

William Carlos Williams



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Papers by

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William Carlos Williams

Papers by Kenneth Burke,
Emily Mitchell Wallace,
Norman Holmes Pearson,
and A. M. Sullivan

Edited by CHARLES ANGOFF

The first three papers in this volume are by authorities on the writings of Dr. William Carlos Williams, and each makes a distinct contribution to the mounting body of research on and interpretation of the works of this modern American poet. The fourth paper is a portrait from memory, so to speak, by the eminent poet and critic A. M. Sullivan, a former president of The Poetry Society of America.

Lecturer-writer Kenneth Burke's critical appreciation of Williams brings out the poet's sensitivity to traffic, not unlikely for a dweller in New Jersey, as a poetic motive and possible source of Williams's copiousness. He further emphasizes the ebullience, corresponding with the copiousness, of a poetic method that could find in anything and everything the makings of a poem.

Emily Mitchell Wallace, who has published the definitive bibliography of William Carlos Williams's works, shows how the poet responded to trees with all of his senses. It is no whimsy of metaphor, then, that poems about himself as poet

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are also about trees. Included with her essay is a holograph copy of Williams's very first poem, printed and illustrated in childish hand, which, significantly, is entitled simply "Tree."

Yale Professor Norman Holmes Pearson describes the fine William Carlos Williams Collection at Yale and the people who use it. Seven hundred books from Williams's personal library reflect part of his literary interests, as do his manuscripts and correspondence. Such a collection as Yale's, says Professor Pearson, "annotates" one unpublished fragment entitled "Rutherford and Me," and "it amplifies his roots, traditions, and memories, his life as a physician, his poems, his plays, his novels and short stories, his critical essays, and his letters from writers everywhere."

The concluding memoir by A. M. Sullivan brings further valuable insights into Williams—his desire for a simplified transatlantic English that is "American," his talks with Ezra Pound, the reception of *Paterson* by the citizens of Paterson, New Jersey, and the fruit of mutual discussions on the shaping of words in the daily vocabulary, on speech rhythms, and on the possible rapprochement of identity of American speech and poetry. These papers were presented as the first of the Leverton Lecture Series, at Fairleigh Dickinson University, made possible by a gift from Morris Leverton, noted financier and member of the Board of Overseers of Fairleigh Dickinson University. Future lectures in the series will also be published in book form.

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Dr. William Carlos Williams,
Poet and Humanist
A. M. SULLIVAN

My earliest recollection of Dr. William Carlos Williams and perhaps my most vivid picture of him was a long moment of silence as he stirred his tea, having squeezed an eighth of a lemon into the cup. We had been talking about his aversion to traditional rhetoric after our Sunday Morning broadcast over WOR in February of 1935. I had been impressed by his simple poetic statement addressed to a mop standing in the corner. Suddenly, he looked up and diverted the dialogue with "Look at that chemical reaction. The lemon has taken much of the color from the tea."

Williams's eyes and ears reported everything of sensory significance. He filled pages of notebooks with items from the trivial to the profound and recalled them as needed. Nothing was too small to record, not even the effect of lemon juice squeezed into a teacup. He sought the universal out of the particular and gave principal attention to the human

touch. Williams possessed a hungry mind that fed on people. He was an avid conversationalist with an audience of one or ten, but he was always the interlocutor if the audience was responsive, especially with the literate audience that he met in his home town. Occasionally he ran into a negative mind that sparked in opposition. One I recall was Dr. Oliver St. John Gogarty, the "Buck Mulligan" of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Gogarty was a resident of nearby Wyckoff for a brief period following the settlement of a libel suit in Dublin, the aftermath of a comment in his autobiography *As I Was Coming Down Sackville Street*.

Gogarty and Williams had one thing in common. They could both write M.D. after their names. Beyond that there was little similarity to what their pens or voices might agree upon in public. They came together one evening at the home of Clayton and Kathleen Hoagland, a Rutherford gathering place for the culturally elite, but there was no entente cordiale between the physicians. After a brief exchange of opinions they were quite willing to "agree to disagree." Gogarty, the traditional lyric poet, and Williams, the irreverent iconoclast of the rulebook, retreated to separate corners with groups of listeners more amenable to their competitive egos.

The humanism of Dr. Williams became a major impulse in his epic adventure in the poem sequence of *Paterson*, a catch-all report of lifelong observations, enthusiasms, and indignations. Williams worshiped at his shrine in nature, the Passaic Falls with its drop of seventy feet. Here was the thing of beauty with its potential of service that inspired Alexander Hamilton in 1791 with the concept of "The Society of Useful Manufactures" in which Paterson became the prototype of the American industrial community. Here, too, was the design of the "Protestant ethic" of material success, the community of lathes and spindles driven by

water power. Here was the vision of the self-sustaining city of skills with the competitive energy and moral stamina to lift the burdens of the citizen and raise the level of livelihood with social and cultural benefits.

A century later Williams saw the Hamilton concept realized, but with mixed results of success and misery. The poet of *Paterson* understood the validity of the hopes of Hamilton but also recognized that the city slum could be the price of progress in a mechanized society. As a humanist he realized the need for a readjustment of the power of the machine with the human impulse for equity.

This tension is mirrored in Williams's use of language, which is of time, place, and circumstance, and dramatized in the labor struggles of the Paterson Silk Strike and the city of Passaic's Textile troubles. He deals in the present tense with his passion for simple statement, and his rejection of Latinized English. Williams deliberately flattened sound values to emphasize an Americanized diction, a fact that is observed in his prose as well as his poems. Some critics modern and traditional have quarreled with Williams over his preference for the idiomatic phrase, and his desire for a simplified transatlantic English that is "American."

Williams was never remote from the daily chores of life. He borrowed experience from his neighbors and assimilated their problems as part of his own existence, whether in his career as a doctor bringing the first glimpse of light and life in to the hospital bed, or as a participant in the cultural events of the community. He was the humanist despite his temptation to test the ideas of political and economic prophets with whom he broke bread and sipped tea. He was a sampler of visions, most of which proved to be the rose windows of zealots. Just as the American writers of the 1840s were impressed as well as confused by Douglas, Ri-

cardo, and Fourier, Williams spent conversational hours as a tea-taster of quality in dialogue. Most memorable to him were the talks with Ezra Pound, which began in the early 1900s during his years of intern training abroad. He was intrigued by Ezra's ex cathedra statements on poetry. They met on many occasions in France, Germany, and England when Ezra was weeding out the sacred traditions of verse craft from its deepest roots. Fifty years later Williams reviewed these talks in his autobiography and calls to mind his visits to Ezra in St. Elizabeth's hospital in Washington, where Pound was under duress for his support of the Fascist regime in Italy during World War II. He was troubled most as Ezra talked of his monetary panaceas, playing the same old cracked records over and over. Williams could only write sadly, "All I could do was to listen."

Williams recalled his own search for the cure-all of the Depression years, when the mercantile and banking systems were fraying at the seams, and the sudden deflation of market values brought forth a host of impromptu saviors with economic yeast bubbling in their veins. Many of these inspired voices were poets offering the variants of socialism, to which Williams gave a generous ear if not complete approval. He agreed that the critics of "the establishment" of the 1930s were entitled to their shadow in the sun, most of them expressing mild themes under new labels. None of the new ideas, however, echoed themes of the communes of the mid-nineteenth century, such as the "get-together" programs of Albert Brisbane, a New Jersey disciple of Fourier, or Ripley's Brook Colony in Massachusetts, but there were plenty of money and credit ideas to mend the errors of Wall Street and the bankers. The more formidable students and activists of Marx and Engels were getting together in cliques of the intelligentsia. Williams, as the humanist and liberal,

parried them all, but he did have a personal affection for John Reed, whose body rests in the Kremlin. Williams visited Reed when the young rebel was jailed during the Paterson Silk Strike. Williams, who sought results in temporal value rather than tractarian preambles, actually supported the liberal platform of Al Smith during the 1928 Presidential campaign. Whatever violence Williams had in his veins was toward "the shape of the word." He gave "his passion to poetry," he tells us in his autobiography, and fought to cleanse the language of inherited rhetoric.

The Paterson of Williams's visions was a symbol rooted in history and folklore, but the city on the Passaic became a state of his incandescent mind, a universe of people compassionate and sensitive to life's values on one day and ribald and rebellious the next. The citizens of Paterson, always proud to have a poet of distinction as a neighbor, began to question their judgment as the sequence of the *Paterson* poems came from the press. The poetry took on distortions of photography with a strange delirium of captions. Something was being said in a mélange of words and rhythms, and they didn't know whether to protest or accept the compliment.

In reviewing several studies of Williams's poetry since the broadcasting venture of 1935, I was anxious to observe the changes in Williams's opinions of the generation lapse since 1935. I dug up a typed copy of the WOR dialogue. The fundamentals are still there but the scalpel of dissection continued to tear the anatomy of language apart. Whether Williams will make permanent impact on poetic forms or not, this much is obvious: he has stimulated and disturbed the grammarian sanctity with his rash treatment of poetic diction. There are dozens of doctoral dissertations in the works and several published books analyzing Williams's approach

to literary communication. If Williams as a youth imitated John Keats with some facility, his imitators of the "shape of the word" in the Paterson sequence have found the facsimile quite difficult to approach or achieve.

During the 1935 broadcast, I opened the discussion with the question, "Can modern poetry abandon the tradition of costume language and rhetoric?" He was ready to pounce on the obvious before I could finish the question. He said, "Costume language and rhetoric taken as a term has a more or less distinct meaning in most minds. Something like hand-painted teacups. One doesn't ask modern painting to abandon painting on teacups. All one asks is that the limitations be realized. The difficulties and opportunities lie elsewhere, that is all. Most people find poetry today rather horrible, rather lacking in what they term poetry. But what they really admire is the past, and especially some rather soft, tripping, and gay thing that the past seems to mean to them. Or else some solid, logical, invaluable appearance of some master-work that no longer occurs today. And that to them *is*, by God, poetry."

I followed up with a loaded question, which Williams also jumped at. I asked, "Is the most successful of our American poetry rooted to the idiom of the language?" I had in mind the relative success or failure of Carl Sandburg who, in his book of poems "The People, Yes," may have strained the values of idiom by his use of slang; but Williams ignored the area of slang, and stayed with the term "American."

Williams, in a direct and specific reply, said, "There is no American poetry that is not rooted to the idiom of the language. There is other poetry written by Americans but most of it has been written in French. A little of it in Japanese, and some more in imitation English. But the success of a

poem that might be called "American" lies first in its identification with the sensual qualities of the language, which the poet hears in his ears all day long. If he ignores that, he has at once removed from his mind the only chance he will ever have for accurate statement, his last opportunity for subtle delineation of character and his major stimulus to musical pattern and so to poetic form. From earliest colonial times the English complained of our corrupt speech. What they failed to observe was that the words we often used as they used them applied to American, not English, objects."

I interrupted, "Can you name names and offer the specific instance?" His first example surprised me. "Certainly Poe was early recognized to be writing, not in English, but in the American tongue. Even Lanier, with his *Indian Burying Ground*, seemed far removed from any country church yard. Whitman is an example too obvious to insist upon. It is safe to say that it was the idiom which gave these men room for their development, as it was their failure to recognize the idiom that largely thwarted the Cambridge School, making them uniformly second rate. They thought American was funny. But they never realized how funny it would make them. When Emerson succeeded he seemed most un-English." His reference to Emerson was highly acceptable to our radio audience, judging by the mail response.

I came back to the shaping of words in our daily vocabulary, and gave some examples from Williams's own poetry of the vernacular, and asked if poets could abandon the "traditional" in rhetorical device. He tied up his observation to the sensory impact on the imagination, saying, "The ability to raise what is under the nose to our imagination is the difficult feat which poetry at least might reasonably be expected to perform. There is nothing at least to prevent us from using our daily vocabulary for this purpose if we find

ourselves able to do so. This presents a different conception of poetry to the mind from that usually accepted. It is not usually accepted. If preconceived ideas stand in the way they had better be junked. 'Costume language and rhetoric' have largely been junked."

Gradually our dialogue swung around to speech rhythm, and the musical identification of a language. Williams never hesitated with this statement: "Poetry is largely music. If we persistently ignore the native music of our speech we shall end by being ignoramuses. We are not English in anything we do even though we use many words of English origin in our daily vocabulary. But we do not use them either in pace, inflection or sometimes even in meaning as any others but ourselves do. When language is packed, when its pace is quickened, when it is sharpened and driven in, it takes a rhythmic character. From time to time men have selected from this purely physical character of language certain elements which they have made into verse forms."

I picked up his theme here, and asked how the identity of American speech and poetry might be observed as time brought them closer together in structure and music. He hesitated on this answer for a quick mental review, then answered: "Different times and different countries have moved according to their local genius to build form to suit themselves. America may do the same. But these forms have distinct significances attached to them as of their times, the whole structure of the line and its various associations in groups is related to the general character of the age that gave it birth. As the understanding and the sensitivity to enlarged meanings has developed, poetic forms may keep reasonable pace. It might possibly come about that a new language like 'American' may find opportunities for inven-

tion today denied to others. New words and meanings require new contexts."

Dr. Williams had been greatly influenced by Thorstein Veblen, and the influence is reflected in his reply to my query, "Can the poetic forms of yesterday be used effectively in expressing modern poetic sensation?" His reply was a flat NO, and he continued, "They can be used—we still play the clavichord. It is very charming, too, but it lacks scope. It all harks back to the faulty conception of what poetry is inherent in the first question. A man should read Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, before he attempts to go far in any phase of art. The value of old forms is revealed there to appertain too often to our vanity rather than our good sense. The major activity of any artist in any period must always be to discover in the idiom of his life about him, the life that his own eyes, ears, nose, mouth, fingers are seeing for the first and only time—to discover therein the lasting qualities of all art and to assert them in the terms he knows, the terms of his day of his own life. When he does this, he invents, he discovers. What he has found necessary under his living circumstances to invent, to forge, will be new, that is to say, unlike anything else that has been done before. It can't be otherwise if he has eyes and ears and a mind that changes."

Yes, indeed since the broadcast of February, 1935, William Carlos Williams went deeper into his well of sources for change, as comparison with his *Paterson* poems illustrates. In conclusion I would say there is something of the spirit of Walt Whitman in Dr. Williams. Whitman, who began writing gentle quatrains for New York papers, used the first name of "Walter" before he rebelled against tradition in poetry and rode Pegasus bareback as "Walt."

Williams in his aim for an "American" poetry has ridden roughshod, too, over the traditions to win acceptance of his gospel of humanism and "plain talk" in his poetry. How successful he may be depends upon the test of time. Rebels have usually failed to destroy traditional values, but they have always succeeded in rubbing off the accumulation of dust from the hard finish of the bone and beauty of poetry itself.

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