M. L. Rosenthal: On William Carlos Williams' Life and Career

Williams was a medical student at the University of Pennsylvania, where he began his lifelong friendship with Pound (a 'special student' there) and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), the daughter of an astronomer whose observatory was associated with the university. Williams had a serious medical career. He studied advanced pediatrics in Germany after his internship, set up private practice in Rutherford, New Jersey (his native town), and eventually became head pediatrician of the General Hospital in the nearby city of Paterson.

Meanwhile, he played an active role in the avant-garde poetic movements centered in New York City and was also constantly in touch with Pound’s literary activities and associates in Europe. His major difference with Pound (apart from Williams’s acutely responsive and realistic presentations of women and his revulsion against fascism; see especially Paterson III–V) lay in his desire to create a specifically American poetics based on the rhythms and colorations of American speech, thought, and experience. His little prose work In the American Grain (1925) is a highly original and intense effort to present—in a sense, to create—the key events and figures of what Horace Gregory, in his introduction to the 1939 reprint, called America’s ‘mythical history’. Without being so intended, it is something of a companion volume to D. H. Lawrence’s Studies in Classic American Literature (1923). The two books complement one another, and in fact Lawrence reviewed Williams’s book with respectful interest. The reciprocal preoccupations of these two dynamic intelligences is one demonstration among many that Williams, like Whitman, was not a provincial despite his passionate search for a truly American poetry. His art and his larger interests were ultimately cosmopolitan.

His Autobiography (New York, 1951) is partly devoted to the medical side of his life and its crucial relation to his poetry—which, like his fiction, draws heavily on his experience as a doctor. His working-class patients, especially the women, whose babies he delivered and whose hardy courage he vastly admired, absorbed his sympathetic if sometimes irritated attention much as Chekhov’s peasant patients did his. They were of a different order of ethnic and class background, often, from the essentially middle-class world of Rutherford where he had spent his childhood and where he settled after his marriage to Florence Herman, the ‘Floss’ of his poems, who also appears in his plays and is the central figure of his novel White Mule (1937)—the first in a trilogy based on the lives of her Swedish mother and German father as immigrants in America.

Williams has gradually emerged as one of the great forces in twentieth-century American verse. His experiments, though striking, may have lacked the brilliance of Pound’s and Eliot’s at their best, and they may lack the elegance of Wallace Stevens in Harmonium or The Auroras of Autumn. But Williams’s work is more expressive of American sensibility, and more saturated with American speech and its rhythms, than any poet’s since Whitman. For these reasons he has entered the bloodstream of later American poetry: Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, Paul Blackburn, and many others show strong traces of his influence. (And indeed his poetry has also cast a net of ‘Americanization’ overseas, in the form of some poets’ stylistic
reorientation. We find writers like Charles Tomlinson and John Montague, for example, reflecting this influence while adapting it to their own countries' colloquial turns and poetic traditions.)

Robert Frost, of course, rivals Williams in his use of the native idiom--his poems are true to the speech and the trapped psyches of the New England country-people he knew; the dark elegiac and tragic strains running through so much of what he wrote carry it far beyond mere pastoral charm. Williams, however, expresses the whole nation's character, and especially its urban volatility: its multiracial and immigrant streams of speech and behaviour, its violence and exuberance, its ignorance of its own general and regional history. His important sequence Paterson, published serially between 1946 and 1961 in five 'Books' and part of a sixth, is an exploration of all these matters. It is presented as a search for the elements of a 'common language': a shared cultural and historical awareness to counteract the fragmentation of American society. Williams saw this fragmentation as a pressure for 'divorce' (i.e., inability to connect or communicate), not only between the sexes but among the people at large.

Williams's Selected Essays (New York, 1954) are most useful as clues to his artistic and intellectual affinities. Joyce, Pound, Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, and Kenneth Burke loom large in this respect, together with Alfred Stieglitz and certain painters: Brueghel, Matisse, Tchelitchew, Sheeler. Williams had far more of a painter's eye than do most poets; see, for instance, his Pictures from Brueghel (1962). His famous, somewhat baffling, yet nevertheless valuable concept of the 'variable foot' (each 'foot'--or line-fragment--a held moment or unit of measure within an unfolding apperception) gives the typographical movement of his later poems something of the character of animated abstract painting. It is clear that he felt a compelling convergence of visual and aural patterns as he wrote.

At the same time, his poems project a sensuous and associative immediacy of extraordinary vivacity. Their aura of spontaneous improvisation has misled many younger poets into overlooking his artistry. ('Rigor of beauty is the quest,' he wrote at the start of the 'Preface' to Paterson.) Perhaps it was his apparently relaxed colloquialism--often coupled, however, with startling shifts of focus and with eloquent passages of beautifully controlled rhythm and phrasing--that delayed recognition of his achievement even in the United States.


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