24 CRITICS DISCUSS

William Carlos Williams

(1883-1963)

"He can give himself, William Carlos Williams, such as he is, without either simple or inverted pride; give himself in is crassness, in his dissonant mixed blood, in absurd melancholy, wild swiftness of temper, man-shyness; Americano, Jerseyite, Rutherfordian; give himself with a frankness, a fearlessness, a scientific impersonality, that is bracing as a shock of needle-spray….And, in moments, of felt power, in moments of conscious toughness and sharp will, he breaks 'through to the fifty words necessary,' and briskly, laconically, like man with little time for matters not absolutely essential to the welfare of the universe, brings into clarity the relation existing between himself and the things seen by him."

Paul Rosenfeld
Port of New York
(Harcourt 1924) 109-11

"Williams has written: 'All I do is to try to understand something in its natural colors and shapes.'… There could be no better effort underlying any literary process…One might say that Williams has but one fixed idea, as an author; i.e., he starts where an European would start if an European were about to write of America: sic: America is a subject of interest, one must inspect it, analyze it, and treat it as subject….The component of…great works and *the* indispensable component is texture, which Dr Williams indubitably has in the best, and in increasingly frequent, passages of his writing….The best pages of Williams—at least for the present reviewer—are those where he has made the least effort to fit anything into either story, book, or (in *The American Grain*) into an essay…As to the general value of Carlos Williams' poetry I have nothing to retract from the affirmation of its value that I made ten years ago…"

Ezra Pound
"Dr Williams' Position"
Dial
(November 1928)

"Surely Williams's savagery is a unique essence in modern American letters. He has perceived his ground, he has made a beginning, he is riding the forces of his locality. Determinedly, he seeks to be a Daniel Boone of letters, a Sam Houston in method, and an Aaron Burr in personal psychology. What threatens him—be it puritanic pressures or the hard exigencies of combining literature with medicine—he barks at it: the dog with a bone in it throat is symbolic of his attitude toward all that might interrupt or diminish his poetic pursuit."

Gorham Munson
Destinations
(Sears 1928) 134

"There are so many things to say about him. The first is that he is a romantic poet. This will horrify him. Yet the proof is everywhere."

Wallace Stevens
Preface
Collected Poems by William Carlos Williams (1934)

"The masters of free verse of the Experimental Generation are William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, H. D., and perhaps Mina Loy in a few poems….The free verse that is really verse—the best, that is, of W. C. Williams, H. D., Miss Moore, Wallace Stevens, and Ezra Pound—is, in its peculiar fashion, the antithesis of free, and the evaluation of this verse is a difficult problem in itself….It is possible to describe an item with no past history in such a way that it will have a significance fairly general. This is the procedure of a handful of the best poems of the Imagist movement; for example, of Dr. Williams' poem, 'On the road to the contagious hospital'….The convention of heightened intensity

is sound procedure in Williams' poem 'On the road to the contagious hospital'…because there is poetic justification, a genuine motivation, for the conventional language, and the conventional language is graduated to the wholly poetic with great skill and energy….

The pseudo-reference of T. S. Eliot's 'Gerontion,' partly a matter of reference to non-existent plots, partly a matter of purely grammatical logic, seems in some ways to resemble the heightened intensity employed by Dr. Williams in 'On the road to the contagious hospital.' That is, while Dr. Williams, in certain passages, assumes more feeling than he perceives, Mr. Eliot, in certain passages, assumes more reasonableness than he perceives. Dr. Williams works up to passages in which his claims are supported by perception; so does Mr. Eliot; and in each poem these passages represent the core of the poem, not only as regards feeling, but as regards rational theme. The climax of Mr. Eliot's poem, the passage beginning: 'I that was near your heart was removed therefrom,' justly one of the most famous passages in recent poetry, is probably greater than anything in the poem by Dr. Williams, though perhaps not so much greater as Mr. Eliot's admirers (who commonly fail to understand Dr. Williams altogether) might be ready to believe….

Dr. Williams has a surer feeling for language than any other poet of his generation, save, perhaps, Stevens at his best. But he is wholly incapable of coherent thought and he had not the good fortune to receive a coherent system as his birthright. His expository writing is largely incomprehensible; his novel, *A Voyage to Pagany*, displays an almost ludicrous inability to motivate a long narrative. His experience is disconnected and fragmentary, but sometimes a fragment is wrought to great beauty. His widest range has been reached in a single piece of prose, *The Destruction of Tenochtitlan*, in which he found his material more or less ready for treatment in the form of history: in treating it, he achieved one of the few great prose styles of our time. Dr. Williams bears a certain resemblance to the best lyric poets of the thirteenth century: there is in both an extreme sophistication of style, a naïve limitation of theme (Dr. Williams has a wider range than the early poets, however) and a fresh enthusiasm for the theme. It was out of such poetry as *Alisoun* that English poetry little by little grew….

To attain major poetry from the position of a primitive poet such as Dr. Williams might necessitate the creation of a good deal of technical machinery as well; whereas the pseudo-referent poet has most of his machinery made and already partly I action….Dr. Williams is more consistently excellent than [Hart] Crane, and at his best is possibly better. Crane's machinery, convenient as it might at any moment prove, remains, so long as it is not utilized, a source of confusion….

My own free verse was very often balanced on this particular tight-rope [arranging lines of blank verse]. During the period in which I was composing it, I was much interested in the possibility of making the stanza and wherever possible the poem a single rhythmic unit, of which the line was part not sharply separate. This effect I endeavored to achieve by the use of run-over lines, a device I took over from Dr. Williams, Miss Moore, and Hopkins….Dr. W. C. Williams once remarked to me in a letter that free verse was to him a means of obtaining widely varying speeds within a given type of foot….In free verse the only norm, so far as the structure of the foot is concerned, is perpetual variation, and the only principle governing the selection of any foot is a feeling of rhythmical continuity; and on the other hand the norm of the line, a certain number of accents of recognizably constant intensity, and in spite of the presence of the relatively variable secondary accents, inevitably results in the species of inflexibility which we have seen equally in the fast meters of Williams and in the slow meters of Pound."

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937-47) 124, 23, 49, 86, 94-95, 116, 121, 129

"He became a friend of Pound and H. D. and shared their subscription to the tenets of Imagism… However, the limited nature of Imagism was extended in *Al Que Quiere!* (1917), the prose poems of *Kora in Hell* (1920), *Sour Grapes* (1921), and *Spring and All* (1922) to Expressionism, characterized by a clean stripping of poetry to essentials, by a holding of emotion at arm's length, and by vivid observations, restricted almost entirely to sensory experience. Williams declared that his poetry belonged to the school of Objectivism, whose publications, like his *Collected Poems, 1921-1931* (1934), were issued from the short-lived Objectivist Press. In its defense, Williams said: 'Imagism…though it had been useful in ridding the field of verbiage, had no formal necessity implicit in it' and so 'it had dribbled off into so-called 'free

verse'…but, we argued, the poem…is an object…that in itself formally presents its case and its meaning by the very form it assumes…this was what we wished to imply by Objectivism.'…

Marked by vernacular American speech and direct observation, his poetry has the character, he declared, that one finds 'as a physician works upon a patient, upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal.' *Patterson* (5 vols., 1946-58) is a long, structureless poem, including much quoted prose, relating to the history, formal and informal, the surroundings, and the appearance of a New Jersey city and about one human figure, partly autobiographical, partly mythic."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"Very responsive at first to the Imagists, he grew to see that their kind of poetry fell short because it lacked 'structural necessity.' Even more significant, his sensual delight, like Lawrence's, soon became grounded in the homeliest images of our common life. He defined 'the classic' as 'the local fully realized, words marked by a place'; and, diverging farthest from Pound, he added a warm sympathy with ordinary people to an ability to discover beauty in the midst of the impoverished and the sordid. Many—perhaps most—of his poems were far too casual, in the imagist mode which he never quite outgrew, but at his best, in 'By the road to the contagious hospital' or 'The Yachts,' he reinforced his unfailingly vivid notations by impressive structures."

F. O. Matthiessen
The Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1352-53

"For the most part, so completely in fact that one must search out the rare exceptions, Williams's verse has been unrhymed; in temper it has been at the furthest remove from 'professional' verse; it has been protestant, yet formal, and the virtues of even his slightest pieces have been those of presenting definite objects and scenes before the eye of the reader….Williams's search for 'an honest man,' as well as an instruction to others 'to stand out of my sunlight,' are the kinds of truth that Williams sought in verse. The search may at times seem wantonly naïve, and at times it has resulted in incomplete and 'experimental' poems, but we may be certain that Williams has never falsified his language; and he has made an ethical distinction between the uses of artifice and art. Craftsmanship, not artifice, has been his concern, and perhaps no writer of the twentieth century has yielded so little to the temptations that mere artifice places within his path."

Horace Gregory & Marya Zaturenska
History of American Poetry
(Harcourt 1947) 208-12

"In spite of their faults…poets like Whitman and Williams have about them something more valuable than any faultlessness: a wonderful largeness, a quantitative and qualitative generosity."

Randall Jarrell (1949)

"Perhaps the most illuminating, and one of the most influential, of native impressionistic readings of American history was William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain* (1925). Here are many brilliant flashes of personalized insight comparable in intensity and eccentricity to Lawrence's. Williams also shares some of the preoccupations of the writers who diagnosed America's cultural weaknesses. The book is primarily lyrical in style, and vigorously assertive in its realignments of dominating and subordinate 'heroes.' In consequence, certain phases of the American past emerge from obscurity, others are pushed back into it, and the whole forms a symbolic reordering of the historical context, in some respects not unlike that given it in Hart Crane's *The Bridge*….

Williams stresses again and again, in a variety of ways, the need for 'direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.' His ideal poetic manner depends resolutely upon factual integrity; he feels the grain of the experience, records the gnarled, drab, cool, windy, sweet, sour, dusty, pungent, cluttered,

serene, distraught facts of his observation: the 'blackbirds in the rain'…colors and shapes of flowers and leaves…

In his career as a poet Williams has considered all the barriers to communication, including the task of the poet himself, who is confused, silenced, all but paralyzed by the rush and roar of things. It is a matter of utmost importance, however, that he retain his loyalty to things as he sees them. This reality is local, particular in its attention to specific regional detail; it is the mundane, quotidian, contemporary detail of Rutherford, Paterson, and northeastern New Jersey. The problem of what to make of this detail, how best to signify its importance, how to order it without losing sight of it, has preoccupied Williams throughout his life. It is both a formal and a moral problem: as a formal problem, it involves a choice of poetic means; as a moral problem, it considers the behavior of man (and his history) in terms of the barriers he has set, unwittingly or maliciously, to natural communication and understanding."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
(Viking/Crowell-Collier 1949-62) 162, 209, 211-12

"Although his lines rarely descend to slang, they are full of the conversational speech of the country; they express the brusque nervous tension, the vigor and rhetoric of American life. Even when they are purposely unadorned and non-melodic they intensify some common object with pointed detail and confident, if clipped, emotion."

Louis Untermeyer
Modern American Poetry
(Harcourt 1950) 275

"Life is more than art for Dr. Williams, as the object is prior to the word. He is no goldsmith making timeless birds. Part of the exhilaration in reading his poetry comes of its formal and logical completeness (this is at the same time its greatest drawback). Many of his poems seem notes to a text—to the dense and fluid text of reality; they seem gestures and exclamations in appreciation of something beyond the poem, insistencies that we use our senses, that we be alive to things."

Richard Wilbur
Sewanee Review
(Winter 1950) 139

"Examined from the perspective of an ideal academic poet like say, Bridges, Dr. Williams appears to be groping about under a very low ceiling indeed….Truthfully pleading his inability to handle traditional coin traditionally, Williams improvises, issues a fluid currency of his own….Incoherence, then, is the principal 'cost,' to use a favorite word with Williams, incoherence raised to a level where it corresponds to Eliot's diffidence or Pound's tactlessness, a quirk which can sometimes reveal the poetry, sometimes conceal it, sometimes ruin it altogether, but which is also absorbed into the success of passage after passage, poem after poem….

It may be simply the effect of time, but at this writing 'Paterson I' seems to me better than 'Paterson II' and both of them better than 'Paterson III,' though the difference is small. What cannot be enough insisted on is that in this poetry, which operates by what Crane called 'metaphorical logic,' the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts. *Paterson* is planned, though more loosely than *Ulysses*, 'Four Quartets,' or the *Cantos*. Successive books have worked fresh material into the mythic, rhythmic, and metaphorical pattern established in the first, so that the effect, though cumulative, is not oppressively so. We don't feel the clouds of a portentious Greatness gathering over us."

R. W. Flint
Kenyon Critics
John Crowe Ransom, ed.
(World 1951) 335-40

"Williams has found his end in his beginnings. He has devoted himself to the American scene as it met the eye of a doctor practicing in the provinces….He gives the inner quality of things not by transferring to them his feeling about them, nor by a kind of damp sentiment from which even so inward a poet as Rilke

was not wholly free. He gets at the essence, as apprehended not *behind* but actually *by means of* the phenomenon: the reality grasped by devoted concentration on its manifest being…

If 'Paterson' is rarely as good as Pound's work at his best, it is far more alive than the drearier sections of the *Cantos*. Both poets are concerned with communication, and with the forces obstructing and debasing it. The great difference is that for Williams the time is not antiquity or the renaissance, but now (he sees its old roots): the scene is no foreign country, but is the provincial factory town on the Passaic in all the sordidness of its abused beauty and energy."

Babette Deutsch
Poetry in Our Time
(Holt 1952) 109-10, 104-8

"More than any other modern poet, William Carlos Williams has been in self-conscious search of an American idiom. When much of modern American poetry seemed to be negative and alienated, Williams' poetry was affirmative and committed. As much contemporary poetry became densely intellectual and deliberately obscure, Williams' poetry became simple and lucid. In pursuit of a purely native voice, Williams discovered his unique, personal style….Williams' poetry is characterized by its close, detailed attention to things—things-in-themselves. The things may vary from a red wheelbarrow to Queen-Anne's-Lace, from the road to a contagious hospital to yachts in a seascape. But whatever the object, Williams seems to scrutinize it from within the material substance itself. His is an X-ray vision that penetrates and bombards interiors—without in the least disturbing the placid exteriors. The tone is casual, sometimes flat, but the energies generated are frequently astonishing….*Paterson* is the epic of a man-city, weaving together history, the contemporary scene, individual ecstasy, and personal anguish. In its abrupt transitions and fragmentary air it is somewhat like Eliot's 'The Waste Land,' but in tone and mood it has greater affinity with Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*."

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 986-87

"It is necessary to love this man because he teaches life the richness of its own combinations. The world is his mistress, made beautiful by his love. The fact of her is his passion. No poet since Donne has banged so avidly at Things, at the hammer and take of the world upon the senses. Everything, even his own aesthetic, has been shattered in the name of Things."

John Ciardi
Nation
(24 April 1954) 368

"He is one of the most tensile, dynamic, and kinaestheticallly engaging of poets; his quick transparent lines have a nervous and contracted strength. Often they move as jerkily and intently as a bird, though they can sleep as calmly as a bird, too; they do not have the flowing and easy strength, the rhythmic powers in reserve, the envelopment and embodiment of some of the verse of old poets. But sometimes they have a marvelous delicacy and gentleness, a tact of pure showing; how well he calls into existence our precarious, confused, partial looking out at the world—our being-here-looking, just looking! And if he is often pure presentation, he is often pure exclamation, and delights in yanking something into life with a galvanic imperative or interjection….He loves to tell the disgraceful or absurd or obscene or piercing or exhilarating or animally delightful truth. He is neither wise nor intellectual, but is full of homely shrewdness and common sense, of sharply intelligent comments dancing cheek-to-cheek with prejudice and random eccentricities; heis a somebody who, sometimes, does see what things are like, and he is able to say what he sees more often than most poets….

The organization of 'Paterson' is musical to an almost unprecedented degree: Dr. Williams introduces a theme that stands for an idea, repeats it over and over in varied forms, develops it side by side with two or three more themes that are being developed, recurs to it time and time again throughout the poem, and echoes it for ironic or grotesque effects in thoroughly incongruous contexts….Everything in the poem is interwoven with everything else, just as the strands of the Falls interlace: how wonderful and unlikely that

this extraordinary mixture of the most delicate lyricism of perception and feeling with the hardest and homeliest actuality should ever have come into being!”

Randall Jarrell
Poetry and the Age
(Knopf 1955) 236-37, 203-09

“After more than thirty books and at his present age Williams exercises his whole personality to unlock a remarkable lyrical lore of love. His love is inclusive of many things, attitudes, and feelings. It has the qualities of sincerity, knowledge, and acute perception. It is mature man speaking direct truth. Yet I do not mean that there is not a great deal of strategy in the way he makes his verses.”

Richard Eberhart
Saturday Review
(18 February 1956) 49

“A man spends Sundays in the park at Paterson, New Jersey. He thinks and looks about him; his mind contemplates, describes, comments, associates, stops, stutters, and shifts like a firefly, bound only by its own milieu. The man is Williams, anyone living in Paterson, the American, the masculine principle.…The park is Everywoman, any woman, the feminine principle, America….‘Paterson’…is about marriage.… Everything in the poem is masculine or feminine, everything strains toward marriage, but the marriages never come off, except in the imagination and there, attenuated, fragmentary, and uncertain.”

Robert Lowell
Nation
(19 June 1958) 692-93

"How, against Eliot’s claims for the power of myth and religion and Pound’s for the power of ‘Kulchur,’ lift the environment into expression, and oneself with it? This was the question answered by the first four parts of *Paterson*. Moreover, *Paterson* demonstrated a means, a technique, a mode, appropriate to the poet who would carry on Whitman’s work….The new mode was a reconstitution of the old—that of Whitman and his peers—under the pressure of a kind of poetry—Eliot’s—which would deny its relevance and worth.

Paterson represents only a mid-point, however, climactic, in Williams’ poetry. For the ‘line’ toward which he worked came to be nothing less than the poet’s means of taking absolute control over his world and of baptizing it in his own name. The strictly historical materials in Paterson are…allowed to have meaning only as they fit into the poet’s scheme of things. (Which is the opposite situation to that of the ‘Waste Land.’) In this poem everything must be *present*, not even in imagination can we be elsewhere than where we actually are. Yet in Williams’ later poetry the historical is not present, having been eliminated altogether and restored to the process of nature from which it must have at one time been precipitated. It is the line which, as he refines it in the poems after *Paterson,* enables Williams to make such a restoration. It is also the line which brings him perilously close to the loss of his own identity. For the line of the later poems works primarily as a means of imitation the rhythms of perception and cognition, not of discriminating among and organizing what is perceived and cognized. It tends to minimize our need to separate an object perceived from its surroundings, a concept held from antecedents and consequences—as though the reality principle itself, no longer having any function, had withered away. The road away from *Paterson* has been even more dangerous than the road to it. One of the rewards of his compulsively public career is the perspective they give us on the affiliations of his poetry and the kind it represents with major American poetry of the nineteenth century. He has taken it upon himself to be a prophet among twentieth-century American poets….

Because Williams has wanted so much from poetry, he has proclaimed from the rooftops of the world the necessity of reconceiving its technique. Technique has meant for him only the ‘line’ and a ‘workable metric’—as though the sole necessary condition for a poem were an adequate prosody. In the poems from which I have just quoted [‘The Pink Church’ and ‘Burning the Christmas Greens’] the incantatory overrides logic, structure, and the disposition of meaning. The millennialist expectation is that out of poems written in this ‘new mode’ there will come a ‘new language.’…

In this radically alternative version of the theory of Eliot's 'Music of Poetry,' man is the measure of all things; but the essence of man, and thus the ground of the measure, is expressed not in what he has done or what he is doing, but rather in the way his language bids him do it. The theory of the variable foot is simple—just as a magical formula is simple when compared to the wonders it will work. To be true it *has* to be simple. Like Eliot's theory, Williams' looks toward its own kind of mirage, beyond mere language. Yielding to the demands of language, the poet yields to that which is essential in his sense of himself in his world. This is the extreme formulation of the 'new mode,' in which, as Wallace Stevens was to say, 'the poem is the cry of its occasion.' At its best—in the first four parts of *Paterson*, above all—the new mode is Williams' means, in a phrase from 'A Sort of a Song,' 'through metaphor to reconcile / the people and the stones.' 'Reconcile' is the key term. Reconciliation requires a balance between people and stones, with the poem as a fulcrum…

[In] 'Asphodel, that Greeny Flower' (1955)…against the Eliot of the *Quartets* and the Pound of the *Rock-Drill Cantos*, he challenges Dante and the whole history of Christian belief. He declares that the true light is an inner one which only the poet, his verses vibrating with his own radiance, can turn on the world—and can then, and only then, receive as a blessing from his world. As he conceives of himself in this poem, he is no longer alienated; yet he has no home to go to, nor has he undone his alienation by making a home for himself. For he, or so he would convince us, has been home all the time; and he has been alienated not from the world, but from himself; which is all the world he has. Brave new world, the movement of his verses leads him to say, that has me in it!….Thus the physician, having spent a long life healing others, now finally heals himself. Adam—the Adam of the contagious hospital, of the world that is Paterson—magicks himself into believing that he has never left Eden. He has just imagined that he has. Now he can imagine that he has not."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 336-46

"Williams remained apart from literary movements, although his work is influenced by several. He was an early friend of Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle (H. D.), and Imagism undoubtedly contributed to the formation of his lucid, precise, lyrical style. His poetry is without rhyme or conventional meter, usually written in short graceful lines and in what the poet calls an 'American rhythm.' His patriotism, as opposed to the sour anti-Americanism of many of his contemporaries who became expatriates, motivated much of his work, especially *The American Grain* (1925), a book of prose reconstructions of American cultural history and a volume that Hart Crane found indispensable.

Williams became the poet of everyday life; his passion for the details of existence, presented barely and without moralizing, attracted many followers among younger writers, some of whom organized themselves during the 1930s and 1940s as the Objectivists. None, however, achieved Williams' power to evoke deep feeling from the simplest objects. 'No ideas but in things'—this he reiterated in *Paterson,* his most ambitious work…*Paterson* is an attempt to apprehend the essence and the experience of his city and at the same time to use its river as an entrance into the general stream of time.

Williams has been accused by Yvor Winters and others of lacking depth, of cutting poetry off from any possible content other than discrete images without history or intention. He sometimes seems not in full control of his motives as a poet. Yet his work is remarkably unified, deriving from the poet's unaltering emotional center. His point of view, as Louise Bogan has remarked, is 'at once archaic and humane; but his straightforward anger at injustice always remains that of the detached observer.' In this Dr. Williams combined the sensitivity and linguistic skill of the poet with the observational powers of the physician, and the result is consistently vigorous and acute."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"Much that Williams said about the American idiom is not really borne out in his poetry because much of it rises way above the American idiom as it is commonly used. It's a kind of high language."

Denise Levertov (1965)

"The voice we hear in the poetry is almost always wholly romantic, as Wallace Stevens said more than thirty years ago; but when the poet tell us what he intends, and what he thinks poetry is, the formulas he falls back on are generally as antiromantic as Eliot's and Pound's. The second paradox is that the man behind the voice we hear in the poetry, as we come to know him through his autobiography, his letters, and his comments on his own career, is likely to strike us as characterized chiefly by his simplicity, honesty, and openness; yet he produced a body of poetic work and poetic opinion so complex, various, and self-contradictory that no single generalization about it is valid for all of it. A third paradox is that this poet whose most sympathetic critics—including R. P. Blackmur, Wallace Stevens again, and, especially Randall Jarrell—do not think him a clear abstract thinker, prided himself particularly on his role as a *theorist* of poetry….

He wrote a great deal, often very fast, in the evenings. He read very little—there was not time to, for one thing, and I suspect not much inclination to. And if ability to handle abstractions is taken as the mark of intelligence, then he was also very much less 'intelligent' than Stevens or Eliot or Pound, or perhaps than any modern poet with comparable fame and achievement. Williams is the classic American example of a poet who wrote better than he knew….He could never resolve in his mind what it was he was trying to do as a poet….As late as *I Wanted to Write a Poem* in 1958, when he was in his middle seventies, he was still repeating the early Modernist formulas of his youth: A poem is an artifact that is 'made'—*made*, mind you'; it is simply a 'machine' that works or doesn't work; it is perfectly self-enclosed; it is not 'about' anything and has no subject but the words it is made of; it is an 'object' like any other object in nature; the only test of the value of the poetic artifact is the 'expertness' with which it has been made…

To the end of his life he mingled with such opinions as these others fundamentally incompatible, continuing to speak of his poetry as expressing himself, his personality, as aimed above at capturing truth and reality, as a continuation of Whitman's theme…So far as the root of Williams' confusion was not psychic, it may be found in his mixed feelings of loyalty and antagonism toward Pound and Eliot and his feeling for his mother. Pound, a college classmate and life-long friend, had launched him as a poet…but Pound has not only launched him; he had *taught* him. As Williams put it…'Before meeting Ezra Pound is like B.C. and A.D.' Williams had started by imitating Keats. By the time he showed a group of poems to Pound, he had moved on to Whitman, but Pound put an end to that phase: 'The poems I was writing before I met Pound, were what I can only describe as free verse, formless, after Whitman.'…

His mother and Pound were the two paramount influences on Williams as a poet, and the two influences, working at different levels of consciousness, pulled him in different directions. He identified his mother, as he himself has said, with all that was romantic, free, heroic, rebellious, in short, with the self he wanted to become. Jewish and Spanish, preferring to speak Spanish in the home, she seemed as exile in industrial northern New Jersey….How curiously the mother and Ezra move in and out together in all these memories recorded in old age, linked private symbols as it were of romance and 'realism,' freedom and authority, impulse and discipline, the unconscious and the conscious. It was the mother who chiefly shaped the man, but Ezra who chiefly shaped the poet's consciously held ideas about poetry. No wonder Williams spent a lifetime uttering opinions that flatly contradicted his other opinions and often denied or betrayed the poetry he had written out of his deepest impulses. After Pound's instruction had 'taken,' how could he think of himself as a romantic poet?...Williams' dilemma, which he became partially conscious of only in the very last years of his life—how to be in fact a 'romantic' poet while accepting, and generally trying to write in terms of, an antiromantic, and implicitly behavioristic, theory of poetry; or how to be true to his mother, his self-image, and Ezra, all at the same time….*Paterson*, Book IV, is the last Poundish poem he ever wrote. In the end, his mother won out….

He often spoke of his poetry as having been shaped by his 'scientific' training. He despised 'religionists and statists and all those who want the past to stay as it is for their benefit—mostly pecuniary.' For most of his life after he had met the Pounds and been taught how 'messy, blurry, sentimentalistic' the nineteenth century was, he spoke slightingly of Whitman, reversing himself on this only after Randall Jarrell had taught him that it was all right to have been impressed by Whitman once and to have continued to be like

Whitman without knowing it. Furthermore, quite apart from whether he really was a sort of modern Whitman or not, as Jarrell suggested—and I think he was—it is clear from the references he made to the older writer throughout his life that he really knew very little about Whitman….

He had been influenced, he said, to adopt free verse by reading the 'opening lines' of 'Song of Myself'….No wonder he found himself confused, and not wholly pleased, when his friendliest critics placed him in the Whitman tradition. How could a poet who thought of himself as writing 'pure' poetry, as the abstractionists in painting created 'pure' paintings, feel any deep kinship with Whitman as an *artist?* Emphasizing 'the poem itself' was, of course, exactly what the 'New Critics,' taught by Eliot's 'autotelic' theory, had all along been trying to get us to do. By the time Williams made this defiantly Modernist speech, New Critical theory had long since reached the textbook stage…

It would be fair to say that Williams 'intended' to write 'pure' poetry; that he also 'intended' to defend and celebrate the native and the local; that he 'intended' to write poems in which the only thing that mattered about them, or that critics should attend to, was the 'expertness' with which he handled 'the variable foot'; and that he 'intended,' despite repeated denials, to affirm the beauty and interest of the commonplace; the supposedly ugly, the apparently trivial, the outcast and outlawed and despised….He was in the Whitman tradition, very deeply so, even if he didn't, with a part of his mind, 'intend' to be. Attracted to him at the beginning, then warned off by Pound, he was closer to him in the end than he knew….Williams' best poems, from *Al Que Quiere!* In 1917 on to the end of his life, and increasingly so in the last ten years, are squarely within the Whitman tradition. Stevens' remark that they are distinguished by the tension in them between romantic feeling and a determination to confront reality could equally well have been made of Whitman's best work, especially 'Song of Myself.' As the youthful Whitman accepted what he called 'materialism,' but then 'imbued' it with spirit, so Williams, determined to be a 'realist,' looked long and hard at things—and found in them the source and sufficient basis for dream."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 369-80

"William Carlos Williams was long viewed as the homespun poet for the technological age. A New Jersey physician, he was mistaken for a hobbyist-poet jotting verses at odd moments between patients. Only with the 1946 publication of Book One of his modern industrial-age American epic, *Paterson*, did readers begin to appreciate Williams's achievement as a major twentieth-century American writer. Thereafter, students, young poets, and critics looked closely and with increasing admiration at his formally innovative books of poetry, fiction, drama, and criticism. Dr. Williams had been writing in relative obscurity since before 1920. At last, at midcentury, his readers caught up with the poet and began to realize that Williams deserved the recognition and honor already accorded to the select group of twentieth-century American poets that included T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, and Wallace Stevens….

Williams's break with traditional forms and subject matter came with *Al Que Quiere!* ('To Him Who Wants It!'), a book of iconoclastic lyrics, and with *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920). *Kora* was an experimental montage of passages written 'automatically' to tap subconscious funds of poetic energy; portions of unpremeditated writing were coupled with Williams's commentary on them. *Kora* appeared in the same issues of *The Little Review* that carried James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a work that was to influence Williams profoundly, as it did numerous other American writers. (Williams met Joyce in 1924, while on sabbatical in Europe with Flossie.)

The 1920s were an especially prolific period for Williams. Continuously experimenting in form, he spoke in the voice that is unmistakably his. Often angry and irreverent in tone, it was defiant of all conventions—formal, political, and religious. A self-consciously American poet, he was angered by—and jealous of—T. S. Eliot, whose insistence on the British tradition Williams thought retrograde. During those years, various small presses published many of Williams's most lasting works, including *Spring and All* (1923), which combined prose and poetry, *The Great American Novel* (1923), and *In the American Grain* (1925), a personal revision of American history and culture. Williams always remained innovative. He believed the repetition of familiar forms to be a kind of living death for a poet….

From the wartime 1940s, as successive books of his long poem *Paterson* appeared and his reputation grew, Williams began to suffer health problems. Through heart attacks and strokes he continued, with the tireless help of Flossie, to read, write, travel, and lecture. Two major works, *The Desert Music* (1954) and *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962) came from the efforts of those years, as he struggled toward a flexible verse form he called the variable foot. By now Williams was earning prestigious prizes for his poetry. Still he resolutely encouraged the younger poets who wrote him letters and appeared on his Rutherford doorstep. He never forgot how hard it was to make his way or how difficult his isolation had been. He remarked in 1950, 'I think the artist, generally speaking, feels lonely. Perhaps his recourse to art, in any form, comes from his essential loneliness. He is usually in rebellion against the world'."

Helen Vendler
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1557, 1558, 1560

"Since his death in 1963, William Carlos Williams's centrality among the American modernist poets has been assured by a spate of critical studies elucidating his innovative poetics, his use of American language and scene, and his ties to revolutionary currents in the visual arts. In formal experiment and in modulation of poetic voice from the highly objective to the intimately autobiographical, Williams's influence on the writing of younger generations of poets has been extensive. Beyond this emphasis on craft, however, lies his essential humanity and what he called 'contact' with the immediate world: from close attention to the flora and landscape of his native northern New Jersey to his concern with the struggle, pathos, and comic resilience of the working class. A writer of amazing shifts and changes, Williams interest in process and discovery led him to reflect the fragmentation an disjunction of modern life as broken lines and flashes of incomplete thought. That he also wrote novels, short stories, plays, essays, and experimental non-fiction makes him one of the most versatile and prolific writers of this century….

Influenced by early reading and imitation of Whitman and Keats, Williams was to find his way after publication of *Poems 1909* through Imagism and interest in modernist art to a new attitude toward poetic form and treatment of immediate reality. Although Pound…could not fully convert him to Imagism's tenets, his ideas helped to free Williams from a more conventional Romanticism. The result was the objective, hard-edged observations of poems like 'The Great Figure.' Responding to Pound's advice, as well as to new writing appearing in magazines such as *Poetry* and the *Little Review*, Williams alternately distanced himself by means of a stripped-down language that captured ordinary scenes from an urban landscape and, in markedly different poems, created a persona who revealed passionate engagement with the sensual world.

With publication of *Al Que Quiere!* In 1917 Williams first displayed the qualities of his mature work: the short enjambed lines characterizing his visual style contrasted with more colloquial verse shaped by what he called the 'American idiom'; the brash, no-nonsense voice of the social man contrasted with a lyrical, romantic strain; precise, almost photographic recording of scene contrasted with evocation of intimate emotion. In large measure Williams's break with traditional forms and with aesthetic attitudes toward mimesis and beauty was a response to contemporary movements in painting and photography…. Williams found support for a radically new approach to verse. Rejecting conventional metres and forms, he reproduced in boldly original and often difficult poems the commonplace objects and scenes visual artists had portrayed in works that made new demands on their audience….

In his later work Williams often employed what he referred to as the 'variable foot,' a triadic or step=down form he first discovered in writing 'The Descent' in *Paterson*, Book II. Line length in 'The Pink Locust,' for example, is sometimes determined by grammatical units, sometimes by the emphasis Williams places on phrases or individual words. The speaker's voice is direct, personal. Like the pink locust, Williams persisted during the last fifteen years of his life, weathering a series of heart attacks and strokes and a nervoic collapse, to write a number of psychologically complex and hauntingly beautiful poems. He is considered the most diverse and challenging poet of his generation."

Theodora R. Graham
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 1205-07

PARODY

Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams (2005)

Kenneth Koch

I chopped down the house that you had been
    saving to live in next summer.
I am sorry, but it was morning, and I had nothing to do
And its wooden beams were so inviting.

We laughed at the hollyhocks together
and then sprayed them with lye.
Forgive me, I simply do not know what I am doing.

I gave away the money that you had been saving
    to live on for the next ten years.
The man who asked me for it was shabby
And the firm March wind on the porch was so juicy and cold.

Last evening we went dancing and I broke your leg.
Forgive me. I was clumsy, and
I wanted you here in the wards, where I am a doctor.

William Carlos Williams

(1883-1963)

Poem, or, Spring and All (1923)

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast—a 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 approahces—

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 wildcarrot 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.

ANALYSIS

Consider the opening lines of the poem by Williams. The nervous meter, words like "surge," "mottled," "driven," suggest an intensity of feeling not justified by the actual perceptions in the lines. These words are therefore conventional. The content of the passage is factual to a greater degree than it is perceptual, and in itself has extremely little interest. In thus describing the lines, I employ the terms *perception* and *perceptual* solely with reference to the awareness of the author of fine relationships between facts observed (or perceived directly) and language, or the medium of judgment and communication. More feeling is *assumed*, or *claimed*, by the poet, in a passage such as that under discussion, than is justified by his language: he claims more than he is able to communicate, or more, perhaps, than he chooses to communicate.

At first clance a passage of this sort appears a trifle strained, to use a common but somewhat vague epithet. But in the present poem, the strain is deliberately sought and exactly rendered. The tempo established in these lines, the whole quality of the feeling, the information conveyed, are all necessary to, in fact are a part of, the effect of the eight central lines. (*Now the grass*, etc.) differs widely from the feeling in the preceding six, but is dependent largely upon the feeling already established in the preceding six for its existence. The feeling is one of pathos, aroused by the small and familiar in austere and unfriendly surroundings. It is related to the feeling of *Animula Vagula*. The last six lines of Williams' poem revert to the conventional level, but carry with them, if read in their context, an echo of the precedent intensity.

My analysis of the poem has been oversimplified for the sake of momentary convenience. The conventional passages are not devoid of perceptual value: the skill with which the details of the landscape are placed in juxtaposition in the opening lines is in itself an act of perception. The beat, also, in lines nine, ten, and eleven, taken in conjunction with the material described, has perceptual value, and one could point out other details. The details are not of a uniform level of intensity: no two details can be so. The important thing for the moment is that the intensity claimed by the passage is on the whole in excess of the

justification within the passage, and that the intensity assumed in indicated with the greatest of firmness, with the result that departures from it can be made with equal firmness.

For example, I have said that the beat in lines nine, ten, and eleven has perceptual value, as indicating the "twiggy" appearance of the landscape. Yet the meaning-content (as distinct from the sound-content) of every adjective contributing to this perception is a little vague: "reddish," "purplish," for instance, are by definition uncertain in their import. But the vagueness is willed and controlled: one has a definite measure of vagueness set against the definite intensity of the meter. To make these perceptions more precise would lessen the impact of the central lines. This mastery of emphasis and of the conventional is one of the marks, and probably the most important mark, of the great stylist: without this mastery poetry degenerates into slipshod sentiment at worst, and at best, as in much of [Hart] Crane, into brilliant, but disconnected, epithets and ejaculations….

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow, 1937-47) 79-81

"The best example of Williams' skillful development of 'things' into forms is the opening poem of *Spring and All*. The slow, painful arrival of the spring season, together with the universal meaning of such an event, is brilliantly suggested through objects, natural things, which slowly respond to the early invitation of the season. The observer travels along 'the road to the contagious hospital,' and he notes the transition from winter to spring: the 'blue mottled clouds' driven by 'a cold wind.' Beyond, evidences of the waste revealed by the departure of the winter: the 'waste of broad, muddy fields / brown with dried weeds.' Their entrance into the new world is attended by uncertainty; they are sure only 'that they enter,' and the entrance is the key to the change, growth, rejuvenation, that the spring symbolizes. 'One by one objects are defined—' Gradually the objective fact of spring is fully seen and defined, in terms of an awakening of life.

The essential for Williams is not to violate the integrity of these 'things,' since they are reality itself and need only to be encouraged to offer (in their being objects) the most natural kind of commentary upon themselves. Ideas are, then, in things; there are no ideas but in things. This does not mean that ideas do not belong in poetry; only that they do not overtly belong there but should be developed from the particulars talking among themselves. Williams is concerned with the basic poetic difficulty of communicating this reality without distortion…."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
(Viking/Crowell-Collier, 1949-62) 210-11

"Here…the procedure is to discover 'things' and to view what has been discovered sharply and precisely and separately; yet at the same time (since the seeing is a continuous process) through the creative force of the seeing, to realize the paradox of continuity in change, relatedness in non-relatedness. In the poem…a perception of a series of objects is made to blend into a thought ('It quickens'), so that it *is* the thought. The implicit claim is not that one sees objects and then expresses their meaning, but rather that they are there, ready to express themselves for one's seeing. The poet sees their meaning, as he hears the meaning of those who populate his 'talking' poems. His role as poet is to recognize, by a kind of affinity, their virtal principle and to find the words whereby it might be expressed. No ideas but in things, as Williams says in *Paterson*…"

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton, 1961) 341

"'By the Road to the Contagious Hospital,' which Williams once called merely a 'picture,' says, or 'means,' or suggests through its total symbolic structure, that 'realism' as Williams conceives it means finding the promise of life, and the struggle toward it, in the most unlikely places, where most of us would not think to look. 'One by one objects are defined,' and as they are defined, we sense the quickening of life. The poem ends with a paradox: the 'rooted' things have to 'grip down' before they can come up into the light and air. 'Awaken,' the last word in the poem, toward which all the details move, gets its power

chiefly from the fact that all the *difficulties* of awakening have been faced. This 'picture' poem, then, is 'about' something—about how to find signs of *life* in an urban waste land."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton, 1968) 381

TYPES OF EXPERIMENTAL POETRY

"The scope of experiment in modern American poetry can perhaps best be understood if we examine five 'experimental forms of order.' The first of these is 'pure imagery,' with little or no attempt to 'intrude' a meaning upon an isolated imagistic statement (H.D., Hulme, some few of Pound's verses). Beyond that form of simplicity or purity, there is the poetry which 'adds on to' or imposes upon the image an indication of attitude or an external 'use' of the imagery: William Carlos Williams' occasional adjurations ('These things are important'); 'These things astonish me'; 'So much depends…'), or H.D.'s 'Spare us from loveliness.' More complicated and elaborate, and an advance in structure as well, is the 'image cluster' (what Randall Jarrell has called the 'mosaic'): an acumulation of images, with spatial and temporal orders of varying complexity. Eliot's 'Preludes' are perhaps the best illustration of this form, as indeed they are the finest examples of what the Imagist disciplines were able to do for modern poetry."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
(Viking/Crowell-Collier, 1949-62) 203

I. "*Traditional poetry* is poetry which endeavors to utilize the greatest possible amount of the knowledge and wisdom, both technical and moral, but technical only in so far as it does not obstruct the moral, to be found in precedent poetry. It assumes the ideal existence of a normal quality of feeling, a normal convention, to which the convention of any particular poem should more or less conform Actually, the conformity of any poem, even though the traditional norm could be exactly defined or could be found embodied in a single work (…George Herbert's 'Church Monuments'), would be impossible, since every poem, good or bad, is unique. But if we cannot lay a finger precisely upon the norm, we can recognize the more or less normal. If the reader does not follow me, let me point out that it is easy to recognize the Laforguian convention in Apollinaire, in the early Eliot, and in Pound's *Mauberley*, or the Miltonic convention, even though indifferently managed, in Thomson and in Wordsworth.

The traditional norm is less obviously discernible, for it embraces a wider variety of essential qualities, and no one of them receives so marked an emphasis. One might describe it negatively as that type of poetry which displays at one and the same time the greatest possible distinction with the fewest possible characteristics recognizable as the marks of any particular school, period, or man; as, in brief, that type of poetry which displays the greatest polish of style and the smallest trace of mannerism. One may describe traditional poetry positively by saying that it possesses these closely related qualities: (1) equivalence of motivation and feeling; (2) a form that permits a wide range of feeling; (3) a conventional norm of feeling which makes for a minimum of 'strain'; (4) a form and a convention which permit the extraction from every unit of language of its maximum content, both of connotation and of denotation; that is, a form and a convention which are in the highest degree economical, or efficient.

II. *Experimental poetry* endeavors to widen the racial experience, or to alter it, or to get away from it, by establishing abnormal conventions. In one sense or another Spenser, Donne, Milton, Hopkins, Laforgue, and Rimbaud are experimental poets of a very marked kind. The most striking example in English of a convention of heightened intensity (that is, of what the unsympathetic might call poetic strain) is to be found in *Paradise Lost*. When the poem does not achieve grandeur, it is grandiloquent; yet the quality of the grandiloquence could have been achieved only by a master of the highest order, and without it the poem could hardly have been accomplished. As an act of invention, of daring experiment, the creation of Miltonic blank

verse, both meter and rhetoric, is not equaled in English poetry; in fact one is tempted to wonder if it is equaled in any other. The perils amid which Milton ventured and which he avoided with perfect equanimity are best estimated by a consideration of his disciples. Yet in spite of his mastery, the emphatic and violent rhetoric which he created limits his range, as compared to the range of Shakespeare, a man of comparable genius but working in a series of conventions which are relatively traditional. The same relationship holds between the sonnets of the two men, and is the more readily discernible, perhaps, because of the smaller form. Milton is the more complex rhetorician, but the simpler moralist and a man of far less subtle perception. Milton is the nobler, but Milton's nobility is in part, and as compared to Shakespeare, the over-emphasis of imperception.

from "The Basis of Faith in Art" (1954)

William Carlos Williams

(1883-1963)

My brother, who is an architect, told me recently that his mind had been aflame over the problems of construction today more than ever before. Upon what shall we base our judgments/ he said to me almost in despair. You are a writer, he said, I'd like to know how you work. What do you find to be of importance? We must both be looking for more or less the same things. Tell me how you go about it.

I just sit down and write.

It must be more conscious than that. You must have some basis for acceptance of a word, a phrase—a general character of composition. I, for instance, after a lifetime of practice, feel that I'm just beginning to sense a few of the underlying movements, call them rules, governing my profession and that all this talk of 'old' and 'modern' has very little to do with the matter.

That's a large piece of woods, though, to get lost in.

The basis is honesty in construction, that you can do certain things