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THE DESERT MUSIC OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS:

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF AUTHENTIC EXPRESSION

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in English at Massey University.

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- To My Parents -

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PREFACE

It is the purpose of this essay to study the poetical works of William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) that are contained in The Desert Music collection in addition to a study of one poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower", included in the collection entitled Journey to Love. The Desert Music poems were first published in 1954, Journey to Love appeared one year later. Both these selections were subsequently published in 1962 in a cumulative volume entitled Pictures from Brueghel which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1963. It is this latter volume from which my textual quotations come.

It has been my concern to consider these poems from a particular viewpoint, one which^{as} will be made clear in this essay, was of enduring interest to the poet himself. Throughout his long writing career Williams was deeply concerned to establish a distinct and significant literary tradition in the United States. Much of the literature that was written by Americans Williams felt to be, if not irrelevant, then only bearing partial relation to the people, events and peculiar experience of the United States. Literature written in the United States, he maintained, was to be authentic, it must reflect and explore the American experience. This work is an effort to document and examine William Carlos Williams' achievement of identity and genuine expression as an American poet.

This is not a study of a mere regional poet. Williams

himself stressed that to be a regional poet alone was insufficient. He had, however, to understand and contain the area from which he came. The approach adopted has been to commence with a consideration of a variety of prose works by Williams that express his intentions and hopes as a writer. The most significant of these is In the American Grain (1925) but of importance also are the Prologue to Kora in Hell (1920) and a wide range of essays and letters. These writings establish clearly Williams' particular concept of authenticity and also reveal the poet's attitude towards poets such as T.S. Eliot, whose values and expression he vehemently opposed.

A general discussion of Williams' sprawling manifestos occupies the first chapter with a view to showing their application in poems in Pictures from Brueghel. These poems are peak works in Williams' career. Kenneth Rexroth saw The Desert Music as the beginning of a new era of accomplishment for William Carlos Williams, then nearing seventy:

...from now on, as Williams grows older, he will rise as far above his contemporaries as Yeats did above his in his latter years. The fruit has ripened on the tree.¹

Indeed in letters, quoted below, Williams himself felt that in theme and prosody these poems embody authentically attitudes and experiences he wanted to convey.

The following three chapters analyse these poems, grouping them thematically. The first of these deals with the descent, which I wish to establish as a key motif, in addition to a discussion of his triadic "variable foot". The next chapter

is concerned with poems stressing synthesis and harmony and Chapter Four which focuses mainly on "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" is concerned with love and its significance for the poet's craft.

While the poems selected for study are all late ones written in a very short span of his long literary career, I feel justified in concentrating on them. They are evidence not only, as Rexroth says, that "the fruit has ripened on the tree" but they also epitomise the consistency and devotion that Williams displayed in the 1950s to principles that he stressed initially in the 1920s and earlier.

The opening chapter deals with Williams' hopes as a writer. The following three chapters deal with the transfer of these precepts to some of his poems. The conclusion attempts to define and evaluate his achievement and examine the peculiarity and quality of Williams' search for genuine statement.

Included as appendices are two extracts from Williams' writing, too lengthy for inclusion in the text but too relevant to be excluded. They are the chapter 'Descent' from In the American Grain and the final section, "St. James' Grove" of the early and seminal poem "The Wanderer".

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