as Hofmannsthal, Eliot and Thomas Mann. Writing to Gilbert Seldes, the 'Dial's' managing editor, in 1922, Williams felt constrained to admit that the contents which most interested him 'are usually by some Europeans'. (25) Particularly in the early 1920s the 'Dial', and its publisher-editor Scofield Thayer, was pro-Eliot and against that 'localism' which Thayer believed inevitably made American art provincial. Thayer's co-publisher James Sibley Watson was, on the other hand, a great admirer of Williams and even wrote editorials under a pseudonym, W. C. Blum, intended to suggest his particular respect for Williams.

From 'In the American Grain' onwards Williams' books (with a few exceptions, such as the small editions published by the Alcestis Press in the mid-1930s) were seriously and substantially reviewed. Almost inevitably, the most penetrating comment on 'In the American Grain' is D. H. Lawrence's brilliant piece in the 'Nation' (No. 17), wherein Lawrence takes hold of Williams' central conception of the 'local' (brought into focus, as is well known, by Dewey's 1920 'Dial' essay, Americanism and Localism) and relates it to 'contact'. Lawrence perceives why Poe's distinction between nationalism and localism is important to Williams, and why he can take the (what may have seemed surprising) view that 'it is a *new locality* that is in Poe assertive' and that 'it is a *beginning* he has in mind, a juvenescent *local literature*' (IAG, 216, 217). Lawrence sees clearly, as does Zukofsky a year or two later on reading 'A Voyage to Paganry' (No. 20), that Williams' own concern is with how to '*begin* to be American' and that he feels the only positive way to do it (in contrast with the fearful, puritanical attempt hitherto) is, in Lawrence's phrase, to 'touch America as she is', to make contact with the hidden genius of the continent.

For Williams all economic aspects of the vocation of American poet were considerably straitened. He largely paid for publication of his first five books himself.

The next two were limited editions printed in France: 'The Great American Novel' (1923) issued from William Bird's Three Mountains Press, one in a series edited by Pound, and 'Spring and All' (also 1923), as one of the Contact Editions, collaborative fruit of Bird and McAlmon (who had met through Hemingway in 1922). Then, sixteen years after Williams paid Reid Howell of Rutherford \$50 to print 'Poems', Albert and Charles Boni published 'In the American Grain' in New York. 'It was my first book by a commercial publisher', Williams wrote later, 'and I was dancing on air' ('Autobiography', 236). The Bonis produced what he described as 'a beautiful book', but he felt that they made virtually no attempt to sell it. Williams was now considered worthy of critical notice, but more than a decade was still to elapse before he achieved any kind of publishing security.

Almost at the moment 'In the American Grain' was published, Williams became friendly with John Riordan, a young engineer who was a member of A. R. Orage's writing class in New York. (26) Riordan proved to be a useful critic of Williams' poetry. They shared the desire to be 'scientific' (i.e. objective) and their correspondence of this period deals centrally with the relationship between 'fact' and 'experience'. Riordan brought to Williams' notice C. P. Steinmetz's 'Four Lectures on Relativity and Space' (New York and London, 1923) and A. N. Whitehead's 'Science and the Modern World' (New York, 1925) (Williams wrote in his copy of the latter, when he finished reading it at sea in September 1927, 'A milestone surely in my career ...'). Suggesting to him that 'when anyone begins to know anything about what we call "emotions" and "nerve adjustments" it will be found that the structure of your poems (written intuitively) is as rigid as any mathematical solution' (27) Riordan is in effect saying that poet and poem are part of a process. 'Behind this idea', Weaver notes, 'were both the Gurdjieffian discipline of observation without analysis or intellectuality in which Orage had trained his students, and the mathematician's delight in the theory of relativity.' One can see why such an approach to the nature of poetry would appeal to Williams, although temperamentally and intellectually Riordan was very different from him. Riordan's remark about emotions almost seems to address itself directly to Williams' statement eight years earlier: 'The world of the sense lies unintelligible on all sides. It only exists when its emotion is fastened to it. This is artistic creation.' (28) Here the 'fastening' of emotion to action is virtually identical with transforming it imaginatively (by 'invention', Williams would later say). Equally

important, even a great scientific discovery (such as the Curies' isolating of radium - a 'fact' which was to provide, in 'Paterson', a counterpart to Pound's 'radiant nodes', the 'radiant gist') is 'stale, useless' once it has been achieved. Only the very act of discovery engenders a live emotion. Adapting from Pound, Williams holds that 'a truth twenty years old is a lie because the emotion has gone out of it'. In contrast he introduces an idea which was to become central for the Objectivist group of poets: 'To each thing its special quality, its special value that will enable it to stand alone. When each poem has achieved its particular form unlike any other, when it shall stand alone - then we have achieved our language.' Most remarkable in Notes from a Talk on Poetry is the phrase, 'when its emotion is fastened to it', and the whole range of thinking implied by that phrase. No wonder, then, that Williams proposed to Riordan that they should collaborate in writing a 'Modern Prosody'. Riordan had suggested to him that one's emotions could be measured objectively, and that the world of phenomena has a *priori* existence but is nevertheless part of a system of relativity (as Weaver shows, this is background to Williams' gradually evolved theories of measure, particularly 'the variable foot'). Finally, Whitehead's book, a copy of which Riordan had given to Williams in December 1926, contains this statement on the relation between subject and object: 'So far as there is dependence, the *things* pave the way for the *cognition*, rather than *vice versa*. But the point is that the actual things experienced enter a common world which transcends knowledge, though it includes knowledge.' (29) For Williams, of course, the 'things' too are in some sense 'transcended'. From early in his career he felt that the imagination intensified pre-existent reality, and that from this intensification comes the 'eternal moment' when we are truly alive - hence his view of the importance of the fact, and the process, of moment-to-moment experience. The capturing of the 'eternal moment' in poetry (as poetry) he apprehends as realizing 'vividness', declaring that 'poetry should strive for nothing else, [but] this vividness alone, *per se*' (SE, 68) (November 1928). The capture depends therefore on language, and we may relate this to Williams' sense of history - as much a matter of language and imagination as of data - and the consequent texture of 'In the American Grain'.

Another commentator on Williams' work at this period was Louis Zukofsky, whose notational and sometimes sketchy published observations form only part of his critical response to Williams. Meeting Zukofsky (through Pound's

introduction, early in 1928) re-focused Williams' work and his thinking about it in a specific way. He admired Zukofsky's early poetry for its quality of being based on words, language, rather than 'thoughts', and may himself have invented the name of the Objectivist group when he noted, 'Your early poems, even when the thought has enough force or freshness, have not been objectivized in new or fresh observations' (SL, 101). Zukofsky had found in Williams (twenty years his senior) the kind of poet he was looking for. Responding to 'Spring and All', he said of Williams that 'his exclusions of sentimentalities, extraneous comparisons, similes, overweening autobiographies of the heart, of all which permits factitious "reflections about," of sequence, of all but the full sight of the immediate' manifest a 'living' aesthetic. (30) At another point in his somewhat rambling critique Zukofsky anticipates ideas of Edward Dahlberg and Charles Olson, when he defines the concept of Williams' 'reiterated improvisations': '... it is a definite metaphysical concept: the thought is the thing which, in turn, produces the thought' ('Symposium', 69). Of American modernist poets, including Williams, Zukofsky points out the characteristic importance of 'devices emphasizing cadence by arrangement of line and typography' and he further stresses the importance of the visual in Williams by making a parallel: 'In Williams, the advance in the use of image has been from a word structure paralleling French painting (Cézanne) to the same structure in movement - "Della Primavera Tra[n]s-portata Alla Morale"' ('Symposium', 73). Later, in his introductory material to 'An "Objectivists" Anthology' (1932), Zukofsky included 'Spring and All' on his list of essential reading, singling out poems in which 'objectification is to be found' and including among his selection his rewritten version of Williams' March (in the closing section of the anthology - poems by various people, all 'revised' in some way by the editor. Many years earlier March had also been drastically revised by H.D.). (31) 'I admire Louis', Williams wrote to Norman Holmes Pearson in 1938, 'but his work is either the end, the collapse or the final justification of the objective method' (SL, 175). Yet from the beginning he had sent Zukofsky typescripts for comment and we find him in late 1929, for example, responding: 'Your notes have been of great assistance to me in revising the Stein thing.' (32) Well after 1938 Williams continued to send Zukofsky his writings, a prime example being the typescript of 'The Wedge' (1944), now in the Buffalo Collection, which is extensively annotated in Zukofsky's hand.

Pound continued his championing of Williams in

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contributing to the 'Dial' in November 1928 a piece occasioned by 'A Voyage to Pagany', Dr Williams' Position. Reprinted a number of times since, it is not one of Pound's more incisive essays, its discursiveness conveying a sense that he (as he says is typical of Williams) 'has meditated in full and at leisure' on his friend's position after nearly two decades of public literary activity. Noting Williams' integrity and objectivity, he says: 'One might accuse him of being, blessedly, the observant foreigner, perceiving American vegetation and landscape quite directly, as something put there for him to look at; and his contemplative habit extends, also blessedly, to the fauna.' Following this Jamesian pronouncement he contrasts Williams (whom, he asserts, is analytical) with the average American writer, the provincial sedulous ape who offers pale imitations of what happens elsewhere. Such writers are 'porous types', easily penetrated, as compared with the resistant, opaque Williams. And if Williams is not strong on form neither are the 'Iliad' or Aeschylus' 'Prometheus': 'The component of these great works and the indispensable component is texture; which Dr Williams has in the best, and in increasingly frequent, passages of his writing.' Pound sees Williams, in contrast to the run-of-the-mill genteel novelist of the time, as 'hurling himself at an indomitable chaos, and yanking and hauling as much of it as possible into some sort of order (or beauty), aware of it both as chaos and as potential'. (33) He concludes by suggesting, but not exploring, a possible contrast in method between 'A Voyage to Pagany' and W. H. Hudson's 'A Traveller in Little Things'. Respecting both men's work, he was to remark a decade later that 'Most of Williams' "Life Along the Passaic [River]" is as good as W. H. Hudson at his best'. (34)

THE 1930s

Reviewers of Williams' first collection of short stories, 'The Knife of the Times' (1932), tended to see his fiction as technically derived from his Imagist/Objectivist poetic practice, combined with his supposed clinical objectivity as a medical practitioner; but Wallace Stevens went a stage further. Introducing Williams' 'Collected Poems 1921-1931' (1934) (No. 27) Stevens offered the dictum that Williams' 'passion for the anti-poetic is a blood passion', a remark which was to plague and irritate Williams because (as he had made clear at the end of his essay on Marianne Moore in 1931) for him no subject or material is anti-poetic and no 'special things and special places are

reserved for art' (SE, 130). Stevens' point lodged itself and, despite Williams' demurrers, was to be repeated by one critic after another over the years, much as the little poem *This is Just to Say*, from this volume, was to become the paradigmatic Williams poem for many critics on either side of the question - for some seeming not to be poetry at all, for others to be a celebration of the physical life, rendered with strict economy but with a high degree of essential 'vividness'. As Williams wrote to Marianne Moore in response to her review of the book (No. 31), 'I feel as much a part of things as trees and stones' (SL, 147).

By the mid-1930s Williams had been publishing for a quarter of a century. Known in *avant-garde* circles in Europe and the United States, recognized among his fellows as a writer of stature, he still had not achieved regular book publication under the colophon of an established house. Published by a group of like-minded fellow-poets, 'Collected Poems 1921-1931' was followed in 1935 and 1936 by two collections issued under the Alcestis Press imprint. 'An Early Martyr and Other Poems', bearing the title-page legend 'BY WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS/aetate suae/ 52 (September)', was issued from a Fifth Avenue, New York, address. 'Adam & Eve & The City' was published from Peru, Vermont. Each was printed in an edition of under 200 copies. Williams described the publisher, Ronald Lane Latimer (or James G. Leippert), who may have instigated the writing of his autobiography (SL, 149-51), as 'a strange person'. An interesting glimpse into the question of Williams publication at this time is provided by contrasting two of his remarks, more than twenty years apart. Of 'An Early Martyr' he grumbled to Edith Heal in 1958, 'None of them - the poems - had been seen; the magazines wouldn't publish me' (IWWP, 55). Miss Heal reminded him of the claim on the blurb: 'Many of these poems have been published in the magazines - almost all of them.' Williams had written in February 1935, answering a request for contributions to Latimer's periodical, 'Alcestis', 'I haven't a damned thing to send you for #3 - not a line of a poem. Everything has been snatched out of my hands the moment it's written' (SL, 152). (Two of his poems had appeared a month earlier in 'Alcestis' no. 2. He made twenty other magazine appearances that year.)

Alcestis Press books did not sell and Latimer apparently soon went out of publishing. Nor were the books reviewed (although T. C. Wilson contributed a rather generalized piece on 'An Early Martyr' to 'Poetry' in May 1936), so there is little critical notice of Williams in the mid-1930s. Right then he was adopting a more

overtly political role. As early as 1920 he had contributed a defence of a young radical to the 'Freeman' ('Bibliography', Item C50), and throughout his life his general tendency was towards a socialistic point of view, but he rarely wrote with direct political intention until this period (35), when he agreed to become advisory editor of 'Blast', a magazine of proletarian fiction started by his new-found friend Fred R. Miller, and when he took to contributing to such periodicals as 'New Democracy', 'New Republic' and 'New Masses'. His rather earnest, though cautious, assessments of books of verse by the proletarian Sol Funaroff and the 'Missouri dirt farmer' H. H. Lewis appeared in 'New Masses' and he answered one of the frequent questionnaires of the period in an ironic two-liner:

What's wrong with American literature?
You ask me? How much do I get?

As early as 1936, however, he had written to the editors of 'Partisan Review and Anvil' of a 'democracy of feeling which will defeat Marxism in America' (SL, 157). Proletarian writers such as Funaroff, Herman Spector and Joseph Vogel (editors of 'Dynamo') criticized his writing for its lack of social commitment. Looking perhaps from a somewhat different angle, and interested in 'the objectivist method' of Williams' prose, the 'New York Herald Tribune' reviewer of 'White Mule', Willard Maas, says (11 July 1937, Books, 4):

One gathers that Williams has definite social consciousness, and that he feels rather intensely about labour problems, but that does not prevent him from making Joe Stecher, ex-labour organiser, a strike breaker and a sympathetic character. Williams' ideas are powerful because there is no attitudinizing or false underscoring.

Deep disillusionment, Linda Wagner suggests, (36) pervaded Williams' sense of life then, and certainly his letters are sprinkled with observations such as his acidulous remark to Pearson that, 'It's a world unfit for literature' (SL, 175).

In the meantime he had made contact with James Laughlin, who was to found New Directions publishing house in 1937. As a Harvard student, Laughlin had edited for Munson's 'New Democracy' a poetry section called New Directions. Admiration for Pound's work led Laughlin to Williams, to whom he wrote in the autumn of 1936. At first sceptical of any possible liaison, we find Williams

shortly writing to Laughlin: 'Dear God: You mention, casually, that you are willing to publish my "White Mule", that you will pay for it and that we shall then share ...' (SL, 161). How different this Williams sounds from the man H. L. Mencken had written to Alfred Knopf about, presumably scotching a rare chance to break in with a New York publisher: (37)

Williams' poems in the main fatigue me severely. Nevertheless he undoubtedly has a large following, and inasmuch as most of his existing books are inaccessible, I believe that a comprehensive collection of his work will have a chance. He would certainly do a lot of loud whooping for it himself, and he might get some effective aid from the other writers of advanced verse.

Laughlin brought out 'White Mule' in mid-1937, followed it in a few months with Williams' second book of short stories, 'Life Along the Passaic River' (1938) and, within the year, 'The Complete Collected Poems 1906-1938'. 'White Mule' was, Williams recalled, 'a hit of a day' with the New York critics ('Autobiography', 301). To Richard Johns, editor of 'Pagany', he wrote that the book 'has received a very good break from the reviewers, so much so that it looks like a winner'. (38) His 'first real success' was somewhat circumscribed by the fact that Laughlin, on a ski-ing holiday in New Zealand, could not be reached to authorize extending the printing run (1,100 copies were printed) when it seemed, to Williams at least, that the book might take on. Ford Madox Ford, who had chatted favourably in 'Forum' (No. 37) about 'White Mule' and Laughlin's approach to publishing, attempted to persuade Stanley Unwin to bring out an English edition (No. 38) but nothing came of it.

Williams now got himself involved in a political squabble which was to affect his status and reputation more than a decade later. The new 'Partisan Review', socialist but anti-Communist in outlook, announced that he would be among its contributors. As part of a 'campaign to discourage pro-Communist authors from printing' (39) in the resuscitated quarterly, 'New Masses' repudiated this claim, saying that Williams had actually refused to appear in 'Partisan Review'. Professing to have no special interest in either magazine, Williams yet chose in favour of 'New Masses' and, by letter, withdrew an earlier offer to submit a poem to 'Partisan Review'. Within a week 'New Masses' published Williams' assessment of four pamphlets by H. H. Lewis, which he had reviewed in 'Poetry' nearly two years earlier. Declaring himself

in favour of 'labour' Williams offers schemes for cheap publication and distribution of printed matter. Conceding Lewis nothing as an inventor of new forms (and therefore a truly central poet), he admires the 'revolutionary', seeing in such individuals men comparable with the best of the Puritan colonists. For once he acknowledges that, in Lewis' case, it is the poems' content that counts, though their exhortation to political action strictly limits them as poems. (40) Williams made his pro-'New Masses' move just at the moment when American intellectuals generally were becoming disillusioned with Communism. His only further contribution is a review of Funaroff's 'The Spider and the Clock', which appeared in August 1938; but the social circumstances of the time had caused him, at least temporarily, to shift his aesthetic base. His social concern shows most directly in the stories of 'Life Along the Passaic River' (1938), which again attracted a plethora of reviews in New York periodicals, particularly those with a socio-political focus. Paul Rosenfeld, for example, praised these stories as 'a true, sympathetic comprehension ... of the ways and qualities of the poor Poles, Italians and Jews of the North Jersey industrial area' ('New York Herald Tribune', 27 February, 1938, Books, 6).

Social consciousness is seen as a characteristic also of Williams' poetry by Horace Gregory, who compares him with D. H. Lawrence. In the poems of each are 'the same flashes of insight into the essential nature of humanity as it exists in the modern world', hence the social component in their work. Gregory, perhaps more convincingly, approves of Williams' poems 'because they seem to be written from the very centre of a spoken language, many ... seem to possess a classic purity of utterance'. Read aloud, 'there would be an almost kinaesthetic brilliance radiating from each poem' ('New York Herald Tribune', 5 February 1939, Books, 10). But if the note sounded by critics of Williams' fiction was positive, commentators on the poetry were generally less wholehearted. Philip Horton, for example, reviewing 'The Complete Collected Poems 1906-1938' (No. 43) turned Stevens' 'anti-poetic' and 'sentimental' against Williams, seeing Williams' 'objectivism' as a 'deliberate stylization of the anti-poetic state of mind', but claiming that, while 'overtly' objective, Williams was really sentimental and was attempting to solve his own inner conflict by substituting the impersonal for the personal. Yvor Winters, like Horton an exponent of Hart Crane, dealt in anti-theoretical terms with Crane and Williams in 'Primitivism and Decadence: a Study of American Experimental Poetry' (1937). Eventually to become one of Williams' most

ambivalent critics, Winters in this book treats him as a major figure, several times lauding his widely-praised poem *By the Road to the Contagious Hospital*, naming it one of the 'handful of best poems of the Imagist movement'; (41) yet elsewhere in the same work he upbraids Williams as one who 'encourages in his juniors a profound conviction of their natural rightness, a sentimental debauchery of self-indulgence' (Winters, op cit., 55). At one point extravagant in his praise of Williams' *The Destruction of Tenochtitlan*, seeing it as 'superior in all likelihood to nearly any other prose of our time' (Winters, op. cit., 63), he suggests at another that Williams is insensitive to the history of language. He includes Williams in a list of the modern masters of free verse, but at the same time points out that free verse is a limited medium. Setting up a contrast between Williams and Hart Crane, in terms of his central motif - primitivism and decadence, Winters says that 'Dr Williams is more consistently excellent than Crane, and at his best is possibly better' (Winters, op. cit., 95), but his whole response to Williams is a qualified one, in the following tone (p. 84):

Dr W. C. Williams, an experimental poet by virtue of his meter, is in other qualities of his language one of the most richly traditional poets of the past hundred and fifty years; in fact, making allowances for his somewhat narrow intellectual scope, one would be tempted to compare him, in this respect, to such poets as Hardy and Bridges.

Just after Williams' death, and near the end of his own life, Winters' judgment of Williams' intellectual capacities had resolved itself into the acerbic observation that he was 'a foolish and ignorant man, but at moments a fine stylist' (No. 44, headnote).

New Directions published several more Williams titles in the years immediately before the United States entered the Second World War in 1941, but these did not appreciably alter the critical reception of his work. Ruth Lechlitner's extended overview of the poems, in *Poetry*, September 1939, provided a contrast to the condescending *'Time'* magazine paragraph in late December 1938, which describes Williams as 'predominantly a poetaster' with 'a new-fangled code to express a primitive notion of beauty'. Lechlitner's essay, the first comprehensive assessment of Williams' work to appear in over a decade, sums up rather than provides fresh insights. Observing that Williams had not joined the expatriates she believes that his sustained contact with America has resulted in

21 Introduction

deepening social perceptions. Echoing Stevens' points about Williams' supposed balancing of the sentimental with the anti-poetic, she lists also his use of broken forms and contemporary speech, his 'clean' use of words. Condemning the 'opacity' of 'Kora in Hell', she perceives elsewhere in Williams' oeuvre the influence of D. H. Lawrence (and equates Lawrence's sense of 'godhead' with Williams' 'seeing the whole thing at once'). Feeling that Williams' poems of the later 1930s had taken a wrong direction, into psychology, she judges that 'Williams' treatment of subjects with social import is best when there is no analysis that is not implicit in the aspects of the object viewed. He stops just short of implications...'. Her rather obscure sketch of Objectivist aesthetics seems to reduce itself ultimately to repeating Williams' own dictum, 'No ideas but in things'. Concluding that isolated perceptions are of little value, she sees in the major work-in-progress, 'Paterson', possibilities of 'fusion or cohesion' of 'separately represented facets of the American social scene into something completely observed' (and thus seems to subscribe to Williams' own aesthetic observation - 'without forethought or afterthought, but with great intensity or perception').

Generally sympathetic, Louis Untermeyer in a notice in the 'Yale Review' (spring 1939) suggests that praise for the steadfastness of Williams' 'anti-poetic' attitude has probably done him a disservice because his range is much greater than that. Nervous of Williams' 'explorations of the limbo between poetry and prose', Untermeyer adds (P, 613)

But most of his experiments in stripped utterance are as powerful as they are native, and some of his longer poems make a new verse out of broken and syncopated rhythms. Like his prose, this poetry is the very opposite of fine writing....

Williams, however, was stuck with the label 'anti-poetic'. R. P. Blackmur, somewhat akin to Winters in his approach, sees Williams as 'attention-caller' to 'the unrelenting significance of the banal' (No. 46), and his attitude is generally shared by reviewers of 'In the Money' (1940), who looked upon the novel as part of Williams' 'rehabilitation' of the commonplace, though few accounts were as urbane as Clifton Fadiman's ('New Yorker', 2 November 1940, 85), to whom it was 'a kind of radio serial rewritten by a serious artist: a succession of domestic trials, triumphs, and tribulations forming the content, but transfigured by Dr Williams' patient and almost surgically

dexterous feeling for the essence of the minutiae of American middle-class life'. Blackmur's description of Williams' verse technique as 'unexpanded notation' has proved fruitful, but his judgment that 'Dr Williams has no perception of the normal' (Blackmur seems to oppose 'normal' to 'average') should be balanced against the tone of comments such as Fadiman's or, more seriously, Horace Gregory's Introduction to the New Directions reissue of 'In the American Grain' (1939). Siding with Williams on the somewhat thorny question of localism, Gregory perceives him as having a very firmly-rooted sense of the normal:

Anyone who has read all of Dr. Williams' prose and verse becomes aware of its great ability to grow at its own pace. And if anyone is looking for the secret of its good health and the freedom it exerts within an individual speech and manner, it may be found in its determination to 'stay at home', to accept the roots of its being and to grow slowly to its full maturity. This radical willingness to accept the limitations of normal growth has given Dr Williams' work a quality that resembles an aspect of life itself....

As the 1940s began, Williams' critical reputation was about equally divided between those who felt that he was a poet of 'pure' language, restricted by too close an attention to the 'anti-poetic' (the 'banal', the 'common-place'), and those who saw his work, in Paul Rosenfeld's phrase, as 'a sort of spiritual prolongation of the voyages of Columbus' (No. 48).

An otherwise unremarkable review of 'In the Money' in 'Time' magazine (2 December 1940, 83) links Williams' fictional technique to Zola's 'Naturalism' and suggests that 'Williams makes clear "social significances" which the authors of "Middletown" can only bumble over'. No critic has so far explored a possible connection between Williams' work and the sociological studies of 'Middletown' carried out by R. S. Lynd in the 1920s and 1930s. Lynd's 'Middletown in Transition' (1937) was drawn to Williams' attention by David Lyle, the engineer who had moved to Paterson, N.J., in 1938 and almost at once begun a copious correspondence with Williams which was itself to have a direct and crucial effect on both the structure and texture of 'Paterson'. Detailed parallels may be made between the poem's method and Lynd's procedures and observations, starting with an obscure reference to 'good Muncie' (P, 18) and the knowledge that the 'Middletown' studies were based, at least partially, on

the small mid-west town of Muncie, Ind. Such, however, is not our present concern. (42)

Another reviewer of 'In the Money', Ruth Lechlitner ('New York Herald Tribune', 17 November 1940, Books 18), perceiving this 'sociological' approach of Williams' as an extension of his 'objectivism' into fiction, saw it as a limitation and suggested that 'the complete social and economic background of the Stecher family' could not be presented by a detached observer with the same impact as 'when he steps in as an interpreter and lets loose his own feelings regarding his characters'. Typical comments on the fictional style are 'authentic America ... firm and uncluttered, sharp and vivid' and 'direct, unassuming ... fresh and individual' but ironically 'objectification' proves to have unexpected pitfalls. Direct and unassuming he may be, but in the words of the same reviewer ('Canadian Forum', December 1940, 290), 'it takes a little getting used to. It is not unlikely that this manner has kept him from the wide public he deserves'.

THE REDEEMING (LANG)WEDGE

Objectivist aesthetics were much akin to those expressed in two 'Little Review' essays by Fernand Léger. (43) Léger clearly saw the distinction between 'plastic' beauty and 'sentimental, descriptive or imitative values'; holding that every object has its own independent value, he felt that the creative act is a mysterious struggle between objective and subjective. The artist's task is to attempt to see objects '*in isolation* - their value enhanced by every known means', thus enabling them to take on a degree of 'personality' never before realized.

An obvious offshoot of Objectivist theory, Williams' well-known definition of the poem as a machine resembles Léger's formulations. A full decade before Cummington Press published 'The Wedge', (44) Williams had written, reviewing George Oppen's 'Discrete Series': (45)

It is the acceptable fact of the poem as a mechanism that is the proof of its meaning and this is as technical a matter as in the case of any other machine. Without the poem being a workable mechanism in its own right, while at the same time it constitutes the meaning of, the poem as a whole, it will remain ineffective.

He had decided, in the years leading up to 'The Wedge',

that the artist must be both 'objective' and 'sensual', needing the latter quality to 'produce' vital experience and the former to prevent ego or thought from predetermining its structure. Both qualities depend on *where* he is, simply because he *happens* to be there, and on his local idiom, whatever it happens to be - in Williams' case, the American idiom. One Buffalo Collection typescript has alternative titles, 'The Language' and 'The (Lang)WEDGE' (associated with the metaphor of the flower that splits the rock). Zukofsky, in his detailed criticism, recommended that some Joycean prose passages be recast into poems, and thereby emphasized his sense of the poet as technician. The titles proposed for the book were, he felt, over-explicit.

Some years before his involvement with Fred R. Miller, 'Blast' and 'New Masses', Williams had written to Kay Boyle that poetry is not involved in causes, ('socialism, communism') but 'deals with reality, the actuality of every day, by virtue of its use of language' (SL, 131). By contrast, his Introduction to 'The Wedge' contains his best-known statement that man is *used by* language, the poem having a more objective quality and presence than man himself. The Freudian view of poem-making as self-therapy (which he subscribes to elsewhere) is dismissed and a metamorphic view of man offered. Again he rejects sentimentality, particularly the sentimentality of the rhetorical. The poet's constructing of his machine is anti-rhetorical, he makes it from 'words as he finds them interrelated about him' (CLP, 5) and in the resulting composition, 'the intimate form', is to be discerned 'the exact meaning' of any work of art. Promoting as they do Whitehead's 'common world which transcends knowledge' and bodied forth in poems vaunting nature's process (volcanic eruptions, flowers forcing growth through rock), these views in some sense anticipate the methods of 'Paterson', towards which Williams had been building for many years.

Unlike Williams' small press books of the 1930s, 'The Wedge' got a fair number of reviews. F. O. Matthiessen, in a 'New Republic' notice afterwards incorporated into 'The Responsibilities of the Critic', (46) writes of Williams' reaffirmation of 'the belief shared by Whitman and Thoreau that a poem must grow organically out of physical life'. Williams, Matthiessen says, 'can become so happily absorbed in the immediate concrete details that he mistakes their life for the structure of his poem'. Obviously employing the term in a way different from Williams, he suggests that no poem in 'The Wedge' 'shows the formal invention that made *The Yachts* or *The Catholic Bells* into sustained wholes'. Since many

critics (Randall Jarrell among them) have praised *The Yachts* for its formal perfection (and some for its marxist symbolism!) Williams' own 1961 comment on this anthology-piece is worthy of note: (47)

This is the one consciously imitative poem I ever wrote ... I felt ashamed to have forgotten the American idiom so completely. As yet I was not sufficiently grounded in the variable foot, though I was consciously enough grounded to make me feel that something had gone amiss. I was unhappy at the result. I felt ashamed of myself. I have never forgotten it.

To return to 'The Wedge', Blackmur expresses much the same view as Matthiessen, though perhaps more succinctly, since he does so observing that each Williams poem takes its own form, with the poet letting 'the modes do as far as possible all the work' (No. 50).

Writing to Norman Macleod in 1945, responding to a proposal for a Williams number of 'Briarcliff Quarterly', Williams fulminated against critics whom he saw as insisting that he should fit into 'some neo-classic *recognizable* context'. He declared that the first part of 'Paterson' 'begins my detailed reply ... but I have already been informed that "Paterson" will not be accepted because of its formlessness' (SL, 239). His anger is understandable. Since early in the century when he had discovered 'the wonders of "Aucassin and Nicolette"', prose and verse alternating' ('Autobiography', 52), he had been preparing the way for his long poem. Signs of its central method are available throughout his career, in 'Spring and All', 'Kora in Hell', *The Descent of Winter*, and elsewhere. The 'Dial' had featured Paterson in February 1927, of which fourteen lines survive in 'Paterson', containing several important elements of the long poem: the figure of Mr/Dr Paterson, the dictum 'No ideas but in things', and the macrocosm/microcosm ('Inside the bus one sees/his thoughts sitting and standing' - P 18). (48) After this date references to a projected long poem and scraps which have direct bearing on 'Paterson' occur from time to time, and in a postscript to a letter to Zukofsky as early as June 1932 (Yale Collection) Williams notes, 'Paterson untouched', as if the work were then in progress. On the other hand, he told the critic Henry Wells in 1955 that 'I conceived the whole of "Paterson" in one stroke' (SL, 333).

Some of the critical debate about 'Paterson' is contained within the poem itself and in associated manuscript material. One note in the Yale Collection sets