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“Making a Modern Bolus”: The Non-Poetic Path to the New American Poetry of William Carlos Williams, 1921-1932

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“Making a Modern Bolus”:

The Non-Poetic Path to the New American Poetry of William Carlos Williams,

1921-1932

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Languages and Literature

of Bard College

by

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To Jenny Gbetti and Carey Mann for ignoring my self-deprecatory lapses and being good and constant people; to Matt Mutter for his patience, guidance and friendship; to my parents for their understanding; to JodiAnn Stevenson for forcing poetry on an unwilling, arrogant bastard; to the librarians and staff of the Stevenson Library at Bard College because they need more credit; and, finally, to the financial institutions to whom I shall forever be indebted

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The greatest difficulty is to state the difficulty, to state the problem in terms which can be investigated. Often, if we knew it, there is none other. But all through the modern depression of understanding, with its attendant schisms between men and men, runs this primal fault—and the value of the poet. It is to state—in the simplest possible, that is the most profound, terms, making us all brothers in the naturalness of our defects.

-William Carlos Williams, *The Embodiment of Knowledge* 49

Introduction

Looking back upon the following work once it has been effectively completed reaffirms my experiences while researching the poetics of William Carlos Williams. From the beginning, I focused not on the Rutherford poet's sixty-odd years of creative output but on the prose he wrote between 1919 and 1933. In fact, it began with a wider scope than even that.

Naively, the scribblings and odd thoughts while formulating, condensing, and eventually settling on a topic, were initially concerned with the same explorations in prosodic experimentations on the way to a concretized poetic. The difference lay in a grander schema, covering the American tradition of three of the country's preeminent poets: Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, and Allen Ginsberg. These three writers, each known popularly for their poetry, wrote extensively in prose. Whitman has his *Democratic Vistas*, Williams his *In the American Grain*, and Ginsberg his countless essays written as a public intellectual during the war-torn 1950s and 60s. It quickly became apparent that although the triad of writers is rich for inspection and comparison, ambitiousness must be checked for the sake of thoroughness.

Accepting practical limitations and the need to pick one of the three writers, it was not difficult to settle on Williams. For one, he is taught and mentioned less in school than either of his fellow poets of the New York metropolitan area. Chalk it up to either contrarianism or attraction to the unknown, the choice of Williams was made quickly and without looking back.¹

Familiarity with Williams' poetry was not my primary consideration, though it inevitably and necessarily informed key aspects of his poetics. My research veered away from the books of 'traditional' poetry as soon as the decade-long drought became apparent. As will be mentioned in passing throughout the essay-proper, from *Spring and All* onward, Williams wrote no books of poetry for over a decade. This period became an obsession as I began compiling the texts to be explored. As such, the major texts covered herein are entirely of this period: *Spring and All*, *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, *In the American Grain*, and essays from this period. Many of Williams' non-creative works from this period and later on were incredibly important to my understanding of his books generally.² These three key books, however, make up a pivotal period in Williams' career. During this time, he started the long process of understanding the elements of poetry, and began to work his way toward the ideal poetic alluded to from the beginning of his efforts.

With this focus in mind, with the trio of books at the center of my desired concerns, a three-part structure for this essay materialized in more or less its current form. First, Williams' conception of the poetic process must be clearly delineated. Rather than

¹ This excludes the brief coda on Whitman with which the essay begins.

² His letters and his two autobiographies—one traditional and one cataloguing and explaining his books—are excellent artifacts of an artist reflecting upon his life and work

a systemization of his poetic, I take the tack of an explanation. Feeling that his poetic is too complex to be a secondary consideration during the analysis of his work, while, at the same time, believing that clarity requires a taxonomical look at the basic principles of his poetics, the first chapter does share characteristics with a systemization. Nevertheless, I make no claims to mastery of his multiform poetic system. As will be shown, such a claim would be in direct contradiction to Williams' basic beliefs regarding knowledge, education, and the role of academia. The chapter, therefore, is broken down into three parts, dealing, in turn, with the imagination, knowledge, and the synthesis of the two by the poet. As a whole, the chapter points toward what Williams would consider the methodology of an ideal poet.

The second chapter looks outward from Williams' poetry onto four other writers: T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and William Shakespeare. The three modernists and Williams' contemporaries, and the unequivocal bard offer the spectrum of Williams' taste. Shakespeare warranted more than a half-dozen sections of Williams' instructive text, *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, because of many of the traits Williams considers ideal both in his creative output and in his characteristics as an individual. Joyce and Stein, on the other hand, were contemporaries working outside the bound of one of Williams' key concerns: America. Nevertheless, they both garnered Williams' praise based on specific tendencies he valued. In direct opposition to the praise lavished on the other three, Williams was relentlessly critical of Eliot, whom he considered the downfall of American poetry. This digression from Williams' work allows another perspective upon his artistic values, and, I hope, offers a comprehensive range of artistic sensibilities from which to draw. Given the slapdash nature of Williams' literary analysis, this chapter

is an attempt to contextualize his sensibilities despite the deficiencies one might find in his analytical methodology. Whereas the first chapter hews closely to Williams' words, the second chapter takes more liberties that are both firmly enough rooted in his texts, and considerate of the attitude with which he treats approaches his craft. Ultimately, the chapter takes his artistic values and applies them to the world of art. By doing so, a practical application of Williams' theories and preferences is extended to other, equally idiosyncratic artists. The necessity of applying Williams' values to other writers compensates for how often he seems wrapped up in an unrealizable ideal poetry. He often defines various desirable qualities present only in himself. The tenacity of, say, *Spring and All's* grandstanding distances Williams from the reality of art's broad berth. By this, I am alluding to a very real absence in Williams' writings. Nowhere does he call for diversity among writers. The second chapter is an attempt to quash that criticism and show it as something he considers self-evident.

The final chapter explores the internal logic of two of the fundamental texts: *Spring and All* and *In the American Grain*. In a sense, these two texts could give enough material for the entirety of a project, and probably offer sufficient means of exploring similar conceits as I do here. Nevertheless, to be true to Williams' understanding of art, and how one must approach it, required that I follow a less traditional path toward my goal. So, instead of featuring prominently, the dissection of his works independently are handled as a single approach to further understanding Williams' poetics. So, the final chapter deals with the two 'imaginative' works from the decade long period in Williams' career in which he abstained from writing 'traditional poetry. These books were selected for their experimental nature. *Spring and All* combines traditional poetry with lengthy

sections of prose. In comparison, *In the American Grain* is a collection of stylistically disparate narratives concentrating on figures of historical importance. Both works undermine traditional understanding of their mediums and disciplines. As the final chapter, these two works specify the broader interests of the first two chapters, making apparent, finally, Williams' artistic process through example.

With the bulk of this long-form essay behind me, the path I took seems obvious, but it was definitely not as I wrote it. This period of Williams' writing is incredibly frustrating. By his own definition, art should not explain itself, nor should the poet too obviously guide his or her reader to some predetermined answer. Instead, art must be undertaken no differently than any other experience. Likewise, there are no clean answers at the end of an experience, no moral of the story. Art defies summary. From this perspective, the following tripartite analysis of Williams' poetics during his 'drought' period follows the poet's lead. It is merely an attempt to piece together my experience of Williams' poetic philosophy with his own methods in mind at each juncture.

Coda:

Whitman's Legacy; Williams' American Inheritance

To ignore the lineage of American poetics would be irresponsible, and so to look at the path William Carlos Williams followed during his sixty-odd year career, Walt Whitman must be the first stop. The two poets overlapped by nine years, the elder dying in 1892, while the younger was born in 1883. As far as American literary heritage is concerned, none could be more integral than that of Walt Whitman. Many of Williams' earlier poems mimicked the style of *Leaves of Grass*. By 1913, William Carlos Williams had met Ezra Pound and had moved beyond Whitman's poetic diction—free verse—and would soon describe his literary progenitor as a “broom-stroke and failure” (*New World Naked* 108; *Letters* 136). But Whitman's influence upon Williams extends far beyond his preferred poetic diction. His speculative essay, *Democratic Vistas*, expanded upon the exuberant expressions of American values found in his poetry, and laid out the elements necessary to the continuation of American democracy and freedom, in his estimation. He believed that the American experiment would not succeed until it created “its own forms of art, poems, schools, theology, displacing all that [currently] exists” (*Democratic Vistas* 955). Any faults to be found in the ligaments of American culture (and he does outline a score of them), can only be overcome by “Literature” (956). Within this one text are found the entire gamut of influences and innovations; sources of potential failures and triumphs; outlets of the best and worst in his beloved citizens; and most of all, the role of the arts in promoting the ideal characteristics of the nation. Contrary to the glorifications of physical deeds found in his poetry, in *Vistas*, Whitman promotes the achievements of poetry above the culmination of manifest destiny and his prophesied expansion

perpendicularly³ (960). The vision apparent in *Democratic Vistas* exceeds simple classification or summary, but one thing is apparent: Whitman envisioned a totally transformed, or metamorphosed America led, incidentally, by a fresh American breed of poetry constructed by poets in the interval to capture “the interior and real ... of this American continent” (958). Moreover, Whitman’s essay contains almost every strain of poetic (and artistic) philosophy found in the writings of William Carlos Williams over forty years later. These key parallels consist of the necessary break with European literary history and language⁴, the supreme role of the imagination in artistic creation, the integral function one’s life plays in their poetic output (968), the ability for objects to express universal meaning (984), and, among other less striking tropes, the heretofore failure of original, American art and thought (985).

These consistencies of thought, regardless of the slight discrepancies and regularly occurring contradictions, between the two poets represent the progression and evolution of American poetics from the Civil War to the Second World War and beyond. That this process extends beyond the two artists, in both directions, and never quite results in the individual poet’s expected conclusion should reinforce the importance of the legacy. Unlike the expatriated modernism found in, say, Williams’ contemporary, T.S. Eliot, both Whitman and Williams’ art gestated in their particular era of the American condition. As a result, their work, beginning with Whitman, focused on the implications inherent in the young country’s distinct need for a native artistic mode. From this central concern, Whitman imagined a supreme role for the poet in the basic elements

³At one point in *Vistas*, Whitman foresees the day when America will assimilate Mexico and Canada into its body. The nationalistic implications of this section are important critically; however, it does not lie in the scope of this exploration to ‘go there.’

⁴ Both Williams and Whitman call for a formal schism between British and American English.

of the blossoming democracy, ranging from the resurgence of a ‘true’ religion, the physiological makeup of its citizens, the role of politics, and everything in-between. With the interim years, Whitman’s idealistic vision was cooled and reevaluated as the American landscape shifted with the changing consistency of the republic. As such, Williams indulges in no such grandiose imaginings. Instead, he boiled down the essence of the grander vision into something palpable and individually attainable for *an* artist. He proposed no greater set of values for the American populace than a proposed poetic model.⁵ Taking key aspects of Whitman’s variegated proposals, he implanted them within his separate understanding of an artist’s life and artist’s art. Foremost among these extracted ideas was the Whitmanian break with traditional poetic form, handed down from European and more ancient sources of taste and tradition. Williams characterized this break as the beginning of American research “into the nature of the line” (Letters 286-7). While Williams rejected the “barbaric yawp” of Whitman’s *vers libre* (Something Urgent 301), he understood and respected Whitman’s realization of the importance behind breaking with this tyrannical limitation, and, indeed, he referred to Whitman’s experience on a New Jersey coast, which turned him toward free verse, as the most important moment in the history of American poetry (MSS of *Paterson IV* qtd. in *New World Naked* 107). For Whitman, the American poetic form is equated with the success of the American experiment, extending from poetry into other areas where the new country must distinguish itself. Democracy will prevail when it creates “its own forms of art, poems, schools, theology, displacing all that exists” (*Democratic Vistas* 955).

⁵ It will be shown later that Williams did, at times, display some of Whitman’s enthusiasm, namely when he professed the belief that poetry, and only poetry, should guide the zeitgeist. Comparatively though, Williams’ *beliefs* are more grounded and, perhaps, more realistic than those of Whitman when it comes to the potential greater role of poetry in the world.

Free verse is best explained by Whitman in the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. He describes American English as “brawny enough and limber” (25) implying that it can adapt for greater expressive latitude than English-proper.⁶ Additionally, “it is the dialect of common sense.” By this, Whitman promotes a linguistic base founded upon the use of words for inherent expressions of the human condition. Rather than European abstractions (a concept he touches upon in *Vistas*), the American idiom is grounded in the objective meanings of things rooted in reality, in that what is written is done so that every citizen can understand, and thereby allowing a wider audience for the work. Condensing this valuation, Williams’ poetry (and other writing) is rooted in the same tradition, both linguistically—spoken American English—and the mode of expression—a reliance on the language’s deep-seated associations and its adaptability of meanings. The two writers, however, do not align on every point. One of Williams’ biographers notes that as early as 1913, Williams had abandoned the pure *vers libre* of Whitman because it lacked the scientific certainty⁷ he desired (*New World Naked* 108). From that year onward, Williams fixed his attention on the metrical foot, either rooted in measured time, or a physical, i.e. syllabic, constitution. His own experiments with the formal linguistic aspects of language varied with time, but for most of his career, his verse attained toward some sort of meter. So, the two writers differed on the rhythmic foundation of the written line, but idiomatically they valued language *as spoken*. Whitman envisioned the formal basis of *Leaves of Grass* as carrying on the construction found in the King James Bible. Underlying the wrapping lines of seemingly endless

⁶H.L. Mencken reaffirms this view in the introductory chapter of his exploratory treatise *The American Language*, a book which Williams’ wrote about on occasion.

⁷ All aspects of Williams’ poetics will be explained further in the bulk of this work. For the moment, it is enough to touch upon the relationship between Williams and Whitman as a common tendency for, and certain disparate opinions on larger concepts.

phrases patched together haphazardly (but beautifully), no metrical pattern or theory can be found. Tonally, Whitman remains very consistent, but the actual linguistic underpinnings remain distinctly unscientific and informal. *Leaves of Grass*, if flipped open to a random page, reveals a clumpy string of lines, syllabically chaotic and metrically void; the verse of Whitman attempts an aural reconciliation between the sound of American speech and the artistic formal language of ancient texts. He mixes slang with winding, chant-like lines, where breath must be gathered quickly but consistently. As alluded to earlier, Williams could not abide by this form, and so he broke with Whitman's free verse, keeping, however, the primary element: the American language as spoken, its rhythms and its adaptability.

Whitman's objection to formal poetic diction can also be seen as a result of distaste for the linguistic homeland: Britain. Admittedly, both poets express some pretty harsh criticism toward Britain and, more generally, Europe. Their institutions of politics and education tend toward "inertness and fossilism" (*Democratic Vistas* 974). Unlike the opinion Williams eventually formulates about Europe and its art, however, Whitman cherishes the feats of the past and hopes that America and its new way will continue the tradition of other creative nations and their literary output. In fact, so eager is he to do so, he hopes the future "orbic bards" of American art will "dominate, even destroy" the European legacy (998). Short of iconoclasm, Whitman was more concerned with the installation of an American culture than with the destruction of its antecedents. Whitman believed that the success of the American experiment requires an original, American culture to direct the country's path ahead, and to ensure the eventual artistic-historical record that would allow America to rival the immortal art of Greece and Judah (957),

whose entire cultures are known only through that which has been recorded by the written word. The greatness of those cultures can be surpassed, but only if America can turn around the stagnant state of its arts, Whitman would claim.

As of the time Whitman wrote *Vistas*, he did not view the past or present of American creative output very favorably. The primary flaw Whitman points out is the potential fracturing of the American cultural identity (959). He mentions the “conflicting and irreconcilable interiors” possible in the future should his vision not come to pass. This “common skeleton” captures his ideal America that enjoys both the exclusive and separating power of Individualism, and the unifying force of this shared cultural identity. He sought to bring together the rugged individualists based on this shared characteristic. This contradiction in the identity of Americans can either promote the country and its citizens to the ideal state Whitman promotes, if, and only if the country does not suffer another internecine conflict like the Civil War. Even an unarmed rebellion without a formal declaration by any subculture threatens to undo Whitman’s vision for the country. Foretelling the philosophy of those who will come after him, Whitman “demand[s] of this programme or theory a scope generous enough to include the widest human area” (986). He is only laying the groundwork for others to follow and perhaps formalize, but he knows enough that it must be inclusive of disparate individuals.

He explains the contradiction between inclusiveness and individuality by saying that the latter will, when perfected, create men capable of becoming “a law, and series of laws, unto himself, surrounding and providing for, not only his own personal control, but all his relations to other individuals, and to the State” (966). Whitman’s proposed unification of one and many does not extend far beyond this statement. He gives some of

the characteristics of these individuals, but does not directly address the constitution of their supposed philosophy or laws. Basically, he believes that Americans must understand the shared experience of being American, and rise to the occasion of their mutual existence. Whitman chides his contemporaries for producing inferior, derivative drivel, lacking innovation, instead of beginning to create American art that would follow the unification understanding. Art seems, to Whitman, to lack the innovative spirit that pervades every other American endeavor. Referring specifically to 'romantic' literature, Whitman says that it "does not...substantially advance" in comparison to American science and journals (999). As every other discipline reinvents itself, literature relies too heavily on the conventions and aesthetics of earlier, foreign sources. Whitman compares the tedious tendencies of contemporary love stories to "the same endless thread of tangled and superlative love-story, inherited, apparently from the Amadis and Palmerins of the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries over there in Europe" (999). He sees no end of possible inspirations for art among the exploits of Americans during this time, and yet the arts lag behind, focusing on "dandies and ennuyes" and "dapper little gentlemen from abroad" instead of the pioneers, inventors, and average and yet outstanding citizens. It will be shown that Williams agrees with Whitman about the state of their respective literatures, but Williams does not extend the philosophy beyond his own process for selecting favorite authors and his own subject matter. He denounces and praises his fellow artists, but does not extend the criticism to the average citizen, since to do so would devalue them. Whitman has no qualms extending the criticism to the masses since they should be driving the artists to create according to a higher standard.

And so the final treatment by Whitman remains accordingly situated. *Vistas* concentrates upon the question of artistic subject matter, from which experiences the subject should be drawn, and, ultimately, the role of poetry and art in the artist's own life. In the coming chapter, these three topics will be explicated upon fervently in relation to Williams' own poetic theories. As such, Whitman's views are even more important to document clearly and separately.

Grandiose theories aside for a moment, from what does Whitman draw when writing his poems? Generally, the title of his most famous long poem gives the best point of entry for analysis: "Song of Myself." The reflexive nature of the pronoun keeps the title from sounding entirely egomaniacal, and with the preposition 'of', it further clarifies the poem. Whitman writes of that which he is constituted, the personal experiences, as when he recounts, in the 23rd canto of the poem, his experience on the beach. With the waves lashing at the coast, he proclaims "I am integral with you, I too am of one phase and of all phases" (208). This is an experience he shares with no other soul, except through the act of writing poetry. From it, he received and formulated an impression of the universe and his place within it. An external interaction evokes an internal realization.

This is the first source of topics for his poetry. In *Vistas*, he explains this when he says, "even for the treatment of the universal, in politics, metaphysics, or anything, sooner or later we come down to one single, solitary soul" (984). The poet is the sieve through which any discipline formulates, and any experience comes to obtain importance. Likewise, Whitman extrapolates this formulation to the poetic object. The beach is inherently valuable and rich with poetic potential. It represents both the physical phenomenon—the beach—and something more universal. He goes on to explain in

Vistas, “The quality of BEING, in the object’s self, according to its own central idea and purpose, and of growing therefrom and thereto...is the lesson of Nature.” By this, he means that objectively, a natural object contains qualities that can be extended beyond itself and applied generally. The universal thought proceeds from the individual object. It is the quality of existing things to contain more general combinations of “idea and purpose.” And so the two realms of subject matter—the object and the self—coalesce when considering the role of the poet’s life in relation to his or her art. One’s experiences intrinsically guide and form the mind. The web of context is multifaceted and unknowable except as a pervasive force in the life of an individual. To write requires that one lives, either imaginatively or in the world of the real. Whitman would elect the latter as the ideal means of molding one’s poetic sensibilities and collecting the materials with which to write. He writes, “We must not say one word against real materials; but the wise know that they do not become real until touched by emotions, the mind” (994). The individual unpacks an experience or object of the deeper, more real essence: the poetic thought. As shall be explored in depth regarding Williams, Whitman foreshadows Williams’ preferred phrase when, at one point, he calls poetry, “imaginative literature”, in which “something equivalent to creation⁸ is...imperatively demanded” (959). Where experience and individuality interact, imagination arises as the guiding poetic force on an individual level. *Democratic Vistas* itself begins with a warning about its own contradictions, but Whitman sidesteps this by saying of contradictions, “I feel the parts harmoniously blended in my own realization and convictions, and present them to be read only in such oneness, each page and each claim and assertion modified and temper’d by

⁸ Keep the phrase “equivalent to creation” in mind. Williams writes extensively on the ‘realness’ of poetic creations, of which he deems only the purest manifestation *ideal*.

the others” (954). Whitman’s ideas include a broad range of possible contradictions, but each must be treated carefully and individually, because the conflicting points are no less valid in relation to the others. It requires a hyperlogical—i.e. an intuitive common sense—form of appraisal. Whitman’s process is one of revelation, from an object or experience outward through the personal mind of the poet to create an external representation: the poem.

And it is precisely the poem that is at the heart of the following exploration of William Carlos Williams; however, poetry shall be considered from the body of his *non-poetic works*. Known almost entirely for his poems, Williams wrote an equal quantity of prose, which, it will be shown, he used as a vehicle to propel his explorations into poetry. These prose works can be designated blandly as either ‘creative’ or ‘non-creative.’ The former category includes hybridized books of prose and poetry, fictitiously-elaborated nonfiction, and ‘purer’ fiction. The latter category contains works of conventional non-fiction, including essays, autobiography, correspondence, and interview-esque pieces. Through the analysis of these non-poetical works, Williams’ poetic theories gestated and evolved over his half-century long career. Often, these works did not themselves ‘focus’ on questions of obvious poetic importance, yet it will be shown that they were integral in the formulation of his final, quasi-epical poem, *Paterson*. Between the chapters concerning the ‘creative’ and ‘non-creative’ works, I shall introduce an interlude dealing with Williams’ writings on other artists, American and foreign, his contemporaries and his literary predecessors. The decision to follow this variegated path was no doubt informed by Whitman’s methodology in the creation of *Democratic Vistas*. So many of Williams’ concerns depend upon the same questions Whitman tried to answer in that long

essay, and so its meandering means of explication both suits the needs of understanding Williams in the larger context of American writers and mirrors, for the most part, Williams' own means of exploring the possibilities of his own thoughts on a new, American poetic mode.

Chapter 1: Imagination, Experience, and the Creation of a Poem

I: The Materials of Poetry, or, Imagination's Clay

Understanding the poetic process as Williams conceived of it, it must be broken down into discrete pieces. Before writing a poem, and, indeed, before becoming a poet, an individual lives their life. From this perspective, the individual poet relies entirely on the totality of their experiences, which will, in time, become the material for their poetry. This aligns closely with most modern explanations of how poetry and art come into being. Very few alternatives exist for the source of poetry. Yet Williams' understanding of experience and its product, knowledge, is entirely his own. Not only does Williams emphasize the role of experience in the eventual output of poets, the knowledge gained as a result of experiences stands out as a complex epistemological system at the root of his poetics. Generally speaking, Williams believed that all accrued knowledge is equal. Whether acquired through formal education or as a byproduct of quotidian life as a common citizen, no one type of knowledge should be valued over another. Moreover, any art that does treat a certain mode of knowledge as privileged does a disservice to the fabric of artistic creation.

A poet, therefore, should not be limited by any one source of knowledge. A brief perusal of Williams' writing will show the value he placed on non-academic sources for subject matter. Literary and artistic references are second-rate methods of conveying a poetic effect. There are times when erudition and reference are useful, but compared to the heights achievable through down-to-earth objects and subjects, these sources fall short. Knowledge from life is superior to knowledge of life. Williams lays this theory of art and knowledge out in his book of fragmented essays, *The Embodiment of Knowledge*.

The book contains 51 fragmented ‘essays’⁹, ranging in topic from Goethe to the sham of science and philosophy. *The Embodiment of Knowledge* is a highly inaccessible, nebulous text that must be crucial to any exploration into Williams’ understanding of art and knowledge. Within it, prose is discussed at length, as well as modes of understanding. Throughout, Williams repeats and rephrases himself, attempting to convey his own knowledge in the way that he proposes is the right one. A few of its many contentions are as follow: first, science and philosophy are shams because of the misunderstanding of those in the fields about how knowledge operates. Second, knowledge is not something to be acquired, and there is no ‘end’ to the learning process. Third, scholars limit explorations in their fields by specialization and exclusion; their knowledge is not part of a hierarchy, and is definitely not in a privileged position. And finally, the transmission of knowledge is successful when it proposes a certain experience, condition, etc. to the public who are then to judge whether it is a worthy (or, true) one; the ideal form, at least for writing, is poetry, because it attempts to do so in the shortest and fastest way possible.

Of those topics, the non-hierarchical nature of knowledge pervades a good many of the pieces. It is instructive while looking at *Spring and All*, to consider the following excerpt as foundational to Williams’ philosophy. He writes:

We have to acknowledge first besides degrees and conditions of scholarship, that there is a division between those who know (some certain thing) and those who do not know it. We have to acknowledge then, that

⁹ This term must be taken with some liberty. *The Embodiment of Knowledge* was published posthumously. It was attached to a note by Williams that called for it to be published ‘as is’ if it was deemed interesting enough. See the Introduction to the book written by Ron Loewinsohn for a complete analysis of the book’s history.

the scholar, not being ignorant, has not the knowledge which the ignorant man possesses. All that the wise man knows is colored by his wisdom. And all that the ignorant man knows is colored by his ignorance. But both are part of the whole. (44)

This is one of the primary human conflicts, as Williams sees it. He does not value any type of knowledge over any other, but instead appreciates the thoughtful presentation of knowledge, through whatever art form or other method that strikes the knower. No difference exists between the educated and the uneducated, except for the power structure that has been long instituted. He disparages clannish specialists for hoarding scientific data, which, when released, it is not in a simplified form the public can understand. They prefer to keep their knowledge exclusive. Williams does not want to stop science from progressing, rather he hopes to put the entire process of dealing with knowledge on a more level plane, accessible to the public in a condensed form to allow critique *on a general level*. Specialists of knowledge in any and every discipline could and should benefit from “all that the ignorant man knows.” Similarly, artists need not kowtow to the critics and tastemakers of artistic institutions. From whatever source, innovation, or the ability to imagine the *new*, brings vitality into the arts. As will be explored more thoroughly in the chapters that follow, Williams believed that tradition leads to institutionalized stagnation, and this, he hoped, could be undermined during the search for a new American poetics.

Before the imagination of the poet interacts with the poetic subject matter to enact the poem, the materials must either be experienced or engaged with through thought. In short, for Williams, poetry does not emerge *ex nihilo*. If one considers the process of writing poetry, it is apparent that whatever ends up being written, it must originate, in

some way, through experiences. This occurs either externally, in the daily doings, or internally, in the poet's mind. The process was more or less literal in Williams' conception. He valued firsthand action and experience over secondhand knowledge, which he would attribute to academically-driven education where learning results from books and lectures. The comparison of these two modes of acquiring experience or the materials of poetic creation appears throughout Williams' work. In *The Great American Novel*, he refers to the American settlers as "the real empire builders" (88). Their acts culminate in a real product, namely the subjugation of the inhospitable wilderness. This is in direct opposition to pioneers' contemporaries, the wealthy landowners and 'statesmen.' These inactive counterparts achieved nothing concrete. They engaged in the artificial systems of society and maintained them, rather than engaging with the natural world built through acts and deeds.

Action and creation support Williams' entire poetic theory. To write poetry, one must first experience the world of natural objects, and then create something—as opposed to reading poetry and writing derivatively. Looking at Williams' life as a doctor, action underlies his daily (and nightly) profession. Awoken in the middle of a rainy night, Dr. Williams would tend to the sick and dying. "Tending to" his patients involved the usual medical dealings, diagnosing the ailment and deciding upon the proper course of treatment. The process followed by Williams the doctor directly parallels and allows for Williams the poet. However, the processes alone would not have molded Williams' poetics; it allowed him the direct experiences with the whole range of (American, that is, local) humanity only afforded to public servants. From the experiences in households of various constitutions—rich and poor, American-bred and immigrant—Williams gained

firsthand knowledge of the variegated human condition. From these and his own personal, non-professional experiences, Williams the poet broadened his wealth of materials, or poetic subject matter, and continued to engage in the pioneer, action-based existence that would eventually inform the actual creation of poetic works.

Williams does not consider any type of firsthand knowledge superior to any other. When he speaks of the feats of advancement performed by the pioneers, he does not mean that they are better or more important than those performed by a doctor or a supermarket checkout attendant. “Every step once taken in the first advance of the human race, from the amoeba to the highest type of intelligence, has been duplicated, every step exactly paralleling the one that preceded in the dead ages gone by” (*Spring and All* 9). Not only are all actions equivalent and rooted in the past, they are equally valuable to the progression of human knowledge since there is no beginning or, for that matter, an end. Every action, except those aforementioned systemic ‘jobs’, is a step on an endless journey. Therefore, all experience and all action contribute the same value of a ‘step’, no more and no less than any other. All experience is an action, since some act, be it sitting on a bench and observing, or picking up the axe to fell a tree, precedes the acquired experience, or step. As such, the only ones of heightened importance are those that are done uniquely, with what will eventually be described as ‘imaginative.’ Value does not come into the picture when considering actions, except artistically.

Valuing art, and specifically poetry, was Williams’ strongest stance on anything. He believed that art is the embodiment of “human need” (*Essays* 178). This is the reason poets should write. By human need, Williams meant that the ideal form of poetry that fulfills some innate requirement of the human soul. The details of that need may change

with the times based on that era's needs, as the knowledge and poetry evolve with each successive generation (*Spring and All* 53). Williams here promotes a very complex understanding of knowledge and its evolution. Poetry both guides and follows successive zeitgeists. There is a reciprocal relationship between the poet and his or her society's knowledge. Beyond the mere accumulation of facts, experiences, and so on, an artist is a "creator of knowledge." Through the act of writing, a poet does not transcribe and educate based on his or her individual knowledge. Instead, the poem is a creation equivalent to natural phenomena (53). It is an autonomous object capable of being experienced and endowing knowledge on par with any physical experience. The poet creates new knowledge from his or her own experiences and knowledge, which through the imaginative act¹⁰, becomes empowered with the vitality and richness of any other source.

To take another approach toward Williams' understanding of knowledge, some examples of his ideal forms of it might be useful. His hero, he states in *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, is Daniel Boone, because one must walk alone (33). Boone, according to Williams' account from *In the American Grain*, went off into the wilderness alone and survived, doing many deeds along the way. Williams values both the actions Boone managed to do and the character necessary to be alone for so long. "A piece of experience—of any kind—... is meat that enriches the whole body" (35). He claims that "there is nothing else for a man in the face of the world" except to break off from fellow humanity to find clarity and "direct vision" for oneself (34). This is Williams' idea of

¹⁰ The imaginative act is vital to Williams' creative process. It is, without doubt, the single most important conceit throughout his long career trying to understand how art is created. The next section focuses entirely on this idea.

knowledge, “no teaching, no friend, no wisdom” (33). Personal experience, without discussion or tutelage, is the purest means of attaining knowledge. He adds that “almost everything is worthless,” by which he refers to some endpoint of this knowledge. There is no final knowledge, and therefore any valuation is meaningless. All is merely a step, equal to all others.

In a sense, Williams refutes hierarchies. In discussing literary criticism, he denounces a particular breed of critic, those who say, “Well you do not know your subject. What is that?” (35). Williams claims that this question shows a distinct lack of knowledge, since the critic obviously claims to be more learned, but does not know Williams’ self. The critic has a certain strain of knowledge—what Williams would call ‘academic’—but he does not believe this to be supreme. He goes on:

Know me. You can't? Then your knowledge is useless. When you, the acknowledged learned, have acquired a comprehension of me, revering me, giving yourself to the abandonment of all else (as you ask me to give myself to the acquirement of learning—emulate your own instructions to me in acquiring what you off)—then, according to your own rules, begin to discuss. Your knowledge is one of the provinces I allocate to you to work in. Bring what you have prepared and make it ready so that it may be handy when I need it. That's your business. Mine is to be perfect. (35)

This is undoubtedly non-hierarchical thinking. He admits the usefulness of the gathering academicians, but only as a tool for his own (and all artists’) use. However, he is not suggesting that any critic abnegate himself so totally. The relationship between artist and critic should be reevaluated. How anyone, average reader or learned scholar, considers art should be reconsidered. In *Spring and All*, Williams gives a better method for criticism:

pieces of art can only have their “meaning and worth...studied and understood [by]...that which begot them” which Williams says is the imagination (53). Rather than criticizing a piece of art from the point of view of a scholar—that is, from the historical and literary legacy taught throughout the schools—a critic should engage the work as a creation of the mind. This does not lend itself to any clear means for the confused scholar, but if Williams’ entire poetic conception is considered, the method becomes clear. A critic, whose job it is to “gaug[e] the weight, force, significance, penetration of a work” (*Embodiment of Knowledge* 35), should experience the work like any other experience: subjectively (and perhaps alone, at least at first). Two subjective experiences are never alike. As previously with the origin of poetic inspiration and subject matter, one must act in order to experience something. So too must a critic act, and allow the poem to be pondered upon, or experienced, without undue antecedents muddying the involvement.

Likewise, the pure scholar outside the realm of criticism must come to terms with the broad taxonomy of knowledge. Equivalency of types of knowledge places the ‘self-sufficient’ plebe at the same level as the learned scholar (*Embodiment of Knowledge* 44). Williams reasons this from the fact that no scholarship is complete. “The scholar is but the final piece in a train going beyond sight into tradition. So he must always feel himself incomplete.” Understanding the limitations enforced by mortality, Williams perceives the impossibility of knowing it all. Time and infinitude are equally limiting to those seeking knowledge. On the other hand, an ignorant individual, if self-sufficient, should be seen as more knowledgeable because of a different kind of completeness. A regular citizen might very well live a life without claiming knowledge over any other. By doing so, this “ignorant” citizen reflects the attitude Williams’ attests to the best poets.

While it may sometimes seem that Williams overemphasizes the role poets should hold in society, for all his grandstanding and self-implicated apotheosizing, Williams' ideal poet neither can, nor should lord the position over the rest of the populace. Williams does not believe in the idea that one type of knowledge contains more value than any other. What a poet conveys through the role as a "creator of knowledge" is not the same as a scholar claiming mastery over a subject, personage, or any division of knowledge. The act of knowledge creation and the intended conveyance of this knowledge instead places poetry in the same realm as experience and, therefore, the natural world itself. As a poet, Williams does not claim to know more about whatever it is he writes about. If that were the case, he would get into arguments with green grocers over plums since he once wrote a poem about the fruit. His claim, however, is that poetry offers, "more probably a way to *know* differently" (*Embodiment of Knowledge* 101). A poet recreates some experience or object¹¹, which are efforts "to influence all thought" (75). More specifically, he unpacks this concept by saying that "all that will be attempted will be to show how knowledge may be related to the individual in a new way" (75). This new knowledge that poets are creating is merely a re-explanation, through example, of the way one knows things. Experiences and objects, for Williams, too often go unexamined.

Quite often in his essays, Williams compares poetry's relation to knowledge with the advances in science, claiming that the former should be seen more in the way of the latter (*Embodiment* 74). Science concerns itself with the "increase of knowledge" and any

¹¹ The terms 'experience' and 'object' must be taken loosely when in the context of what a poet draws on for his/her work. It can be anything, down to the smallest detail of an object, or the experience of no particular importance except recursively. The next chapter will deal more with how a poet manages this reliance on the quotidian.

advancements are “accepted or rejected solely upon that score” (74). Poetry, for Williams, must be handled in the same way. Whereas the scientist discovers something new or unravels the mechanisms behind some already present system, the poet must use his or her writing to do the same with knowledge itself. He explains this as an attempt “to show how knowledge may be related to the individual in a new way” (75). As such, through the poet’s own subjective experience, through the creative act, its end goal is to reexamine existing experiences that are potentially related to the reader, and offer an alternative to the likely knowledge gleaned from the experience. Slowly, the poet experiences something. Through that experience, a poem is written in which an alternative or reexamination or a first thorough look is given. Consider a scientist studying a well-known natural process. Imagine that the scientist then uncovers a heretofore hidden series of factors underlying the already *known* process. Through reexamination, the scientist has found new knowledge within older, assumed knowledge. As scientific knowledge progresses, so too does the means of understanding, that is, a progression of knowledge unlocks further methods and tools to explore the natural world. Similarly, the progression of time gives an individual, in this case, a poet, a wealth of past knowledge that inevitably shapes their understanding in ways different than those who discovered the knowledge in the first place. As such, the poet has the potential to experience further than anyone before, in exactly the same way as the advancement in the scientist’s field allows access to new means of seeking. This is the type of knowledge Williams concerns himself with when he discusses knowledge. However, the accumulation of knowledge differs from that of the scientists, but only slightly. The past,

tradition, and habit are, to Williams, the enemies of the American poet for a variety of reasons.

The discrepancy between Williams' poetics and the influence upon it by the past is an important characteristic of his knowledge system. Primarily, Williams believes that the past is an obstruction for the American poet. For him, American experiences must be concentrated upon by American poets. Williams sought a complete break with European literary tradition. To continue the scientist metaphor, Williams' place in poetics mirrors that of the rise of science after the Medieval approach gave way to the scientific method. By this he would argue that just as for centuries science and medicine were based on superstition and traditional oversimplifications of natural processes, so too has literature been ruled by the prevailing tastes and conventions of bygone artists and thinkers. Williams promoted faithfully America's cleavage from its cultural antecedents. This extends to nearly every aspect of society's constitution, from its language to its economic and political institutions. In *The Great American Novel*, a character cries out, "O America! Turn your head a little to the left please" (38), because its eyes focus too often on the historical precedents descending from Europe. He describes the modern age with its modern gadgets, cars, etc., against the dignified and highfalutin "muddle" in the German poem he has just finished reading, in which there are "such a lot of things mixed together under one title" (38). This reader is referring to the philosophically dense writings of, say, a Goethe, which dealt less with objects and more with abstractions. Traditionally, philosophy has entered poetry to a greater or lesser degree based on the era and country, but Williams does not see its role in American poetics. In fact, Williams mocks high-philosophical language in *Spring and All* when he claims, "I speak for the

integrity of the soul and the greatness of life's inanity; the formality of its boredom; the orthodoxy of its stupidity" (5). These obvious inversions point out the flimsiness of such abstraction. Such words convey nothing, add nothing to poetry that cannot be done more simply and directly. Nevertheless, Williams believed that such poets as T.S. Eliot refused to take their eyes off the traditional. The poetry reader above even asks Americans nicely, saying 'please,' to look to the side long enough to consider something new, something homegrown, something American.

One reason Williams so strongly seeks this break with tradition is what he calls "my sense of inclusiveness without redundancy" (*Spring and All* 42). The past and present are brimming with artists, and success requires adherence to the prevailing, traditional tastes. In art, so much has been already explored, so many experiences evaluated and shared; redundancy seems inevitable to Williams. Otherwise, one is forced into the 'inclusiveness' of following historically prominent art. The artistic forms that worked for a poet in the sixteenth century may not—and Williams would argue, cannot—be sufficient for a poet in the twentieth or fiftieth centuries. The sonnet, for example, was adequate for sixteenth-century poets, but it cannot suffice for poets of an age filled with automobiles, television, and industrialized wars. Just as he questions the privilege granted to artistic forms and tastes, Williams also extends this critical eye to the entirety of American culture. Literary conventions are no different. America has two main characteristics, according to Williams: potential and nothing to show for it. "American is a mass of pulp, a jelly, a sensitive plate ready to take whatever pint you want to put on it," the speaker in *The Great American Novel* says before lamenting over the country's distinct wasted potential. "We have no art, no manners, no intellect—we have nothing.

We water at the eyes at our own stupidity” (35). There is hope, but so far Europe and the entirety of Western literary tradition has maintained its grip on the colonial country.

Foremost, Williams mourns the state of language in America. “We have no word,” says an unknown American voice. Europe has stifled America because its English has historical priority and literary legitimacy. America is “another bastard country in a world of bastards” (37). Everything attains toward the past because the past holds the keys to gaining acceptance and reaffirmation. The critics are trained by a long line of critics *cum* professors whose lineage dates back to European institutions—the institutions upon which American higher education is based. Of course the American language cannot gain ground against institutionalized Europeanism and the taste-making, legitimizing academics of its loins. Williams observed an institution put in place by distinctly unoriginal Americans. The potential he saw for the “jelly”-like country worked against itself since its formulation began with a trans-Atlantic mold.

Europe haunted Williams throughout his career. If a poet is born in America, and a poet’s source material arises from his or her immediate locality, then to distance oneself from direct contact with American life is harmful to their work. Of knowledge in general, he says, “nobody knows anything, in America at any rate [this] has always seemed the take-off for the first serious experience which must be undertaken, and the beginning of that is in the mistaken character of knowledge itself” (*Embodiment of Knowledge* 77). This is Williams’ call for perspective. Acknowledging one’s shortcomings begins the “first serious experience” characterized by self-doubt that, eventually, opens the path to properly understanding knowledge. So, Williams implies that in order to acquire knowledge, one must not begin with the assumption of perspective. To leave America at,

say, the age of eighteen or twenty-five, as many of his contemporaries did, and then write about America in hindsight—or, in their preferred phrase, “to get some perspective”—lacks the experiential basis of Williams’ method. Leaving a place to gain perspective is not inherently harmful to writing; it is only when the experiences are aborted and short-lived that the writing will suffer. Continual experiences or immersion impress the artist with a perspective on knowledge. Anything else lacks what Williams calls placement “on the near side of reality” (132).

This ‘near side’ refers to the beginning of uncertainty in one’s life. At this point, the individual has the opportunity to decide between two expanses: the ‘unknowable,’ and the ‘immediate,’ or ‘near side.’ The former is the domain of “the source of religion; the preconscious, the savage, the animal” (133). When uncertainty appears in consideration of a force of nature or an intellectual point of interest, the unknowable realm of knowledge is mired in abstractions and fantasy. The sun becomes a deity; sex becomes a communion with God. Williams believes that uncertainty leads one to look off into the horizon for answers, forgoing immediate sources of understanding. It is the difference between a prophet and an evolutionary biologist. One elaborates on myth, legend, and hearsay, while the other dissects, observes, and draws conclusions based on evidence. “What we elaborate is worthless” and “a pretension” (132). An idea, or the font of greater knowledge, must place itself firmly in immediate reality. To do otherwise is to paint in broad strokes, resulting in a thinker “hold himself superior to all thought [in] which every practice is baseless” (133). Knowledge, then, must be rooted in the local and immediate soil of its considerations.

The rampant Europeanism of Williams’ contemporaries is denounced by his

understanding of knowledge. Europe, Williams believed, gained knowledge primarily through the past, through their rich cultural heritage. The ‘masters’ of each medium dangle perilously over the heads of each new artist in turn. By forgoing new experiences in lieu of the second-hand experiences of the past masters in books and taught in schools, that critical moment of indecision predominantly leads one toward the unknowable elaborations and, finally, abstractions.

One way Williams explains the European legacy is by examining the state of the English language. When exploring the possible uses of words, Williams says, “I touch words and they baffle me. I turn them over in my mind and look at them but they mean little that is clean” (*The Great American Novel* 35). In this sense, cleanliness equals directness of meaning. A word like ‘rose’ is not free of connotation. It immediately evokes thoughts of love, or associations with the portrayal of love in art, caked onto the simple four letters by endless centuries of literary convention. Objects and their connected words have been through the long process of layering from the longer line of writers and critics whose usages have permeated and numbed the ideally independent system of communication. Since this buildup has not proceeded without the implications of Europe’s own distancing itself from immediate experience, the associations pile on. Phrases enter and exit cliché in an ebb and flow of tedious reference. Eventually, language has entered the derivative jungle of abstraction and reference, where the “night mind” dwells. The ‘night mind’ is the opposite of the ‘near side’ rooted in immediate reality.

To cure language of this deep-seated illness, Williams touts the benefits of the imagination, of the pioneer spirit, of the Fordian capability for innovation. Only in a new

American paradigm can language—the basis of all poetry—be cleansed and reborn, in a new and exciting mode of epistemologically immediate poetics.

II: Imagination, the Filter and Force of Poetic Output

To break through all the misconceptions and inherited limitations of the materials available to modern American poets, Williams draws renewed vigor from the proven force of American ingenuity. His ideal character, as has been shown, is the individual acting in some semblance of solitude; either a Daniel Boone, or a Henry Ford-like figure. Similarly, these two figures created their vision without committee to interfere, and without the baggage of the past to limit their vision. Each branched out and carried their achievement into fruition. Popular American culture has always promoted the Horatio Alger-like character, capable, by sheer force of will, to go from nothing to everything. In one sense, Williams' proposed poetics relies very much on the same cultural value and the resulting process. The same dedication and effort is required of the poet as with the bootstrap-pulling entrepreneur. Both types are enabled by the country's nominally democratic 'equality.' The difference between an economic success and a poetic success is the difference between an effort of will and the force of the imagination. An entrepreneur must form his vision out of the circumstances of an economic reality, while the poet must use the imagination to mold and bake his or her experiences into artistic products.

At its root, Williams' definition of 'imagination' is multifaceted, yet based on a few simple facets. On the one hand, imagination is an innate aspect of an individual's mind. In this sense, Williams describes a process by which someone "give[s] value to life

[by] recogniz[ing] it with the imagination” (*Spring and All* 41). He refers to this aspect as “practical,” by which he means that it is a basic process of art and life, and it is to be used for every engagement with life. This is one of the everyday functions of the imagination. The mind filters experiences through the imagination to make a value judgment about an experience. If something sets off one’s imagination, then it is valuable. Since the poet is meant to be fundamentally imaginative, its preferred status makes sense. The force of the imagination underlies all understanding, and gives meaning to all experiences. Something cannot simply be dissected scientifically and understood by its parts and systems alone. No, experiences and their importance are not simply causal. They must be considered and reused imaginatively so that their many aspects can be made part of and compared with the universal. The inherent value of an experience becomes evident only after the individual mind imaginatively engages with it. A distinction must be made between this conception of imagination and the term as it is understood popularly.

For Williams, the imagination is not merely the mental capacity to invent or elaborate. Usually, imagination is seen as nothing more than extended daydreaming, or, abstractly, as part of the creative process. According to Williams, imagination is an “energizing” force (70). For instance, the imaginative quality extends to society more generally, such as the revolution-era Bolshevik peasants in Russia. He ties these common “primitives” to an existence rooted in an immediacy of experience “dynamized into reality” (68). The same goes for the American populace. Both groups share the vital qualities of “freedom of movement and newness” (68). In a sense, these two groups are ideal because, regardless of their current state—each of which draws criticism from Williams regularly, despite this idealization—their natures share similar strains of these

two characteristics. Both are potentially separate from the usual state of affairs found in the prevailing Western culture. They are, in many ways, pioneers of new social arrangements. Their “freedom of movement” is a potential extending into the future because they have broken off from the society norm. From there, somehow they might achieve ‘newness.’ The end product, Williams thinks, is the potential “to enter a new world” (68). Extending these more general characteristics to the specialized considerations of artists, the concept of a “new world” is central to Williams’ understanding of the relationship between the creative act and the process of the imagination.

To reiterate, the imagination is not merely the ability to imagine something in one’s mind. It is an innate force of the individual’s will.¹² Generally, artists have much to gain through the imaginative force, since it is the basis for artistic creation. More generally, the imaginative force is separate from the artist’s consciousness. The poet’s willingness to engage experience imaginatively demonstrates and enacts his or her will. The imagination is separate from the poet’s consciousness, but remains a part of the poet’s mind. Clashing with the ever-active forces of “ignorance and stupidity,” imagination “stands still with time and forces change about itself” (68). This calls for engagement with the world. Williams does not mean to demean when he says “ignorance and stupidity;” instead, he considers the terms in their broadest and simplest sense.

¹² Williams uses the term ‘will’ without explaining his usage. It seems to mean, on the one hand, the individual drive for enacting a personal vision, as a poet does when writing. On the other, the individual will seems to relate to a willingness to engage with the world imaginatively. In both senses, it is a force of action, differing only in the placement of the imagination in relation. The confusion here is undoubtedly a result of the imagination’s inherency. It does not seem to be something that can be controlled. Instead, an artist *allows* the imagination to act upon experience while creating art. The poet, for instance, does not actively guide his or her writing. He or she writes, and the imagination steers the poet into creating the poetic result. With this understanding of the imaginative force, the association of ‘will’ with ‘willingness’ makes more sense.

'Ignorance' invokes the shared root with 'ignore,' or purposeful evasion. Likewise, the Latin root of 'stupid' refers to numbness, or the inability to engage through some lacking sensory faculty. If the answer to these insufficiencies is imagination, then it must offer a means to engage with the world. Through art and the imaginative sieve of the artist's mind, the immediate, real experience can be "recognized in a pure state" (70). Williams calls this process, "the jump between fact and the imaginative reality" (70). Artists and, more specifically, poets bridge the gap between the unanalyzed aspects of daily experience and the force of change that results from forging new connections and understandings. The imagination is not added to reality, prettying it up with embellishments and highlights. It is the force with which we see reality itself. Something new is created by analyzing and writing of the world. Knowledge accrued through experience becomes a reality newly created through the imagination.

In *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, when Williams writes that the poet creates new knowledge equal to any other source, the imagination was the means of achieving this goal. But he also makes clear the limitations of the human spirit. Like the Roman feasts "with [their] reliance upon regurgitation to prolong" the festivities, consuming the totality of experience and somehow encapsulating it in any way whatsoever, is nothing short of assured self-destruction (28). In this way, Williams denounces condensation of broad topics and concerns. To do so ignores the infinite depths of existence, and stuffs too much into a too-small vessel. Imagination eliminates the inevitable suicide by "acknowledging a new situation" (29). Just as knowledge is unlimited and therefore equally worthless, "having eaten to the full we must acknowledge our insufficiency since we have not annihilated all food nor even the quantity of a good sized steer." The "new

situation” alters the perspective to hunger, which, by eating, has been satiated. The imagination allows the individual to draw out new perspectives on both experiences and the relationship between our capacity and the endless body of knowledge. If satiated, the stomach and the bottomless ocean of knowledge are likewise full; in fact, “both have the quality of fullness” (29). This understanding, that one need not empty the ocean of knowledge to understand it, but instead extend the individual to the status of the whole, allows the poet to discover that “one is equal to the other.” Rather than overfilling a vessel with too many topics, Williams calls for selecting subject matter that can be imaginatively engaged with to represent larger themes. Distinct objects and ideas, like the stomach, share qualities with, and are therefore representative of, larger objects and ideas, like the ocean. Once undertaken by the poet, this process “has released his mind” (29).

Knowledge of immediate experiences is no longer tied to the senses only. Knowledge from sensory and therefore limited data can be put in a larger perspective. Yet again, Williams adds a caveat to this very general but enticing understanding: “In works of the imagination that which is taken for great good sense, in that it seems as if an accurate precept were discovered, is in reality not so, but vigor and accuracy of the imagination alone” (29). To support this, Williams points to the works of Shakespeare. As will be elaborated upon in the next chapter, Williams considers Shakespeare’s defining qualities as a coupling of his general lack of formal education and the process of searching endlessly for some defining, yet elusive knowledge through the written act. Shakespeare poured his understanding of the immediate world not into works of explanation and exposition, but instead into creating autonomous creations of a certain type of representation. His characters and situations interact as genuinely as possible

through the fictive imagination. Of the world himself, Shakespeare created his own five-act worlds comparable to the ‘real’ thing, and just as thriving with experiential potential. This, for example, is the point where academic writers fail adhere to Williams’ understanding of knowledge. It remains that new knowledge requires previous experience, and Williams does not deny the usefulness of reading the works of one’s predecessors. He compares reading the works of others as a fruit tree that may or may not be picked, depending on the readers’ wants and needs (*Embodiment of Knowledge* 106). Reading holds no greater importance than any other act. Knowledge, after all, comes as a result of any act and experience. “One may do as one pleases.” Nevertheless, Williams believed that reading cannot replace living since, ultimately, “the classics, the sayings, the elucidations, are as dead as shells, as fossils.” The classics *can*, however, “still be studied in fine tissue-paper-thin flakes under the microscope,” revealing knowledge of a distant age (106). Reading represents one kind experience, not a replacement for personal and immediate ones.

The value behind any act of reading—contemporary or classic—is based, Williams believed, on several aspects, all of which stem from the imaginative process. Arising from a wholly individual perspective, any proper imaginative writing “will be [...] of an inner conviction common to all men of his existence” (106). By representing an imaginative creation, “the artist does exactly what every eye must do with life, fix the particular with the universality of his own personality” (*Spring and All* 27). This is the culmination of the relationship between one’s personal fullness and the correlating quality in the universal. So, this ‘inner conviction’ is an experience placed within the greater knowledge’s totality. Therefore, a poem or any work of art in Williams’ ideal

conception thereof conveys this shared quality by concentrating on the object. Imagination must too focus on the experience of the particular, otherwise abstractions and grandiose concepts will tend toward the universal. Since Williams claimed that knowledge derives from the particular, the reverse arrangement results in nothingness. “Taught by the largeness of his imagination to feel every form which he sees moving within himself,” claims Williams in *Spring and All*, “he must prove the truth of this by expression” (27). The form found is that of the connectedness between the personal and the universal. The forms might be better thought of as patterns or tendencies. He is not, however, alluding to poetic form. When internally discovering the connection between particular and universal, a form is felt. It is the arrangement of the particular fixed into the universal. To return to the stomach and the ocean, the recognition of these related ‘fullnesses’ is an imaginative form. Imaginatively, the poet charts the shared characteristic. The way in which the relationship appears to the poet and how it is understood, must be expressed to verify its truth. The poet then writes and, through that act, arranges the pattern to be conveyed for public consumption. Without attending to these internal forms, the expression will tend to abstraction and generalization.

Williams follows the previous statement with the fragmented paragraph, “The contraction which is felt” (27). The expression of the connection between personal and universal contracts the two scopes, and the resulting poem (the expression) is both a process of and the contraction itself. Contraction implies a ‘nearing’ of the two realms, which, through the imaginative form-finding, produces the poem. Williams’ poetry is best thought of as a particular experience used to convey a universal. This might not seem like an obvious distinction, but there is a difference. His poetic product does not

introduce the universal except as a byproduct of how the particular is handled by the poet in the poem's final result, the greater whole of style, form, tone, etc. In his own words, "the word"—a term Williams uses both generally and in the sense of a signifier of an object or idea in a direct or non-abstract sense—"must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole—aware—civilized" (22). Thus the word cannot be merely a signifier of the idea of an object, but must be the equivalent of a physical object totally. A tree is not usually captured by the word alone for a reader since their association can never coincide directly with the writer's; but when it is part of a representative creation through the force of a poet's imagination, only then do all of Williams' distinctions bear fruit. Rather than talking about *some* tree, which the reader cannot possibly come to know, Williams would write about *this* tree. And since Williams' tree would be at the center of the poem, the language describing the tree would specify its important qualities for the reader. Williams intends some particular association to be evoked by writing about the tree, and he gives the necessary specifics for *a* tree to become *this* tree.

This aspect of Williams' imaginative force can be best understood in the context of one of his poems. The poem from *Spring and All*, usually known as "The Red Wheel Barrow" did not have a title when printed in the book. It was, however, attached to the Roman numeral XXII, coming twenty-second of the poems interspersed throughout. The poem goes:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens (*Spring and All* 74)

In total, there are three concrete nouns, five descriptors, and an abstract phrase (consisting of an abstract noun, ‘much,’ and an ambiguous verb). There are some prepositions, articles and other piecemeal units of speech, but the poem relies on the images evoked. From the three objects a scene springs into mind immediately. Through the directness of the language, and the scarcity of description, the wheelbarrow and the chickens act more strongly than they would in purpler prose. The poem hinges on the first ambiguous setup¹³, “so much depends.” Tonally, this egalitarian use of grammatical reference points encourages a lilting, down-home pace to the poem. Coupled with the poem’s ultimate brevity, Williams coaxes the reader into a slower and more deliberate pace. “XXII” is the equivalent to a lackadaisical afternoon and evening spent on a porch doing nothing. It evokes a mood of contemplation outside the bounds of the city. Nevertheless, the poem does not fall into a pastoral or sentimental vein. Indeed, the careful pacing in combination with the economy of language, not to mention the complete absence of a speaker or narrator (or character, for that matter), eradicates the possibility of any emotional leanings whatsoever. The objects and the brief descriptors attached to them do nothing to explain or evoke directly. It is solely an image. By

¹³ Note the lack of capitalization extending even to the first line. “XXII” breaks with all poetic convention in order that it might more fully realize itself as an object to be experienced. The language and form do not force the reader undue strain.

absenting the usual literary devices and poetic phrasings, Williams links the mixed autonomy and interrelated objects with the careful insertion of a poetic guide to provoke the reader into careful consideration of the objects themselves. There can be no definitive ‘explanation’ of “XXII”’s meaning, but an intent is clear enough. Williams leads the reader to consider the objects slowly and carefully--not intensely.

Imaginatively, “XXII” conflates poetic form with tone in order to control the pace, or rhythm. However, these gestures do not combine to create an intended effect, except to encourage contemplation. No, the poetic conflation of those elements bespeaks a creative construction in the sense of what Williams describes as a “creator of knowledge.” “XXII” is equivalent to a naturally occurring phenomenon. Through its delivery, the poem sets up an experience that requires the reader to engage with it no differently than how they would any quotidian experience.

III: Poetry: The Synthesis of Knowledge and Imagination

The actual process of writing must be considered in regards to knowledge and the imagination, since it is during the act of writing that these two elements come together and a final effect can be realized. Of course, it is not merely *a* goal or *a* product. For Williams, the process is as important as the product. Therefore, Williams conceived of his poetics as a means by which to live one’s life as a poet. This is not to say that he did not have something in mind for the effect of poetry. Quite the opposite in fact, when he plainly states, “the effect [of this new art] will be to give importance to the subdivisions of experience” (*Spring and All* 77). By “subdivisions of experience,” he is again referring to the minutiae of life experienced immediately by an individual, from farm implements

to plums. Each subdivision of life is experienced by a sliver of humanity, and therefore remains to be given their due. From these particulars, a grander and wider understanding of life can be conveyed through the written word. “Importance” may seem a bit out of place in Williams’ vocabulary, but ultimately by it he means that it will be useful to a wide range of citizen-readers. It can be read by most, and can be understood on whatever level by every reader. “Life is absolutely simple,” he writes, “In any civilized society everyone should know EVERYTHING there is to know about life at once and always” (76). With just a little proper handling, knowledge can be accessible to all. However, there is a definite sense that he believes that all knowledge is equal and equally worthless. No piecemeal knowledge supersedes any other: neuroscience is no more important than automobile maintenance. If this is taken as true, then by everyone knowing everything always being the ideal state, accessible poetry is merely a means to ensure this quality of knowledge is achieved. Williams never claims that there cannot be new knowledge in the schema of ‘everyone knows everything;’ after all, he does consider poets the ‘creators of knowledge.’

A poet must write that which can expand the knowledge held by a society, just as philosophy and the sciences claim to do themselves. Williams would argue that poetry’s method is just as valid and capable as these more generally respected disciplines of knowledge. In a sense, all three disciplines are antecedents to revolutions of the societal consciousness. New ideas and knowledge push forward society, affecting youthful minds more than the adults who developed the changes. From this constant process of forward

influence, new ideas and new paradigms of knowledge continue to evolve and improve.¹⁴ In the ideal form, poetry becomes a force of change and a method of ensuring future change in a more general sense than in the specialized disciplines usually associated with ‘progress.’ Williams hopes to spearhead the eventual founding of an artistic philosophy that keeps the longevity of this forward momentum in mind. He writes, “nothing less is intended than a revolution in thought with writing as the fulcrum” (*Embodiment of Knowledge* 98). This revolution involves both the evening out of the importance given to epistemological schools. He wants to overthrow science, religion, philosophy, and all the other disciplines currently considered primary ways of knowing. Should he succeed, all methods will be treated the same, each offering its slice of knowledge, which is infinite. Individually, the poet must be considered in the context of writing as a process to see how the role fits in the prescribed revolution of thought. In addition to expanding knowledge, poetry is the creation of new ways of understanding.

The process of writing—and more specifically, the process of writing poetry—begins with a decision about subject matter. This choice is not necessarily a conscious one, as will be shown, but the subject matter, regardless of intent, begins the process. From there, the approach taken while writing results from the imaginative force engaging with the material. All this takes place through the physical act of writing, not from a preconsidered place in the mind. Williams believed entirely in the concept of “revelation’ through writing. A poem is written deliberately by the poet, but the imagination leads the artist beyond his or her consciousness. The connections between universal and particular

¹⁴ Williams would at this point interject that certain obstacles exist to this forward momentum: namely reverence for the past over innovation and self-sustaining institutions like schools and artistic trendsetters, as has been previously explained.

objects are revealed through the act of writing. A poet cannot construct a poem in any other way. Preplanning and deliberation contradicts understanding of a poetic product. Since a poem originates through knowledge of direct experience, to think that a poem could begin with a thought just does not make sense unless the subject matter is a thought. The poet writes and the something beyond the individual is created. Nevertheless, if a poem expands knowledge, and we keep in mind Williams' description of a poet as a "creator of knowledge," it becomes clear that the same standards and methodology must apply to writing poetry as it does to living. Therefore, poetry comes from the direct experience of writing. Of the ideal writer, Williams says one "does not necessarily think these things—he does not, that is, think them out and then write them down: he writes and the best of him, in spite even of his thought, will appear on the page even to his surprise—by proper use of words" (*Embodiment of Knowledge* 7). The act of thinking and writing are separate acts. Also, a poet does not write a poem with a specific intent. The act of writing determines the effect settled upon through the imaginative force. Because of the poet's individual capacity—a mixture of individual experience and knowledge, and the individualized imagination distinct to the poet—the poem is, in a sense, separate from and a byproduct of the conscious mind. Poetry, then, is a result of the forces influencing the poet, and not from the poet individually. This eliminates much literary concern over the role of the author upon a work. While this understanding does not quite make poems independent of their authors, it does raise certain sociological considerations about the effect of the lifetime of socialization that occurs.¹⁵ Regardless,

¹⁵ Williams does not delve very deep into the formative years of a person's life growing up. There are a few mentions in *The Embodiment of Knowledge* of the role of education, but they are sparse even for Williams and they tend to focus more on the need for easily summarized knowledge to ameliorate the limitations of time with the focus on academic specialization.

the effect of the poem is referred to as “the best of him,” implying that what effect does occur upon being read is inherently of the poet as an individual, despite the poet’s awareness of it. Through all the meandering ideas that Williams expresses in his writing, the process of writing poetry becomes, on a personal level, a way to synthesize experiences and knowledge. By writing, a poet can “learn, perhaps, in the poetic application of thought, something to think about” (7). Indeed, Williams’ flippancy here masks a very considerable conceit: that although a “thinking” individual might assume that he or she knows something, writing poetry continues the process. It is then a kind of lifelong learning process that, if successfully adopted, keeps the writer humble and with no shortage of things to do and to think.

So, more generally, the poet writes in order to continue to think and learn. A poem can cause a poet to rethink his or her knowledge, since something unthought—that is, not consciously deliberated upon and no conclusion made—and therefore reveals something new even to the writer while originating from the writer. The mechanics of this writing can vary widely, depending on both the individual and the age the writer is born into. Williams’ own taste varied far afield from his own particular breed of poetics. Although he did seek out likeminded individuals, his favored contemporary artists did not necessarily share his conception of art, as will be shown in more depth in the next chapter. He valued the substance of Gertrude Stein, for example, in regards to her deconstruction of their shared language (*Essays* 104), even if the product eschewed the typical Williamsesque straightforwardness and accessibility. He believed that art had a higher purpose and, admittedly, he proposed his preferred means of achieving a new poetic legacy along broad but strict guidelines of his own choosing. Nevertheless, the

innovation and impact of other writers superseded any feelings of particular kinship he felt for the aesthetic principles at the surface of their art.

Individual writers ‘succeed’ “by a magnificent organization of those materials his age has placed before him for his employment” (103). Stein’s writing satisfied this quality, since her materials were word embroiled in the associative meanings of a long, linguistic and cultural lineage. Stein organizes her words in such a way that through repetition and homophonic legerdemain, the centuries of associated meanings drop away and, as Williams preferred, appeared fresh and immediate. He held that the finished work of art finds an arrangement, or ‘magnificent organization,’ from which the new entity—knowledge—can appear by engaging the reader’s imagination. This organization by the poet is “the most vital function of society,” wherein the poet takes reality and through the imaginative act of writing—not, to reiterate, thinking—manages to “recreate it—the collective world—in time of stress, in a new mode, fresh in every part.” The act of recreation is the poetic imperative for the poet in the act of writing, which, as Williams says, the poet “holds no mirror up to nature but with his imagination rivals nature’s composition with his own” (*Spring and All* 51). On another level, recreation should really be viewed more closely as re-creation. Poetry, and art more generally, as has been shown, is a construction of an alternative and equivalent ‘nature’ and the poet “continues ‘its’ marvels” (51) by the imagination’s ability to create. The poet harnesses the same creative force to write a poem as nature does to sustain life.

When considering the actual writing process behind Williams’ poetics, certain words he chooses clue the reader in to the art of poetry itself. “When it comes to what we shall do and how we shall do it,” he writes, “we must realize that it is a world to which

we are definitely articulating—or to which we might be, were we all able enough” (104). The formulation of his phrasing “a world to which” must be considered carefully since its construction is not the more common “a world which.” The poet is not articulating a world; that is, he or she does not explain or express aspects of the world. No characteristics are laid out for the reader to assimilate, at least not as far as “how we shall do it,” or the process of writing. Instead, a poet articulates something to the world, some inherent truth that comes about through the aforementioned process of the imagination. The poet articulates, expresses, and creates an alternative, equal reality through the faculty of the mind and the act of writing. Poetry is written to be given to the world so that some new understanding can be wrought from the poet’s experiences and imagination.

The poet takes to the page and writes. In Williams’ case, he might either force himself to put words on the page—as with the daily jottings that eventually became *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*¹⁶—or he might be compelled to write by something he experienced that day, or any day in the past. Either way, the poet does not transcribe some specific, deliberate poem. The poem is revealed through the physical act of writing, guided by the imagination, and creates a poetic object equivalent to reality. The end product then is neither detached and separate from reality, nor is it a direct representation.

As shown with knowledge, the ideal poem “affirms reality and therefore... it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature” (*Spring and All* 91). Williams rejects traditional realism—the mirror—because it does not engage the

¹⁶ This book is now printed in a collection entitled, *Imaginations*, which also includes *Spring and All*, *The Great American Novel*, and *The Descent of Winter*. This collection captures Williams’ experimental period in the 1920s

imagination. Representing reality is not enough; he requires the creation of a separate and new reality that shares the same potential for experience. Art should not relate reality, but be an equivalent part of reality. As an object, the poem is a “crystallization of the imagination” (78). The subject matter is a product of the individual poetic experience and through the imagination it becomes not an account of that experience but a separate and analogous experience. The imaginative process creates a solid crystal that can be examined and experienced itself. Reality births a new piece of reality through the poet’s mind and the physical act of writing. This is the newness sought after by Whitman and, later, Williams. Though the poet may not know that something new will come of the individual act of writing—and, indeed, Williams would never claim a one-hundred percent success rate—it is only by taking the step to act, to write, that can, in the end, create something separate from nature, but also *of* nature. To write is to act, and to write poetry is an act of creation.

At times, however, the imagination is more than a mere force of change. It can also be an expression or example of change. Williams goes so far as to equate the imaginative act with “flamboyance” (*The Great American Novel* 79). When the public turns out for a circus, they are seeking the same reimagination of reality. While flamboyance might seem more closely related to the grotesque, Williams focuses on its energy and alternate representation. A circus comes with fanfare, lights and displays of extravagance. It is an event, in which the entire experience is informed by the sensory experience of its attendants. The nameless voice in the novella sets up a series of ‘if not, then’ statements showing the capacity the energy of imagination has for corruption. If not harness for the “phases of beauty’s infinite variety” (78-9), individuals will undertake a

“destructive quest” of repression, or, even worse, “a humdrum life.” The imagination is a human necessity, a fact of progress from century to century, leading to each era’s accomplishments and excesses. Williams believes that the outpouring of energy displayed in such cultural phenomena as Jazz-age flappers and the broader spectacle-seeking culture attracting innocuous families into the circus tents and other similar displays of largesse, is the same energy that the poet draws upon while creating the new object. “Flamboyance expresses faith in that energy—it is a shout of delight, a declaration of richness” (79). There is a cycle apparent in this comparison. The reader is sensuously attracted to the feeling of revelry. Since the poet’s creation comes from and finally embodies this richness, the reader is doubly rewarded for joining with the poet in the final product. *This* is the appeal of poetry for the common citizen, especially in America where, by Williams’ estimation, ingenuity and individualism are the prevailing characteristics. Since the poem will shed new light upon experience common to all—because all immediate phenomena must be available or recognizable in some way—the love for “splendor and grotesqueness” by most individuals can be equally fulfilled by the end product of Williams’ poetics.

Since immediate experience of reality is equivalent to the experience of an imaginatively conceived poem, Williams attempts to convey the relationship between the two in many ways. The concept is difficult, he seems to admit. Yet he commits himself to the attempt. In *The Great American Novel*, he describes the experience of children watching trees change with the seasons. The observers remain stationary while the object observed undergoes different states of being.

The children released from school lay in the gutter and covered themselves with the fallen poplar leaves.—A new world! All summer the leaves had been thick on the branches but now after the heat and the rain and the wind the branches were beginning to be bare. More sky appeared to their eyes than ever before. With what relief the children had pranced in the wind! Now they lay half covered in the leaves and enjoying the warmth looked out on the new world. (*The Great American Novel* 47)

The poet allows for the leaf-playing children's realization of the "new world." By writing of familiar things in a new way, the poem causes the reader to experience something familiar again. The leaves are the same leaves that once were on branches. The poet's initial experience—shared with the reader—is reformulated by the imagination, and the leaves cover the reader through which the sky—the assumed knowledge or unevaluated—has attention drawn to it. Readers of poetry feel wonder, to varying degrees, at things they assumed they already understood, and the children exclaim. That experience is no different to the primary one of seeing the leaves and the sky in context of summer, only the season has changed. Purveyors of poetry experience "exaltation" when confronted with a work, and that emotional state arises from "the feeling of reality they draw from it" (*Spring and All* 61). The imagination is the force of change, just as the tilted axis of the earth, in combination with the sun, cause the seasons to change. The poet enacts this change by expressing "the movements of the imagination" through the written word (67). These movements are merely a shift of perspective and a deliberateness of focus as conceptualized by the working poet.

Williams describes poetry in this sense as "the dynamisation of emotion into a separate form" (67). Emotion here refers to more than a feeling; it is the subjective, individualized 'take' on an experience by a poet. By form, Williams means the physical

arrangement of language on paper. Words form the newly created object, and writing 'dynamises' or energizes the poet's efforts. It is the "movement" or writing that engages the poet with reality to create the poem-as-object, thereby breaking through "vulgar experience" into the realm experienced by the leafy revelers. Poetry, therefore, does not concern itself with fact, as such. It is a product of fact, of experience, that becomes an object, an experience capable of being a fact itself.

Chapter 2: Williams on Writers: Applying His Ideal Poetic

Characteristics

I: T.S. Eliot and the Setback of American Poetry

Williams' prominence among certain circles of writers extended well-beyond the works of fiction and poetry he published regularly. Through the active promotion of each era's literary scene, he transitioned from Pound's ideological neophyte to one of the most active purveyors of American arts of the 20th century. Whose work he specifically promoted or railed against is unimportant when compared to the ideological considerations behind these public expressions of taste. From our previous explorations into his early period of writing, a few topics reappear as determining aspects of his literary preferences. From *Spring and All*, the role of imagination, and the raw materials (experience, location, etc.) which pass through it, leads Williams to denounce and criticize certain writers for particular tendencies in their works. In *The Great American Novel*, more practical considerations come into view, such as the role of location in poetry. It is also apparent from that work that as his contemporaries seemingly abandoned the United States in search of greener, European pastures, Williams felt it necessary to address the expatriation phenomenon. Personally, Europe both attracted and repelled him. On the one hand, experiences awaited him across the Atlantic that would enrich his worldview. On the other, he felt the need to tackle the American condition, and in the process, help mold American poetics. These two considerations, fundamentally connected themselves, were combined again as Williams' faced the disappointment of T.S. Eliot's rise to prominence on the back of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and, more significantly, *The Waste Land*.

Unrelentingly critical of Eliot, Williams argued against the basic methodology behind Eliot's breed of poetry. The distinction lay in the role of Imagination. The characterization of the American pioneer (perhaps the idealized version) represented the Whitmanian paragon for Williams. Whether it be the European explorers and Daniel Boone from *In the American Grain*, or his estimation of Poe and Shakespeare as literary pioneers, Williams valued those who sought the *fresh*. What he deemed exceptional was the new, in deed or in words. Eliot failed Williams' expectations as this related to his poetic theory. Williams wrote often about the need for "[i]nvention of new forms" claiming that it must be the sole recourse for "serious minds" (*Spring* 36). These serious thinkers, by Williams' estimation, must attain towards the imaginative construction that he considered the only pathway away from "plagiarism after nature" (35). His poetics requires that the object (the world) be filtered through the onlooker (the artist) to create a separate reality. That is the poet's calling: to create a new 'reality' dependent upon both the source and artist's combined understanding/perspective. Eliot fails because he does not create poems of from an imaginative space.

Williams felt the tonal difference between rooted and uprooted American writers, and none so firmly as Eliot. He described Eliot's poetry, in the essay "The Poem as a Field of Action," as the product of an "extractor" (*Embodiment of Knowledge* 285). By this he meant that rather than creating poetry that could be the source for quotations, Eliot quotes. Of course, there is more to Eliot than a literary archaeologist, but by Williams' value system, the ideal poetry comes from imaginative originality, not a system of referential cultural hodgepodge. In the titular essay from *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, Williams says of literary references and the knowledge thereof, "These are things to use"

(63). However, he adds the caveat that knowledge "can have no meaning but the escape of man from its domination as a fetish of [...] itself by realizing its function and its place as subordinate to himself" (63). Obtaining knowledge should not be viewed as having a definite end point to attain toward. Instead, the process of understanding how knowledge is acquired, through art and experience, must be made a part of one's life, not as the dominating calling. Using past art as the dominant constitution of more art is fetishism. The academic fails at every crossroad to satisfy Williams. Because Eliot uses "thirty-five quotations in seven languages" within one long poem, rather than spark a fresh phrasal permutation or thoughtful image, Eliot is viewed unfavorably (285).

Of course, Williams could not cast aside Eliot completely, but the paths of the two were inexorably separated by the singular condition of imaginative force. As such, Williams clearly demarcates the two choices open to a poet like Eliot: first, he could have joined in the pulsating mass of writers, abandoning immediate distinction to instead "contribut[e] to the conglomerate. By this, Williams intended to promote the democratically-minded poetry that arises from the masses, from which other, later poets of Eliot's ilk might find material. Instead, he followed the second path, that which offers "already an established literature in what to him was the same language (?) an already established place in world literature" (285). He elaborates further that the difference between his own type of poetic output and Eliot's boils down to the difference between 'profusion' and 'distinction.' The ideal poet will be read profusely because his or her poetry contributes something to whole of human knowledge, even if just a word or phrase. The "distinguished" poet will be read and appreciated by academics because he or she makes use of the profuse poetry to deal with abstractions and slivers of knowledge

unimaginatively. Williams' might contribute, like *The Upanishads*, a single word to an Eliot-like poet in the future (285). With force, Williams proclaims that "[w]e must see our opportunity and increase the hoard others will find to use. We must find our *pride* in *that*." The language being used avoids academically-favored abstractions, in lieu of *mots justes*. Instead, Williams again turns to the visceral language of the personal. Although an argument could be made that Eliot—or any poet, for that matter—cannot possibly expunge the personal from a work, the difference is in the firmness of Williams' personal resolution. Writing the personal and writing the imaginative are intertwined. Since experience should be the foundation of all art, and since the filter through which experience passes is the artist's bulk of knowledge gained through personal experience, the poetic output of this process must therefore be highly personal. This conflicts with much of Eliot's critical output. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," he writes, "the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career" (*Collected Prose* 40). Throughout the essay he refers to a process of 'depersonalization' and an 'escape' from emotions and feelings (43). Compared to Williams' poetics, Eliot would not seem to be the one using language evocative of feelings, yet he does negatively, or, rather, as something to be overcome. He values the personal, but only as something to cast off in search of a more ideal expression. Viewed from another perspective, the tendency to use personal pronouns in the work of the two poets--ignoring whether they write from a strictly *personal*¹⁷ perspective—Eliot rather than Williams relies more often upon the poetic *I*. The difference is in the handling of content. Williams' poetry relies heavily on the object,

¹⁷ For Williams, experience is necessarily personal because action and engagement are the key aspects of any individual experience. Even observation requires the individual to act. Moreover, everything that one experiences is colored by the bulk of experience that preceded. Objectivity is impossible.

but as told by a particular voice. Eliot casts a wider net for his subject matter, focusing on highly philosophic statements with less emphasis on *an* image. This method tends to introduce a first-person voice that cannot (or, perhaps, should not) be assumed to be the writer, because it is kept at the same distance as any other object. As such, this *I* tends to be a conflation of poetic and prophetic legacy (i.e. "I Tiresias" from *The Waste Land*). Williams forgoes such injections of quasi-*ars poetica* and instead allows the thematic associations, if there are any, to reveal themselves through a rudimentary system of through the object's inherent qualities, as revealed through interaction with the imagination. Especially in his early works, Williams presents a situation and the implications are veiled within the associations evoked through the poet's filter of experience. Alternatively, when his poems do introduce an *I*, it tends to be a pivot or starting point for the introduction of a trope. Something sparks the bulk of the poem from a personal encounter, such as the grandson and his turtle in "The Turtle" (*Pictures from Brueghel* 63).

Williams begins the poem by reflecting upon the attitude of his grandson about his pet turtle, and how it is the only subject when the two are together. "Not because of his eyes, / the eyes of a bird, / but because he is beaked, / birdlike, to do an injury, / has the turtle attracted you. / He is your only pet." From that experience, Williams writes about the role imagination must fill for a young person, and how only the elder can promote the type of thought that Williams considers the best. He breaks off and tells an admixture of original and historical stories (or myths) about turtles: about their violence, about the tortoise holding up the world, and about the inevitable violence havocked by the turtle in the name of his owner and friend, leaving the grandson the ruler of the world.

“In the beginning / there was a great tortoise / who supported the world. / Upon him / All ultimately / rests” (63-4). Superficially, the poem distills the relationship between a non-parent and a child. It's full of silliness and simplifications of the world, all in the name of fun. Beneath that though, the importance of this relationship, though entirely unstated, becomes apparent. In the context of the Williams' oeuvre—or even just *Picture from Brueghel*—the appearance of the imagination cannot be ignored as simply toss-away material. No, "The Turtle" reveals the intrinsic quality of imagination in our constitution. Imagining begins at birth and never stops. Others imagine with us, teaching us to continue. We are told stories, and, eventually, we too will tell stories. The legacy of imagination is without comparison when looking at the makeup of humanity. However, Williams does not mention any of that, nor does he allude to a legacy except through the presentation of a scenario between a youth and an elder. The latter figure talks, and like all speech, there is a wealth of knowledge and opinion that has accumulated throughout the individual's life. This process perfectly encapsulates the creation of something new, from which later poets might, at best, extract a single word. In fact, "The Turtle" itself is a part of this because it reutilizes the tortoise myth, but does so naturally, as a matter of colloquial speech, not as some dusty artifact of some scroll, brought to light for the first time. Instead, it is an artifact of speech, of conversation, of the living language as *used* by people. The poem contains several layers, all of which are descended from the first: the scenario of a boy, a turtle, and a tale-spinning grandfather.

In comparison to an Eliot poem, "The Turtle" seems lacking, at least from an academic perspective. Looking at "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service"¹⁸, one finds a

¹⁸ Selected arbitrarily based on its length and because I rather like it.

language in direct opposition to "The Turtle". "Service" begins with a one-word, eight-syllable line. This polysyllabic monstrosity effectively means, "extremely prolific."

Linguistically, the poem requires research, or, alternatively, a capaciousness of knowledge equal to Eliot's own. Likewise, the poem contains phrase in Ancient Greek and references to "a painter of the Umbrian school" and an unexplained person named "Sweeney" (*Collected Poems* 47-8). It is unlikely that the poem can speak for itself.

While "Service" cannot be disregarded for its erudition, it fails to meet Williams' criteria for an ideal poetic and therefore explains his disappointment with Eliot's work. A working-class individual of the early twentieth century could not possibly take the time (without great expense to other, pressing matters) to access the poem's theme. In comparison to Williams' poetry, Eliot imposes a language barrier to his poetry. This eliminates Williams' preferred egalitarianism and reliance on the spoken language.

Tonally, "Service" drones from beginning to end without so much as a blip of personal feeling. Eliot wrote funereal chants for the pithy "polymaths" of literary schools, not earthbound verses of and for average readers. Thematically, the poem eschews anyone but the most adept. Once dissected, it seems obvious (in a good way), but the effort involved cannot, again, be expected of many. Within "Service", Eliot explores the dynamism of the learned through a thick veil of learnedness. The erudition breaks down as Sweeney is revealed to have been musing over the scenes presented previously, whilst bathing. It seems that a simpler man, Sweeney, brandishes the same sort of knowledge as Eliot but negates it with his abrupt closing statement that, "[t]he masters of the subtle schools / Are controversial, polymath" (48). He oversimplifies the muddle of idiosyncratic language, which must, admittedly, be his own, with a general statement that

says nothing in particular about the religious, artistic, and entomological considerations. Eliot has written a funny and self-referential poem, but the joke fails because no one but those in or equal to his elite milieu could get it.

Two reasons have appeared that Eliot's "Service" would not appeal to Williams and his poetic philosophy that democracy in the arts. First, the poem is nigh incomprehensible to anyone but the most astute reader, and even then it is likely to require access to a library's worth of abstruse tomes. Thus, the language and literary references fail to include the masses—even if the poem's theme would be appreciated by the masses. One could argue that prohibitive poetry does not exclude so much as *ask more* from the reader. For example, Williams often praised James Joyce for *Ulysses*, even though the breadth of necessary literary and cultural knowledge exceeds Eliot at every turn of the page. So perhaps the question requires further exploration if Joyce is to be absolved from sins attributed to Eliot.

II: The Contemporary Innovators: Joyce and Stein

Williams wrote two extensive essays defending each of Joyce's two books.¹⁹ Superficially, Joyce seems to both align with and contradict Williams' artistic sensibilities. First, Joyce relies on a certain strain of literary allusion, which goes against Williams' break with European tradition and history. This fact is superceded by Joyce's tendency to innovate radically with each successive book. Like Williams, Joyce began his career with a small book of poems, *Pomes Penyeach*, that relies more on traditional,

¹⁹ Williams joined the tradition of writing essays defending Joyce's often controversial works. Both writers were published in *contact* on a regular basis during its brief run as France's preeminent English-language literary magazine during the early 1920s.

formal modes than his later work. His last book was *Finnegans Wake*, which, to be brief, is written in a language of its own. This radical departure mirrors Williams' own but to a greater degree. These similarities endear Williams to the Irish writer, more, in fact, than to any other European contemporary.²⁰

Likewise, Williams wrote two exploratory essays on Gertrude Stein. Unlike Joyce, Stein was an American expatriot, and therefore more representative of and subject to Williams' conceived American poetics. Like Joyce, Williams praised Stein for her innovative writing. Together, Joyce and Stein represent two sides of innovation: Joyce's style and Stein's form. In comparison to Eliot, these two writers managed to satisfy the minimum²¹ requirements of Williams' respect by moving art into a new mode instead of dragging the nineteenth-century along.

Whereas Eliot's style mimics the writing of academia in its emotionless droning, with traditional cadences and minimal deviation from a single tone, Joyce wanders through styles. *Ulysses* is predicated upon an experimentation of styles. Each section adopts some new variation on a traditional trope. In "A Point for American Criticism," Williams excoriates a British critic's estimation of Joyce for her stodgy adherence to English literary traditionalism. The critic, Rebecca West, denounces Joyce because of the incongruent place within the British tradition Joyce would hold if accepted. West praises the beauty in bits of Joyce's prose and calls the rest far-reaching gibberish (*Essays* 81). Likewise, his writing falls in with the 'low' instead of "lifting them over the threshold

²⁰ When writing positively about European artists, Williams most often wrote about painters. This exception for Joyce is an outlier and therefore valuable to analyze.

²¹ In each of the four essays, Williams manages to insert a paragraph of criticism. Stein fails to remain in America, and is therefore guilty of distancing herself from her subject matter. Likewise, "Joyce does offend in taste. Joyce is sentimental in his handling of his materials. He does deform his drawing and allow defective characterizations to creep in" (*Essays* 84).

that divides life from art” (81). Her objection is summarized when she states, “Mr. James Joyce is a great man who is entirely without taste” (80). This tastelessness is, for Williams, the incongruence that proves innovative and therefore worthwhile. He counters her sensibilities with Joyce’s intrinsic and “essential relationship between the genius and the defect” (84). The defect—that Joyce writes disruptively in relation to the “inclusive whole” (84) of the British canon—allows Joyce to take “the leap of a new force” (85). Williams argues further, deflecting West’s intended insult, that Joyce operates similarly to a Shakespearean fool. Instead of “dragging down the great and the good to his own foul level” (87) as West would characterize the fool, Joyce fulfills the role accurately:

But the true significance of the fool is to consolidate life, to insist on its lowness, to knit it up, to correct a certain fatuousness in the round-table circle. Life is not to run off into dream but to remain one, from low to high. If you care to go so far, the fool is the premonition of the Russian Revolution, to modern revolutions in thought. (88)

This is Joyce’s modernist innovation: his style reflects the world in its lowness and truthfully speaks to its machinations. Just as Shakespeare used the fool to foreshadow the philosophical implications in a simple yet veiled voice, *Ulysses* transformed the visceral world into ammunition “for a new means [...] to save the world” (89).

So, Joyce offers Williams a stylistic escape from the mold of British traditionalism. What is this style? In the essay, “A Note on the Recent Work of James Joyce,” Williams compares his prosodic sensibilities to those of Rabelais. He is not a debauchee but “a priest ‘sensitized’ to all such grossness” (*Essays* 78). Delving deep into

a priestly comparison, Joyce is, like priests and the Catholic Church, “unclean in its fingers and aloof in the head” (78). “Jowl to jowl with the sinner,” Joyce takes the sins of the world and “laid it out clean for us ... as a priest might do before the Maker.” His writing is the language—or, aptly, the languages—spoken to God, free from the limitations of a singular set of experience. The reader is treated as an omniscient being, free from the limitations of insular existence. A parallel can be drawn between an American democratic mode and the “divine humanity” of Joyce, characterized best when characterized negatively: his divergence from “the inhumanity of the scientific or protestant or pagan [...] coldly dressed formal language” (78). In short, the innovation laudable in Joyce’s work is his humanity, in that it aligns with Williams’ definition of democratic writing: “free to all temperaments, all phases of our environment, physical as well as spiritual, mental and moral” (“American, Whitman and the Art of Poetry” 2). Joyce melds the worldliness of the low with the spiritual accountability of the divine.

Just as Eliot’s style offers little in the way of innovation, neither does his form. While it cannot be said that he ascribes to the strict formulations of the sonnet or other strict poetic contraptions, at no point does he experiment with the relationship between form and language. His free verse adheres to standard notions of stanza and line. Often he constructs parallel stanzas of relatively equivalent lines. Linguistically, his poems are standard sentences of grammatically adherent construction. Line to line, his poems follow a certain ascertainable logic, though this could be debated. Generally speaking, Eliot fails to experiment with the skeleton underlying the poem *as written*.

It is with the skeleton that Williams concerns himself in considering Gertrude Stein. Logically, Stein has broken from “that medieval remnant” that has infected the

vital fluid of literary development (*Essays* “The Work of Gertrude Stein” 116). Eliot knowingly plays with the “former relationships” of language. He believes deeply in the cultural accumulation from which language derives. Stein, through the creation of a new mode of linguistic logic, abandons the baggage of language. Words, therefore, arise independently *in vitro* from the individual poem. Formally, Stein’s poems are formless in an attempt to transcend linguistic and cultural legacy. Her mode is new; Eliot’s is derivative—even impressively so.

In lieu of the legacy of language, Stein writes with a two-pronged approach. First, the words are independent from the grammatical sections. A word might relate to another, in some relational arrangement, because of repetition or proximity. However, these relationships are *as words* rather than as indicators of some lexicographical or literary heritage. Formally, she eschews the usual poetic arrangements that convey meaning and association. Williams proclaims that “Stein’s theme is writing” (115) and she writes while smashing words until the historical meanings and associations are lying dead upon the floor, leaving a rejuvenated and clean word behind with which she can compose her poetry. Secondly, the syntactic arrangements of words (formerly, sentences) become subordinate to the movement of the orderings. Williams compares this aspect of Stein’s composition to Bach, where the arrangement “of the words determin[e] not the logic, not the “story,” not the theme even, but the movement itself” (117). He uses the unit, “They lived very gay then” as the prime example of this relationship between Stein and Bach. Autonomously excerpted, the ‘sentence’ guides the act of reading, drawing attention both to the constituent parts (words) and the shape or assembly of the whole (movement). The innovative nature of Stein’s writing cannot be questioned; however,

whether these departures from traditional writing constitutes ‘form’ is a matter of dispute. In a letter to Kay Boyle in 1932, Williams explicates his definition of form and its role in the years to follow. Bluntly, he claims that “[t]he form of poetry is that of language” (*Letters* 131). He labels Stein as a “disintegrationist,” which he describes as “the users of words for their individual forms and meanings.”

III: Shakespeare: Creation through the lack of knowledge

Through the criticism of Eliot, Williams’ distaste for the academic is apparent; however, what that actually means remains unclear. Luckily, Williams’ writings on Shakespeare elucidate the criticism and, through a negative definition, clarify his understanding of the academic. From the anti-European and anti-classics sentiments found in *The Great American Novel* and *Spring and All*, the praise lavished on Shakespeare seems contradictory. For Williams, Shakespeare represents a nearly ideal writer, rooted in the soil of his homeland, without a formal education, and incredibly imaginative in content and approach. The only lacking characteristic, it would seem, is innovation of form, which Williams excuses as having been forced on the playwright and poet during his brief education (*Letters* 335). Other than this, Shakespeare satisfies every quality laid out by Williams through his long career.

Shakespeare’s apparent lack of education is admittedly only a ‘recital’ that Williams drew from his own reading. The life he led, according to Williams, was in the best “orthodox tradition” of his times, filled with the usual family and life concerns (*Spring and All* 51). This ordinariness was accompanied by the “café life” in London,

fueling his mind with “the concentrates of science and adventure.” Of his plays, Shakespeare inherited the form from Marlowe, the stories from his theater coterie, and the character types from the London throng (52). From this admission, Williams posits that Shakespeare’s “power was PURELY of the imagination.” The playwright lacked the education and adventure of his contemporaries. Assuming that he was aware of this inadequacy, Williams sees Shakespeare as overcoming his limitations through an imaginative interior existence that rivaled, and almost definitely surpassed that of his fellow Londoners.

Williams claims that Shakespeare’s time was incredibly active. The culture valued deeds over philosophizing (*Embodiment of Knowledge* 11). From this age of action sprang such thinkers as Bacon, whose scientific mind was focused on the creation of new knowledge, new exploits of the natural world, and, in fact, the definitive shift away from the medieval paradigm concerning knowledge. Shakespeare’s entire output reflects this cultural value. Action underlies Shakespeare’s output both literally and literarily. On the one hand, theater, by its very nature, is a medium performed by actors. On the other, the characters in the plays performed actions as a result of the medium’s nature. Theater performances are driven by the deeds of its characters. This moves the story forward, and provides the audience with something to watch beyond characters speaking. As such, the nature of Shakespeare’s medium is an active one. Williams notes that, unlike scholars of modernity, all of Shakespeare’s works revolve around the concept of action (12). His chosen form, the play, necessitated this arrangement. Written for entertainment, the theater demands a plot-driven structure forced along by the characters continual action. Moreover, Shakespeare’s growth developed through the *act* of writing.

The amount of output clearly reinforces the philosophy attributed to Shakespeare by Williams, namely, that the playwright wrote as a conscious action. He finds the process of Shakespeare's writing exemplified in Hamlet, where "the deed of speeches [are where] man is most real" (*Embodiment of Knowledge* 12). Shakespeare wrote in a time when deeds were futile but imperative, and so the artist must write about the deeds to extricate himself from the futility. This explains the absence of reflection "on the state of the times and his soul" in Shakespeare's work (13). Instead of writing personally or from a perspective of the subjective individual, Shakespeare created "a hundred characters in *himself*, true, actual." He constructed the imaginative reality so valued by Williams in *Spring and All*: "The word must be put down for itself" (22), in order that "the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes a creation" (35). Shakespeare lived and wrote in the space Williams explains and glorifies in *Spring and All*. The plays do not reflect reality, but instead they are autonomous constructions of a new reality filtered through the deliberate mental actions of the artist. Both the demands of plays as an art form and the nature of Shakespeare's knowledge and era fit him into this mold and gave him the qualities that led Williams to call his works' legacy "universality through time" (*Spring and All* 75).

The knowledge Shakespeare did have requires further exploration to really understand Williams' valuation. Distinct from academic knowledge, which Williams describes as "hard knowledge," "the hard students of literary history," and "[a]n armed assembly," Shakespeare grew from the "dirt men who keep alive the *geist*," or those that Williams equates with laborers and the common citizen (Letters 194). But Shakespeare was not solely of this latter category. Instead, he synthesized the two types of literary

effort. In alignment with Williams' understanding of the categories of knowledge—that life must be divided into living disciplines of a greater whole, not “dead dissection (*Spring and All* 75)—Shakespeare contains both the earth and the academy. In fact, like Williams' understanding of it, education, and therefore knowledge, is limitless and egalitarian. Academia contradicts this understanding, creating a hierarchy of knowledge that can be mastered by those within the particular field. This limits information and learning within a closed-off section of society. Williams, and more importantly, Shakespeare, proves the opposite is equally valid. The plays of the latter propose no outright philosophy, in the usual sense. Shakespeare does not hold a monopoly on his knowledge or understanding. In his plays, characters interact and act; drama or comedy unfold. Whether there is anything to gain besides the gasps or laughs of the crowd, that does not concern Shakespeare. His is not a privileged position. The works are autonomous from their creator, and therefore convey for themselves. Considering Williams' own poetry, Shakespeare's plays align closely, if not as a direct predecessor to the type of ‘substance’ contained in the Imagistic chunks of poems. The objects, be they characters or images, interact without editorial comment, more or less. Knowledge of a certain mode cooks the objects in the artists' minds, thereby gaining the universal beneficence of the artist-chefs when freed to the world. Ultimately, the artist does not impose his or herself upon the audience. Everything in the writer enters the work, but only as a guide to the limitlessness of experience, knowledge, and, just perhaps, truth.

It is therefore through this process that both Williams and Shakespeare become “creator[s] of knowledge” (*Spring and All* 53). Their individual processes were not defined by what they learned from books, teachers, or other traditional avenues of

knowledge acquisition. For both writers, writing represented a large portion of their individual existences. Writing both complemented and comprised the everyday travails of the two writers, representing either the actual livelihood, as in Shakespeare's case, or an integral part of everyday life, as in the case of Dr. Williams. Shakespeare, according to Williams, continued to produce plays throughout his life, "like a person who needs to reaffirm something to himself in order to keep believing it" (*Essays* 55). Shakespeare's knowledge never cemented itself, or else he would have changed forms or quit writing altogether. Something was being sought after as Shakespeare wrote his plays, some unascertainable knowledge unattainable by the act of thought alone. His plays and the concomitant process of creating anew were the method by which Shakespeare found "his conception of living" (55). Unlike the scientific method of Bacon or Newton, Shakespeare experimented and gained no concrete conclusion from his efforts. Unlike science, art offers no answers, only new perspectives. Indeed, he continued "vacillating" or "oscillating" with each subsequent artistic creation. Just as Hamlet cannot find a surefire path of action for most of the titular play, Shakespeare could not settle on a grain of knowledge from which a basis for existence could be founded. In *The Embodiment of Knowledge* Williams describes this as "thinking in diversified concretions" (136). By this he meant that Shakespeare created his own concrete reality in his plays in order that he might undergo the process philosophers and scientists (if not everyone) undertake when forming their formal hypotheses. Unlike those others, he modeled characters and situations after pieces of his experience, both direct and secondhand, to play out the imagined interactions and through the process obtain a better understanding both of himself and of the external world. Even his historical plays follow this process, being

only “colored” by the introduction of a named figure (111). In short, Williams saw Shakespeare’s creative output as evidence of a process of knowing, much as the bulk of his own output was toward his own poetic conceptualization. Both writers used the creative process as a means of understanding, not specifics, but a generalized and instinctive knowledge of the totality of existence. Art is only a way of understanding the connection between the particular and the universal. For Williams, no writer has been more successful than Shakespeare in this artistic mode. His plays capture the universal forms in the particulars of five-acts’ worth of characters, actions, and scene.

Shakespeare’s attitude towards his plays reaffirms the idea that they were something for his own benefit—aside from the practical considerations of making a living. Williams purports that Shakespeare never bothered to have his plays published, while insisting at the same time the opposite for his poems. This is natural, according to Williams, because the poems were intentional pieces of Shakespeare himself, his name, so to speak (*Letters* 283). As an individual, Shakespeare does not deliberately appear in the plays. They do not concern him in the immediate way art often concerns the artist, the way a philosopher writes from a wholly subjective place as an informed and privileged correspondent. Poetry contained Shakespeare’s external musings; his plays were products of a process that consisted less literally of Shakespeare the man. He wrote his plays as intentional acts of knowledge discovery. The poetry of Shakespeare therefore opposes Williams’ own view of poetics, but the theatric writing mirrors it perfectly. Both forms of expression follow along the precepts of Williams’ artistic faith. Shakespeare ascertained no particular knowledge except that which led to myriad lines of further inquiry; Williams wrote poems to experiment with the forms he conceived as ideal, while writing

essays, stories, letters, plays, etc. in search of a means by which to do so. Unlike Shakespeare, Williams lived in this search, whereas the former merely adventured along in his imaginative pursuits. One engaged in the active dialogue of his time's artistic construction, and the other lived within a society of artists, but only engaged the subject through his deliberate, artistic acts.

From the half-dozen essays Williams wrote on Shakespeare, it is evident that in him he found an ideal, non-academic artist focused on production as a method of acquiring knowledge. The process does not lead to a definitive answer, and neither did Williams' own intellectual peregrinations. Contrariwise, Williams did not classify Shakespeare as exactly one of his own ilk. Shakespeare was an artist engaging in the pursuit independent of a larger artistic environment, and produced no extant (and therefore, most likely, no published) texts on the theory of his craft. Williams wrote ceaselessly on the theory of his search for a new, distinctly American poetic mode. Nevertheless, Williams saw in Shakespeare a kindred spirit of the actualized artistic creation of his own life's work.

IV: Conclusion

Williams' wrote about writers as a way to solidify his own intellectual meanderings. In Eliot he saw the antithesis of an ideal poetic paradigm, consisting of imaginative, local, innovative, and non-academic tendencies of those artists he praised. Joyce and Stein, while less indicative of the general trajectory of American²² poetics than Eliot, were equally influential on all Modernist artists individually. Stein promoted a

²² Obviously Joyce could not embody 'American' poetics since he was most definitely neither American, nor predominantly a poet. Nevertheless, he represented the universal application of Williams' ideal characteristics extended beyond the limited scope of Williams' attention.

formal innovation on the linguistic level that Williams would no doubt have put on the level of Whitman's cleavage with the metrical line. Meanwhile, Joyce found new stylistic endeavors that Williams searched after in his own work. The Rutherford poet championed those he deemed likeminded because his own engagement with the intellectual discussion was shouted down by his contemporaries. Looking backward, Williams touted Shakespeare creative output as evidence of his own theory's correctness. Unlike those who study Shakespeare, Williams did not see the playwright as a beacon from which to draw influence directly. Instead, the artistic methodology of Shakespeare—that is, his ability to treat writing as an act in and of itself, separate from the creation itself—was a prime example of how one should go about creating art. These explorations into other artists show that Williams did not discriminate against disparate artistic modes. Stein's poetry could not be further from Williams' own than are sestinas and sonnets, yet he searched after the less apparent qualities of the artist's character and approach to broaden the purview of his own poetic theorizing.

Ultimately, Williams was more willing to compromise on his ideal characteristics of art than might be apparent from the strong language found in *Spring and All* and elsewhere. Based on the myriad introductions and reviews he wrote throughout his career, Williams was foremost a advocate for the arts, not a critic. More than anything, he desired the continued experimentation and refinement of all written expression. The books he wrote during the 1920s express this personal intent most clearly.

Chapter 3: 1919-1933, The Gestation of Williams' New American Art and the Poetic Drought

I: Repurposing the Violence of Spring and Recreating It All

With the philosophy contained within *Spring and All* thoroughly expounded upon in Chapter One, a broader understanding of the book's internal logic and broader effect will do more to understand Williams' efforts toward a definition and realization of poetics during the period of poetic abstention during the 1920s.

With the release of *Spring and All* in 1923, Williams began a decade of experimentation. Unlike the conventional poetry that he had written before this seminal work, the meager 93-page book has a sense of urgency to it. The book acknowledges a conventional structural format, but eschews its usual effect. There are chapters, but they are numbered pell-mell and follow a logic accessible only to Williams in the act of writing. It jumps from scene to scene and topic to topic as the mood hit its author. Interspersed between the chapters of prose are untitled, numbered poems. However, these two sections do not interrelate except as examples of the prose sections' larger themes. Tonally, the prose resounds with a forcefulness atypical of Williams' usual cool demeanor. These prose bits are, after all, paired with poems such as the ubiquitous "Red Wheel Barrow" and others of an equally bucolic and tonally detached pieces. When combined, these two disparate styles embody the two key aspects of Williams' ideal poetry: the imaginatively forceful energy of the poet, and the use of immediate reality by that force to create something equivalent to reality itself.

Since it utilizes both prose and poetry, and since Williams was ultimately concerned with the ascension of poetry to a higher level of societal usefulness, *Spring and All*'s hybridization of the two modes of writing allowed Williams to achieve something that he considered beyond either mode by itself. *Spring and All* is Williams' manifesto of the imagination as the guiding force of a new American art. It is apparent, however, that he did not believe that he could promote his theories through poetic example alone. His mission required the synthesis of prose's straightforward dealing "with the fact of an emotion," and poetry's "dynamisation [sic] of emotion into a separate form" (*Spring and All* 67). The vehemence apparent in the *Spring*'s prose conveys Williams' frustration with the state of poetics. In a way, Williams has injected the book with his emotion, and settles on a direct way of conveying his emotionally derived views on poetry and the imagination.

From the beginning, Williams clearly expresses the emotional aspect of the book. The first two sentences communicate his concurrent desperation and sense of purpose. "If anything of moment results—so much the better. And so much the more likely will it be that no one will want to see it" (1). Confident in himself and certain that his self-assuredness could not help him, he seems forlornly spurned on by the deaf ears awaiting his work. *Spring and All* begins with this contradiction, which captures the 'emotional fact' of the author's state of mind. *Spring and All* captures the ferocity and frustration Williams personally experienced. At this point in his career, Williams had achieved very little success. *Spring* would not turn around his fortunes with its printing run of two hundred or so. Yet, throughout the prose sections, Williams does not hold back his fringe views concerning the reevaluation of American poetry's current state. He is not

attempting to ameliorate the already disinterested critics. The book is an attack on the direction of the era's poetics. The year before *Spring* went to print, Eliot's *The Waste Land* appeared and immediately became the critical darling²³. Whether writing from a sense of personal affront by the poetry-reading masses, or if it was written while Williams' mind was "disturbed"²⁴ as he claims in *I Wanted to Write a Poem*²⁵, the book hinges on its contradictory reliance upon pronouncements of truth and self-deprecatory acceptance of its inevitable obscurity.

It must be noted that of these contradictory aspects of the book, it more often tends toward pronouncement than maudlin disparagement of its intent. At times, these declarations avoid controversy, such as when the claim is made that "Complete lack of imagination would be the same at [sic] the cost of intelligence" (*Spring and All* 28). He believes that the imagination is the only means of intellectual progression. All advances in thought derive from the ability to create new arrangements of knowledge. Intelligence is a result of imaginative elaboration and innovation. From a culturally normative, American point of view, this statement would be the cause of no objection. Nevertheless, such assertions belong to the realm of philosophy or religion, where a dictate lies at the end of an analytical argument. Unlike formal argumentation, Williams, at best, develops passing thoughts with no concern given to definitively completing them. The prose segments of the book are rife with asides, parentheticals, and, most often, sentences that trail off. For Williams, these tangential and incomplete elements coincide entirely with

²³ The second chapter covers Williams' feelings about Eliot's seminal work, which, to recap, he viewed as having handed poetry back to the academics. His many statements about the poem could alone explain the excitability present in *Spring and All*.

²⁴ Williams says very little regarding this period of being "disturbed." One can only gather that, by his nonchalance, he meant intellectually perturbed by the course of art and not under the shadow of a serious mental illness, as one might gather from the word.

²⁵ See pages 36-8 for the poet's brief and dismissive take on *Spring and All*.

the stylistic intent, and are entirely deliberate—otherwise, he would have edited them out. These two stylistic aspects—the philosophic and the broken stream of consciousness—are the means by which Williams expresses the ‘fact’ of his emotion. Taking each of these emotional states into account—self-doubt, philosophic dictator, free-flowing professor, poet, etc.—*Spring and All* embodies the poet’s many roles as he understanding them. Considered another way, there is no single approach to a formalized representation of Williams’ poetics, at least not at this point in his career. Through the act of writing *Spring and All*, Williams has begun a decade of reflection upon poetry through nontraditional means. His message remains obfuscated and not entirely comprehensible, as discussed in Chapter One, but the experimentation and attempted innovation align perfectly with his conception of knowledge as begun in the unformed morass of *The Embodiment of Knowledge*²⁶.

The many stylistic modes and tones found in *Spring and All* represent an attempted implementation of the egalitarian view of knowledge developed in *The Embodiment of Knowledge*. Williams the philosopher commingles with Williams the poet. His thoughts appear on the page without concern for rhetorical soundness, leaving sections of the book feeling like an extemporaneous conversation in a cafe²⁷, rather than a concise argument prepared for public consumption. Each aspect of Williams’ personal process of discovery and understanding are presented in turn naturally. There exists no way to summarize the views held within *Spring and All* because, formally speaking,

²⁶ Refer to Chapter 1 for the full discourse of this work.

²⁷ Interestingly enough, both *The Embodiment of Knowledge* and *In the American Grain* contain a section or chapter in which Williams attempts to record an actual conversation. Unsurprisingly enough, the tendency to rewind a thought is pervasive throughout both. Likewise, Williams’ dialogue becomes quite heated as he attempts to explain intellectual nuances, which exactly mirrors the charged tone of *Spring and All*.

Williams cannot pin down one approach to pass on his knowledge. In the context of *Embodiment*, this seems natural. Each sliver of knowledge Williams has within a certain mode of thought—his specialization—is incomplete without the others. That is the book’s experiment: to see how every aspect of an individual’s knowledge can be fitted together to convey a conviction comprehensively and with the fewest flaws. *Spring and All*, then, attempts to express Williams’ firm belief in the primacy of the imagination

To chart the book’s course, a representative chunk must undergo carefully paced scrutiny. As many tones and styles need to be present, the cognitive shifts must be illuminated in isolation and in relation to the overall course of the selection. Magnified, this process would begin with the contradictory confident and self-doubting opening sentences, and end with the relationship between the grammatically labyrinthine paragraph concerning the attunement of language necessary “to communicate release from the fixities which destroy it” and the poem, “XXVII,” inexplicably ending the book. From these two excerpts, nearly all of Williams’ attitudes are apparent, but a contiguous portion of the book, those, say, surrounding a richer and lengthy poem, can more tightly illuminate Williams’ knowledge system underway.

Two-thirds through the book, three poems are placed without prosodic interlude. A page of prose precedes this trio that begins with Williams stating that, “It is rarely understood how such plays as Shakespeare’s were written” (61). This oversight relates to the imagination—as most points do. To properly understand Shakespeare, the plays must be engaged from the same faculty as from when it was produced, i.e. the imagination. This is an extension of Williams’ poetic process, as covered in the first chapter. Shakespeare experienced life, and through the act of writing, his imagination created a

work with a “feeling of reality” (61). This isolated prose section has no context, yet Williams wrote and placed it between two large portions of poetry. No obvious connection ties the page of prose with the poetry abutting it. The essence of this section is merely a retelling of the role of the imagination, extended slightly to the reader whose imaginative faculty allows a proper reading a work of “power.” Familiarity with Williams might lead one to question the motive behind asserting that readers often misinterpret how Shakespeare’s plays were written. After all, ‘readers’ is too broad a term for such a narrow question. Most who dabble in Shakespeare’s plays would indeed not understand how they were written. This claimed misunderstanding is more pointed than initially apparent. Williams does not leave this to question since he follows it with the otherwise inexplicable and half-formed thought, “Fruitless for the academic tapeworm to hoard its excrementa is [sic] books. The cage—“. He condemns academia for obfuscating Shakespeare’s actual power from the masses with their fecal erudition. Scholars write inaccessible books thereby ‘hoarding’ the knowledge amongst themselves. The tonal shift from the first to the second paragraph is typical of the schizophrenic style used by Williams. The initial claim is, if anything, a veiled criticism of the hierarchy of knowledge, but the emphasis is placed on unveiling the faculty through which powerful works are created rather than denouncing those who misunderstand the process. The tapeworm comment, though not useful to his argument, shows Williams’ unwillingness to practice self-constraint. He knows who he believes to be at fault, and he’ll be damned if tact will get in the way of calling out those at fault. Even if fragmentary, his thoughts must be recorded.

Williams fades quickly after the initial claim about Shakespeare and the academic parasites. He falls back into a straightforward expository style in which he reiterates the power of the “world of the imagination” (61). The page of prose ends with a summary of the reader’s experience with a power piece of art: “The exaltation men feel before a work of art is the feeling of reality they draw from it. It sets them up, places a value upon experience.” He adds parenthetically, “said that half a dozen times already.” Williams’ frustration with his own constant rephrasing of his central point is clear, but he is compelled to do so anyway. Again, he allows his knowledge of the usual method of writing to appear, nodding knowingly to the reader that the fevered journey they are sharing is both deliberate and inherently valuable as an exercise of the topics under discussion. *Spring and All* is a distillation of the process of knowledge realized as an autonomous reality. This should seem familiar since it is the foundation of his poetics. Rather than some hybridization of two disparate forms of writing, the book is a big knowledge poem. Linguistically, Williams barely sees a difference between the prose and poetry. Instead the distinction between how the two deal with emotion—as either a fact or by energizing it into a “separate” form—reveals the underlying essence of *Spring and All*. By engaging his various emotional states honestly and unrestrainedly, his knowledge coalesced into an autonomous object that has a reality of its own.

“XVIII²⁸” is the third of three poems that follow what shall be hereafter referred to as the ‘page of prose.’ The speaker of the poem presents a few individuals, or types of individuals and their general demeanor. He cuts them to the quick, calling them, by turn and without much explanation, “thieves” and “slatterns”. Their clothes are “sheer rags”,

²⁸ This poem was later, as were all other poems in *Spring and All*, given a title. “XVIII” is more commonly known by this second title, “To Elsie.”

which they wave about unashamedly without the “character” or past that could redeem them. In short, they are mindless, cultureless creatures without forethought or tradition. There is, undoubtedly, harshness in Williams’ description of these passing figures, but the poem progresses toward another figure, Elsie, or the girl raised by the state.

XVIII

The pure products of America
go crazy –
mountain folk from Kentucky

or the ribbed north end of
Jersey
with its isolate lakes and

valleys, its deaf-mutes, thieves
old names
and promiscuity between

devil-may-care men who have taken
to railroading
out of sheer lust of adventure –

and young slatterns, bathed
in filth
from Monday to Saturday

to be tricked out that night
with gauds
from imaginations which have no

peasant traditions to give them
character
but flutter and flaunt

sheer rags—succumbing without
emotion
save numbed terror

under some hedge of choke-cherry
 or viburnum—
 which they cannot express—

Unless it be that marriage
 perhaps
 with a dash of Indian blood

will throw up a girl so desolate
 so hemmed round
 with disease or murder

that she'll be rescued by an
 agent—
 reared by the state and

sent out at fifteen to work in
 some hard pressed
 house in the suburbs—

some doctor's family, some Elsie—
 voluptuous water
 expressing with broken

brain the truth about us— (64-6)

In contrast to the women described above, Elsie evokes Williams' compassion, from an unexpected angle. He sees that the lack of "peasant traditions" in the gaudy women thwarting their imagination and devaluing their gaudiness. Elsie, on the other hand, promises something different, something alluring to 'us' resulting ultimately from a "dash of Indian blood". The connection between her blood and where she ends up in life comes from the intervention of the state because of "disease and murder" that results from the former. This could be read as a denouncement of the intermingling ethnicities in

her blood, but Williams was himself of this genetic arrangement. Instead, the idea of immigration and the 'melting pot' comes to mind, as it stood in the early years of the twentieth century. Between his medical career and the general era in which he lived, Williams witnessed the exploitation of non-Anglo Americans, especially those destitute souls of the lowest-lower class. That is where the emphasis lies, in the situation of many of these people, not as a result of where their ancestors happened to reside.

her great
ungainly hips and flopping breasts

addressed to cheap
jewelry
and rich young men with fine eyes

as if the earth under our feet
were
an excrement of some sky

and we degraded prisoners
destined
to hunger until we eat filth

while the imagination strains
after deer
going by fields of goldenrod in

the stifling heat of September
Somehow
it seems to destroy us

It is only in isolate flecks that
something
is given off

No one
to witness
and adjust, no one to drive the car (66-7)

So, Elsie's position eventually leads her into the service of a suburban family, and under the gaze of "rich young men with fine eyes". Externally, she shakes the internal foundation of those men because she "express[es] with broken / brain the truth about us". This truth reflects the nature of poetry as Williams sees it. Poets should be imaginative beings, as is the case with the male surveyors of Elsie's form. Their emotions are negative when in the presence of Elsie. They (including the poet) are described as "degraded prisoners", but they imagine, or work toward imagining, something more indicative of Elsie's person, something truer to the state of reality. Elsie is, in a sense, objectified by the men

Throughout the prose-like portions of *Spring and All*, Williams declaims against emotion as the guide of poetry. Repeatedly, he announces IMAGINATION as the fitting force behind works of poetics. Internally, the men imagine a pastoral scene of pure beauty in the most universal sense—a deer in a field of flowers during summer. Indeed, their "imagination strains" toward this imagining, but it is nebulous because it is not apt to be captured. "It seems to destroy us", he says. Instead of allowing the liberation of the individual, the process of imagination only grants "isolate flecks" of acuteness to the musings of the imaginers. There is always more to process through the imaginative art.

The final stanza refers either to the creative act of poetry, or to some individualized force—probably the imagination in general. By comparing it to a car, with "no one to drive", Williams solidifies the process into something tangible, but without

resorting to the simplicity of metaphor or simile. Instead, he proffers the image, allowing the comparison to be made by the reader. As for “no one / to witness / and adjust”, this merely reaffirms the driving image. One drives by constant awareness and subconscious readjustments. Imagination and poetry do not allow the poet or imaginer to guide the reading of the work or the ephemeral musings. Poetry is not a machine for Williams; poetry is a realized, ‘dynamised’ experience in and of itself that only results from a poet’s experiences and knowledge as acted upon by his or her imagination. Just as he rejects religious dogmatism (42), Williams refuses to accept the poem/imagination as a predetermined path. A path offers no real, individual experience, except that which was at one point deemed the easier. Poetry offers something more substantial, something new—which is exactly what Williams was always trying to do on both a macro- and microscopic level. From individual words to literary forms, he sought the force of freshness.

“To Elsie” diffuses its meaning through the construction of a proposed image, with no exposition, offering only the reactions through a perspective intended to be both the reader and the speaker’s. The reactions of the men seem close to the reader, closer, in fact, than any other set of images in the poem. In the terms of his rules for poetry excerpted above, the singular poem is an imaginative creation. Elsewhere in *Spring and All*, Williams propounds the idea that poetry must not resort to “Crude symbolism” (20); “To Elsie” lacks symbolism, except as a phenomenon in life, a tendency towards which humanity tends. The poem’s use of symbolism in this way reflects Williams’ distaste for it, or at least his wariness. Symbolism is something that the pretty-eyed boys conjure up upon seeing Elsie, something they attain towards naturally and idealistically, but which

does not reflect the reality of the perceived woman. This tendency "seems to destroy us", he claims (67) because the imagined scene does not align with the reality. 'Wrong' poetry (that which is opposed to Williams' proposed form) masks reality, or alternatively, creates a hollow representation of it.

The hollow representation that he warns against is specifically those schools of art which attempt to "'copy' nature" (30). Williams considers this aesthetic pointless, if not harmful to art. He says, "The only realism in art is of the imagination. It is only thus that the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes a creation" (35). Realism is, after all, an attempt at objectivity, at capturing things as they really are, external to the artist's perspective.

He claims that history too should not be handled in the realist fashion. Otherwise, an artist or historian loses "the residual contact between life and the imagination which is essential to freedom" (19). He sums up his reasoning nicely when he says, "the artist does exactly what every eye must do with life, fix the particular with the universality of his own imagination" (27). Williams seeks a dialogue between the observed and the observer, which, through art, looses the hounds that express the impossibly dynamic and subjective universe. Acknowledging the limitations of any observable knowledge or phenomenon, Williams grasps the nature of both nature and phenomena.

We must acknowledge that the ocean we would drink is too vast--but at the same time we realize that extension in our case is not confined to the intestine only. The stomach is full, the ocean no fuller, both have the same quality of fullness. In that, then, one is equal to the other. Having eaten, the man has released his mind. (29)

This passage accounts for the fullness of the universe. So much knowledge exists that the individual cannot contain it all. However, there is a parallel between the fullness of oneself and the fullness of the universe. They are coequal; they are co-representative. Note his use of the phrase "quality of fullness". He does not use empirical measurements of fullness. "How full?" matters neither to his understanding nor his artistic expression. Williams looks for parallels, similarities, features shared, not degrees and comparisons. Things in themselves allow the usual poetic sentiments to be more accurately 'representative' and meaningful than false symbolism and artificial metaphors.

"To Elsie" typifies Williams' poetics in its lacking exposition, highly subjective imagery, and subtle representativeness of his aesthetics. The poems reflect the 'prosodic' and atypical doctrine interspersed in the work, but without alluding to the, at times, crazed runaround as he explains his emotional take on the imagination, poetry and everything. Their interplay and dynamism show the greater theory behind the work, not as it is laid out in the prose-form philosophy, but as the two disparate paths create as they converge in the over-all experience, which is what Williams' believed a poem should be.

II: *In the American Grain*: Williams' Experiment with American History and Styles of Prose

After the chaotic energy that led to *Spring and All*, Williams' attention turned from the imagination to the past. This shift in topic marks a change in how he approached writing. Unlike every book he had written up to this point, *In the American Grain*²⁹

²⁹ Hereafter referred to solely as *Grain*.

required research and a more formal consideration of structure. At 234 pages, *Grain* exceeds his previous output by several thousands of words. Its topic—broadly, the historical figures of the Americas—demanded a minimum familiarity with primary and secondary sources. Without that baseline of information, Williams could not break through the tradition of historical writing without seeming like an interloper and fraudster. As opposed to his habitual after-hours scribbling, his intent for *Grain* required a different work arrangement, to which he and his family willingly acceded.³⁰

Grain can be considered both a departure from and a adherence to the structural and tonal fusion initially settled upon in *Spring and All*. Consisting of twenty-four sections, each concentrated on one figure, event, or topic from American³¹ history, *Grain* contains an equal number of stylistic approaches. A handful of chapters consist of excerpted collages of primary texts, such as Cotton Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World*. Similarly, the same method is used with the addition of Williams' interpretative addendum. This method is put to use in the chapter "Poor Richard," in which Williams quotes a significant portion of Benjamin Franklin's *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America*, with a concluding piece by Williams called "Notes for a Commentary on Franklin." Both of these types of chapters make up *Grain*'s sporadic forays into editorial excerpting, where Williams purposefully omits and arranges the quoted text to further his intended effect. Other chapters are strict narrative retellings of

³⁰ The biographical details of this period include a year-long sabbatical from his medical practice, a trip to Europe, and leaving both his Rutherford homestead and his two teenage sons for a temporary residence in New York City so he could access the public library for his research. Any biography on Williams will cover this period of change in the writer's life, but Herbert Leibowitz's "*Something Urgent I have to Say to You*": *The Life and Works of William Carlos Williams* does so with concision and a keen appreciation for this period contextualized within the larger scheme of Williams' development as a writer. See the excellent chapter, "The 'Strange Phosphorus' of American History," for Leibowitz's take on this period and *Grain*.

³¹ Williams includes North, South, and Central America in his appraisal. When "American history" is referenced, I mean the totality from the arctic regions of Canada to the tip of Argentina.

particular events. These historical fictions—such as “Red Eric” and “The Discovery of Kentucky”—share only the narrative form. Each story varies drastically in style, tone, perspective, degree of elaboration by the author, and thematic focus. The book’s first chapter on Eric the Red is written in a barbaric impressionism in the first-person³², colored entirely by the eponymous narrator’s subjective senses and emotions as he faces the hardships of exile as a result of internecine dispute and the fracturing of his clan. Finally, the third broad category of chapters consists of the injection of Williams into the historical fray. These pieces vary just as widely in degree of authorial presence as do the styles and themes in the pieces of historical fiction. Some resemble standard historical analyses where the facts are recounted and some commentary is added by the compiler. In another, Williams records a conversation he had with an acquaintance about the chapter’s subject, as in “Pere Sebastian Rasles.” The remaining chapters elude classification, sharing characteristics with one or more of the three primary classifications, or command a separate path.

Regardless of the book’s disparate styles and formal approaches, Williams advocates a new method of dealing with the past. In chapters like “Red Eric” that are essentially fictive elaborations of events and figures of some historical importance, Williams writes primarily from his imagination. Once the historical record has been studied and internalized, he writes beyond the known facts. Elaboration is the fundamental basis for Williams’ engagement with history. The details of Eric the Red’s exile—his hardships and feelings—have not been previously recorded, and really cannot have been. Williams, accurately or not, provides this context more thoroughly. Obviously

³² Though apparently third-person, Eric seems to be telling his own story as one would around a campfire, recounting his own exploits.

the man experienced untold and unknowable sensations, travails, interactions, and so on. Each individual does so. The difference is that historically ignored people do not have historians relating and interpreting their lives based on records of whatever nature, accuracy, or thoroughness. The traditional method of historical writing ignores the infinitude of personal peccadilloes because the record does not, and indeed cannot exist. Historians, Williams would argue, marginalize the individuals while propagating an incomplete persona.

Williams lays out his intention regarding the handling of individual figures in the short prefatory statement of *Grain*. He writes, “In these studies I have sought to re-name the things seen, now lost in chaos of borrowed titles, many of them inappropriate, under which the true character lies hid. [...] it has been my wish to draw from every source one thing, the strange phosphorus of the life, nameless under an old misappellation” (i). From historical sources, he draws out the underlying “new contours suggested by old words.” History misnames these figures because they hew too close to imperfect and incomplete accounts. The “characters” are elaborated to show the “contours”, or unseen subjective aspects of their individual existences: their feelings and character traits, motivations and insecurities. Williams seeks the unwritten, and so he writes it. This is an attempt to create a new genre, filling the void between history and historical fiction. *Grain* is an imaginative history through which Williams reestablishes the humanity of historical figures while adhering to the outline of historical ‘fact.’ His imagination reinvigorates the past with the “strange phosphorus of the” lives of American history’s preeminent and infamous cast.

Williams was fascinated by the potential for imaginative history. In “The Virtue of History,” Aaron Burr’s life is summarized and reevaluated through the force of Williams’ imagination. Before the life of Burr begins to be reassessed, Williams presents his opinion regarding ubiquitous historical judgments. He claims that history “portrays us in generic patterns, like effigies or the carvings on sarcophagi, which say nothing save, of such and such a man, that he is dead” (188). Figures become fixed, whereas Williams believes that this is an unnecessary falsity which he describes as a “tyranny over the souls of the dead” (189). He objects, primarily, to the end of discussion on a figure or event. The phrase, “there that’s finished,” should not exist in thought or deed. “History must stay open, it is all humanity,” Williams believes, going against what he sees as the inevitable fixity “which few escape.” One place where he sees this trend bucked is in literature, “in which alone humanity is protected against tyrannous designs.” This protection against tyranny exists because of the imagination of the writer. Poetic license and the elaboration required in fleshing out a ‘character’ loosens the historical rigidity. Literary handling allows for some ‘wiggle room’ between the limited historical account based on fact, and the endless stream of potential inaccuracies, misrepresentation, and inaccessible, internal qualities of the soul. Williams ends the introductory statements on history with the following distillation of his concerns:

We can begin by saying: No opinion can be trusted; even the facts may be nothing but a printer’s error; but if a verdict be unanimous, it is sure to be a wrong one, a crude rush of the herd which has carried its object before it like a helpless condoning image. If we cannot make a man live again when he is gone, it is boorish to imprison him dead within some narrow definition, when, were he in his shoes before us, we could not do it. It’s

lies, such history, and dangerous. Just there may lie our one hope for the future, beneath that stone of prejudice. (190)

From this, it becomes apparent that ‘herd’ mentality is at the root of Williams’ concerns. Thinking back on his anti-hierarchical system of knowledge, the authority granted written history causes one opinion to trickle down through the subsequent histories, preempting reevaluation. The historian’s knowledge cannot be considered supreme when his or her knowledge is incomplete, when, in fact, all knowledge is incomplete. The acceptance of this limitation is the liberating force for an artist. And once liberated, the imagination can finally work through the artist at work.

Williams’ take on Burr in “The Virtue of History” epitomizes the proper method and desired result of approaching history. The chapter harkens back to the two unnamed voices engaged in a dialogue from *The Great American Novel*. In “Virtue,” the two speakers are eerily connected. Indeed, they are obviously both manifestations of Williams’ imagination, but the way one finishes the other’s thoughts makes it difficult to keep them separate. The above-quoted paragraph ends with the aborted phrase, “Perhaps Burr—”(190). Chiming in with the completed thought, the second voice asks, “A prophet?” This arrangement allows Williams to naturally argue against a receptive opponent with an understanding of the traditional discipline of history. Regularly, the second voice³³ interrupts its counterpart with a relevant historical quote. The second voice’s line after the dotting completion of its complement’s sentence is a quote from Alexander Hamilton. Ignoring the interruption, the first speaker finishes his thought, “Perhaps Burr carried into politics an element of democratic government, even a major

³³ I refer to the voice as ‘first’ and ‘second’ because the former dominates the conversation, and also, simply, because of the order of appearance.

element, those times were slighting[...]an element so powerful and so rare that he was hated for it, feared—and loved” (190). To which the second recites the pertinent quote: “‘A dangerous man, one who ought not to be trusted with the reins of government,’ said Hamilton.” Their interplay allows the first to bounce ideas off the usually concise responses of the second. In response to the Hamilton quote, the first voice rejects the generalization, and offers evidence of his own that puts Hamilton and all of Burr’s detractors in a questionable light: “How dangerous, and to whom? To usurpers? Why did the Senate weep so uncontrolledly [sic] at his farewell address? Perhaps he had somebody’s number. The hateful deed he spoke of had been done already...” (190). The back-and-forth mimics the critical process one should undergo when confronted with any person’s proclaimed truth. Williams’ motto, in this regard, is, “Don’t take their word for it.”

As the piece progresses through Burr’s life, the two voices draw nearer to each other, with the second taking the role of a glorified parrot. It just so happens that the parrot has a working understanding of the first and second generation of the American founding fathers. Once the two voices begin to act as one, Williams’ methodology of extrapolating becomes apparent. He seems to draw on two distinct sources: Sherlock Holmes and conspiracy theorists. On the one hand, he deduces brilliantly. Regarding the decades long feud with Hamilton, Burr suffered a lifetime of attempted ruination by his political rival. Yet when publically described as “politically dangerous” by Hamilton, Burr’s request for an explanation went unanswered. A duel resulted. When asked if perhaps Hamilton was correct in considering Burr a scheming and selfish libertine, the first voice recounts the details of their duel:

Hamilton fired first, the bullet clipping a twig above Burr's head. His hand was trembling. [...] Then Burr fired. He shot coolly, seriously and with conviction. He killed his man, logically and as he meant to do and knew he must. For a moment, as he saw his adversary fall, he was overcome with compassion, then turned away. Hamilton, before he died, dictated his astonishing testament, in which he says—imagine the flimsy nature of his lifelong enmity toward the man—that, regarding Burr, he “might have been misinformed of his intentions.” Good God, what an answer! Work till you are fifty-seven to ruin a man, insult him, malign him and then say, dying: I may have been misinformed. (201)

Unlike most historians, Williams imagines the emotions and subtleties of his subjects. Burr's attitude at the duel, in comparison to Hamilton's, including the turnaround of his death-gripped confession, informs Williams' imaginative understanding of Burr beyond what the censorious masses of academia claim. He saw Burr as a misunderstood embodiment of the values for which he and his contemporaries fought the War of Independence (207). Many of Burr's values were shared strongly by Williams himself. Perhaps this was what drew him to record his wife's account of Burr's life.

The chapter ends with the story of Burr's old age advice to a curious ‘lady.’ When asked if the stories regarding his past as a libertine were true, as “they say” they were, Burr replied: “They say, they say, they say. Ah, my child, how long are you going to continue to use those dreadful words? Those two little words have done more harm than all others. Never use them, my dear, never use them” (207). Rumors and gossip condemned Burr to achieve and contribute less than Williams believed he was capable of attaining. For being a step ahead of his time, his brilliance was sacrificed because of petty claims of immorality by “triflers” (204). Yet the centuries had not sufficiently reassessed

those possibly libelous claims. Instead, historians and history savvy individuals listened to what ‘they’ had first said.

Burr represents the extreme example of Williams’ imaginative history, if only because Burr’s character is categorically derided. His laudable elements of personality are overshadowed by the criticism levied upon him by Jefferson and Hamilton—two figures sanctified because of their status as “Founding Fathers.” Williams’ version of Burr is closer to a hypothesis than a verifiable exoneration. “The Virtue of History” offers an alternative to the prevailing opinion³⁴ regarding a man whose story sparked the interest of both William Carlos and Flossie Williams³⁵.

To reiterate, Williams believed that traditional historical writing comes short of capturing the essence of the past. Based on imperfect source material, the operative method behind history has suffered as a result of its unimaginative foundation. As with literary tastes and practices, history descends from the European tradition. Just as Williams calls for new, American forms of art, so too does he see the need for a fresh, American handling of history to counteract the detrimental effects on how the country understands its antecedents.

³⁴ History, Williams would say, can be nothing more than an opinion because the knowledge is almost always acquired secondhand. Readers of all ‘non-fiction’ should approach such works warily. Though he never discusses the topic, firsthand records of the lives of individuals—autobiography and, more so, biography relying on interviews with the subject and his or her close associates—might satisfy Williams’ need for subjectivity. Even if these firsthand histories are prone to the bias resulting from *strong* personalities, the detail afforded by these methods would do no detriment to the effort.

³⁵ In *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, Williams confesses that all the research on Aaron Burr was done by his wife, and he only wrote him into *In the American Grain* because she “told [his] story so graphically and vividly” that he had to sit down immediately to add him (43). Undoubtedly, this mostly applies to Burr’s own chapter that immediately follows “Jacataqua,” but it seems reasonable to assume he picked up this scene from either Floss, his wife, or through an account of the Sachem. Since Williams does not cite the sources behind his interpreted takes on the scenes and people, *Grain* is obstructed from being fact-checked.

In *The Great American Novel* and *Spring and All*, Williams describes the inferiority complex driving America's adherence to Europe's traditions. Its sterile approach to history condemns Europe to obsolescence, if only America (and any other nation that successfully breaks with Euro-normative culture) can break off anew. Williams believed in the American individualism that values deeds and innovation. With time, he has described the gradual defeat of the pioneer spirit by Eurocentric tastemakers and intellectuals. All of these leanings toward European tendencies are reinforced by the passive American relationship with the past.

All Williams really desires is the imaginative and critical engagement with the past, continuing the country's nominally innovative nature. In "Pere Sebastian Rasles," Williams responds to his conversation partner:

Against [Cotton Mather's] view I continually protested. I cannot separate myself, I said, from this ghostly miasm. It grips me. I cannot merely talk of books, just of Mather as if he were some pearl.—I began to be impatient of my friend's cultured tolerance, the beauties he saw. I grant you, I said, the stench of their narrowing beliefs has been made to cling too closely to the men of that time, but the more reason then to lift it out, to hold it apart, to sacrifice *them* if necessary, in order to disentangle this "thing." (115)

The "miasm" of the accepted past disallows Williams from understanding the difference between the pioneers and "a theoretic dogma that clung to them unevenly" (114). The essence of this difference is the "thing" he needs to draw out from the murkiness of past

books. Records and artifacts do not recount the multifaceted nature of Puritan settlers; only edited accounts of deeds and characteristics remain to posterity. Williams can sense the absent distinction and *Grain* attempts to separate, compare, and distill the untold from the recorded. This is expressed best when he writes: "I speak only of sources. I wish only to disentangle the obscurities that oppress me, to track them to the root and to uproot them." He continues, "I seek the support of history but I wish to understand it aright, to make it SHOW itself" (116). The past must be acknowledged, but its surface obscures the truth underneath. History, like poetry, must be revealed to the writer through some engagement, critically, with the surface reality. Just as one acquires knowledge through experience, which in turn becomes a broader understanding of the system of knowledge, so too does history require experience to uncover its depths. The text, both first- and secondhand, must be read and, through the imagination, superficial knowledge is replaced with a more thorough representation of the unknowable past.

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