

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS' DISCOVERY OF AMERICA:

A STUDY OF IN THE AMERICAN GRAIN AND PATERSON

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with William Carlos Williams' attempts to discover a culture for America. To Williams, "discover" is a verb synonymous with "invent" or "create." Williams believed that Americans had no cultural relationship with their own country. What passed for culture in America had all been imported from Europe, the Old World. If man's relationship with the New World was to be understood, old traditions and customs had to be disregarded. Williams' career as a poet of culture shows his attempts to disregard the old and invent what he had failed to inherit--a communal hero, a poetic form, and a moral and aesthetic vision of man's relationship to his community.

Williams provided himself with direction for his poetic quest after culture by creating a myth of America. This myth is delineated in the two of his central works to be studied here--In the American Grain and Paterson. In his early poem, "The Wanderer," he made a symbolic pledge to the people and things of America. In In the American Grain he begins to discover America through her people and things. In Paterson IV he completes his quest as well as he is able. Finally, Paterson V is at once a summary of his explorations and the beginning of a new search.

On his poetic quest for culture Williams is either accompanied by or in pursuit of a woman. This woman is a

changing figure, being at one time or another, virgin, nymph or crone. The female figure in Williams' art is a symbol of the spirit of America and, as his work develops, the incarnation of his own imagination. Consequently, the poet's attempts to capture America and cultivate a relationship with her have public and private dimensions. When Williams attempts to create an identity for the American people, he adopts the public voice of the poet. At these times female America is earth mother, wife and lover. When Williams turns to the less public questions of art and creativity, female America becomes the poet's imagination. She creates art and through her the poet gains personal salvation.

The central concern of this thesis is the public aspect of Williams' myth--his discovery of America in her details, his probing into her history and his journey into her present. Inevitably the public and more personal myths intermingle, and in Paterson V the accent is on art, the artist and the imagination. Female America cannot be fully comprehended without an understanding of the communal hero conceived by Williams. In Williams' art it is the poet who integrates female America and who establishes moral and aesthetic values for his community. In examining Williams' discovery of America it is necessary to consider his concept of the duties and functions of the communal hero. Thus, the poet-hero is a major concern in this thesis.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

William Carlos Williams, in a letter written to Horace Gregory in 1939, describes the source of In the American Grain:

Of mixed ancestry I felt from earliest childhood that America was the only home I could possibly call my own. I felt it was expressly founded for me, personally, and that it must be my first business in life to possess it; only by making it my own from beginning to my own day, in detail, should I ever have a basis for knowing where I stood.¹

In this letter Williams describes his entire career, for at the center of his work is a constant delight in the possibility of possessing America, past and present, and so renewing and discovering his own potential. His allegiance to America has nearly always been an integral aspect of his poetry. Early in his poetic life Williams burned the manuscript of a long poem, which was an imitation of Keats' Endymion, and replaced it with "The Wanderer." This new poem celebrates a ritual baptism and marriage. In the poem the celebrant is immersed in the Passaic River, and so acknowledges his identification with his community, and by extension, with America. The poet becomes an organic part of his surroundings and they

¹William Carlos Williams, The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams, ed. John C. Thirlwall (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957), p. 185.

of him:

Then the river began to enter my heart,
 Eddying back cool and limpid
 Into the crystal beginning of its days.
 But with the rebound it leaped forward;
 Muddy, then black and shrunken
 Till I felt the utter depth of its rottenness
 The vile breadth of its degradation
 And dropped down knowing this was me now.²

This poem marks the beginning of Williams' central poetic quest--the descent to one's origins. "The Wanderer" expresses his early allegiance to America and his determination to find poetic material and inspiration in his country. Inherent in Williams' work is a concern with things American; people, language, history, customs and traditions. In works which attempt an analysis of American cultural problems, such as In the American Grain and "The American Background," Williams is concerned with the lack of perception and the desperation of the American people. He believes that these problems have weakened the fibre of American life, producing a fragmented and frightened nation. He does not view his fellow citizens as the progenitors of a great national experiment or as a people welded together by common, positive experience. To Williams, the American public is a mob which shares only fear and ignorance. The American is a divided man with his body split from his soul. His culture is imported from Europe and dissociated from American geography and experience. Since the American lacks

²William Carlos Williams, The Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams (New York: New Directions, 1951), p. 11.

a sound knowledge of the land which gives him life, he is an alien in his own country. This dissociation from his time and soil allow him to be victimized by anyone clever enough to detect his ignorance and fear. Early in her history America had manifested her inhibitions and desperation by burning witches at Salem. During Williams' time she executed Sacco and Vanzetti. In his essay, "The American Background," Williams explores the elements which he believes to be responsible for the divisions and inhibitions still present in American culture. In the poem, "Impromptu: The Suckers," he indicates that fear lies behind these cultural disruptions and illustrates his point by reference to the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti.

Williams analyzes the central problem afflicting America as the split between instinct and will. The problem is focused in the parable used to introduce "The American Background." Here Williams describes his version of an early approach to the New World. He claims that from the first America has been misinterpreted:

They saw birds with rusty breasts and called them robins. Thus, from the start, an America of which they could have had no inkling drove the first settlers upon their past. They retreated for warmth and reassurance to something previously familiar. But at a cost. For what they saw were not robins. They were thrushes only vaguely resembling the rosy, daintier English bird. Larger, stronger and in the evening of a wilder, lovelier song, actually here was something the newcomers had never in their lives before encountered. Blur. Confusion. Strange and difficult the new continent induced a torsion in the spirits of the first settlers, tearing them between the old and the new. And at once a split occurred in that impetus which should have carried them forward as one into the

dangerous realities of the future. They found that they had not only left England but they had arrived somewhere else: at a place whose pressing reality demanded not only a tremendous bodily devotion, but as well, and more importunately, great powers of adaptability, a complete reconstruction of their most intimate cultural make-up, to accord with the new conditions. The most hesitated and turned back in their hearts at the first glance.³

Williams' conception of America as a misinterpreted and exploited country and of the American as a perplexed and frenetic explorer colors nearly all his work. His major theme is that of a descent to the ground for renewal and a search for an untouched America. This theme is accompanied by his conviction that America is a schizophrenic nation--a country in which neither the colonist nor the present day citizen adjusts to the environment. Because he has no real knowledge of his environment or any sensual contact with it, the American lives a life sanctioned only by the will. Williams believes that the dominance of the will in America has led to the suppression of instinct and imagination. The will has tended to impose traditional forms on experience. Thus, the possibility for a genuine culture, a life rooted in the American grain, has eluded the New World.

Williams' desire for American cultural experience seems to have motivated him to experiment with verse and prose forms. He was in search of a "correct form," a structure which would be solidly American. He joined forces

³William Carlos Williams, Selected Essays (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 134. All future references to the essays will be to this source and will be identified within the text by page numbers in parentheses.

with the Imagists, hoping to discover a new form of poetic composition, a form for the future. About this time his lifelong quarrel with Eliot began. Williams felt that "Prufrock" (published in 1917) was a betrayal and rejection of America. Eliot who, with his craftsmanship, could have done so much to further the poetic credo which Williams represented had shown himself as an academic and cosmopolitan poet. To Williams the desertion of so fine a poet produced a crisis in the development of American poetry. His answer to what was a personal as well as a public crisis was to write Kora in Hell: Improvisations. Because of Eliot's success Williams felt his desire for a poetry based on American language and experience to be threatened. In Kora he sees himself, the American poet, the Springtime, bound for Hell. However, the work ends on a note of optimistic anticipation: "There is no thing that with a twist of the imagination cannot be something else This day of all others is the one chosen, all other days fall away from it on either side and only itself remains in perfect fullness."⁴ Kora in Hell, like "The Wanderer," resolves a crisis. Williams affirms his poetic credo by asserting the imagination's immunity to external threats.

Williams' satisfaction with Kora in Hell, both with its stylistic innovations and its revelation of himself to

⁴Williams Carlos Williams, Kora in Hell: Improvisations (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1967), p. 82-83.

himself, gave added strength and vigor to his commitment to American culture.⁵ In the next few years he produced several books of poetry and a variety of prose pieces. The Great American Novel and A Voyage to Paganry center about an American in Europe making discoveries about America and its quality of life. Both novels reveal something of Williams' conception of America, but they lack the scope of In the American Grain. In neither of the former works is there a detailed analysis of the past or an attempt to understand modern America in terms of her history.

In In the American Grain Williams' explores America in a novel way, through the character of her history. His method of exploration becomes comprehensible when it is remembered that Williams was a physician as well as a poet. In his autobiography he speaks of the close relationship between his two professions: "When they ask me, of late as they frequently do, how I have for so many years continued an equal interest in medicine and the poem, I reply that they amount to nearly the same thing."⁶ As an artist Williams did adopt the role of physician to his country's conscience. It is as a diagnostician and potential healer that he wrote In the American Grain. The book is a case history of America, a dialogue between the forces which have shaped her. Williams

⁵William Carlos Williams, I Wanted to Write a Poem, ed. Edith Heal (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 26.

⁶William Carlos Williams, The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams (New York: New Directions, 1967), p. 286. All future references to The Autobiography will be to this source and will be identified within the text by page numbers in parentheses.

returns here to the theme first suggested in "The Wanderer." Living in the squalor of modern America he defines his country as he believes it to have been. Against the background of what America has become he examines the forces which produced this situation. At the same time he looks for forces in the past which held some promise, but which have been buried or misinterpreted. If a myth is a story which embodies the traditions of a people concerning their country and their beliefs, then In the American Grain creates new myths and destroys old ones. In his preface Williams puts it this way: "I have sought to re-name things seen, now lost in the chaos of borrowed titles, many of them inappropriate, under which the true character lies hid."⁷

In the American Grain is an imaginative probing into American history in order to discover a past that has been misconstrued and an America which has never been recognized. By showing that present tensions between geography and culture, instinct and will, need not be a part of American life, Williams hoped to help heal these conflicts. He contended that America need not be a nation split between the demands of the body and the mind. Moreover, Americans could discover a culture which affirms the relationship between man and his native ground.

⁷William Carlos Williams, In the American Grain (New York: New Directions, 1956), n.p. All future references to In the American Grain will be to this source and will be identified within the text by page numbers in parentheses.

Paterson is Williams' second major attempt to come to terms with his culture. The central theme of Paterson is similar to that of In the American Grain. Both works focus on a poet's quest for renewal, in terms of his need to find a language capable of extracting the life element from the morass under which it has been buried. But in Paterson the emphasis has shifted. Williams no longer deals primarily with the American past; he is now more concerned with the immediacy of the present. The primitive and socially untouched world of early America has given way to industrialization. Doctor Paterson lives in a world where pollution, the din of automation and the anonymity of technology are the norms. In the poem Williams seeks a way of ordering the seemingly chaotic experience of modern existence and contacting the primal reality which he believes is always available to the man of imagination.

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss Williams' two major attempts to come to grips with American culture and to explore the individual's place within this culture. One work emphasizes the American past; the other stresses the present. In the American Grain is not history in any formal sense; rather it is a poetical reconstruction of the past. What is relevant to this study is the style and structure of the book, the poet's aesthetic code and his concept of heroism. Paterson will be examined as the culmination of Williams' views on the character of American life. It is a loosely structured poem which depends for unity on the repetition of certain key symbols. In order to

explicate the theme with which I am basically concerned--the search for language and the relationship between culture and language--it will be necessary to examine Paterson's symbolic pattern.

In his autobiography Williams explained his plan for Paterson in medical jargon: "I took the city Paterson as my 'case' to work up, really to work it up" (A. 392). His design for Paterson and the connection he made between art and medicine help to elucidate his dictum "no ideas but in things."⁸ The physician requires a patient and an intimate knowledge of the patient's body before he can perform successfully. In accordance Williams believed the poet needed to ground his ideas in concrete objects drawn from the world about him. The poet should write of the locale because it is the only world he can know concretely. Williams' decision to write American poetry and poetry in the American idiom was not chauvinistic. It was based on the concept that the poet must write about the things he knows.

Williams frequently indicated that a poem was an action of the imagination. The activated imagination provided the poet with a new and more sensitive understanding of his world. A poem is a record of this understanding. For Williams, if there is to be a poem, there must be an object for the imagination to act upon, an object to color the poem and excite the imagination. The poem is an area of understanding--the place where external objects meet with the poet's imaginative grasp of them. In Williams' world these objects

⁸William Carlos Williams, Paterson (New York: New Directions, 1963). All future references to Paterson will be to this source and will be identified within the text by page numbers in parentheses.

do not exist as symbols of an externally imposed divine order. Each object has its boundaries and its individuality. When the poet discovers this individuality he discovers something of the world about him. Williams maintained that "The locale is the only universal, upon that all art builds" (A. 391). When a poet grasps the individuality of an object or of his community he has the keys to the universal. The locale is the concrete object on which the imagination acts in its quest for illumination.

Williams' idea of the poem as an action of the imagination helps to explain his view of the poetic quest. The action of the poem gives the poet a fresh understanding of both himself and his world. Thus, invention, the discovery of new poetic structures, becomes important. Through new structures the poet can develop and explore the self, which is itself exploring and discovering. Williams' insistence that the poem brings renewal and fresh life explains his quest after "Beautiful thing" or some other female image. "Beautiful thing" is a fertile source of energy--she is the poet's own imagination which he pursues in his attempts to discover himself and make contact with his world. Williams' poetic quest is dominated by the imagination pursuing the imagination, that is, the poet's desire to continually unlock the sources of energy dormant in himself.

Williams' concept of culture is in keeping with his ideas about poetry. In Paterson he says, "The province of the poem is the world" (P. 122). There is no subject matter

which is intrinsically poetic. The term "anti-poetic" has no meaning for Williams; everything intensely perceived has its place in the poem. Similarly, there is nothing of the "ivory tower" in his view of culture:

It is a realization of the qualities of a place in relation to the life which occupies it, embracing everything involved, climate, geographical position, relative size, history, other cultures--as well as the character of its sands, flowers, minerals, and the condition of knowledge within its borders. It is the act of lifting these things into an ordered and utilized whole which is culture. It isn't something left over afterwards. That is the record only. The act is the thing. It can't be escaped or avoided if life is to go on. It is in the fullest sense that which fits. (SE. 157).

Culture, then, according to Williams, is a community's expression of its own uniqueness and innate particularity. He considers the white pine furniture built by the Shakers as a genuine cultural expression. The furniture met a need, told by its design something of the life in the community and was made from local materials. In structure, fabric and use it reflected the blood and bone of the community. On the other hand, Williams is quick to condemn the official cultural preceptors--most scathingly the university. He condemns this institution as being a mere reflector of the culture of its wealthy patrons who imported their tastes from the Old World. American universities were not related to the American scene and discouraged any genuine cultural expression. Williams' disgust with the academics grows from his belief that they did nothing to promote an indigenous American culture.

There is another aspect to Williams' concept of culture. In his thinking culture is process and not product. It is not simply the finished poem which is poetry, nor the finished product which is culturally expressive. Neither poetic nor cultural expression is static. Real poetry and real culture are kinetic, the verb rather than the noun. It is the act of creating the white pine furniture and creating the poem which are cultural and poetic activities. Process and not product registers a community's cultural awareness. Only through active advance can anything be comprehended. The finished product, the white pine furniture or the written word, is a record, an attempt to communicate the essence of what the inventor has experienced.

Williams' experience was American. His first business in life was to possess America in detail--her grass, her people, her things. His art draws its scope from the concrete, the visible and the tangible America. He repudiated the cosmopolitan lifestyle of the expatriate poets and doggedly remained his entire life in the small town of Rutherford, New Jersey. His loyalty was to the American proletariat, to the men and women who live and struggle in cities, rather than to the middleclass who live comfortably in suburbia. Yet, for all the apparently "low brow" and "grass roots" aspects in his selection of material, in the shaping of that material Williams was a highly conscious and meticulous craftsman. In this study I will examine his two major attempts to give shape and form to his perceptions of America and to develop for Americans an aesthetic understanding of

their country.

Chapter II

A STUDY OF IN THE AMERICAN GRAIN

One of the problems in In the American Grain is Williams' concept of time and history. Here the mathematical, spatialized time of the intellect is not of ultimate importance. Calendar and clock time have little place in Williams' world. Instead time strains forward and its living reality must be directly intuited. This reality cannot be measured or grasped by the intellect, but must be apprehended by the creative imagination or the senses. Each moment in time offers fulfillment to the individual with clear perception and poetic imagination. Williams' view of the historical process is in keeping with his view of time. Western society, with its strong imprint of Judeo-Christianity, has viewed history as progressive, one event following another in a linear irreversible direction. Such a perspective disallows the freedom which belongs to Williams' concept of time. In Christian eschatology man gains freedom when he is delivered from time and his deliverance comes only with the End. Williams, who believes that "the beginning is assuredly/ the end" (P. 11), denies the traditional eschatological view of the historical process.

Williams denies that time proceeds in a linear and irreversible direction and returns human experience to a

time that is cyclical and infinite. In Paterson the continuous flow of the Passaic and the year with its cyclical changes embody the cyclical nature of life, and in Book V a kind of eternal spring reveals the power of the imagination to escape even the cycles. Here time as it is normally perceived does not exist. We move from eternal recurrence to eternity. In In the American Grain the break with the linear and irreversible concept of time is less obvious. This work attempts to understand the present condition of America by exploring her past and to transcend the present by returning to an untouched pristine beginning. Williams makes this explicit: "However, hopeless it may seem we have no other choice: we must go back to the beginning; it must all be done over; everything that is must be destroyed" (IAG. 215). In Williams' scheme everything can be destroyed and done over. In a world where time is infinite, the unformed but potentially fertile beginning always exists. Though this pristine moment might be veiled from the eye of the intellectual, it is revealed to the imaginative eye of the poet.

In his autobiography Williams writes that "the greatest boon a poet grants the world is to reveal that secret and sacred presence" (A. 390). Williams' "sacred presence" is the life-force inherent in all things and this reality is open to the poetic imagination. In In the American Grain the poet faces the sordid world of actuality and then perceives a reality which is consonant only with the

imagination. This reality is a place of freedom where the artist can understand what is new and fertile. Since this center is always available, Williams discovers a way of escaping the mathematical time of the intellect and the world of actuality. This world of imaginative perception is timeless, spaceless and inviolate. In Paterson this concept is more sophisticated. The world of the eternal present emerges. Later, Williams' link with the regenerative forces which he believes are always present are his poems--"The Desert Music" and "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower."

Williams' belief in the flux and change of an individual's state of mind and his conviction that the energy of a community must be expressed in new and innovative ways led him to reject his early preference for Keatsian models and the barbaric yawp of Whitman. He sought to revitalize dead language and form and to convey his perceptions of his community through Imagism.

Imagism insisted on a form which presented things directly without intervening and non-contributing words. In poems like "The Red Wheelbarrow" and "Young Sycamore" objects are directly presented. Each object exists with its sharp edges and there is little authorial comment. The red wheelbarrow is presented and the reader is left to draw his own conclusions. Williams' attitude is nominalist--an object is itself. However, in the "thing" the poet may discover an idea. An idea common to both "The Red Wheelbarrow" and "Young Sycamore" is that these objects exist side by side