

## 46 QUOTATIONS



### William Carlos Williams

(1883-1963)

William Carlos Williams is a Modernist poet whose plain free verse became the most influential model for poets after the 1960s, during the Postmodern period—more influential than the more difficult Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens. Williams was a generous mentor and poems in homage to him have been written by hundreds of different poets. Also appealing to Postmodernists besides his simplicity are his secularism, philosophical materialism, and rebellious individualism. W.C. Williams became the liberal counterforce to the conservative T.S. Eliot. Yet he was unlike liberal academics in hating academics. He was a practicing physician in New Jersey who wrote poems and nonfiction on the side.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, poetic ideal, free verse, language, Ezra Pound, Imagism, objectivism, imagination, writing, measure, poems, the classic, poets, women, love, capitalism, skepticism, time, “Prufrock,” “The Waste Land,” Library of Congress, a man is a city, Patterson, old age:

#### YOUTH

You remember I had a strong inclination all my life to be a painter. Under different circumstances I would rather have been a painter than to bother with these god-damn words. I never actually thought of myself as a poet but I knew I had to be an artist in some way.

The books that influenced me were my own discoveries. I knew Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* by heart, and Shakespeare and the romantic poets.

#### POETIC IDEAL

I was conscious of my mother’s influence... She seemed an heroic figure, a poetic ideal.

Who shall say I am not the happy genius of my household?

## FREE VERSE

The poems I was writing before I met Pound, were what I can only describe as free verse, formless, after Whitman.

I stumbled all over the place in these earlier poems.... I would divide those lines differently now.

I think I was too haphazard.

## LANGUAGE

I couldn't speak like the academy. It had to be modified by the conversation around me.

As Marianne Moore used to say, a language dogs and cats could understand.

## EZRA POUND

Before meeting Ezra Pound is like B.C. and A.D.

Pound got me to read *Longinus on the Sublime*, but it meant little to me.

## IMAGISM

so much depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow / glazed with rain / water / beside the white / chickens

## OBJECTIVISM

No ideas but in things.

One by one objects are defined-- / It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf...

In description words adhere to certain objects, and have the effect on the sense of oysters, barnacles.

## IMAGINATION

The only realism in art is of the imagination.

As birds' wings beat the solid air without which none could fly so words freed by the imagination affirm reality by their flight.

## WRITING

If they give you lined paper, write the other way.

I think all writing is a disease. You can't stop it.

Dissonance (if you are interested) leads to discovery.

To make a start, / out of particulars / and make them general...

## MEASURE

The thing that concerns me is the theory of what I was determined to do with measure, what you encounter on the page. It must be transcribed to the page from the lips of the poet, as it was with such a master as Sappho.

[Emily Dickinson]: She was a real good guy. I thought I was a better poet because the American idiom was so close to me, and she didn't get what the poets were doing at that time—writing according to a new method, not the English method, which wouldn't have made much sense to an American. Whitman was on the right track, but when he switched to the English intonation, and followed the English method of recording the feet, he didn't realize it was a different method, which was not satisfactory to an American. Everything started with Shakespeare.

[What has he left of value to new poets?]: The variable foot—the division of the line according to a new method that would be satisfactory to an American.

#### POEMS

A new music is a new mind.

Rigor of beauty is the quest.

If it ain't a pleasure, it ain't a poem.

It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.

#### THE CLASSIC

The local fully realized, words marked by a place.

#### POETS

Poets are damned but they are not blind, they see with the eyes of angels.

Let / him beware lest he turn to no more than / the writing of stale poems... / Minds like beds already made up...

#### WOMEN

All women are not Helen, I know that, but have Helen in their hearts.

#### LOVE

It is at the edge of a petal that love waits.

Your thighs are appletrees. Your knees are a southern breeze.

#### CAPITALISM

Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside...until the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind... their cries rising in waves still as the skillful yachts pass over.

#### SKEPTICISM

They enter the new world naked, / cold, uncertain of all / save that they enter.

It is almost impossible to state what one in fact believes, because it is almost impossible to hold a belief and to define it at the same time.

For the beginning is assuredly / the end—since we know nothing, pure / and simple, beyond / our own complexities.

## TIME

Time is a storm in which we are all lost.

“Prufrock”

“Prufrock” appeared [in 1917]. I had a violent feeling that Eliot had betrayed what I believed in. He was looking backward; I was looking forward. He was a conformist with wit, learning which I did not possess.... I felt he had rejected America and I refused to be rejected and so my reaction was violent.... It was a shock to me that he was so tremendously successful; my contemporaries flocked to him—away from what I wanted....

“The Waste Land”

These were the years just before the great catastrophe to our letters—the appearance of T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” [1922].... Our work staggered to a halt for a moment under the blast of Eliot’s genius which gave the poem back to the academics. We did not know how to answer him....

Then out of the blue *The Dial* brought out “The Waste Land” and all our hilarity ended. It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it and our brave sallies into the unknown were turned to dust. To me especially it struck like a sardonic bullet. I felt at once that it had set me back twenty years, and I’m sure it did. Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself—rooted in the locality which should give it fruit. I knew at once that in certain ways I was most defeated. Eliot had turned his back on the possibility of reviving my world.... I had to watch him carry my world off with him...to the enemy.

## LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

It was just at this time [1948] that I received the appointment for the Chair of Poetry at the Library of Congress. I had had a stroke at the time, not a bad one, but crippling for a brief period. Floss wrote them, and they said to take my time. When I was well enough to take care of the duties in Washington—I was anxious to live up to the obligations of this honor—they didn’t want me.

## A MAN IS A CITY

A man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways 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.

PATTERSON

I was getting up closer to the city [in Book IV of *Paterson*], 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.... 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. [1958]

## OLD AGE

It is not fair to be old, to put on a brown sweater.

Some of these quotations are excerpted from  
“William Carlos Williams, *The Art of Poetry*” (1964)  
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