WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS AND THE ART OF PERCEIVING

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All genuinely new art holds an element of pain. It wrenches us out of the familiar, pierces with new sensations, breaks barriers and exploits the dimensions within us, and occasionally leaves the sudden terror of vacuums to be filled with truths greater than or contrary to those we knew. And often through art comes something which, without knowing it, we yearned for yet had no way of reaching. That limitation of our nature which bars completion is our tragedy. Yet now and again it is our triumph that one life undergoes long pain and infinite joy to expand our vision, to supply one more link toward either the expansion of a particular moment or the growth toward an ultimate vision. Shock, pain, then the joy of revelation, and the slow growth in human perception.

Precisely the *how* of that perception becomes increasingly both the subject and object of many key poets' preoccupations in the twentieth century. Never before in the history of poetry have so many poets been so concerned with what poetry can do. Obviously a new age demands a new way of coping with that age, a form which will capture the moment of its own conceiving. William Carlos Williams falls directly, of necessity, into that now *traditional* trap —an unending search for a language and a form to express his time, for a structure of the self, in poetry, which will at the same time link the poet with his world, its history, and with all men. The way is the poem, the task to discover what is possible through the poem and how.

No wonder then that, engaged in the task, Williams felt destroyed when Eliot's *The Waste Land* appeared in *The Dial* in 1922.

> *It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it and our brave sallies into the unknown were turned to dust.*

To me especially it struck like a sardonic bullet. I felt at once that it had set me back twenty years, and I'm sure it did. Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself-rooted in the locality which should give it fruit. I knew at once that in certain ways I was most defeated.

Eliot had turned his back on the possibility of reviving my world. And being an accomplished craftsman, better skilled in some ways than I could ever hope to be, I had to watch him carry my world off with him, the fool, to the enemy [1].

What actually happened, it seems, was perhaps the best thing that could have happened to Williams. He was forced to re-examine and to forge, which is to say he was challenged to do for himself what Eliot had done for himself, to begin to discover who and what, as a poet, he was.

And where to begin? It is a commonplace to point out the post-Romantic and post-Darwinian need on the part of many thinking and feeling beings to restructure one's universe, a need made increasingly strong by continued advances in science and consequent retrogressions in traditional religion. Nonetheless the commonplace does not diminish the sense of agony or the concern of the seeking man. So, yes, where to begin? For where are the common human symbols? where the basic unity, national or international, of pre-accepted values? Where, then, the understood means of communication? Words there are, but who now, the poet might say, understands them in common? Somewhere there must be a re-orienting. If the technological world demands conditioning from day to day, must not poetry also demand it? Must not each member of that world still seek a communication with the others? Such an act must presume knowledge of oneself and what is *not* oneself, an act felt deeply and articulated clearly, and, to Williams, made with an objectivity which typifies the scientific and material age in which we live. Williams begins in the logical place, with what is near, outside him, and directly observed-objects.

He was thoroughly aware of all currents in poetry; he was steeped in the awareness that the symbol, with its impliced levels of separate being, was a clear answer to the demand for a concrete weapon for poetry, in answer to the scientific fact, which could order the multiple

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[1] WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*, pp. 174-175.

realities of his time; he was experienced through his brief contact with the Imagists and his own expert practice of controlled imagism both as poet and as editor of *Contact,* an objectivist magazine[2]

By 1922 with the appearance of *Spring and All,* five volumes of verse behind him, he was writing those *notations to himself* —poems— which begin to delineate his world and therefore his self. In his now classic poem *the red wheelbarrow,* we begin to discover his method:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

Objects are described objectively. They have an undeniable life of their own. Each has a self. By being placed starkly side by side, they are related. In a sense we are assaulted by the purity of the description. What, however, gives a sense of emotion to what follows is precisely the subjective relation of the one who has made the observation, a comment which is very moving in itself: *so much depends.* The dependence is a great one, and Williams tells us a good bit about his and other modern poets' problems.

As poet, Williams needs objects, things and people (*Inside the bus one sees his thoughts sitting and standing*). They are his initial matter for use in poems, but they also define him and his necessity as man and poet. They are what he is not. And he can learn what he is and what he is capable of precisely through the effect they have on him, what he makes of them, and how they may be used to accomplish his purpose of relating, through them, to other men and to the world. In one sense the poem is tragic in its implications-it defines our separateness and isolation and the personal need, through aesthetics, to overcome life's isolation and move toward union.

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2 In *William Carlos Williams,* p. 77, Vivienne Koch reports that although Williams said there was no objectivist poetry he gave the following definition: *Objectivism has to do with the whole poem —the structure of the poem as a metrical invention— a complete objective significance uniquely in itself above any partial image which it may contain.*

Besides, the organic effect is a forcing of the reader into relating to the poem, making him aware of the poet and his world, making him share in the creative act and startling him with the poet's perception as he too realizes it.

The poem thus sets up a series of relationships which link poet and reader through what is shared. Williams begins to demonstrate the capacity of poetry.

As he tells us in *Kora in Hell*: *Improvisations* in 1920, Williams saw the work of artists of previous ages as being *designed to keep up the barrier between sense and the vaporous fringe which distracts the attention from its agonized approaches to the moment* and he had the ambition of ridding himself of the *constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world...* The method, as far as the poet is able, must be to let the object be seen in all its freshness, which means (for him) to destroy traditional poetic barriers and see anew. Williams himself already sees anew, and must find the language and form for that vision. His notations, such as *so much depends,* already indicate his probing. He must go further: *What I put down of value will have this value: an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from 'reality'-such as rhyme, meter as meter and not as the essential of the work, one of its words* [3].

For Williams the real world of the object must touch the senses and be transformed into the other reality which the imagination makes of it. The phrase so crucial to Williams' vision is *no ideas but in things,* a negation of any formalized system which will destroy one's identification with continued change and growth. It is not only the duty of the poet to discover the thing in itself but also his task to create for his poem the reality invented by his imagination, a reality quite apart from what he originally viewed and, in the final sense, a part of his self at that moment as the artist captures himself in the act of perceiving, a moment of joy and growth.

The extent to which he succeeds, when he does, is owing to the accuracy of his idiom and his technical control of its spoken variations, sound, speed, cadence —or measure— as it shifts rhythm to reflect the precision of the awakened perception. To what we observed in

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[3] VIVIENNE KOCH, *William Carlos Williams,* 45.

so much depends other poems add a quality of drama by multiplying the revelations in the action. The poems capture the living motion of the imagination being aroused. Few poems reproduce this success with more force than *By the road to the contagious hospital*:

By the road to the contagious hospital,
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast-cold wind. Beyond, the
waste of broad, muddy fields,
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen,

patches of standing water,
the scattering of tall trees.

All along the road the reddish,
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines.

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches.

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind—.

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wild-carrot leaf.

One by one objects are defined—
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of
entrance— Still, the profound change
has come upon them; rooted, they
grip down and begin to awaken.

Three stanzas of notations —now incomplete, verbless, fleeting observations— catch what his eyes see in passing. What is seen is geared to the one thing not again mentioned in the poem after the first line —the contagious hospital— whose very presence lends life-death, human values to the landscape. As designless as the poem might at first appear, the vertical-horizontal pictures (*standing and fallen /*

standing water / tall trees / upstanding) and the wetdry images all partake of the inseparable and ironic duality of life and death.

The first three stanzas now serve as a touchstone from which the poet can nove —a deceptive touchstone, a world *lifeles in appearance.* To this point, all movement is outer movement, the poet's as he moves down the road. Now the movement shifts to spring's inner action of regeneration, stated in language which parallels the natural with the human births.

Were this all, the poem would be polished but hardly unique. But this is *not* what the poem is exclusively about. Yes, it is about birth, yet more than the birth of man or of nature, it is a drama about a poem dynamically being born to the imagination. For at the same moment that *objects are defined, it quickens.* One is forced to ask: What quickens? The ambiguity of *it* is deliberately designed. Life in man and nature quickens. The poet's perception quickens. The poet's imagination, seizing perception, quickens. A poem quickens into being. And the revelation of what is happening —and how— quickens the reader. He too is caught in the poet's act of imagination as if the revelation were his own directly, and suddenly, realized one — as Williams would have it be.

The emotion, if felt, is a sharing in creation. At best, succeeding in this manner, Williams has realized the function of his individual poem — to link man and man through a given moment with a unique insight which might enable the reader to perceive relationships —perhaps for the first time, in a new away— afresh.

However, Williams is not always content to allow the drama to be performed without guidance. In later work he generally becomes more explicit, especially when he treats the problem of writing, though in no way is the drama diminished in effect or significance; in fact, his art is more refined in his ability to write a poem within a poem, to demonstrate the poet at work creating at the same time that he speaks about the *how* of creating:

A Sort of a Song
Let the snake wait under
his weed
and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.
—through metaphor to reconcile
the people and the stones.

Compose. (No ideas
but in things) Invent!
Saxifrage is my flower that splits
the rocks.

Talking to himself, as in *so much depends,* in this parallel the poet endows the word with all the snake's potentiality. It is this latent power which must be realized in order *to reconcile the people and the stones.* With this purpose he can command himself to *compose,* remembering his principle (*no ideas but in things*), immediately discerning that the challenge is to his imagination to produce the metaphor which will contain and release that potentiality: *Invent!* The imagination responds as Williams terminates the poem by the action of creating a metaphor which is in itself a poem. The imagination, through metaphor, has embodied the idea *to reconcile / the people and the stones*; it has discerned the idea in the thing and elevated it to its own reality, complete in itself as a poem and completing the poem about how to make a poem which will function between poet and reader: *Saxifrage is my flower that splits the rocks.*

The flower is one of the central metaphors in the art of William Carlos Williams, and though he refuses to formalize a system, the extension of the flower image indicates something of the personal, social and metaphysical extension of Williams' world as he tries to encompass that world whole in his longer poems and in his attempted epic poem, *Paterson,* in his later years.

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The collected poems of Williams would be enough to give us a unique world, a consistent volley of revelations which might orient us to insistent variety, freshness, vitality and a sense of newness. But in the earliest seeds of that poetry, the metaphor was growing in dimension, incorporating relationships on a much larger scale than the quick bursting insights of the shorter poems indicated. Indeed, as Williams preoccupations grew, his poems grew longer; he was perfecting both the spoken rhythms of his age and the *measure* of his *variable foot,* a triadic line which he made exclusively his, and within this invented form the metaphor which extended his relationships. Eventually it blossomed in such long poems as *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower* and in his mystic search for total union in his epic poem, *Paterson.*

Williams is famous for having written more beautiful poems about flowers than any poet writing in English. The flower, a key metaphor, suggests the amplitude of his vision and his ability to wrestle with and control the dimensions of multiple reality the poet must confront in the twentieth century.

From the beginning he had a predilection for yellow, with all its consonant suggestions: birth, innocence, purity, the child, his world, the evidence of the cycle of human and natural birth in spring, the seasonal continuity and therefore perpetuity and a consequent moral regeneration:

this crooked flower
which only to look upon
all men
are cured. (The Yellow Flower)

Often the flower represents in both its regenerative motion and its product a description parallel to sexual penetration, Williams' own view of the world and of his mind and poetry inseparably bound to each moment's active gestation; consequently an intense sexual symbolism runs through much of his poetry.

No surprise is it then that he sees the flower in the form of woman, often his wife, Flossie, and, like any part of the natural cycle, she becomes the container of the future. So, too, the flower embodies growth, change and the idea of eternal beauty beyond death. The flower's action, opening to receive a proboscis, unites it with something outside itself. And the act of love reflects the higher union that moves particular growth and all living things.

As a particular, the flower, like the person Williams sometimes sees in it, contains its history, its total past. At the same time it is the particularization of all the past implicit in the species and a summation of all that has gone before. It is the end-product of all floral history and contains its implicit future. Since its major characteristic, like our own, is a constant capacity for change, its world is an ever-present *now*.

Life as constant change indicates a triunmph over man's defining of dimensions in time and space through the persistency of a force which lives beyond the particular. That force is a probing moral force which Williams finds, of course, in himself, progenitive from his own imagination and faith and endowed upon the world he looks out upon. The life of the flower is given the meaning which his imagination places

there. With that force Williams —through observation, thought and memory— proyects the whole man into a unified vision of the universe.

The greatest (it seems to me) and longest of Williams' flower poems beautifully weaves his method of extended perception. *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower* multiplies the particular insights of the short poems and fuses them into a mastery of the range and complexity of one man's life as a microscosm of twentieth-century man's life made whole in the vision within Williams' technique.

By choosing a real and mythological flower, the asphodel, the poet elevates and expands known reality into the unlimited world of the imagination as it informs the known world. Looking at the flower, he is plunged into a multiple journey — through earth and hell, present and (both personal and historical) past, dream and actuality, actuality and imaginative reality. The poem creates a world of the self, a link with woman, all men, and the universe at large.

At once his senses appeal to his imagination, and Williams fuses two realities in a journey which is a descent and then an ascent. For imagination creates for the odorless asphodel an odor which transports him through memory into an associational recreation of Williams' search for wholeness as doctor, husband, poet, and man.

An odor
springs from it!
A sweetest odor!
Honeysuckle! And now
there comes the buzzing of a bee!
and a whole flood
of sister memories!

The flower is Flossie —girl, woman, wife— and physical and spiritual love. The green-yellow world is also the world of light for it is the sparking point of the imagination, the beginning and the end, like its own cycle, of both life and the act of the imagination which has set the poet's mind in motion.

The journey recreates, but now anew for it has meaning, the elements of his intimate, public and imaginative life, all bound by the imaginative act. The moral unity is achieved as the imagination perceives the light which transforms the object it acts upon. The whole poem becomes a complex weaving resulting in a mystic union whose meaning is made transcendent to all its parts as love, light and the imagination fuse.

His penetration of his life and his union of elements is parallel to both the latent religious and sexual unions implicit at the altar with his wife, recalled in memory and heightened in imagination (in some of the loveliest lines in English love poetry), exactly as his imagination has penetrated all the facets of his poetic art:

At the altar
so intense was I
before my vows,
so moved by your presence
a girl so pale
and ready to faint
that I pitied
and wanted to protect you.
As I think of it now,
after a lifetime,
it is as if
a sweet-scented flower
were poised
and for me did open.
Asphodel
has no odor
save to the imagination
but it too
celebrates the light.
It is late
but an odor
as from our wedding
has revived for me
and begun again to penetrate
into the crevices
of my world.

Now finished, the poem becomes an imaginative flower reflecting all the dimensions of his symbol.

The structure of the poem shows the mastery Williams finally acquired, not only in its cyclical action, a return to the flower-woman with which he began, nor in the return of the imagination to the odorless flower endowed with a moral odor, but in the as-near-perfected method of his *versos sueltos* (as he called them) as he could create. Ironically and instinctively he was working toward a triadic unity in his search for wholeness. Intentional or not, the three-structure gives a feeling of religious and metaphysical totality to his technical accom-

plishment in thorough accord with the unity of love, light and imagination which the *measure* of his verse represents.

The complexity of Williams' working and discovering, from the expansion of the particular, is only suggested in this paper. From his early work, Williams' decision to take the typically American and probe only in depth (with the consequence of extending) is evident:

> *...I believe all art begins in the local and must begin there since only then will the senses find their material. Our own language is the beginning of that which makes and will continue to make an American poet distinctive* [4].

His loyalty to that method makes Williams' achievement more significant than that of the majority of American poets of this century. He realized that whatever vastness could be given through poetry, however it might cope with the layers of our twentieth-century life, his method of working with the *local* —as opposed to Eliot's, for example— was concentration, not dispersion. His manuscripts, his rewriting of finished poems into new and more controlled poems, show how carefully he worked over forty years to master depth and range. His individual poems, and especially his flower poems, show not only his art of perceiving but a collective motion toward deeper and more refined penetration. By the time he was ready to write *Paterson,* he was most firm in his intention:

> *To make a start,*
> *out of particulars*
> *and make them general, rolling*
> *up the sum, by defective means—*

To create a myth —the plague of modern poets— and give man a transcendent feeling of belonging and unity, he knew that, with his gift for perception, he could only do it by exploring one place in all its dimensions, and so produce something representative of American life and modern man.

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[4] Vivienne Koch, *William Carlos Williams,* 89.