

“To Sail Free in Her Own Element”: The Novelization of the Epic  
and the “Cress” Letters in William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson*

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The long, scathing letter from Cress, a female poet detailing “woman’s wretched position in society,” at the end of Book Two of *Paterson* has appeared perplexing, to say the least, to readers and critics of William Carlos Williams’ *magnum opus* since its first publication. The letter arrives directly at the center of the projected four books of *Paterson*, which we learn in Book I concerns itself overall with “A man like a city and a woman like a flower / — who are in love. Two women. Three women. / Innumerable women, each like a flower. // But / only one man—like a city” (Williams, *P* 7). The tension between the symbolic and the literal man and woman of *Paterson* holds a central place in the poem, and invites a gendered reading, particularly at the crucial juncture of the Cress letter, based around the appropriation of a female voice by a dominant male author/text. My paper will argue that Williams’ appropriation is more of an attempt, however inadequate, at integration—rather than imposing male poetic dominance over a female voice, Williams aims to deconstruct male authority, if not destroy his own authorship, by emphasizing the relational, *dialogic* nature (even in terms of “marriage” and “divorce”) of communication itself. A hopeless task, perhaps, but one that is emblematic of the entire project and problematic of *Paterson* as a “whole.” Indeed, the first part of my paper is devoted to a discussion of how the genre theory of Mikhail Bakhtin in his essay on the “Epic and Novel” provides, *in distinctive terms*, the kind of critical framework necessary to understand the role of Cress in *Paterson*.

## I. The Use of Centrifugal Force

In Mikhail Bakhtin's "Epic and Novel," the key terms *dialogism* and *heteroglossia* offer a useful vocabulary to analyze how and why Williams incorporates other voices, Cress being the most prominent example, as essential elements of his epic, and how almost by definition these voices cannot be subsumed into one authoritative voice—no matter how much Williams as poet desires their *marriage*. Bakhtin's essay articulates his observations regarding the novel's development as a genre, as well as the unique characteristics that define "novelness" in other genres—even the epic itself. From the start, Bakhtin classifies the novel as a genre still in the process of definition—indeed, the very openended nature of the novel is its own primary qualification, and reflects its moment in history. Bakhtin argues that the novel is the modern world's central genre:

The novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding. Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process. The novel has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making; it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it. In many respects the novel has anticipated, and continues to anticipate, the future development of literature as a whole. In the process of becoming the dominant genre, the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres, it infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness. It draws them ineluctably into its orbit precisely because this orbit coincides with the basic direction of the development of literature as a whole. In this lies the exceptional importance of the novel, as an object of study for the theory as well as the history of literature. (Bakhtin 7)

Already in this passage Bakhtin hints at the larger design of his analysis: he is developing a theory not only of the novel, but also of how the rise of the novel influences, and indeed penetrates and redefines other genres. Bakhtin explains that any genre that refuses to adapt to the innovative features of the novel, but rather steadfastly clings to "canonical," strict and defined forms, becomes increasingly irrelevant:

Those genres that stubbornly preserve their old canonic nature begin to appear stylized. In general any strict adherence to a genre begins to feel like a stylization, a stylization taken to the point of parody, despite the artistic intent of the author. In an environment where the novel is the dominant genre, the conventional languages of strictly canonical genres begin to sound in new ways, which are quite different from the ways they sounded in those eras when the novel was not included in “high” literature. (Bakhtin 6)

In this passage is evident the problematic nature of the epic as a viable genre for the modern world, and indeed “stylization taken to the point of parody” becomes a dominant, if perhaps inadvertent, theme of the epics that Williams and other modern poets ultimately produced. But, as Bakhtin explains, the “rigidity and canonic quality” of the epic tends to dissolve in the context of not only the modern world, but the primary genre of modernity, the novel. Indeed Bakhtin argues that the novel brings about the “novelization” of other genres. With the novel as precedent, if not model, other genres may become:

...more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the “novelistic” layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openedness, a living contact with the unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the opened present). As we will see below, all these phenomena are explained by the transposition of other genres into this new and peculiar zone for structuring artistic models (a zone of contact with the present in all its openedness), a zone that was first appropriated by the novel. (Bakhtin 7)

Here Bakhtin formulates the key terms that would become crucial to his project, *dialogism* and *heteroglossia*. They are both related to the “contact with the present in all its openedness”—indeed, the impulse to keep the text centrifugally “open” as well as the tendency to bring the text to a centripetal closure. Dialogism demonstrates this idea in the open nature of the text itself, the compulsion for response. That is, the dialogical nature of the novel allows for the incorporation of the *context* to be brought to bear upon the novel—thus the process of reception is recognized by the author of a novel. The capacity for the novel to more accurately represent and reflect reality necessitates such a move. That is, the novel allows for the maximization of “open”

discourse, of interaction between the self (or the author, the text) and the other (the characters, the readers). Heteroglossia, meanwhile, substantiates dialogism in the very incorporation of “extraliterary” languages, the “multilingual consciousness” (Bakhtin 11)—that is, the very context, as well as the multiple speech types that make up the world of a novel in its depiction of different types of characters and speech situations that constantly break up the monologic tendencies of the author. Thus, through dialogism and heteroglossia the novel possesses the capacity for a full integration with the living present, an openended reality that incorporates the dialogue between text and society, and within society itself.

Bakhtin finds the ultimate counterpart and opposition to the novel in the epic. Where the novel is dialogic and open, the epic is (or was) monologic and closed. Bakhtin characterizes the constituent features of the epic as the following:

(1) a national epic past—in Goethe’s and Schiller’s terminology the “absolute past”—serves as the subject for the epic; (2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for the epic; (3) an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality, that is, from the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives. (Bakhtin 13)

All three elements are completely contradictory to the aims of the novel, which maintains an immediate contact and engagement with the reality of the present. The epic not only consists of a distant traditional valorization of the past, but moreover a past that never was and never could be—that is, the epic as *generically* conceived, never could, and never will, take place in the present:

The epic past is called the “absolute past” for good reason: it is both monochronic and valorized (hierarchical); it lacks any relativity, that is, any gradual, purely temporal progressions that might connect it with the present. It is walled off absolutely from all subsequent times, and above all from those times in which the singer and his listeners are located. This boundary, consequently, is immanent in the form of the epic itself and is felt and heard in its every word.

To destroy this boundary is to destroy the form of the epic as a genre. But precisely because it is walled off from all subsequent times, the epic past is absolute and

complete. It is as closed as a circle; inside it everything is finished, already over. There is no place in the epic world for any openness, indecision, indeterminacy. There are no loopholes in it through which we may glimpse the future; it suffices unto itself, neither supposing any continuation nor requiring it. Temporal and valorized definitions are here fused into a single inseparable whole (as they are also fused in the semantic layers of ancient languages). Everything incorporated into this past was simultaneously incorporated into a condition of authentic essence and significance, but therefore also took on conclusiveness and finality, depriving itself, so to speak, of all rights and potential for a real continuation. Absolute conclusiveness and closedness is the outstanding feature of the temporally valorized epic past. (Bakhtin 15-16)

Significantly, the epic world and epic consciousness are completely static, allowing no involvement with the reality of the present, and therefore no influence or reflection on society itself. A society and culture that valorizes the epic as the definitive literary genre is by definition dead, a waste land—there is no room for dynamic progression or connection with either the values and characters reflected in their literature, or between members of the society. That is, the epic world is distant—from its representations and from itself. Bakhtin continues:

The epic world is an utterly finished thing, not only as an authentic event of the distant past but also on its own terms and by its own standards; it is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in it. It is completed, conclusive and immutable, as a fact, an idea and a value. This defines absolute epic distance.... Thanks to this epic distance, which excludes any possibility of activity and change, the epic world achieves a radical degree of completedness not only in its content but in its meaning and its values as well. The epic world is constructed in the zone of an absolute distanced image, beyond the sphere of possible contact with the developing, incomplete and therefore re-thinking and re-evaluating present. (Bakhtin 17)

The epic as a genre thus is “finished”—it cannot progress by itself into the reality of the present because its form and content belong to the immutable monologic past, with one voice valorizing all frozen aspects of the epic world. By extension, there is no possibility for future development because the epic is utterly disconnected from the present. When the novel, with its multivoiced and multilingual dialogism, valorizes the present, the structure of society and artistic images change radically, and allows the possibility of a future, as Bakhtin details at some length:

The present...is in essence and in principle inconclusive; by its very nature it demands continuation, it moves into the future, and the more actively and consciously it moves into the future the more tangible and indispensable its inconclusiveness becomes. Therefore, when the present becomes the center of human orientation in time and in the world, time and world lose their completedness as a whole as well as in each of their parts. The temporal model of the world changes radically: it becomes a world where there is no first word (no ideal word), and the final word has not yet been spoken. For the first time in artistic-ideological consciousness, time and the world become historical: they unfold, albeit at first still unclearly and confusedly, as becoming, as an uninterrupted movement into a real future, as a unified, all-embracing and uncompleted process. Every event, every phenomenon, every thing, every object of artistic representation loses its completedness, its hopelessly finished quality and its immutability that had been so essential to it in the world of the epic "absolute past," walled off by an unapproachable boundary from the continuing and unfinished present. Through contact with the present, an object is attracted to the incomplete process of a world-in-the-making, and is stamped with the seal of inconclusiveness. No matter how distant this object is from us in time, it is connected to our incomplete, present-day, continuing temporal transitions, it develops a relationship with our unpreparedness, with our present. But meanwhile our present has been moving into an inconclusive future. And in this inconclusive context all the semantic stability of the subject is lost; its sense and significance are renewed and grow as the context continues to unfold. This leads to radical changes in the structuring of the artistic image. The image acquires a specific actual existence. It acquires a relationship—in one form or another, to one degree or another—to the ongoing event of current life in which we, the author and readers, are intimately participating. This creates the radically new zone for structuring images in the novel, a zone of maximally close contact between the represented object and contemporary reality in all its inconclusiveness—and consequently a similarly close contact between the object and the future. (Bakhtin 30-31)

The present is always in motion, always progressing toward the future—and while the epic perhaps operates under the assumption that the present cannot be captured in a literary form, the novel's objective is to attempt to depict the present in all its inconclusiveness. The novel thus becomes an inconclusive, unfinalizable form—for the trajectory of the present can never be "plotted," as such—the very act of portraying the present necessitates both the negation of closure and centripetal forces, and the affirmation of an open, centrifugal, dialogic confrontation with, and assimilation of, the heteroglot forces that make up the present.

Bakhtin concludes that the implications for the dialogic orientation to the novel are far ranging, and extend to other genres, including poetry. However, because of his intense

repudiation of the epic, Bakhtin sees no possible productive engagement with that genre in the present. Indeed, the novel seems to counteract any tendency for the literary imagination to cling to epic forms. In “Epic and Novel,” however, Bakhtin does not afford himself the opportunity to analyze how the epic still influences the modern world—how thinking in epic, absolute terms can lead to hopelessness and despair when confronting the fragmentary, open nature of the present—literally, a waste land. The project for modern literature was to redeem the world from the fragmented, shattered remains of a world longing for the lost plenitude of coherence and unity—what Bakhtin would term conclusiveness and closedness. To do this, as we shall see with Williams, modern poets reinstated epic forms in their mapping of the world, in the hope that such coherence would grant meaning to modern existence. In the process, modern writers came to realize that in order to confront the present, they had to do so on its own terms—they had to engage with the openedness and multiplicity of the present directly. The tension in modern literature, therefore, lies in the impulse to put the world back together, as it were, by using closed, epic forms, and being constantly drawn towards openness in their representation of the open, dialogic present. The epic thus—eventually—becomes novelized, inconclusive, unfinalizable.

Of course this description can be readily applied to William Carlos Williams in *Paterson*, and as we shall see clarifies the crucial role of the Cress letter at the supposed “center” of the poem. Indeed, the tension in *Paterson* between the centripetal force of the epic and the centrifugal force of the novel is evident in Williams’ own justification for writing the poem:

The first idea centering upon the poem, *Paterson*, came alive early: to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about me. The longer I lived in my place, among the details of my life, I realized that these isolated observations and experiences needed pulling together to gain “profundity.” (Williams, *Autobiography* 391)

Thus there is an opposition between the inconclusive, open, “knowable” present, and the closed, “pulling together” of poetic, epic creation. The image that Williams chose, of course, was the modern man (or poet, i.e., himself) as representative of the city of Paterson, NJ—the details and particulars of which Williams had been familiar all his life, and in which he lived in the present. Williams acknowledges the challenge of incorporating the present, with all its multiplicity, its dialogism and heteroglossia, with his own poetic, monologic voice:

I took the city as my “case” to work up, really to work it up. It called for a poetry such as I did not know, it was my duty to discover or make such a context on the “thought.” To *make* a poem, fulfilling the requirements of the art, and yet new, in the sense that the very lay of the syllables Paterson as Paterson would be discovered, perfect, perfect in the special sense of the poem, to have it—if it rose to flutter into life awhile—it would be as itself, locally, and so like every other place in the world. For it is in that, that it be particular to its own idiom, that it lives. (Williams, *Autobiography* 392)

Williams recognizes that a poetry that is “particular to its own idiom” necessitates a poetry “such as I did not know”—that is, to bring those dialogical tendencies into the poem requires breaking apart traditionally conceived elements of the poem. He would not be able to impose a closed shape upon this poem—as Eliot was willing to do, just as Pound attempted to avoid—even as he works with the epic form. Williams was only certain of the contextual nature of the poem, that he is writing in and for the present, with the knowledge of others who will read the poem, who by definition exist within the very fabric of the poem:

Having decided what I wanted to do I took my time deciding how I should go about the task. The thing was to use the multiple facets which a city presented as representatives for comparable facets of contemporary thought thus to be able to objectify the man himself as we know him and love him and hate him. This seemed to me to be what a poem was for, to speak for us in a language we can understand. But first before we can understand it the language must be recognizable. We must know it as our own, we must be satisfied that it speaks for us. And yet it must remain a language like all languages, a symbol of communication. (Williams, *Paterson* xiii)

Even before he begins to use this language in the poem, Williams is aware of his own tendency to emphasize the closure of the epic. The tension in *Paterson* always resides in Williams’

inclination to represent the world and at the same time put the world back together. That is, Williams is encountering a fragmented city in a fragmented world, in which broken people use broken language to communicate. To represent this city, he takes as his object a singular man—and herein lies the digression from dialogic to monologic poetic consciousness. His propensity is to put a novelistic world (the city) in the frame of an epic (the man). What Williams realizes before he even begins to write, however, is that this is an impossible task. As he inscribes in the Preface:

the city  
 the man, an identity—it can't be  
 otherwise—an  
 interpenetration, both ways. Rolling  
 up! obverse, reverse;  
 the drunk the sober; the illustrious  
 the gross; one. In ignorance  
 a certain knowledge and knowledge,  
 undispersed, its own undoing. (Williams, *Paterson* 4)

In blunt terms, Williams wants it both ways. He wants to represent the city the only way he knows how, through the poem—specifically an epic poem. But to do so, he must incorporate the stuff of his observation not in logical or hierarchical sequence, but in a field of interrelated, even arbitrary, action. Realizing he has formulated incommensurate goals, he warns himself of the dangers of submitting to an imposed, closed form:

and the craft,  
 subverted by thought, rolling up, let  
 him beware lest he turn to no more than  
 the writing of stale poems . . . (Williams, *Paterson* 4)

Here Williams desires nothing less than to relinquish his own monologic “thought.” And as if to illustrate the “writing of stale poems,” Williams begins the poem proper (that is, *Book One: The Delineaments of the Giants*) with a nod toward parody—a stylized version of what a true epic about Paterson (the city and the man) might look like:



articles, contemporary letters, the history of the city of Paterson, as well as Williams' own disjointed, inconsistent poetry and prose—and perhaps most significantly, the Cress letter.

Breslin elucidates the significance of this shift in poetic consciousness:

*Paterson* is by no means a finished work, its parts rolled up into a fixed order at several removes from immediacy. The poem, instead, *is* the act of creation, recording the consciousness of its creator, whose dual fidelity to the *world* and to the *poem* constantly forces him to turn back and start all over again. *Paterson* is the beginning (all there can now be of it) to the impossible poem *Paterson*. (Breslin 171)

The poem never even attempts to return to the epic quality of the opening lines—and as the poem as a whole progresses, it loses its own intended shape (the original structure of four books expands to five, and preliminary notes for six). That is, the dialogic engagement with the vital present negates any inclination toward coherence. As Augustus Kolich remarks,

Williams recognizes that the mathematic is much more complex than a simple, unreflective reduction to one would permit. Eliot had solved a similar equation in *The Waste Land* by thematically unifying all voices from the present and all allusions to the past around *his* summary judgment, which lent certainty to his own views of civilization's spiritual decline. But Williams will not allow himself to do what he believed Eliot could do so effortlessly: to rise above the subject of the poem to find creative assurances in the vatic display of a consciousness bred on Old World standards of value and taste. (Kolich 56)

The tension of the rest of the poem resides not in unifying the multilingual consciousness of the poem, but in letting the different voices that make up Paterson the city (and the man/poet) and *Paterson* the poem rest side by side—by resisting the generic requirements of the epic.

Bruce Comens explains:

The dilemma, for *Paterson*, is to find a means of including other voices without subsuming them to one, authorial voice, of granting each its own place without allowing the poem to fall apart—in sum, to write a poem that would not simply extend a tradition of strategic poems.... Hence the poem, *Paterson*, is founded on its own catastrophe—a continuous “dive,” or series of dives, that manifest a constant refusal and destruction of any strategic, redemptory scaffolding—and it is this refusal and consequent ongoing catastrophe that, Williams hopes, will paradoxically “redeem” the poem, redeem it from ultimate catastrophe and even from the necessity of redemption. (Comens 112, 113-114)

Williams finally lets the shape of his poem reflect the shape of modern existence—that is, the poem begins with the centripetal desire for closure, for form, but in the process of incorporating dialogic forces, the poem ultimately affirms the centrifugal pull of the present, of the opened heteroglossia inherent in modern society, in Paterson. Thus, the unfinalizable nature of the poem reflects the indeterminacy of the present and the future. Both poem and society radiate outward toward that future, with no beginning or end, simply the recognition that all voices speak—not with one voice, but on the same page, in dialogue.

## II. The Authority of “Cress”

Throughout the first two books of *Paterson*, the reader encounters the poetry of Williams’ persona, Dr. Paterson, alongside “found” materials related to the city and man of Paterson—newspaper articles, historical narratives, and personal letters from a variety of different, anonymous voices. As Williams himself explained, *Paterson* is about “the search of the poet for his language” (*P* xiv)—a search guided by the dictum, “no ideas but in things” (*P* 6). But in collecting these “things” in the collage of the poem, Dr. Paterson is constantly thwarted by the perception that the people’s “language / is divorced from their minds” (*P* 12) and that “Divorce is / the sign of knowledge in our time” (*P* 17)—while the poet seeks fruitlessly to “marry” language and life, the City and the Park, the Male and the Female, in the very act of composing the poem. In Book Two Dr. Paterson spends a *Sunday in the Park* by the Falls, the Park which is “female to the city // —upon whose body Paterson constructs his thoughts / (concretely)” (*P* 43). As he moves through the Park, Williams’ Dr. Paterson further articulates the “defeat” of the act of poetry (in “The Descent”), even as “She” (the Park) insists, “Marry us! Marry us! / Or! be dragged down, dragged / under and lost” (*P* 83). The dialogue between “She” and “He”

concludes that “the language is worn out” (*P* 84)—that alone, “He” is incapable of “marriage,” as long as they are both “—divorced / from the insistence of place— / from knowledge, / from learning—the terms / foreign, conveying no immediacy, pouring down” (*P* 83-84). The letter from Cress, the female poet, dispersed in fragments throughout Book Two, arrives in full force at this point—eight uninterrupted pages (in the original publication) acting not merely as a dramatic conclusion to the section, but effectively bringing the larger apparent design of *Paterson* to a standstill. Rather, at least a certain segment of critical reception describes the letter’s function in the poem in this manner. Indeed for a long while critics did not know quite what to make of the letter from Cress, and it took at least two decades not only to accept the letter as an essential part of the poem, but also to identify who “Cress” *really* was, besides her significance to *Paterson* and to Williams.

The early formalist bewilderment of Randall Jarrell provides an adequate example of the kind of hesitant critical response the inclusion of the letter first received:

Should so much of this book consist of what are—the reader is forced to conclude—real letters from a real woman? One reads these letters with involved, embarrassed pity, quite as if she had walked into the room and handed them to one. What has been done to make them part of the poem...? I can think of no answer except: “They have been copied out on the typewriter.” (Graham 165)

Roger Seamon goes one step further, articulating a key contention with later critics, as he concludes that the letter represents “a triumph of the female material, the anti-poetic, over the shape of the poem” (Graham 165). Thus critics had great difficulty relating the substance of the letter to the themes of the poem—until they discovered the “author” of the letter to be Marcia Nardi, and pored over Williams’ own letters, finding correspondences between his art and his life. (Of course, the relation between art and life is precisely the nature of Nardi’s complaint, as we shall see.) Once critics allowed themselves to look outside the poem for Williams’ own

justification for including the letter, they began to see how the letter made sense in the context of the poem. As Paul Mariani explains in his biography of Williams:

Nardi's letter would serve to recapitulate nearly all the major themes with which his autobiographical poem had been concerned: the woman as victim, complaining, accusing, crying out in pain; the divorce between the two sexes and the danger that the woman would turn to other women for solace; the woman as the energy and the flower of a man's life; the poem itself as a confession of inadequacy; the socioeconomic ills that had created so many of the tensions between men and women, making of the man a false nurturer and forcing the woman into an unnatural dependency on the man.... Moreover, the letter would serve too as a prose coda to a poem, insisting on language's inability—even at its most lyrical—to eradicate the all-pervasive facts of blockage and divorce in modern love. Williams meant that letter to send the whole poem into a tailspin at its halfway point... (Mariani 474-5)

With such an emphasis on the interaction between the sexes, as well as the evident fact that Williams uses a female's voice for his own purposes, feminist critics have been drawn to the Cress letters, especially Sandra Gilbert in "Purloined Letters: William Carlos Williams and 'Cress.'" "

Gilbert's main argument revolves around two general questions related to Williams' "voracious consumption" of the Cress letters: namely, "why male writers would choose to 'usurp' or 'appropriate' women's words, and particularly the words of women writers," and "why male writers and thinkers would want, at least symbolically, to occupy 'female' positions" (Gilbert 7). Gilbert's questions are prompted by two letters from William Carlos Williams, delineating his intentions for including the Cress letters. To Horace Gregory, soon after Book Two was published, Williams explains:

The purpose of the long letter at the end is partly ironic, partly "writing" to make it plain that even poetry is writing and nothing else—so that there's a logical continuity in the art, prose, verse: an identity.... But specifically, as you see, the long letter is definitely germane to the rest of the text. It is psychologically related to the text.... That it is *not* the same stuff as the poem but comes from below 14<sup>th</sup> St. is precisely the key. It does not belong in the poem itself any more than a note on—Dante would. (O'Neil 128-9)

Gilbert focuses on the apparent dismissal of Marcia Nardi's letters as mere "writing"—"by implication, of course, *bad* writing, but therefore writing which the poet's collage technique will purify and redeem" (Gilbert 7). Gilbert concentrates more on the context *outside* of the poem, and even beyond the letter to which she refers. For Williams goes to great lengths throughout Book Two to emphasize that even his own collage technique is "worn out"—that the search for a pure, redeeming, *true* language is his main objective and continually out of his grasp *because* he cannot "marry" the opposites (i.e., Male/Female, literature/life) with *his* "writing" alone. Thus, the letter does not "belong" in the poem, for if it did, it would be subject to the same *falseness* as Dr. Paterson's writing. The fact that the Cress letter represents, according to Gilbert, "a threatening form of insubordination, a 'tail' that tries to 'wag' the dog" (Gilbert 7), only serves to reinforce the theme of divorce—Dr. Paterson tries to reconcile the two voices in his own poetry, but the hierarchies of language and authorship prevent him from doing so. As Gale Schricker argues, if Dr. Paterson "embodies only the male element, then he must, if he really wishes to marry opposites in the poem, allow the female element her say" (Schricker 27). To counteract his own dominance, Williams makes sure that "*She* has the last word," as Williams noted to himself on an early draft (O'Neil ix), so that he, and poetry in general, may move beyond the duality and hierarchy of male-dominant language, or as Anthony Flinn puts it, "masculist thought" (Flinn 25). But does even the voice of Cress adequately represent the female element, even in the context of *Paterson*?

Indeed, Gilbert questions why Williams would choose to include such a "paradigmatic woman of letters" into his work except "by transforming her into a *character* and thus a creature he could control, a creation of his own imagination. Paradoxically, he could only do this by *letting* her say her say but forcing her to do it on his own terms" (Gilbert 8). However, this

conclusion contradicts a further explanation by Williams of including Cress' "last word" (as well as Gilbert's reaction to it). This time Williams writes in a 1951 letter to Robert D. Pepper:

It is, as you see, an attack, a personal attack upon me, by a woman. It seemed a legitimate one.... I decided that [there] were more reasons for putting the letter in than there were for leaving it out. In the first place it was a reply from the female side to many of my male pretensions. It was a strong reply, a reply which sought to destroy me. If it could destroy me I should be destroyed. It was just that it should have its opportunity to destroy. If I hid the reply it would be a confession of weakness on my part. (Weaver 208-9)

Williams does not want to *control* this female voice—in fact he grants it the opportunity to *destroy* his own voice, which it effectively does at the end of Book Two. If Williams had not, if he had chosen to hide or “silence” Nardi's reply to his life and work (implicitly through his own writing), he himself would have been hiding behind his “male pretensions,” the traditional structure of male *authority*—which Williams makes clear would be a “confession of *weakness*,” not strength or dominance, on his part.

Nevertheless, Gilbert concludes from Williams' letters that Marcia Nardi as “author of these [‘Cress’] texts is seen as simultaneously powerless (vulgar, barely competent, from ‘below 14<sup>th</sup> street’) and powerful (threatening, deflating, even castrating)” (Gilbert 7). Indeed Nardi/Cress comes across as powerful and powerless in that her voice is present, but *apparently* not within her own text/context. Gilbert persists further in her objections, questioning why Williams would not choose letters from a female writer such as H. D. or Marianne Moore, whose writing would be “far more logical equivalents” to the “intellectual seriousness and self-confident lyric passion” exhibited by the letters Williams includes in *Paterson* from established and up-and-coming male writers such as Ezra Pound and Allen Ginsberg (Gilbert 11). However, in describing the Nardi/Cress letters as “the frantic and passionate excoriations of...a failed writer who sees herself as ‘more the woman than the poet’ (*P* 15),” Gilbert ironically reinforces the established male literary “authority” of a figure like William Carlos Williams (Gilbert 11). For

Williams, by placing such a “frantic” voice within the structure of his *own* poem, identifies with and indeed perceives *himself* (or his persona, Dr. Paterson) as the same “failed poet” as Nardi/Cress, rather than a self-confident (or cocky) author such as Pound or Ginsberg, or perhaps even Moore. That is, the letter—a caustic critique of the kind of “disconnected” writing in which Williams engages throughout *Paterson*, and a female poet’s complaint that she is “too fettered by her circumstances to write” (Flinn 24)—which Williams works into his poem, effectively *silences him*.

Some examples from the first few paragraphs of the Cress letter will serve to elucidate this assertion:

My attitude toward woman’s wretched position in society and my ideas about all the changes necessary there, were interesting to you, weren’t they, in so far as they made for *literature*? That my particular emotional orientation, in wrenching myself free from patterned standardized feminine feelings, enabled me to do some passably good work with *poetry*—all that was fine, wasn’t it—something for you to sit up and take notice of! And you saw in one of my first letters to you (the one you had wanted to make use of, then, in the Introduction to your Paterson) an indication that my thoughts were to be taken seriously, because that too could be turned by you into literature, as something disconnected from life.

But when my actual personal life crept in, stamped all over with the *very same* attitudes and sensibilities and preoccupations that you found quite admirable as *literature*—that was an entirely different matter, wasn’t it? No longer admirable, but, on the contrary, deplorable, annoying, stupid, or in some other way unpardonable...

*Only* my writing (when I write) is myself: only that is the real me in any essential way. Not because I bring to literature and to life two different inconsistent sets of values, as you do. No, *I* don’t do that; and I feel that when anyone does do it, literature is turned into just so much intellectual excrement fit for the same stinking hole as any other kind.

But in writing (as in all forms of creative art) one derives one’s unity of being and one’s freedom to be one’s self, from one’s relationship to those particular externals (language, clay, paints, et cetera) over which one has complete control and the shaping of which lies entirely in one’s own power; whereas in living, one’s shaping of the externals involved there (of one’s friendships, the structure of society, et cetera) is no longer entirely within one’s own power but requires the cooperation and the understanding and the humanity of others in order to bring out what is best and most real in one’s self.

That’s why all that fine talk of yours about woman’s need to “sail free in her own element” as a *poet*, becomes nothing but empty rhetoric in the light of your behavior towards me. No woman will ever be able to do that, completely, until she is able *first* to “sail free in her own element” in living itself... (P 87)

Nardi/Cress goes on to insist that because of her socioeconomic circumstances and lack of human contact (and lack of a typewriter), she too is “Blocked” (*P* 62)—she cannot write poetry, and therefore cannot articulate her “real” self, except in this letter to Williams/Dr. Paterson. But ironically, as Anthony Flinn explains, the placement of this letter, her prose, in the *poem* “gives her a life that she did not have before, creating in the minds of the readers a vision approaching in fullness and clarity the vision of her possessed by those, like Williams, who actually knew Marcia Nardi. The boundaries of art and life are blurred, rendering moot the accusations of both Cress/Nardi and the ‘imbalance’ critics” (Flinn 24). By including the letter, Williams attempts to provide Nardi with what she bitterly complains he could not in real life, or indeed in his writing—the “cooperation and the understanding and the humanity of others” (including other readers), with the prospect of bringing out “what is best and most real in one’s self” in *her* own writing, her own element, her own reality—her “essential” self.

Ultimately with Cress superseding his own voice, Williams renders his own objectives for *Paterson* in much sharper relief, as Flinn continues his argument:

Furthermore, having released such a powerful figure as Cress into the poem, Williams deflects the focus from the authorial presence of the male poetic speaker. At the same time, her self-defining presence determines the poem’s contents just as Williams’ speaker does, thereby continually unmaking the sense of intrusive, and thus masculinist, authorial control. (Flinn 25)

Nardi/Cress thus may “sail free in her own element” within the poem, which Williams himself may not do, and might never accomplish, for he still has two (eventually three and almost four) more books of “his” poem to write. But now he may continue with a *real* female’s admonition to “marry” literature with life, and with an authoritative example from *her* of how it can be done—that is, by acknowledging that writing *and* living involve the cooperation and integration of others in dialogue, in the attempt to make contact with the living present.

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William Carlos Williams was an American poet closely associated with modernism and Imagism. He was also a pediatrician and general practitioner of medicine. In May 1963, he was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962) and the Gold Medal for Poetry of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. The Poetry Society of America continues to honor William Carlos Williams by presenting an annual award in his name for the best book of poetry published by a small, non-profit or university press. Williams' house in Rutherford is now on the National Register of Historic Places. He was inducted into the New Jersey Hall of Fame in 2009. ...more. Combine Editions. William Carlos Williams's books.