

## ANALYSIS

*Paterson* I-V (1946-58)

William Carlos Williams

(1883-1963)

“Written in the ‘variable foot’ of Williams’ free verse, the work incorporates prose passages from historical documents, newspaper accounts, geological surveys, literary texts, and personal letters ranging from one by an anonymous semi-literate black man to those by Edward Dahlberg, Alan Ginsberg, and Ezra Pound, all reinforcing the poem’s themes. The Author’s Note declares: ‘a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody—if imaginatively conceived—any city, all the details of which may be made to voice his most intimate convictions.’ Using the city of Paterson on the Passaic River near his hometown of Rutherford, N.J., as a subject so as to bring forth the universal from a local setting (‘there are no ideas but in things’), the poem presents local history and the natural scene (particularly the Falls and Garrett Mountain) as well as the consciousness of a gigantic, mythic man (Paterson) and of the author, poet and doctor.

Book One (‘The Delineaments of the Giants’) mythologizes ‘the elemental character of the place’: the city (a masculine force), the landscape (a feminine principle), and the vital, unifying river. Book Two (‘Sunday in the Park’), concerned with ‘modern replicas,’ meditates on failures in communication through language, religion, economics, and sex, but suggests redemption through art, imagination, and memory. Book Three (‘The Library’) moves from the previous section’s ‘confused uproar’ of the Falls to find that ‘books will give rest sometimes,’ a sanctuary for ‘dead men’s dreams,’ but the past represents only desolation, and death, and ‘I must find my meaning and lay it, white, beside the sliding water.’ Book Four (‘The Run to the Sea’) treats the polluted river below the Falls in terms of human corruption by modern civilization, while recognizing innovations in science, economics, and language, but finally the identity of the river is lost in the sea, although the individual man (Paterson) survives and strides inland to begin again. Book Five (untitled but dedicated to Toulouse-Lautrec) is like a separate work, an oblique commentary on the poem by an aged poet from a point of view more international and universal than local.”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

“The history of his verse is the history of his attempt to make the poem a means of synthesizing the power of the thing with that of the idea.... Here we consider its high point—when, in *Paterson* I-IV, the synthesis most surely held. (Before *Paterson* Williams could not discover a means to achieving the synthesis; since *Paterson* he has striven to transcend his need for it.) The derivation of ideas from things and the discovery of thingness in ideas—these are in *Paterson* but two aspects of the same process: invention. *Paterson* is, among other things, an attempt to give new life and meaning to this term out of traditional rhetoric and poetics....

There are in Williams’ earlier work many anticipations of the mode of *Paterson*. But in them the objective is absorbed into the subjective, not synthesized with it. In the best of the earlier poems he makes his protagonists into aspects of himself, so that we are not really interested in them as they might have been before he invented them and will be again once he has done with them.... He is historian, geographer, reporter, critic, medical practitioner, Peeping Tom—all that he needs to be to put down what Paterson, the place, actually is. Moreover, he is poet; so that putting down what Paterson actually is, he puts down himself. He has a right to call himself Dr. Paterson, because he invents himself, having discovered himself *in* Paterson.

He longs to transcend his own insufficiency, yet in the very longing, knows that he cannot. The form and function of the poem initiate that infinite series of discoveries of self through discoveries of the other.

The series ends, the poem ends, only when the fact of spiraling infinity (which is a sign of man's infinitude) is confronted, and he who confronts it (turning, somersaulting, within himself) becomes something of a hero.... All in all, *Paterson* is an epic of the modern world as it alienates the hero who might give it the wholeness it no longer has. The theme is divorce, as Williams puts it: separation of man from his history and geography, his continuity, and his fellows. The poet's task is to register in as many of its phases as he can the divorcement which has made him what he is. His potentiality for heroism lies in the fact that he knows, as only a poet can, what the world has made him into. Granting the fact of his essential alienation, he can find no certain means in his culture of giving form and wholeness to his knowledge....

In *Paterson* the raw materials of poetry and the poetry they occasion exist side by side, so that the one will never get too far away from the other. The poetic imagination in and of itself cannot give order to the things of its world. As they are its occasion, so it must govern itself according to their intrinsic, fixed nature. 'No ideas but in things.' Williams intends that we see no clear structure in *Paterson*. He will not yield to a Whitman's temptation to write and rewrite his poem so as to give it some sort of specious architectonics; nor to a [Hart] Crane's temptation to let the power of the word, the dynamics of the metaphor, get out of hand. He admits that he is stuck with the things of his world as they are, and he will take them as they are, trusting in his capacity to make the proper inventions. Such is the price he pays, and pays willingly—too willingly for those who would like his poem to have the beginning, middle, and end and that necessary continuity which are the criteria of great poems, greatly achieved....

Thus Dr. Paterson—who through his participation in the series becomes the poem's hero—is no universal, cosmic man. He is, for good and ill, only himself.... It is primarily a study of Paterson as a city in time and space. The city is pictured as a giant, its Falls his dreams and thoughts; his dreams and thoughts its life.... In counterpoise with this giant, struggling to order his dreams and thoughts, is the woman who is at once a segment of those dreams and thoughts and, in all her rich particularity, their cause. The counterpoise is manifest not only in the quality of the description but in its movement...

Book I gradually develops the image of Dr. Paterson the poet who is seeking to assemble the things of his world in their dispersed existence. He meditates most of all the history of the place, particularly the history of those who have been lost in its Falls, lost in its thoughts, lost in its language. He hopes to be lost in its Falls, but in order that he may find himself—the old hope of the maker of an American epic.... So the rest of *Paterson*, after Book I, in which the poet so clearly defines his own situation and its limits, appears to be disintegrative. The apparent disintegration is no more than a sign that the poet feels within himself an increasing power to deal with the chaos of modern life....

The method of the poem is here put down in a single word: dissonance. And then spiraling inward upon itself—somersaulting, in Williams' term—the section, apparently an animadversion on Pound's economics, indicates that all that is wrong with the world is a failure of men to give credit to other men.... In the poem the Giant and the poet whose true progenitor he is have relived the past so that they might live in the present and into the future. The conditions of such a life are the conditions stipulated variously throughout *Paterson*: a sense of locality; an ability to love; an ability to create; above all, a sense of the enormous dispersion of persons and things, each of which represents a different and uniquely valuable stage of the metamorphic movement which is at the heart of the poem. But this is a curious kind of metamorphosis; for the poet is interested not so much in the metamorphic process itself or in that which links together the persons and things metamorphosed. His interest lies rather in the infinitude of possibilities which the metamorphic process reveals. (There is no 'finished product.')...

In the end, he depicts Dr. Paterson, wearied by his long journey, tempted to believe that the sea—to which the river and all things go—is his 'home.' It is as though at this point Williams were meditating the thesis of 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' and confronting something like Whitman's ultimate acquiescence to that single life principle imaged by the sea and its movement. The concluding action is simple: At the shore, Dr. Paterson sees his dog swim in the sea, then come out; and he walks home with her, toward 'the distant waterfall.' Here Williams concludes like his mentor, the D. H. Lawrence of *Studies in Classic American Literature*, who had commented bitterly on 'Out of the Cradle,' 'Only we know this much. Death is not the goal.'... The argument of *Paterson* is that since the land was there before we were, we are the land's. But its effect, surely, is to demonstrate that the land could not be there unless we had

come to it. Coming to it, we struggle to see ourselves as we might have come from it; and so we make ourselves into something new. In this sense we have invented our land out of the need for inventing ourselves.”

Roy Harvey Pearce  
*The Continuity of American Poetry*  
 (Princeton 1961) 112-21, 128

“This is a large poem in every respect. Williams surveys contemporary civilization in an excursive assemblage of lyrics, narrative episodes, prose interludes, notes, etc. The poem is the culmination of Williams’ effort to make, not something that means, but something that is.... Williams explains... ‘Part One introduces the elemental character of the place. The Second Part comprises the modern replicas. Three will seek a language to make them vocal, and Four, the river below the Falls, will be reminiscent of episodes—all that any one man may achieve in a lifetime.’

Book V, which appeared some years after the first four, is a kind of coda to the rest, carrying the development forward into new complexities. In Williams’ case the city is, of course, Paterson, N.J., where he worked most of his life as a physician. The poem is shaped by the overriding metaphor: the human mind (male and female) as a city beside a river (time), constantly eroded and rebuilt, the only sound being the ‘language’ of the waterfall (contemporary events). Into this structure Williams has mortised large chunks of history, some rough hewn from the chronicles of Paterson itself, others imaginatively reconstructed, still others drawn from different lands and cultures. Alongside are personal reminiscences, letters, love poems, stories, all pointing toward the primacy of objective experience. The whole makes a remarkable testimonial by a poet who has been called ‘America’s greatest living primitive,’ a mystique of the natural world which endows the historical moment with utmost meaning. It may be that *Paterson* will eventually be seen to be the 20<sup>th</sup>-century counterpart of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.”

Max Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
 (Crowell 1962)

“*Paterson IV*, intended as the final book in Williams’ epic celebration of the local and the actual...is... interesting and revealing... Here for once Williams seems not to like his people or his scenes; the implicit theme is one of decline and degeneration. Even Williams’ most enthusiastic and sympathetic followers did not like the poem. Williams was hurt by their reaction and began planning new books of *Paterson* to correct the impressions he had left in Book IV. The poem reflects the mood of discouragement and depression that afflicted Williams in the late 1940’s, for one thing. For another, the plan of the poem was dictated by the original design for *Paterson* as a whole: to begin at the headwaters of the Passaic River and move down in space to the mouth, in time to the present. The river at its mouth is extremely polluted by the industrial cities along its banks. This is a *fact*: what could a poet who wanted to be true to fact always, *do* when this fact was raised to symbol, what could he do but write like the early Eliot (‘Burbank with a Baedeker, Bleistein with a Cigar’) or like Pound (‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberley’), noting evidences everywhere of ‘tawdry cheapness’ and perversion and blight?

Asked about the poem in 1958, Williams responded at length and with some bitterness.... Williams always did his best work when he did not ‘think it out,’ when both the theme and the form were discovered in the course of the poem itself. In what follows, we shall find Williams falling back on the old Imagist ideas of Pound (a poet merely ‘*sees...reacts*’) in an attempt to explain and justify himself: ‘[Randall Jarrell] didn’t react at all to Book Four—couldn’t take the identification of the filthy river with the perversion of the characters at the close of the fourth section of the poem. It was typical of him that he lost track of the poem as a poem and became identified with the characters. I was getting up closer to the city, approaching the mouth of the river, identified with the mouth of the Hudson...the Passaic enters into Newark Bay. If you are going to write realistically of the conception of filth in the world, it can’t be pretty. What goes on with people isn’t pretty. With the approach to the city, international character began to enter the innocent river and pervert it; sexual perversions, such things that every metropolis when you get to know it houses. Certain human elements can’t take the gaff, have to become perverts to satisfy certain longings. When human beings herd together, have to face each other, they are very likely to go crooked. What in the world is an artist to do? He is not a moralist. He sees things, reacts to them, must take them into consideration.

Therefore when the river reaches pollution, which my river comes to face in Book Four, I had to take the characters and show them graphically. My critics, Randall Jarrell among them, and Marianne Moore had the same reaction—felt that the Book Four was less expert than the earlier parts of the poem.’

It would not be fair to Williams to quote this if it were not thoroughly typical of him when he tried to handle ideas, and if, also, I had not already tried to make a case for the greatness of his poetry when he was not *thinking*, and were not about to try to strengthen and extend that case. A statement could hardly misrepresent Williams’ basic attitudes and feelings more completely if it were made up by an enemy and attributed to him. It shows us why we must not approach his poetry by way of his work as a ‘theoretician’.”

Hyatt H. Waggoner  
*American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*  
(Houghton 1968) 383-84

Michael Hollister (2015)