

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: AN AMERICAN MASTER

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It is difficult to generalize about William Carlos Williams as a poet and as a person. A physician his entire life, Williams at the same time had a long and distinguished poetic career. Born in 1883, he published his first volume of poetry in 1909 and continued publishing poetry, short fiction, novels, plays, and essays until his death in 1963. It can easily be argued that Williams is the most important American poet of the 20th century. Although his work did not gain widespread recognition until the 40's and 50's, Williams had an enormous influence on younger poets—Creeley, Duncan, Lowell, Ginsburg—so that in looking back it seems clear that Williams' is the dominant tradition in 20th century American poetry. And yet, we are certainly far less familiar with Williams' work than with that of T.S. Eliot or Robert Frost. People's acquaintance with Williams is usually limited to "The Red Wheelbarrow," "This is just to say" (the poem about the plums), and perhaps "The Yachts." Given the anthology selections, it is sometimes difficult to determine what it is about Williams—that minimalist poet of hard, angular surfaces, a collector, it seems, more of "found" poems than of "made" poems—that makes him so significant a force in the history of American poetry and so substantial a poet in his own right.

There is no doubt about it—Williams is a difficult poet. But the difficulty of a poem such as "The Red Wheelbarrow" is not so much one of explication as one of reception. Even today we have trouble accounting for the distinct value of such a poem—or whether it even merits the term "poem" at all. As anyone who has tried to teach "The Red Wheel Barrow" knows well ("a red wheel / barrow / glazed with rain / water / beside the white / chickens"), it is difficult to get students to share the ecstatic discovery of the obvious which seems, indeed, to be the poem's very point. In the following pages, I want to suggest how such work fits into Williams' larger vision of poetry in general, and American poetry in particular, by charting the contours of his thought and introducing some of the themes which underlie his poetic career.

Language

Emerson's essay "Nature," perhaps the most important document of the American Romantic movement, begins with this challenge: "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" (*Selected Writings* 3). And this is the basic question that drives all of Williams' poetry too. At the beginning of *Spring and All*, a collection of alternating sections of poetry and prose which he published in 1923, Williams decries the "constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world" (*Imaginations* 88). Poetry, his poetry, must break down those barriers. Thus the poet's task is to make us see the world, not in terms of our past associations or traditional responses, but in the freshness, as his contemporary and fellow-poet Wallace Stevens put it, of the "first idea" itself. Only in this way can we repossess our world, and through it, our own imaginative possibilities.

The key to repossessing our world is language. For Williams, the world does not exist apart from language, so that a change in our perception can only come about through a change in the language we use to interpret that perception. And poetry, for Williams, was first and foremost words. However, the words themselves need to be washed clean, stripped of the weight of their traditional associations, and

brought into new relation with one another. Again and again in his essays, Williams, like Emerson, insists on the need to reattach words to things:

It's the words, the words we need to get back to, words washed clean. Until we get the power of thought back through a new minting of the words we are actually sunk. This is a moral question at base, surely but a technical one also and first. (*Selected Essays* 163)

Williams was continually supportive of those writers whose technical experiments with language promised the radical innovations he sought. In a review of Marianne Moore, Williams praised her poetry for “wiping soiled words or cutting them clean out, removing the aureoles that have been pasted about them or taking them bodily from greasy contexts” (*Selected Essays* 128). For James Joyce, it was his achievement in having “liberated words, freed them for their proper uses” (*The Great American Novel* 169). And with Gertrude Stein, it was her unprecedented attempts to break language free of even its conceptual framework:

. . . [Gertrude] Stein has gone systematically to work smashing every connotation that words have ever had, in order to get them back clean. It can't be helped that it's been forgotten what words are made for. It can't be helped that the whole house has to come down. In fact the whole house has to come down. . . . And it's got to come down because it has to be rebuilt. And it has to be rebuilt by unbound thinking. And unbound thinking has to be done with straight, sharp words. (*Selected Essays* 163–164)

But above all it was the painters who helped Williams discover a technique to achieve this “unbound thinking.” In the multiple perspectives and break-up of the picture plane in modern art, Williams found a technique that could liberate poetry, in much the same way the painters had liberated painting from the tyranny of perspective and verisimilitude. Williams visited the Armory Show of 1913¹ (actually “The [First] International Exhibition of Modern Art”) where works by Cezanne, Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso, Braque and Duchamp were first seen by the American public. These experiences with the new art coming from Europe had a tremendous impact on Williams. He later recalled his sense of liberation at seeing Duchamp's “Nude Descending a Staircase”: “I do remember how I laughed out loud when first I saw it, happily, with relief” (*Autobiography* 134).

In a poem of this period, “The Rose,” Williams shows these influences at work. The poem is based on a collage by Cubist painter, Juan Gris, where the roses are actually photographs, cut out from a flower catalogue and pasted in. Williams' poem tries to capture some of the tactile and dynamic quality of Gris's work while asserting its own theme:

The rose is obsolete
but each petal ends in
an edge, the double facet
cementing the grooved
columns of air—The edge
cuts without cutting
meets—nothing—renews
itself in metal or porcelain—

whither? It ends—

But if it ends
the start is begun
so that to engage roses
becomes a geometry—
* * * * *
The rose carried weight of love
but love is at an end—of roses
It is at the edge of the
petal that love waits
Crisp, worked to defeat
laboredness—fragile
plucked, moist, half-raised
cold, precise, touching
What
The place between the petal's
edge and the . . .

As a symbol, the poem tells us, the rose “is obsolete.” And yet, in this very rejection of its previous meaning lies the possibility for its re-visioning. The poem invites us to see this object not for what it *symbolizes* but for what it *is*—a dynamic center of potential meaning radiating lines of force. Taken out of its familiar context, stripped of its traditional associations, and viewed in terms of its essential form, the rose can now be reconstituted in the virtual space of the imagination. As form, it has edges which “cut without cutting,” providing new surfaces for imaginative contact, and its significance is only to be determined at these points of contact with the reader/viewer: “It is at the edge of the / petal that love waits / Crisp, worked to defeat / laboredness. . . .” Instead of relying on convention or sentiment, this new way of seeing requires a “geometry” of the mind—a process which leads to unsuspected connections:

. . . From the petal’s edge a line starts
that being of steel
infinitely fine, infinitely
rigid penetrates
the Milky Way
without contact—lifting
from it—neither hanging
nor pushing—
 The fragility of the flower
 unbruised
 penetrates space.

Despite the transformation of this natural form into the rigid, inorganic forms of art, the rose’s essence remains “unbruised.” Imbued with a power that “penetrates space,” the rose, as now perceived, promises a new union of the world and the imagination. Thus by the end, the rose, contrary to the

poem's initial claim, is no longer obsolete. Renewed in the imagination through art, it now radiates lines of force powerful enough to “transfix” the universe and us in the process.

“The Rose,” however, is not just a defense of modernist techniques. It is also an argument about the power and value of the imagination to renew our vision of the natural world. Though the artist must first destroy the previous forms, his break-up of the object provides the possibility for a break-through in perception—the work of art creates new edges, new potential points of contact, multiple perspectives, assuring that the object will remain capable of revealing unsuspected beauty and that truth will never be fixed. This technique is at work in the poem itself. In “The Rose,” the syntax of the poem is broken-up so that the words themselves are freed to form new associations. In these places (lines such as “love is at an end—of roses” or, even more disconcerting, “It is at the edge of the—”) the poem frustrates our expectations and provides, what Williams calls,

a counterfoil to the vague and excessively stupid juxtapositions commonly known as ‘reality’. . . . The effect is to revive the senses and force them to re-see, re-hear, re-taste, re-smell, and generally revalue all that it was believed had been seen, heard, smelled, and generally valued. By this means poetry has always in the past put a finger upon reality. (*Selected Essays* 235)

For Williams the highest imaginative act is thus to see something freshly and, in response, to make something new. To those who complained about the difficulties of his own work and that of the painters and writers he most admired, Williams could reply that this difficulty is due not to the intentional obscurity of the artist, but to the very conditions of the world with which the artist must contend:

. . . [the] fragmentary stupidity of modern life, its lacunae of sense, lous, perversions of instinct, blankets, amputations, fulsomeness of instruction and multiplications of inanity. To avoid this, accuracy is driven to a hard road. To be plain is to be subverted since every term must be forged new, every word is tricked out of meaning, hanging with as many cheap traps as an altar. (*Selected Essays* 71)

Measure

As the very use of the term “geometry” (literally “to measure the land”) in “The Rose” indicates, Williams’ desire to “make it new” was balanced by his search for a form capable of containing that vision. Williams sought throughout his career for a new poetic measure that would not be based on European-derived forms. Towards the end of his career he felt that he had discovered such a measure in his “variable foot”—a triadic form that provided pattern and regularity without constraining the spoken idiom. This obsession with form is one way that Williams differs from his spiritual father, Walt Whitman. Although Williams acknowledged Whitman’s trail-blazing efforts to capture a new American speech, those efforts, Williams felt, ultimately failed because of Whitman’s inability to find a form independent of his own personal rhetoric. In an essay, “Against the Weather,” Williams complained that Whitman

was never able to fully realize the significance of his structural innovations. As a result he fell back to the overstuffed catalogues of his later poems and a sort of looseness that was not freedom but lack of measure. Selection, structural selection was lacking. (*Selected Essays* 212)

And in his letters, Williams noted that “Whitman . . . could not go on. . . . His invention ended where it began” (*Letters* 135–136). Yet Williams did not want to follow those, like Eliot, who became obsessed with tradition and form at the expense of the vitality of living speech. The line—both the poetic line and the “party line”—Williams insisted, must change, but the measure must be a distinctly American measure, supple enough to capture the American idiom and tough enough to reflect the American experience. It must be “a new way of measuring that will be commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living” (*Selected Essays* 283).

Thus for Williams, the “measure” of poetry becomes the “measure” of ourselves—the way in which we give order and coherence to our world. In *Paterson*, Book 2 (1948), Williams stresses this crucial connection between the measure of our world and the form of the poem:

Without invention nothing is well spaced,
unless the mind change, unless
the stars are new measured, according
to their relative positions, the
line will not change, the necessity
will not matriculate: unless there is
a new mind there cannot be a new
line, the old will go on
repeating itself with recurring
deadlines. . . .
* * * * *
without invention the line
will never again take on its ancient
divisions when the word, a supple word
lived in it, crumbled now to chalk.

The passage links poetry, the mind, and the world in such a way that a change in one can only come about through a change in the others. Everything, Williams suggests, depends on finding this “new line” in poetry, a way of seeing and measuring as powerful as Einstein's theory of relativity in liberating our perceptions of the world and breaking the stranglehold of the old order. In fact, in a poem entitled “St. Francis Einstein of the Daffodils” (1936) Williams imagines America's response to Einstein's first visit. The land declares its independence from the tyranny of a Newtonian world-view and repressive social order: the waves “ripp[le] with laughter” and “a tearing wind,” like the West Wind in Shelley's “Ode,” shakes America out of its political and social lethargy. Without the constantly renewed vision of reality and relative measure of ourselves provided by poetry, Williams claims, the “necessity / will not matriculate”: the very word, “matriculate,” suggesting the source, the matrix, to which we must continually return in order to avoid the deadening repetition of the past. And yet, ironically, such a new measure, relativistic in its ordering of our world, can achieve precisely that timeless quality of all art, provide us with those “ancient / divisions when the word, a supple word, / lived in it, crumbled now to chalk.”

Williams continually justified the revolutionary quality of all great art:

It must change; it must reappear in another form to remain permanent. It is the image of the phoenix. To stop the flames that destroy the old nest prevents the rebirth of the bird itself. All things rot and stink, nothing stinks more than an old nest, if not recreated. (*Selected Essays* 208)

This notion of the imagination as a flame which destroys in order to re-create recurs throughout Williams' poetry. In "Burning the Christmas Greens" (1944), it is the need for the green decorations of the past year to become the "living red" of the new, transformed into a "living flame" so blinding that, the poem declares, our "eyes recoil from it."² Yet the process brings about, in the dance of flames consuming the outworn products of the old year, a cleansing and necessary renewal for the year to come.

Williams found this cleansing exhilarating, particularly during the 20's and early 30's, and his formalist experiments never overrode his belief that the true sources of art are instinctual, irrational, in touch with the deepest core of our being, and similar to the powers of renewal manifest in nature. These powers require a loosening of desire in order to release the creative potential within us. In an early poem, "Danse Russe" (1915), we see the figure of the poet, when all else are asleep in the house, dancing "grotesquely / before my mirror / waving my shirt round my head," admiring "my arms, my face, my shoulders, flanks, buttocks / against the yellow drawn shades." This instinctual, night-time, creative self is the corrective to the day-time, middle-class complacency that Williams felt suffocating American society. In "The Trees" Williams contrasts the deadened sensibility of such a society with the instinctual abandon of nature. In the poem, the people, ironically, are the "ghosts / sapped of strength" while it is the trees whose "buds / [burst] from each pore" and whose language is ecstatic and free: "Wha ha ha ha / Wheeeeeee / Clacka tacka tacka / tacka tacka / wha ha ha ha ha / ha ha ha." In another early poem, "Perpetuum Mobile: The City," Williams invites the reader to acknowledge the fact that "there is no end / to desire—" and that the only choice, therefore is to "break / through / and go there—." And in "To a Poor Old Woman" Williams provides a portrait of an individual who has actually broken through and made contact with her world:

To a Poor Old Woman

munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand
They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her
You can see it by
the way she gives herself
to the one half
sucked out in her hand
Comforted
a solace of ripe plums
seeming to fill the air
They taste good to her

In the poem, the old woman gives herself wholly to the satisfaction that the world provides. She has let her instinctual desires lead her to this truth: the “sucked out” half of the plum in her hand is evidence that she has tasted deeply, giving herself wholly to the experience. It is indeed her giving of “herself” that the poem stresses. She samples her world instinctively and finds “comfort” in the “good” that the world has to offer. Even in her poverty—or perhaps because of it—she retains the ability to enrich herself by this contact with the world. Thus, the poem ends with an affirmation of the essential goodness of this world, despite its undeniable social and spiritual poverty, and it does so in a form which gives measure to her expectations (“They taste good to *her* /They taste *good* /to her. They *taste* / good to her” [my italics]), allowing us to “measure” our own experience of the world against the vital possibilities presented through the poem.

Beauty

Unless, like the old woman in the poem, we regain an immediate contact with our world, we remain dead to its potential beauty. For Williams, like Whitman, no topic was too “low” for poetry, no subject so ugly that beauty could not be discovered. In “Nature,” Emerson asserts that “there is no object so foul that intense light will not make beautiful. . . . Even the corpse has its own beauty” (*Selected Essays* 9). And, indeed, Whitman writes about a dead prostitute in a poem entitled “The City Dead House,” declaring her a “divine woman” (*Leaves of Grass* 367) while elsewhere proclaiming that even “the scent of these armpits [is] aroma finer than prayer.”

For Williams, as with Whitman, the potential for poetry exists all around us: “It is actually there, in the life before us, every minute that we are listening, a rarest element, not in our imaginations but there, there in fact” (*Autobiography* 361). In “Between Walls,” Williams asserts the presence of beauty even in the most unlikely of places.

Between Walls

the back wings
of the
hospital where
nothing
will grow lie
cinders
in which shine
the broken
pieces of a green
bottle

In the midst of decay, where “nothing / will grow,” the bottle, in fragments and discarded, at first appears to be a symbol of the futile search for beauty. Yet it is the object's very brokenness, the loss of its usefulness, that allow us to look at it again. In the midst of these cinders, the poem calls attention to

the particular quality these fragments reveal—their “shine,” the fugitive radiance of a beauty contained in all things. Beauty, the poem suggests, can be found even “between walls,” hemmed in on all sides by urban reality, but only once we pay attention to the unique qualities of the thing itself.

Like the bottle, the poem which describes it is also a “broken” thing made up of fragments. The poem's break-up of syntax forces us to pay attention to the individual words as having potential “edges” and experience the possibilities that may lie in their unforeseen juxtapositions. Thus the middle line of the poem—“will grow”—is a possibility that arises from the “nothing” that precedes it in the line above. Williams’ break-up of the syntactical unit—“nothing / will grow”—works against our prosaic reading, for out of this “nothing,” surprisingly, something does indeed grow and flower to the imagination. The relationship between these two elements—the “nothing” of this locale and the “shine” of the bottle—is important. This “nothing” is the necessary ground against which the bottle’s “shine” is discovered; it is the undefined against which the bottle can be redefined. Likewise, the poem, too, functions as the ground against which the object may be redefined. Within the neutral space of the imagination, the emptying out which is the poem, we are able to see the thing for what it is—a manifestation of a universal potential for beauty.

Williams’ poems, like Whitman’s before him, attempt to change the way we experience our world. As Williams analyzes the problem in his fictional/historical work, *In the American Grain*, the failure of the early explorers and settlers was due to their inability to see the country as something unique. Columbus’ original perception of America as a NEW WORLD was quickly lost to the Puritans, who saw it only in terms of their Old World assumptions. The result was a false vision imposed by a worn-out perspective. For Williams, this attitude has persisted in the Puritanical rejection of beauty as somehow suspect and dangerous, something to be acknowledged only when it conforms to our socially acceptable images.

Williams, however, remained an optimist. Whereas Eliot in his poetry depicts the exhausted resources of the modern individual—the ego which has tried to possess its world and ended up isolated, like Prufrock, or left with fragments, like Gerontion, or needing supernatural assistance, like the characters in *The Wasteland*—for Williams, beauty is always available, here and now. It exists as the figure of Kora, the goddess Persephone, whose abduction by Pluto leaves the world without spring. Williams knew this myth well, and used it as the title of one of his prose works—*Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920). In the myth, Demeter, the mother of Persephone, wanders the earth, disguised in her grief but still powerful and able to grant humanity great gifts. Poetry, for Williams, is the attempt to recognize this disguised figure and through her power release Kora—that “core” of our instinctual being and the world’s potential beauty—whose rescue will bring a springtime renewal of our world.

This disguised visitor from the underworld appears throughout Williams’ work, usually associated with the dispossessed, the lower classes—those who have retained a vital spark within them. She appears as the “Beautiful Thing” in *Paterson*, the young woman who has been beaten up by the boys from Passaic because they are afraid to acknowledge the presence of such beauty in their world:

Beautiful Thing!
 And the guys from Paterson
 beat up
 the guys from Newark and told
 them to stay the hell out

of their territory and then
socked you one
across the nose
Beautiful Thing
for good luck and emphasis. . . .

While to the young men she is simply another thing to be beaten into submission, to the poet her “vulgarity of beauty surpasses all their / perfections!”

I can't be half gentle enough,
half tender enough
toward you, toward you,
inarticulate, not half loving enough

BRIGHTE

the cor
ner
where you are!
—a flame,
black plush, a dark flame.

Even in her disfigurement, she becomes an instance of a beauty that remains somehow intact—a flame that can rekindle our imaginations and our capacity to value our world. The hesitations of the verse at this point only emphasize the poet's wonder that such unforeseen discoveries still exist.

When we lack a language by which to approach and acknowledge this potent remnant of beauty in our world, our energies are directed, out of fear or despair, in self-destructive ways. After 1950, Williams often pictured this ultimate failure of the imagination in terms of the nuclear bomb. Such raw power too often becomes irresistible, leaving us mute and defeated:

The mere picture
of the exploding bomb
fascinates us
so that we cannot wait
to prostrate ourselves
before it. . . . (“Asphodel”)

But this self-destructiveness manifests itself in other ways, too. In Williams' epic poem, *Paterson*, we see it in the figure of Mrs. Cummings, the minister's wife, who lacks a language by which to express her inner longings. Mesmerized by the power and deafening roar of the Falls on the Passaic River—Williams' symbol of the overpowering chaos of modern society and its oppressive patriarchal voices—she falls to her death. As Williams says at the end of Book 3 of *Paterson*,

the roar,
the roar of the present, a speech—
is, of necessity, my sole concern .
* * * * *
I must
find my meaning and lay it, white
beside the sliding water: myself
comb out the language—or succumb
—whatever the complexion.

The poet must provide that language by which we can come to terms with our world. Without it and without the measure that poetry bestows upon the incoherent roar of the present, we remain lost to ourselves and to the potential beauty of our world. “Divorce, divorce,” Williams announces in *Paterson*, is the sign of the times.

The Local

In order to help us deal with this chaos of our world and our divorce from the sources of renewal, poetry must provide not an escape from the world but a means of repossessing it. Thus all good poetry, for Williams, as for Whitman, must be rooted in the local. Like Emerson, Williams championed an American literature. The American artist, according to Williams, must conceive “the possibility, the sullen, volcanic inevitability of the place” and be willing “to go down and wrestle with its conditions” (In the American Grain 225).

Williams was tempted to escape, like his expatriate friends, from an America which treated its artists badly and seemed incapable of providing the conditions for great art. But he came to believe that those who did turn away from America, like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, would end up cutting themselves off from the only source of vitality—contact with the local:

But he who will grow . . . must sink first. . . . He [must] have the feet of his understanding on the ground, his ground, *the* ground, the only ground that he knows, that which *is* under his feet. I speak of aesthetic satisfaction. This want, in America, can only be filled by knowledge, a poetic knowledge, of that ground. (*In the American Grain* 213)

Williams believed that only through the local can one come to the universal. In *Paterson*, Williams provides a visual rejoinder to Pound's insistence on the superiority of a cosmopolitan approach.

Williams includes a letter from Pound in which Pound mocks Williams' notion of an American culture and exhorts him to read “all the Gk tragedies in / Loeb.—plus Frobenius, plus / Gesell plus Brooks Adams . . . / Then Golding[’s] ‘Ovid’ . . .” But next to this, Williams prints the results of a well boring at the Passaic Rolling Mill:

At this depth the attempt to bore through the red sandstone was abandoned, the water being altogether unfit for ordinary use. . . . The fact that the rock salt of England, and of some of the other salt mines of Europe, is found in rocks of the same age as this, raises the question whether it may not also be found here.

Although the attempt to bore down and find fresh water is abandoned, Williams suggests that underlying his local is a universal stratum—one need only dig down deep enough in order to find it.

Paterson is Williams' epic attempt to bore down into the local and find what freshness remains. While concerned with the people and places of Paterson, New Jersey, the poem is mythic in structure. As Walter Scott Peterson explains it, “Williams conceives Paterson as a mythic being—a ‘Giant’ somewhat like one of Blake's ‘Giant Forms’—in whom the qualities of both man and city are fused. . . . On one level he is a ‘real’ person, Noah Faitoute Paterson. As the name suggests, he is meant to embody, among other things, the Biblical Noah's capacity to survive the Flood . . . Noah Webster's mastery of the American idiom, and the vitally active man's desire to ‘do all.’ . . . On yet another level, Paterson is a projection of Williams himself (often as ‘Dr. P.’). . . .” (19).

Paterson, Books I–IV, published between 1946 and 1951 when Williams was in his 60's, is Williams' most ambitious attempt to find, in the local environment, the speech that will redeem both the people and the place and will repair the divorce between the people and their world. The poem is a jagged collage of poetry, newspaper clippings, letters, and historical accounts. In the poem, the poet-protagonist wanders through Paterson, Garrett Mountain Park, the library, and New York City searching for the source of a new poetry. However, Dr. Paterson is continually bogged down in his quest by his own unwillingness to accept the modern conditions for poetry or by the recalcitrant conditions of the world itself. But throughout *Paterson* occur moments of imaginative insight where Williams identifies both his method and his hope for the work. One such moment occurs in Book 3, where the poet rejects the poetry of the past and watches as the library where he has been searching for answers goes up in flames. In the ruins that remain, Dr. Paterson finds another bottle:

An old bottle, mauled by the fire
gets a new glaze, the glass warped
to a new distinction, reclaiming the
undefined.

* * * * *

The glass
splotted with concentric rainbows
of cold fire that the fire has bequeathed
there as it cools, its flame

defied—the flame that wrapped the glass
deflowered, reflowered there by
the flame: a second flame, surpassing
heat.
Hell’s fire. Fire. Sit your horny ass
down. What’s your game? Beat you
at your own game, Fire. Outlast you:
Poet Beats Fire at Its Own Game! The bottle!
the bottle! the bottle! the bottle! I
give you the bottle! What’s burning
now, Fire?

The flames are based on an actual fire that swept Paterson, New Jersey, in the late 1800’s. The results of the fire were devastating for the city. Yet Williams celebrates the defiant energy released in this conflagration, since out of this destruction comes something new, “the glass warped / to a new distinction, reclaiming the / undefined.” Like the “Beautiful Thing” elsewhere in the poem, the bottle has been “mauled” by the fire, “deflowered / reflowered.” But in its remains can be seen the visible presence of a transforming force, the “concentric rainbows / of cold fire” captured in the very congealing of the molten glass. The process does not stop there, however. For from this flame, a second flame “surpassing heat” comes into being—the flame of imaginative perception. For this reason, the bottle becomes an object of ecstatic discovery by the end of the passage. Like a Williams’ poem, the bottle retains the visible evidence of its transformation in a process that requires a “deflowering” of its original form as a necessary prelude to its “reflowering” in the imagination. The forces at work, indeed, suggest a way by which the poet can match the destructive and consuming force of the world with the liberating power of imaginative creation—“Poet Beats Fire at Its Own Game!”

Another such moment of recognition occurs in Book 4. Here Williams offers us the figure of Marie Curie and her discovery of radium as a symbol of his own hopes for the cure of society that the poem might effect. Initially, all this work of sifting and refining on the part of the Curies seems fruitless:

. . . after months of labor
a stain at the bottom of the retort
without weight, a failure, a
nothing.

Yet her extraordinary persistence leads Marie Curie to discover something new and powerful from this unpromising material:

And then, returning in the
night, to find it .

LUMINOUS!

* * * * *

. knowledge, the contaminant
Uranium, the complex atom, breaking
down, a city in itself, that complex
atom, always breaking down
to lead.

But giving off that, to an
exposed plate, will reveal .

And so, with coarsened hands

she stirs

* * * * *

But there may issue, a contaminant,
some other metal radioactive
a dissonance, unless the table lie,
may cure the cancer . must
lie in that ash .

Curie's discovery is both an act of love, occurring "after months of labor," and an imaginative leap of faith. Walter Scott Peterson explains just what type of extraordinary effort was required in this discovery:

Pitchblende, the naturally occurring ore of . . . uranium, is approximately four times as radioactive as the amount of uranium seems to warrant. It was this discrepancy, in fact, that prompted Pierre and Marie Curie to subject several tons of pitchblende to a process involving more than ten thousand separate crystallizations and recrystallizations, in order ultimately to extract, in the form of radium chloride, the tiny percentage of radium (barely a few millionths of an ounce). The ordinary compounds of radium are all colorless, but they become colored ("stained") upon standing as a result of bombardment by radioactive particles, and are luminous in the dark. (195-196)

Although the attempt at first seems a failure, at long last something “luminous” appears. In Williams’ poem, this word “luminous” is immediately followed by an excerpt from Columbus’ diary in which Columbus expresses his amazement on first coming ashore in the Americas: “During that time I walked among the trees which was the most beautiful thing which I had ever known.” This original vision of America as a “beautiful thing” is the “radiant gist,” the luminous element that Williams hopes may still be discovered in the sifting and analysis of his local environment. It is the vision of Columbus even in the urban reality of Paterson, New Jersey; it is that potent force which “may cure the cancer” of our society. But, Williams emphasizes, such a remedy will take patience to discover, and it may be found only in the very “breakdown” of contemporary life, of knowledge, of language. It was this very “dissonance,” however, that led the Curies to their discovery and that Williams, as poet, pins his own hopes to: “Dissonance / (if you are interested) / leads to discovery.”

Paterson does not offer itself as the cure nor does it present us with a definitive solution. The last Book, titled “The Run to the Sea,” has Paterson urging himself to “waken from . . . this dream of / the whole poem” and turn back from the “sea that sucks in all rivers”—that temptation to give up the struggle with the recalcitrant particulars of the modern world and impose, rather than discover, an order. But this does not mean that the poem is a failure, nor that all of *Paterson*, in its attempt to find a redeeming language to unravel the confused torrent of past and present, does not achieve something of value. Even while the poem recreates the poet’s struggle with his diffuse material, it does achieve moments of imaginative balance, what Williams calls the “one phrase that will lie married beside another for delight,” that begin the process of sifting and crystallization preliminary to any cure.

The poem’s value, indeed, lies in its confrontation with the modern facts of decay and dissolution. In it we see, as Wallace Stevens phrases it, “the poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice” (“Of Modern Poetry”). And it does find, again and again, in the very dissonance of the present, a radiant gist—something given off in the decay of elements which can potentially cure the cancer of our society by curing our way of perceiving our world and ourselves. The poem intends us to understand that our world can provide us with authentic moments of beauty and wonder once we find a language that gives us access to that world. Without it, speech goes unacknowledged, the beautiful thing is beaten and battered by the boys from Passaic, and those who should understand—the Church, the government, the University—fail to sustain us, not because they lack messages, but because they have failed to provide us with the means of successfully re-measuring our world and recognizing our power within it—that power to discover the ever-changing manifestations of beauty available to us, and preserve, in measured words, its power to set our imaginations dancing once again.

Imagination

It may seem strange, in a poet who seems so intent on “things,” to find such a concern with the imagination. Yet no less than Emerson and Whitman, and Wordsworth behind them, Williams believes in the power of art to let us see into the life of things and preserve a vision of virginal beauty in a world whored by ignorance and utility.

Paterson Book V, which appeared seven years after Book IV, asserts this power of art to redeem our world. The poem is dedicated to Henri Toulouse Lautrec, the deformed painter who visited brothels in order to paint the beauty he found there, but it draws on the legend of the virgin in the unicorn tapestries for its central symbol. Book V thus celebrates this marriage of the real and ideal, the whore and the virgin. The redemption of our world depends on the imagination’s ability to rescue what has

been broken, mauled, and spent by use and familiarity and renew its virginal power. Though “the flower dies down / and rots away,” Williams declares,

 there is a hole
in the bottom of the bag.
It is the imagination
which cannot be fathomed.
It is through this hole
we escape . . .
So through art alone, male and female, a field of
flowers, a tapestry, spring flowers unequaled
in loveliness.
Through this hole
at the bottom of the cavern
of death, the imagination
escapes intact.

“The world / of the imagination,” Williams asserts a few passages further, is what endures: “Pollock’s blobs of paint squeezed out / with design! / pure from the tube. Nothing else / is real.”

Williams most eloquent statement about the imagination occurs in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” his long poem of love and apology to his wife, Flossie, written late in his life:

 If a man die
it is because death
 has first
possessed his imagination.
But if he refuse death—
 no greater evil
can befall him
unless it be the death of love
 meet him
in full career.
Then indeed

for him
the light has gone out.
But love and the imagination
are of a piece,
swift as the light
to avoid destruction.

* * * * *

The light
for all time shall outspeed
the thunder crack.

It is in that interval between the flash of warning and the sound of destruction that “love will blossom”—an image that returns us to the earlier poem, “The Rose,” and the potential of truth to blossom “again.” Both poems assert the primacy of art to preserve and renew a power inherent in the world and ultimately in ourselves. The brokenness of the world, both poems claim, can be redeemed by the wholeness of art. And in the process, the poet proves to be the world’s greatest lover, able to embrace foulness as necessary to the perception of beauty. Without Emerson’s metaphysics and Whitman’s self-assertion, Williams still subscribes to the redemptive power of the human mind. Even when the light goes out, Williams declares in “Asphodel,” imagination can outrace the gathering darkness since it, too, is a power “swift as the light / to avoid destruction.” Williams is thus a modern American romantic, perhaps with Wallace Stevens the last of the American romantics. But in his search for an appropriate measure and form for poetry, Williams forged a new aesthetic that gave those romantic beliefs in the primacy of the imagination and the need for a redeeming language a toughness and durability that allows them to survive a skeptical age.

The qualities that make Williams’ poetry such satisfying reading can perhaps best be summarized by looking at one final poem, from Williams’ Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962). In “Paul,” written to his grandson, Williams is able to take a simple action and suggest some of the themes of his own lifelong quest.

Paul

I.

when you shall arrive
as deep
as you will need go
to catch the blackfish
the hook
has been featly baited

by the art you have
and
you do catch them

II

with what thoroughness
you know
seize that glistening
body translated
to
that language you
will understand gut
clean
roast garnish and

III

serve to yourself who
better
eat and enjoy
however you
divide
and share
that blackfish heft
and shine
is your own

The poem is both a celebration and a bestowal. The significant action of the poem deals with something ordinary, catching the blackfish. But, we quickly learn, this is a quest that demands both skill and art: “to catch the blackfish / the hook” must be “featly baited / by the art you have.” Catching the blackfish is a young boy’s dream, but it is also the quest of middle and old age—as it has been the poet’s quest. To catch the blackfish is to “arrive,” to reach “as deep /as you will need go,” whether this destination is inward or outward—a descent into one’s inner life of memory and imagination or an immersion in the external world of things.

The poem is about the accomplishments that result: about seizing “that glistening / body,” the instinctive and immediate object of the quest, and fully appreciating its beauty, “translated / to / that language you / will understand.” The process that follows—of gutting, cleaning, roasting, and

garnishing—is like the process of Williams' own poems: cleansing words and things of their usual associations so that they may be shared and enjoyed. And that enjoyment brings no diminishment. However “divided and shared” what remains enduring is that “black fish heft and shine,” the essence of its beauty undiminished.

The heft and shine “is” indeed “your own”—the boy’s own distinctive accomplishment and realization. But the ambiguity of the line suggests another possibility—that the taste, heft, and beauty of the blackfish is a foretaste of the boy’s own possibilities. In responding directly to the world, in seeking out its beauty, in partaking vigorously, sensuously, and imaginatively of what the world has to offer, we recognize our own possibilities and celebrate that in us which corresponds to something vital in the world.

This, finally, is the hope of Williams in his poetry—that in capturing what beauty the world provides for us and being able to serve, divide, and share it in the poem, that poetry, far from diminishing the original, celebrates its continued presence in our lives. And in so letting us taste, touch, see, and imaginatively respond, it celebrates those possibilities of love and imagination which, Williams believes, are indeed our greatest defenses against the chaos and potential darkness of the modern world.

Notes

¹There is some question as to whether Williams visited the first 1913 Armory show (as he recalled) or the second one in 1917 (as his wife insisted). Paul Mariani in his biography of Williams believes it possible that Williams may have attended for a few hours without his wife, but in any case he “could not have missed reading about the show in the newspapers. . . . There was something about the Armory in the papers almost every day during the winter and early spring of 1913. . . .” (Mariani 107).

² Williams himself made the connection between the conceptual and political implications of his poem: “Certainly no one can escape the conclusion that this poem envisages a rebirth of the ‘state’ perhaps but certainly of the mind following the destruction of the shibboleths of tradition which often comfort it” (*The Collected Poems*, note, 461).

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William Carlos Williams (September 17, 1883 – March 4, 1963) was an American poet, writer, and physician closely associated with modernism and imagism. In addition to his writing, Williams had a long career as a physician practicing both pediatrics and general medicine. He was affiliated with Passaic General Hospital, where he served as the hospital's chief of pediatrics from 1924 until his death. The hospital, which is now known as St. Mary's General Hospital, paid tribute to Williams with a memorial