Linda Wagner-Martin: On William Carlos Williams' Life and Career

Williams, William Carlos (17 Sept. 1883-4 Mar. 1963), author and physician, was born in Rutherford, New Jersey, the son of William George Williams, a New York businessman of British extraction, and Raquel Hélène Hoheb, who was from Puerto Rico. William Carlos Williams spoke Spanish and French as well as English. From 1897 to 1899 he was schooled in Switzerland, with some time in Paris. In 1902 he graduated from high school in New York and was accepted into the dental school of the University of Pennsylvania, but soon transferred to the medical school. There began his long-lived friendships with Ezra Pound, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), and artist Charles Demuth. Because his mother was an artist, Williams tried painting. Between 1906 and 1909 Williams did internships at both the old French Hospital and Child's Hospital in New York, and at the same time courted Florence "Flossie" Herman, who promised to wait for him while he studied pediatrics in Leipzig.

After his study in Germany, Williams traveled in the Netherlands, France, England, and Spain. In 1910 he opened a private practice in Rutherford, New Jersey, and in 1912 he and Flossie married; they were to have two sons. Williams had published his first poetry collection, Poems, in 1909; in 1913 Elkin Mathews, Pound's publisher, published a second collection, The Tempers, in London.

New York was afire over the 1913 Armory Show of French and Spanish modern paintings, and Williams was restless as a general practitioner in New Jersey while the literary and artistic world hummed happily away in Paris. He worked harder at being a writer than he did at being a physician; he came to know the Others poets Alfred Kreymborg, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Marcel Duchamp, and Maxwell Bodenheim, as well as Edna St. Vincent Millay. His work appeared regularly in both Pound's and Amy Lowell's Imagist collections of poetry. His third volume, Al Que Quiere!--which reflected Williams's Spanish and Puerto Rican roots--was published in 1917. But few writers had a more intense understanding of what being "American" meant; like Gertrude Stein, Williams loved his country with the fascination of the partly disenfranchised. The death of his father in 1918 may have intensified his quest for place and belonging. Elusive, evanescent, his country remained poised just outside his possession, and his love of America became a pervasive theme in both his poetry and the fiction he began to write in the 1920s.

Experimentation had become a way of life for Williams as he crafted such seemingly casual poems as "This Is Just to Say" and "At the Ballgame." With Mina Loy he acted in one of Alfred Kreymborg's plays, and he wrote a play himself (The Apple Tree), though Kreymborg lost the only copy. After his experiences with theater, Williams's need to innovate spilled into prose with the important Kora in Hell: Improvisations (1920) and his editing of Contact with Robert McAlmon. Stressing the need to connect with the earth and the reality of life, the editors of the short-lived magazine insisted on art that stemmed from the mundane. Williams's montage of poems and prose titled Spring and All (1923) explored the ways real speech and events could become art, continuing some of the wry irony of his 1921 poetry collection, Sour Grapes; The Great American Novel, his comic parody of James Joyce's Ulysses, also appeared in 1923 as
part of Ezra Pound's series of new writing. In 1924 Williams took a sabbatical year. Working in the New York Public Library for half the year, he wrote magnificent characterizations of figures from American history, In the American Grain (1925); he and his wife then traveled to France, leaving the children with friends. In 1926 his short poem "Paterson" won the Dial Award, but an out-of-court settlement regarding his story "The Five Dollar Guy," published in New Masses, in which he had called a fictional character by a real person's name, cost him $5,000.

Still restless, in 1927 Williams sent his wife with their two sons to Europe; while they were in school, she traveled and Williams later joined her. His encounters with James Joyce, Brancusi, Gertrude Stein, Pound, and others whetted his appetite for literary success, but he believed his route to fame lay in his American experiences. He published another prose-poetry mélange, The Descent of Winter, and in 1928 A Voyage to Pagany, a first novel as romantic as his first poems had been. The next year he translated the surrealist Philippe Soupault's Last Nights of Paris, and in 1930, with Richard Johns, edited the experimental magazine Pagany. Close on the heels of his immersion in French surrealism came his prominent place in Louis Zukofsky's "Objectivist" issue of Poetry, for which he won the Guarantor's Prize from that little magazine. In 1932 Williams's publications combined unpredictable and often comic surrealism in A Novelette and Other Prose with the stark accuracy of the Objectivists in The Knife of the Times and Other Stories. With novelist Nathanael West, he resumed publishing the magazine Contact for a three-issue run.

Concerned and saddened by the 1930s depression, which hit his blue-collar patients hard, Williams continued to publish incisive short stories in New Masses, Anvil, Little Review, and other left journals; these stories appeared in his 1938 collection Life along the Passaic River. Although Williams was writing more fiction than poetry, in 1934 Zukofsky published Williams's Complete Poems 1921-1931; in 1936 Williams's opera libretto, The First President, appeared, along with another poetry collection, Adam & Eve & the City. James Laughlin's New Directions Press, one of the few publishing houses interested in innovative work, published in 1937 White Mule, the first of what Williams would call his "Stecher" trilogy, fictions loosely based on his wife's relatives. This successful and very American novel about German immigrants' lives was followed in 1940 by In the Money and, in 1952, The Build-Up. Although in 1938 Williams's The Complete Collected Poems had appeared, he was thought of more frequently as a prose writer because of his visible, and political, fiction throughout the decade.

World War II and Williams's busy practice with civilian patients nearly brought his writing career to a halt. In 1944 he published a poetry collection, The Wedge, in which the anguish of his own weariness with trying to combine the careers of a literary man and a physician was evident.

Finally, in 1946 Paterson I, the first book of the epic poem he had been struggling to write for nearly twenty years, was published. In its totality, Paterson was in some ways an answer to T. S. Eliot's lament over the decline of values in twentieth-century mechanized culture. The doctor-poet persona of the poem, who is himself named Paterson and lives in the industrial town of Paterson, New Jersey, leads a normal life, sees normal happenings, and learns to live with philosophical and sexual freedoms. He may not like the behaviors of his "townpeople," but he at least gives them the right to decide what their behaviors will be. By concentrating on the dailiness of the poet's experience, using idiomatic language and the rhythms of speech in his poetry, Williams forced readers to see that their lives were poetic. A distinctive blend of prose excerpts and free-form poetry, Williams's work grew from what he had learned by reading Pound's Cantos, Hart Crane's The Bridge, and the work of Walt Whitman, H.D., John Dos Passos, and countless other American writers--always reacting spiritedly against Eliot's
poetry of the 1920s. Happily, critics recognized Paterson's worth as the expression of Williams's unique voice and vision.

In 1947 Williams gave a series of lectures and workshops on the art of the short story at the University of Washington, his first academic exposure. But years of struggle to keep two careers going had worn him out; in 1948 he experienced his first heart attack. That same year he nevertheless published the second volume of Paterson, A Dream of Love (a play), and several small collections of poems. In 1949 he published Selected Poems and Paterson III, along with the chapbook The Pink Church, which later provoked controversy because of its apparent association with communism, even though it was simply a poem about the human body. He won the Russell Loines Award and was made a fellow of the Library of Congress.

In 1950 Williams's writing career peaked: he was awarded the National Book Award for Selected Poems and Paterson III; he and Flossie spent time at the Yaddo artists' colony--his first leisure to write seriously in twenty-five years--and then took a reading tour along the West Coast. He published Make Light of It: Collected Short Stories and Collected Later Poems (1940-1950), and began publishing with Random House, the first commercial publisher besides New Directions to handle his work. Paterson IV, Autobiography of William Carlos Williams, and The Collected Earlier Poems all appeared during 1951.

In March 1951, however, Williams had his first stroke and retired from medical practice, and in August 1952 he had another serious stroke. Controversy over his being named consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress--because of his own supposed associations with communism and his friendship with Ezra Pound, who had broadcast for the Fascists during World War II--led to his hospitalization for depression during part of 1953. Though he shared the Bollingen Prize for Poetry with Archibald MacLeish that year, he lost the coveted consultanship and felt that his character and his devotion to his country had been maligned.

Writing in what became known as the "triadic line," Williams published two collections of late poems, some of his best work. The Desert Music appeared in 1954, Journey to Love, which included the moving "To Asphodel," a love poem to Flossie, in 1955. He also published Selected Essays and a translation, done with his mother, of Don Francisco de Quevedo's A Dog and the Fever (1954). In 1955 he took another extensive reading tour. In 1957 John Thirlwall edited Selected Letters, and in 1958 he published Paterson V and a conversational bibliography, done with Edith Heal, I Wanted to Write a Poem.

In October 1955 Williams had his third, paralyzing stroke. Though he eventually taught himself to speak again and learned to type with his unparalyzed hand on an electric typewriter, his pace necessarily slowed. In 1959 he published Yes, Mrs. Williams, a biography of his mother, and participated in the successful off-Broadway run of his play Many Loves. Short stories collected in The Farmers' Daughters and plays collected in Many Loves and Other Plays appeared in 1961. He also survived another debilitating series of strokes. In 1962 New Directions published what would be Williams's last poetry collection, Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems (including the triadic line work of The Desert Music and Journey to Love), the collection that won the 1963 Pulitzer Prize for poetry posthumously. Williams died in Rutherford.

No listing of Williams's work can do more than suggest the range, interest, and experimentation of his writing in the forms of fiction, drama, poetry, epic, essay, and sketch. Criticism suggests that he is more properly a postmodernist than a modernist, for Williams embodied the spirit of adventure and quest that was hardly anticipated in the weary angst of
modernism as it was then defined. As if he were listening continuously to Pound's maxim, "Make it new," Williams drew his life in America in his poems' terse images: "a young horse with a green bed-quilt / on his withers shaking his head," "A big young bareheaded woman / in an apron," "Flowers through the window / lavender and yellow / changed by white curtains." He presented these images unapologetically. His purpose was not to point a moral or teach a lesson; rather, he wanted his readers to see through his eyes the beauty of the real. He was content to rest with the assumption that the reader could duplicate Williams's own sense of importance of red wheelbarrows and the green glass between hospital walls, and thereby dismiss the need for symbolism. As he said succinctly in Paterson, "no ideas but in things."

Just as Williams established new principles for the writing of poetry, so he revitalized American fiction. Much of his prose is carried through dialogue that makes Ernest Hemingway's seem contrived and redundant. Moving as far from literary convention as possible--most of his fiction is plotless--his prose was criticized by contemporaries for being artless, but later readers have found his emphasis on the basic elements of language, structure, and character essential to postmodernist work (the Minimalists, led by Raymond Carver, owe a great deal to Williams). "The Burden of Loveliness," "Jean Beicke," "The Use of Force," and other stories are often anthologized. The same kind of paring away of convention dominated his plays, whether in the fragmented forms of Many Loves or the more conventional A Dream of Love. A powerful agent once told Williams that she could not place his dramatic writing because it was so unconventional; that segment of his work has yet to be rediscovered. The writings of William Carlos Williams are a nearly inexhaustible reservoir of twentieth-century American themes and images, given expression through a voice unique in the history of literature.

Bibliography

Williams's papers are housed primarily at the Beinecke Library, Yale University, and the Lockwood Memorial Library, SUNY, Buffalo. Bibliographical information appears in Emily Mitchell Wallace, A Bibliography of William Carlos Williams (1968); Linda W. Wagner, William Carlos Williams: A Reference Guide (1978); and chapters by Wagner on criticism of Williams's work in Sixteen Modern American Authors (rev. ed., 1973; vol. 2, 1990). Reed Whittemore, William Carlos Williams: Poet from Jersey (1975), was the first biography; Paul L. Mariani, William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked (1981), is an exhaustive, complete biography. Some private papers are sealed until 2013, fifty years from the poet's death, so biographical work may begin again at that time.


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