

William
Carlos
Williams

The American
Background

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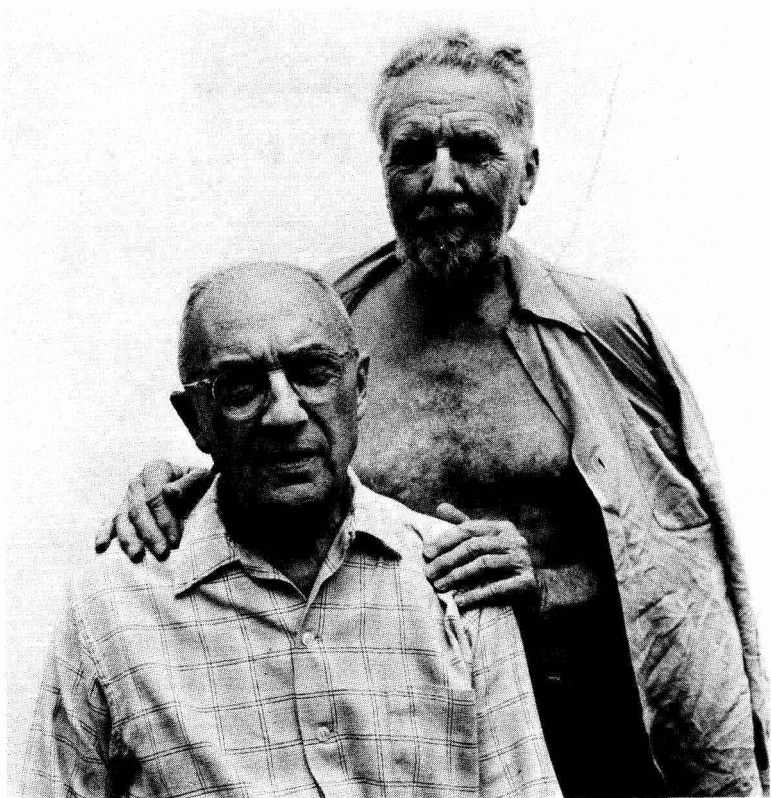
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William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, photographed by Richard Avedon, Rutherford, N.J., July 1958

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Preface

In 1923 William Carlos Williams wrote: 'It would be a relief to discover a critic who looked at American work from the American viewpoint.'¹ Forty years later it seemed to me that his plea had hardly been heard in his own country, and in Great Britain not at all. Challenged by Williams to hear his poems in the American language, I realised that as an Englishman there was much in his idiom which, for lack of his viewpoint, I could not 'hear', and so I came to understand that the question of idiom is more profound than a matter of adjusting the ear to a new music; the difference between the British and American idioms rests on important divergences in attitudes of mind.

I have tried to provide the prolegomena to a study of Williams, presenting his American viewpoint but not offering an evaluation of his work. In stressing the local side of his personal, literary, aesthetic, intellectual, and social background, I have taken for granted his debt to Ezra Pound,² and chosen to neglect the parodic element in *Paterson* relating to Homer, Goethe, Joyce, and Eliot, with whose work Williams was, of course, familiar. I have presented him in the company of those who supported him emotionally and intellectually throughout his long career.

It is to the unregarded carriers of art and literature, who with few exceptions will not survive in the public memory, that this book owes its largest debt, for they were the instigators of more than four hundred fugitive little magazines which I studied in libraries in England, France, and the United States in my effort to establish the American viewpoint. Yet reliance on published sources alone proved insufficient

¹ W. C. Williams, *The Great American Novel* (Paris, 1923), p. 61.

² Emily Mitchell Wallace, 'Pound and Williams at the University of Pennsylvania', *Pennsylvania Review* I, 2 (Spring 1967), 40-53.

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to prove Williams' interest in his reading matter, even when, from the remnants of his library at Yale University and Fairleigh Dickinson University in Rutherford, it was possible to tell what had found its way into his home. For instance, the extent of his interest in American Indian music could only misleadingly be judged by the simple discovery of the printed source for a quotation from Frances Densmore used as foreword in *Pictures from Brueghel*.¹ It was reasonable to assume, one would have thought, that Williams knew the text in full and at first hand, and that he had perceived a relation between the structure of Indian music and his concept of an indigenous American measure in poetry. It was a salutary lesson to receive the following account from Tram Combs of how he came upon it:²

In his last few years I made a point of calling on the doctor on his birthday, and as his gift in 1961 I presented him with a 3 × 5 slip of paper on which I had written a quotation from an essay by Frances Densmore; when I had met the clause a few years before in my reading, I had immediately thought 'wouldn't Bill love that!', and I was delighted to see the joy of his response; he immediately said with great animation that he was going to put that in the front of the book of poems he had shipped off to Laughlin the day before; and there it sits as the foreword to *Pictures from Brueghel*.

I am especially grateful to the many people who provided me with documents and information by which I could corroborate my own judgement of what was important in the formation of Williams' thought: Ethel M. Albert, Boski Antheil, Richard Avedon, Mary Barnard, Charles G. Bell, Norma Berger, Charles Boultenhouse, Basil Bunting, Nicolas Calas, Tram Combs, Jack Conroy, Malcolm Cowley, Ellman Crasnow, Robert Creeley, Donald Davie, James J. Davis, Marcel Duchamp, Gladys Eckardt, Herbert A. Fisher, Martin L. Friedman, Donald C. Gallup, Edward J. Gorin, Edward M. Graf, Louis Grudin, Ben Hagglund, Jim Higgins, Kathleen Hoagland, Beckett Howorth, Grover Jacoby, Matthew Josephson, Horace M. Kallen, Standish D. Lawder, Howard A. Levin, Jane Lidderdale, David E. Lilienthal, Diana June Logie, Edward M. Longwell, David Joseph Lyle, Louis L. Martz, Jerome Mazzaro, Elizabeth K. Miller, the late Fred R. Miller, Robert Motherwell, the late Gorham B. Munson, Henry

¹ W. C. Williams, *Pictures from Brueghel* (Norfolk, Conn., 1962) [1].

² Letter to the author, 12 December 1965.

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Niese, the late Donald J. Paquette, H. B. Parkes, Norman Holmes Pearson, Robert D. Pepper, Hayden Phillips, Stephen Prokopoff, Carl Rakosi, John Riordan, Emanuel Romano, Suzanne Rutter, Arthur Sale, Winfield Townley Scott, Eli Siegel, Mary Ellen Solt, Parker Tyler, Liz Weaver, Anne Whelpley, Florence H. Williams, Jonathan Williams, Robert N. Wilson, William Wolarsky, and George Zabriskie.

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Key to Sources

Where no source is given for an unpublished document the original may be assumed to remain in private hands. The library symbols of the Library of Congress are used to locate all other unpublished documents and collections of books and periodicals formerly in William Carlos Williams' possession:

CtMW	Wesleyan University, Middletown
CtY	Yale University, New Haven
ICN	Newberry Library, Chicago
InU	Indiana University, Bloomington
MdBE	Enoch Pratt Library, Baltimore
MH	Harvard University, Cambridge
NBu	Buffalo Public Library
NBuU	University of Buffalo
NjFD (Rutherford)	Fairleigh Dickinson University, Rutherford
RPB	Brown University, Providence
ViU	University of Virginia, Charlottesville

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A Culture in Effigy

The Family Background

William Carlos Williams was born on Constitution Day, 1883, in the small country town of Rutherford, New Jersey, to parents of mixed extraction. His father was an Englishman, said to have been born in Birmingham; his mother in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, to a Basque mother and a Jewish father. His middle name was taken from his mother's brother who practised medicine in Panama City. If his ancestry was in any way Spanish it was more by cultural adoption than by blood. He was half English, one-quarter Basque, and one-quarter Jewish.

Williams' religious background was equally mixed. His Jewish grandfather had married a Catholic, and his Anglican father had done the same. Once established in Rutherford, the family cast aside its former affiliations to become a founding family of the local Unitarian Society.¹

The year of the poet's birth saw the reorganisation of the land company which had purchased the portion of Union Township known as Boiling Spring.² It had been named the Rutherford Park Association after the largest landowner in that part, John Rutherford. In the years following the arrival of the Williams family the name of the village changed interestingly; Boiling Spring first became the aristocratic Rutherford Park, then in 1883 this was replaced by the thoroughly un-historical Rutherford. Possibly the inhabitants were unhappy with the association of the former lord of the manor, and preferred to think of the place where an imaginary river 'Ruther' could be easily crossed.

In *The Build-Up*, part three of the trilogy of novels following the

¹ Two letters from Williams to Louis Untermeyer, 5 March 1941 and 7 February 1942 (InU).

² Kathleen Hoagland, 'A Brief History of the Rutherford Area', in *Directory of Municipal Officials, Boards, and Services*, Borough of Rutherford, 10 February 1966.

progress of his wife's family, Williams conveys the ethos of this young town bent on self-improvement. He contrasts Rutherford ('Riverdale') with Carlstadt ('Kronstadt'), the little German town on the Hackensack road with its Sommergarten of folk-songs and beer-steins.¹ Unlike Rutherford Park it was called for its founder's first name. The tailors of Carlstadt formed a conservative community, not by means of churches but with ample beer. Psychologically, as Williams suggested, Rutherford was quite different, being composed of commuters, heterogeneous in their origins, who refused – and still refuse – to have a licensed bar in their town. The Union club was determined that it, too, would remain dry; 'a desirable resort for all the members and a place where their wives or parents can find no objection to their attendance'.² Williams' father was a member of its board of governors. There his two sons enjoyed their first stage entertainments, dances, and concerts.

Just as sobriety was a condition of enjoyment, so truth was a condition of religious belief. The Unitarian Society of Rutherford, of which Williams' father was a prominent member, expressed the members' point of view as follows:³

They agree that the individual's religious faith is a matter of serious concern, but that it is important, not so much that a person shall profess any given beliefs, as that he shall, in fact, believe that which he may be willing to profess. They think that the church, itself, should have but one imperative dogma which may be expressed in five words –

NOTHING THAT IS NOT TRUE

Such a constitution was as clear a declaration of ecclesiastical independence as the public referendum in favour of the creation of the borough of Rutherford had been some years before.

The values of the family that had helped to create Rutherford were still based on the past. The idealism of the mother was, as Williams himself explained it, that of the defeated romantic.⁴ Her career in Paris as a painter had been thwarted not so much by lack of talent as by lack of money. If the prizes of Paris were without price, then her ideals were

¹ W. C. Williams, *The Build-Up* (N.Y., 1952), pp. 66–7.

² J. M. Van Valen, *History of Bergen County* (N.Y., 1900), p. 443.

³ 'Unitarian Church', *Bergen County Historical Society*, Twentieth Annual Report, 15 (1921–2), 77–9; 79.

⁴ W. C. Williams, *Tes*, *Mrs. Williams* (N.Y., 1959), p. 33.

equally absolute; if her sons were her 'vicarious atonement'¹ for not having achieved artistic success, then she transferred to them her passionate desire for its attainment. In the early years of Williams' youth her idealism cost him nothing less than mental agony and physical deprivation. The sober ambition of the young family, as of the newly constituted town, ended by imposing arbitrary prices upon immeasurable commodities:²

Once her elder son, in a fit of despair and philosophic resolution stood her and her husband up against the sideboard in the dining room and bitterly told them: I don't love you because you are my parents. I love you if I love you at all because you are lovable and for no other reason! Could she not see that? Could she not have seen that that was his attempt to liberate her, to liberate them all, his father, his mother and himself – that they might fall into each others' arms and be melted together. But they were shocked and he crawled away defeated. The resistance was too hard, the barriers were too great and mounted rather than diminished as time went on.

This outburst, it may be supposed, followed several years of effort to please his mother. It was largely as a result of his mother's devotion to the memory of her brother, Carlos, who had sent her to Paris, that Williams was persuaded to enter the medical profession. He began at the University of Pennsylvania with dentistry, but soon gave it up for medicine. But if maternal influence was a factor in his choice, at least he was not averse to medicine; 'I do like it as well or better than anything else but my mind is a book of questions and until I find their answers I will never be settled.'³

In his first years at university Williams fulfilled his parents' wishes to the full. He attended the French Church, refused to drink in celebration of a football victory, was a member of the fencing team, and admired an oil painting by a certain H. M. Walcot at the Academy of Fine Arts exhibition.⁴ But by the end of his time he would confess to his brother that his work bored him and he really wanted to do something else:⁵

I don't think I'll ever be a great success at anything, I sort of keep going out of an instinctive dread of failure but lord knows I don't feel that divine fire which

¹ *Ibid.* p. 5.

³ Letter to his mother, 10 October 1904 (NBuU).

⁴ Letters to his mother, 1902-4 (NBuU).

⁵ Letter to his brother, 31 March 1907 (NBuU).

² Ms. of *The Autobiography* (CtY).

I long for and I know a man must have to succeed. I'm just a low down mediocre lazy mucker and I know it. I tell you honestly Bo if it wasn't for you people sort of restraining me I'd throw up the whole thing and go into some fool venture or another that would give me satisfaction or do me up for once and all.

Eighteen months later he spoke of success in terms of writing and not of medicine at all:¹

I have been writing a great deal recently and somehow or other at some time or other I will succeed and if I ever do succeed Bo, I know it will be real, real, real. But oh how hard it is with the seriousness and vast importance of it all in my eyes to feel that in the eyes of all around I am wasting time, for it does take time and even I am not always sure I am not a fool. Bo, if I didn't have you it would be impossible.

Evidently he had discovered a new idea of success, and another approach to truth. The family's approach was essentially that of reason, of Darwinian science and Unitarian faith. Now, quite quickly, Williams saw a third approach offering itself, that of passion:²

It all happened very quickly. Somehow poetry and the female sex were allied in my mind. The beauty of girls seemed to me as the beauty of a poem. I knew nothing at all about the sexual approach but I had to do something about it. I did it in the only terms I knew, through poetry.

Early Literary Influences

In 1903 W.B. Yeats, passing through Philadelphia on a tour, paused briefly to read to the students at the university, but Williams did not hear him. His taste was, as he said himself, 'ripe for a fall, to the ground'.³ To his brother, in a letter filled with his Unitarian philosophy of truth and beauty, he recommended James Whitcomb Riley's 'Knee Deep in June' and 'Don't Cry, Little Girl, Don't Cry'.⁴ At home his father would read Kipling's 'Brushwood Boy',⁵ then at the height of American fashion, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar.⁶

The predominant influence in American poetry was a Canadian

¹ Letter to his brother, 12 November 1908 (NBuU).

² W.C. Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem* (Boston, 1958), p. 14.

³ Mss notes: miscellaneous and unidentified (CtY).

⁴ Letter to his brother, 16 November 1904 (copy: CtY).

⁵ Letter to his brother, 2 December 1907 (copy: CtY).

⁶ W.C. Williams, 'Note on the Translation of *El Hombre Que Paresia Un Cavallo*', *New Directions* 8 (1944), 318-19; 319.

poet, Bliss Carman. Pound later went so far as to say that, 'In America the poetic life was almost exclusively contained in the "Songs of Vagabondia" by Carman and Hovey'.¹ In May 1907 Edgar Williams gave his brother a copy of the ninth edition, and against Carman's 'The Joys of the Open Road' Williams put a marginal comment, 'Great', with special marks beside the couplet:²

A lover of books, but a reader of man
No cynic and no charlatan.

Williams' response to Carman and Hovey is all the more interesting in the light of his reaction to Pound's first book, *A Lume Spento*, which can be gauged from Pound's own letter in reply.³ Evidently Williams considered the volume bitter and personal, even dissolute and decadent; Pound had taken no heed of the eyes of a 'too ruthless public'. But exactly why he thought Pound's work anarchic Pound could not guess; Williams contented himself with speaking portentously of 'ultimate attainments of poesy', and avoided detailed criticism saying that he felt powerless to deny another man's work. He concluded that Pound's vagabondism was simply unconstrained. Williams noted Pound's earlier recommendation⁴ that he should read a story about a disguised baronet languishing from melancholia in a London slum, who regained his optimism when he met a street-urchin living among fallen women and thieves, whose 'mere animal joy in the temporary animal comfort of the moment stirred and uplifted them from their depths'.⁵ But he did not follow its moral so closely as to provoke such an incident as the Wabash College affair, when Pound was dismissed for harbouring a stray girl in his room. *A Lume Spento* was neither unreflective of experience nor decorously forced. Williams, like Carman, still preferred a melancholic interpretation of life to a bitter appraisal of the facts of existence.

In mid-July 1909 Williams went to Leipzig to combine further medical studies with learning German; the following March he spent

¹ Ezra Pound, *Profile: An Anthology* . . . (Milan, 1932), p. 14.

² Copy inscribed to Williams by his brother (NjFdu[Rutherford]).

³ *The Letters of Ezra Pound*, ed. D.D. Paige (N.Y., 1950), pp. 3-7.

⁴ Letter from Williams to his mother, 1 March 1906 (NBuU).

⁵ Frances Hodgson Burnett, 'The Dawn of a To-Morrow', *Scribner's Magazine* xxxviii, 6 (December 1905), 643-57; 657. The story continued in the following issue, xxix, 1 (January 1906), 34-52.

a week in London with Pound. In correspondence Pound had gently told him he was 'out of touch', and had recommended that he read Yeats, Browning, Francis Thompson, and Swinburne, as well as poets of the 'second rank' like Margaret Sackville, Rosamund Watson, Ernest Rhys, and Jim G. Fairfax.¹ Now that Williams was briefly in London Pound doubtless pushed home his lessons. But if the Imagist doctrine was already presaged in Pound's first dictum, 'To paint the thing as I see it', his second, 'Beauty', was commonly held by the poets he had recommended, as well as by H. D. and Richard Aldington to whom beauty was religion. As Aldington wrote, 'you had to know the passwords - Omar, Vita Nuova, Aucassin'.² Williams knew enough to be identified as friend.

The visit to London produced the title for *Kora in Hell*, which Williams acknowledged as Pound's. For Pound the source of their discussion of the myth of Persephone was in a long-forgotten poem by E. W. Sutton Pickhardt, 'Ariadne Diainomene'.³ For Williams, Botticelli's *Primavera*, which he had seen with the *Birth of Venus* at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence just prior to coming to London, provided a visual correlation. Pater's idealised and mysterious view of the Renaissance lay behind both their tastes.

The local representatives of American poetic life to whom Williams could turn on his return from England were *The Papyrus*, a magazine edited by Michael Monahan, and *The Bang*, edited by Alexander Harvey. Williams knew *The Papyrus*,⁴ and it is probable that he would have heard of the New York literary club, The Vagabonds, for which *The Bang* was a bulletin, since Harvey lived in nearby Hackensack. There were other magazines like *The International*, and *Moods*, both edited by B. Russell Herts and Richard Le Gallienne. *The Papyrus* was subtitled 'A Magazine of Individuality'; Carman's *The Making of the Personality* and James Huneker's *Egoists* indicate the range of its interests - from Hellenist perfection to Nietzschean iconoclasm.

Whatever sympathy Williams might have had with the local egoists was soured by the presence of Ferdinand Earle, the 'Gregory Ives' of

¹ *Ibid.* p. 8.

² Richard Aldington, *Life for Life's Sake* (N.Y., 1941), p. 100.

³ Pound, *Profile*, p. 14.

⁴ Collection of his magazines (CtY).