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THE DESERT MUSIC OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS:

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF AUTHENTIC EXPRESSION

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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<sup>as</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

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".

For their assistance and guidance in the preparation of this essay my thanks are due to the following people:

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## CHAPTER 1

### "PIECE BY PIECE WE MUST LOOSEN WHAT WE WANT"

"We have no words. Every word we get must be broken off from the European mass...Piece by piece we must loosen what we want"<sup>1</sup>

The writing of William Carlos Williams has been just such an attempt. Williams, hamstrung by his alienation from the orthodoxy of American poetry and reluctant to become an exile, sought to find the new words to frame the new ideas that he felt as an American artist. He was not, of course, the first to have attempted this or even to have recognised it. Ralph Waldo Emerson much earlier had proclaimed vehemently in his essay on The American Scholar (1837) that "we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe".<sup>2</sup> Williams as a typical New World writer confronted the problem as if it existed only for him but this in part informed his writing with greater urgency and enabled him to develop an idiosyncratic style.

Williams, as a major poet of the early 20th century, reveals a number of difficulties. He, unlike Pound, chose not to eschew American life and values though he was unhesitating in his judgements on them. Rather he chose the essentially provincial

life of a physician in Rutherford, New Jersey. But his aesthetics and his writing are not those of a regional poet and his influence on, and acquaintance with, leading American writers—Ezra Pound, H.D., Marianne Moore, Kenneth Burke and Wallace Stevens was scarcely that of a hayseed. In a long and constantly evolving career Williams wrote a mass of poetry, fiction, essays and letters that document the mind of a writer determined to hone his material to its truest edge, revealing with the greatest clarity and veracity the stuff not only of his dreams but of the most humble aspects of the phenomenal world. With Blakean simplicity he wrote to Marianne Moore: "I feel as much a part of things as trees and stones".<sup>3</sup>

Williams was very much preoccupied with the American dilemma. He sought to dissect and examine, to diagnose what he felt made it tick. His writing shows his process of discovery. Williams' prose works The Great American Novel and In the American Grain were attempts to come to grips with American aspirations and American history. He was trying to establish contact with the past and with the environment. In the American Grain was an attempt to create a "usable past", to use Van Wyck Brooks' phrase.<sup>4</sup>

Williams' interest in this book was to delineate the American zeitgeist. Williams wrote to Horace Gregory: "I must have a basis for orienting myself formally in the beliefs which activated me from day to day".<sup>5</sup> The orientation was in writing In the American Grain. It cleared the air for him to continue his writing and helped him to establish identity as an American writer. This book was a quasi-historical selection of essays on

major figures in American history. He ranges from Red Eric to Abraham Lincoln, simulating appropriate archaisms and prose to express his themes. The protagonists of American history he shows to be those of destruction—the conquistadors and the puritans—and those whose history is an example and inspiration to Americans now. It is hardly a patriotic treatise but rather seeks to express the qualities required for American art and society to prosper. His essays are digressive and subjective, historically, but not always thematically, sequential. Williams' attention shifts from past to present.

There was, Williams believed "a source IN AMERICA for everything we think or do".<sup>6</sup> There was a need to search out past motives and past experience to find the basis for an understanding of the present. This lay "in the intelligent investigation of the changes worked upon the early comers here, to the New World, the books, the records...what has been morally, aesthetically worth while in America has rested upon peculiar and discoverable ground".<sup>7</sup>

In an essay entitled The American Background Williams wrote of the first settlers. "They saw birds with rusty breasts and called them robins. Thus, from the start, an America of which they could have had no inkling, drove the first settlers upon their past....They found that they had not only left England but that they had arrived somewhere else: at a place whose pressing reality demanded not only a tremendous bodily devotion but as well, and more importunately, great powers of adaptability, a complete reconstruction of their most intimate cultural makeup,

to accord with the new conditions. The most hesitated and turned back in their hearts at the first glance".<sup>8</sup> For Williams the heroes, the true artists were men in the American grain like Raleigh, Poe and the backwoodsman Boone who "made contact with the intrinsic elements of an as yet unrealised material of which the country was made".<sup>9</sup> It was a receptivity to the new that Williams so admired in men like Boone, Rasles and Burr—they were "men intact—with all their senses waking"<sup>10</sup> who were therefore able to appreciate the wilderness, the Indian, the Negro, the "Common people" and give themselves to the realisation of these new beings.<sup>11</sup> It is this loving appreciation of the strange, the new and the different that is truly "moral: to be positive, to be peculiar, to be sure, generous, brave—TO MARRY, to touch—to give because one HAS".<sup>12</sup>

But these eager men with all their senses waking are overshadowed by the elements of destruction that Williams chronicles and reveals as concomitants to the American experience. The first destroyers were Cortez and de Leon, conquistadors who destroyed New World cultures. These men, Williams argues, were crass, they were "deafened and blinded" by the recreative New [World] unfolding itself miraculously before them".<sup>13</sup> "Bitter as the thought may be", Williams concludes, "that Tenochtitlan.... Should have been crushed out because of the awkward names give their emptiness, yet it was no man's fault".<sup>14</sup>

But the destruction that proved more malignant and more knowing was that of the Puritans who sanctioned their emptiness by the inverted morality of their religion. They did not grow in America, instead they "looked black at the world and damning

its perfections praised a zero in themselves".<sup>15</sup> The New World for the Puritans was a "squallid, horrid American Dessart" and they prided themselves on their alienation from it.<sup>16</sup>

Their religion was so "spiritual", so "concise, bare, PURE" that they were able to mask all natural beings—the woman, the child, the Indian—"into one safe mold". "They must have closed all the world out" asserts the poet "...Having in themselves nothing of curiosity, no wonder, for the New World".<sup>17</sup> It was precisely this element of wonder that was to characterise Williams' own work, an aspect that I will later discuss in this chapter. The Puritans were "virtuously" trapped. The insidious frigidity of the Puritan remains says Williams, he still "keeps his frightened grip upon the throat of the world"<sup>18</sup> so that no new American culture can begin. D.H. Lawrence in his review of In the American Grain wrote "There are two ways of being American; and the chief, says Mr. Williams, is by recoiling into individual smallness and insentience, and gutting the great continent in frenzies of mean fear. It is the Puritan way. The other is by touch: touch America as she is, dare to touch her! And this is the heroic way. And this, this sensitive touch upon the unseen America, is to be the really great adventure in the New World".<sup>19</sup>

It was the men unafraid to touch America as she is that offered alternatives to the shrinking, mean Puritan response that still exists "stinking all about you...a kind of mermaid with a corpse for a tail".<sup>20</sup> These men would liberate the emotions especially the erotic, they would liberate American

women and artists—"there have never been women" he wrote "save Pioneer Katies; not one in flower save some Moonflower Poe may have seen, or an unripe child. Poets? Where? They are the test....Never a woman: never a poet saw sun here".<sup>21</sup> It was men with their senses intact like Daniel Boone whose spirit, whose usable past could give new direction in the modern New World. Boone "was a great voluptuary born to the American settlements against the niggardliness of the damning puritanical tradition, one who by the single logic of his passion, which he vested on the savage life about him, destroyed at its spring that spiritually withering plague...full of a rich regenerative violence he remains, when his history will be carefully reported, for us who have come after to call upon him".<sup>22</sup>

The man who is to confront his environment fully, be it Boone or Poe or William Carlos Williams, must descend to discover new worlds. The idea of the descent is a key notion in Williams' writing. It is an image that he stresses and enacts repeatedly and one that for my purposes demonstrates the tenacity and consistency with which the poet clung to his principles. He gives the word 'descent' explicit illustration in the chapter entitled 'Descent' in In the American Grain. Similar references occur in an early poem entitled "The Wanderer", in a letter to Marianne Moore dated 1934, in Paterson, and in the opening poem of The Desert Music entitled "The Descent".

The most telling and forceful use of this notion, one that is central to his ideas on authentic literature, is found in In the American Grain.

While particular figures like Boone and Poe enact and illustrate the descent, the notion is most prosaically and explicitly stated in the essay entitled, simply, 'Descent'. This essay, curiously absent from the list of Contents in all editions, is concerned with one Samuel Houston born in 1793. It chronicles his early life, how he spent three years living with the Cherokee Indians before he "reascended to the settlements for school",<sup>23</sup> then later became Governor of Tennessee and married Eliza Allen. But the marriage collapsed after three months. He then rejoined the Cherokee, "left everything behind him and took the descent once more to the ground".<sup>24</sup> He lived with the tribe for eleven years and took an Indian woman for his wife. After this Houston 'rose' again, returned to European society and became a successful soldier, senator and Governor. Interspersed with these facts Williams makes clear the doctrine of the descent. It is to forgo all and rediscover the self and the ground. All must be done over, all must be destroyed, this was Houston's lesson and one that regenerated him to great achievement and sensitivity. Williams digresses wildly to rail at the universities and the state of American letters. Indeed Williams' antagonism towards academics and the universities only abated near the end of his life.

The essay 'Descent' places important stress on the realisation of the self and the locality and implicitly and explicitly points up the failure of American society. There is no authenticity in American letters because too few artists undergo the descent. The contribution of the woman, the

"feminine principle" that will be discussed in greater detail below, is shown to be aborted in Houston's failed marriage but repaired by his subsequent taking of an Indian wife. This action, Williams asserts, gave Houston a vigour and direction without which he would have failed. Williams desperately sought to return to first principles. "It is imperative that we sink" he wrote in 'Descent'.<sup>25</sup> This cultural and personal abnegation was combined with a strong sense of locality—the spirit of place—something Williams learned from the idealists and pioneers in the American grain. For example Poe was one who realised there could be an American culture. "He was the first to realise that the hard, sardonic, truculent mass of the New World, hot, angry, was in fact, not a thing to paint over, to smear, to destroy...that it is NOT a thing to be slighted by men...Poe conceived the possibility, the sullen, volcanic inevitability of the place".<sup>26</sup> Williams as an American and a poet was fully conscious of the inevitability of place, discoverable by descent to the foundations. "However hopeless it may seem" he concludes in 'Descent', "we have no other choice, we must go back to the beginning; it must all be done over; everything that is must be destroyed".<sup>27</sup>

The price to pay for this descent can be high. For the poet it can mean silence. Boone and those like him "had no way of making their realisations vocal. They themselves became part of the antagonistic wilderness against which the coastal settlements were battling. Their sadness alone survives. Many of them could hardly read. Their speech became crude. Their manners

sometimes offensive. It was the penalty they had to pay".<sup>28</sup>

The rediscovery of words and forms was a major part of Williams' attempt to find the American grain. As a poet he sought to find authentic expression; to come to grips with his place and his experience. Williams was proud of Ezra Pound's taunt which he incorporated into his long poem Paterson.

P. Your interest is in the bloody loam but what  
I'm after is the finished product.<sup>29</sup>

But, Williams contends, the finished product springs from the bloody loam and can only come from there. He will run the risk that his speech be unmannered and thick. "Where foreign values are held to be a desideratum, he who is buried and speaks thickly—is lost," he remarks angrily, "...Those who come up from under will have a mark on them that invites scorn, like a farmer's filthy clodhoppers".<sup>30</sup> But only from this primal loam can true poetry come. Only from there will Williams find the "hidden flame", a purity that is free of the husks of outdated and irrelevant conventions and forms. The descent must take place into the desert to find what Williams, in his poem, indicated was "The Desert Music". Poe, he said, "can be understood only in a knowledge of his deep roots. The quality of the flower will then be seen to be normal, in all its tortured spirituousity and paleness, a desert flower with roots under the sand of his day".<sup>31</sup> Whitman equally "had to come from under. All have to come up from under and through a dead layer".<sup>32</sup> The poet must know the loam Williams insisted. "He wants to have the feet of his understanding on the ground, his ground, the ground,

the only ground that he knows, that which is under the feet. I speak of aesthetic satisfaction. This want, in America, can only be filled by knowledge, a poetic knowledge, of that ground".<sup>33</sup>

Williams is concerned with this descent in his early poem "The Wanderer, a Rococco Study".<sup>34</sup> This poem as a whole, but its final section "St. James' Grove" in particular, reflects the preoccupation Williams had with the initiatory descent, the article of faith that "it is imperative that we sink".<sup>35</sup> The poet's relationship with the world is restated and with elaborate care. The whole poem is concerned with his initiation by his grandmother depicted as a sage old crone. In the "St. James' Grove" section and "Soothsay" immediately before it, two principles which merge as one become apparent. The first is what he called a sense of "inner security", the other is a consequence of this resignation to existence—a freedom as a poet to depict a total existence with the authority of his integrated artistic self. This was gained by an immersion and rebirth in his locality, metaphorically represented by the image of immersion in the sewage filled waters of the Passaic River, the "filthy Passaic". This sense of "inner security" he wrote in the letter, previously mentioned, to Marianne Moore, as "something that occurred to me when I was about twenty, a sudden resignation to existence, a despair—if you wish to call it that, but a despair that made everything a unit and at the same a part of myself. I suppose it might be called a sort of nameless religious experience. I resigned; I gave up".<sup>36</sup> This

resignation and consequent oneness with the world is his vindication as an artist. This is the **index** of his authenticity, his capacity to conjure up "The Desert Music" as it were. As a result of his 'death' in "The Wanderer" he strives for what he earlier in the poem called "a new grip /..up and out of terror "<sup>37</sup>.

It is the very transformation that Williams described as a realisation of "inner security" that is represented poetically in the final section, "St. James' Grove". His grandmother is presented as an old priestess bringing the young initiate to the water's edge:

She bathed our brows wailing and laughing:  
 "River, we are old, you and I,  
 We are old and by bad luck, beggars.  
 Lo, the filth in our hair, our bodies stink!  
 Old friend, here I have brought you  
 The young soul you long asked of me.  
 Stand forth, river and give me  
 The old friend of my revels!"

And the filthy Passaic consented!

An interchange of identities takes place and two streams emerge physically. The river is "Eddying back cool and limpid...:  
 But with the rebound it leaped forward / Muddy, then black and shrunken". This represents the two streams of life that Williams deals with in such poems as "The Desert Music" where the "other music" must be accommodated with the hideous deformity that also exists and cannot be evaded. The woman invokes the spirit of the river:

"Enter, youth, into this bulk!  
 Enter, river, into this young man!"

The two currents, one cool and refreshing, the other filthy and abhorrent, comprise the full apprehension of experience. The water flows over him

Muddy, then black and shrunken  
Till I felt the utter depth of its rottenness  
The vile breadth of its degradation  
and dropped down knowing this was me now.

"...this was me now" he writes. As the water finally finds its level he says: "I knew all—it became me." His baptism is complete, the poet is liberated to new and free expression. The old woman gives her final benediction:

Live, river, live in luxuriance  
Remembering this our son,  
In remembrance of me and my sorrow  
And of the new wandering !"

The new wandering, the further descent that Williams writes in his poem in The Desert Music collection, opens to new places "heretofore unrealised",<sup>38</sup> can now begin. The need for the reconciliation of both refreshing and the polluted currents is crucial to Williams' view of the poet. Williams called for a freedom of subject matter that embraced all existence "including the 'filthy Passaic', the repugnant, chaotic, and anti-poetic elements of reality both inside and outside of himself".<sup>39</sup> The artist, he wrote in an essay in 1939, "attacks, constantly toward a full possession of life by himself as a man".<sup>40</sup> This same theme, the exhortation to the descent, is repeated in Paterson III iii. This epic poem concerns simultaneously the city Paterson and the central protagonist also named Paterson. Like Joyce's Ulysses and Eliot's "The Waste Land", it contains

fragments and impressions. Published in five sections it is one of the longest modern poems written and includes a host of historical information as well as a dramatisation of the life of Mr. Paterson. It ranges freely but is centred on the stream metaphor of the Passaic River, the "filthy Passaic" into which the initiate must go in order to understand all the elements, good and abhorrent, of his experience. The poet falls into the slimy waters

to the teeth, to the very eyes

uh, uh.

(Paterson,<sup>41</sup>)

He makes the descent into the inarticulate mud, the teeth for speech and the eyes for seeing are submerged, there is finally the 'uh', 'uh' of the incomprehensible. From this the mind rises again, becomes fluid and learns new language, sees new landscapes both without and within. The authentic spirit of change on it; his poetry will reveal the flux, the glimpses, the beauty and the pain of experience.

Williams wanted this new poetry appropriate to its time and place, alive to its context. Instead he found only sham and flaccid imitation. On the tendency of Americans to adopt European ideas in one great bolus, Williams is merciless. European art had been plundered and taken to the New World. Even Emerson had been wooed by Europe's courtly muses, "his genius as poet" Williams commented, "[remained] too often circumscribed by a slightly hackneyed gentility".<sup>42</sup> Whitman and Poe went unheralded and misunderstood. Just as they had mistaken the robins, new Americans had imposed irrelevant and stultifying

conventions on a new environment. America as it grew and as its cities grew,"sought to surround itself with the appurtenances of a finished culture which is of no direct significance in the new sphere...a culture in effigy has become predominant".<sup>43</sup>

"Meanwhile" adds Williams caustically and with regret, "an unrelated Hopi ceremonial—unrelated that is, except to the sand, the corn, the birds, the beasts, the periodic drought and the mountain sights and colours—was living in the farther West".<sup>44</sup> Williams castigated the response to the arts in America, its respectability and its irrelevance: "wealth established museums, but it could not tell, it had to be told, what was good in them....There were the Boni de Castellanes, the tiara age of American opera, boxholders sleeping through the music or wondering what the hell it was all about, while the American composer, Ives, remained unknown".<sup>45</sup>

The trappings of European culture were not to be imported by the boatload and be propped up, ossifying, in bourgeois museums. That only demonstrates a failure of sensibility, a vulgarity. "In France there are special reasons for every phase of an art. Americans are still too prone to admire and to copy the very thing which should not be copied, the thing which is French or Irish alone, the thing which is the result of special local conditions of thought and circumstance".<sup>46</sup> Elsewhere he makes the point more harshly: "the thing that Americans never seem to see is that French painting, as an example of what is meant, is related to its own definite tradition, in its own environment and general history, and which, when they have done

with some one moment of it and have moved on to something else, they fatly sell where they can—to us, in short".<sup>47</sup> The American is the art sucker.

Williams constantly points to the new conditions of the New World. Allen Curnow made a similar observation in 'The Unhistoric Story'.<sup>48</sup>

It was something different, something  
Nobody counted on.

In a letter to Jean Starr Untermeyer in 1948, William Carlos Williams most cogently stated his role as an American poet and all that this implied. "We've got to begin by stating that we speak (here) a distinct, separate language in a present (new era) and that it is NOT English. For English connotes an historical background from which its prosody is derived which can never be real for us. It is basic for us to know that the English prosody we imitate as a matter of course is not determined by the mere facts of the mechanical syllabic sequences but an accretion through the ages from English history and character. And that these are NOT our character".<sup>49</sup>

Williams saw innovations in prosody, a descent and a return to the loam, that would be the turning point in writing. "Until you have a new frame, something consonant with our times demands an adjustment to liberate us all in the poem. Philosophy may, and in fact must, follow the poem. The poem is first".<sup>50</sup> With total assurance and commitment Dr. Williams provided his prescription. The whole situation of American letters was befuddled by this alien prosody. Was it any wonder, he queried,

"when all our language departments in our supposedly American universities are called English departments where English is taught and not our own tongue".<sup>51</sup>

The impatience of his tirade and the glibness of his judgements make Williams' comments less persuasive but nonetheless the bulk and quality of his oeuvre suggest some proof in the pudding. With a shade of complacency but more probably, enthusiasm, Williams wrote: "Whitman was an open but not a clear thinking rebel. He did not know what it was all about, that our primary conception of the prosody was at fault. Men like Eliot and Pound and many lesser examples have run away from the elementary necessity for differentiating the two prosodies. They never got to know the problem. They avoided it".<sup>52</sup>

The differences in intention and result in Pound and Eliot on the one hand and William Carlos Williams on the other have been described by Roy Harvey Pearce. Williams as a poet, says Pearce, wanted to "discover and rediscover his world exclusively in terms of himself".<sup>53</sup> In his rambling Prologue to Kora in Hell, Williams quotes Hilda Doolittle's letter on an early poem of his entitled March:<sup>54</sup> "I don't know what you think but I consider this business of writing a very sacred thing! —I think you have the 'spark'—am sure of it, and when you speak direct are a poet".<sup>55</sup> Williams' reply is explosive and a shade melodramatic: "There is nothing sacred about literature, it is damned from one end to the other. There is nothing in literature but change and change is mockery. I'll write whatever I damn please and it'll be good if the authentic spirit of

change is on it".<sup>56</sup> As Pearce writes "the poets who looked elsewhere than into the violence of the self for a means of discovering the spirit of change in the world were to be *anathematised*".<sup>57</sup>

Indeed they were. Williams' response to T.S. Eliot's poetry was blunt. He never got to know the problem. He avoided it. Speaking on American poetry, Williams wrote: "our prize poems are especially to be damned not because of superficial bad workmanship, but because they are rehash, repetition—just as Eliot's more exquisite work is rehash, repetition in another way of Verlaine, Baudelaire, Maeterlinck—conscious or unconscious—just as there were Pound's early paraphrases from Yeats and his constant later cribbing from the Renaissance, Provence and the modern French".<sup>58</sup> These men, scowls Williams, were "content with the connotations of their masters".<sup>59</sup>

Williams was a poet of personality not a poet of culture. He would not produce poetry shop-soiled in Europe. The poetry he sought, to be authentic, had to be new. This did not mean, as my later chapters show, that he could not use the influence of past literature but it meant it must first have been internalised and rediscovered by Williams to put the "authentic spirit of change on it".<sup>60</sup> J. Hillis Miller wrote of Williams, "the poet's job is to find examples of the American measure new-born in all their purity, and put them in his poems for all to hear".<sup>61</sup> In Paterson people cannot communicate—"the language, the language / fails them".<sup>62</sup> Authentic language, says Miller, "Springs from the present moment, words pasted over with past

associations get between man and reality".<sup>63</sup> Eliot and Pound are phrasemongers to the past for Williams. "There is always some everlasting Polonius of Kensington", he said of a critic named Jepson, "forever to rate highly his eternal Eliot. It is because Eliot is a subtle conformist. It tickles the palate of this archbishop of procurers to a lecherous antiquity to hold up Prufrock as a New World type."<sup>64</sup>

His close friend Ezra Pound was artistically, diametrically opposed to Williams' intentions in art. "E.P." he wrote, "is the best enemy United States verse has".<sup>65</sup> Pound for him, in his lack of real immersion in the American experience, left too much unanswered and unexplored; instead he showed: "a middle-aging blight of the imagination".<sup>66</sup> Williams qualifies some of his rancour when he praises those who have the courage and conventionality to confront and attempt to relate to past literature but adds: "confine them in Hell for the parietic assumption that there is no alternative but their own groove".<sup>67</sup> Pound had his retorts to Williams however, which the latter included in his collage of ideas and impressions in the Prologue to Kora in Hell. "America?" says Pound witheringly:

"what the h-l do you a blooming foreigner know about the place. Your père only penetrated the edge, and you've never been west of Upper Darby, or the Maunchunk switchback. Would H, with the swirl of the prarie wind in her underwear, or the virile Sandburg recognise you, an effete easterner as a REAL American? INCONCEIVABLE !!!!!

My dear boy you have never felt the woop of the PEERaries. You have never seen the projecting and protuberant Mts. of the Sierra Nevada. WOT can you know of the country?

You thank your blocking gawd you've got enough Spanish blood to muddy up your mind, and prevent the current American ideation from going through it like a blighted colander.

The thing that saves your work is opacity and don't forget it. Opacity is NOT an American quality. Fizz, swish, gabble, and verbiage, these are echt Americanisch".<sup>68</sup>

Pound, however, oversimplifies William Carlos Williams' position. He states only superficial elements of the New World. Williams would retort that he was not attempting any folk poetry, any frontier adulation of the great American west. His is a more cultivated, more personal response. Williams rejects the swish, the gabble and the verbiage. This is the frontier bluff, the language without referents, language that has no meaning because it confirms no reality. Williams, the poet as person not persona - the poet whose intense private experience is both local and universal, personal and catholic - must frame this in fresh forms, the fittest medium. Williams' art is an attempt to break down connotation, to state what is, uncluttered with mechanical associations and hackneyed cultural responses, the "dead weight of logical burdens".<sup>69</sup> This is not a rejection of the past so much as a refusal to repeat clumsily trite connotation, to exploit lazily and be content with, the connotations of the masters. Yet Williams at the end of his career, still keeping true to his literary precepts, is able to evoke past and present culture with reference to Theocritus and Spenser, Chaucer and René Char, with a true understanding and empathy; with all the authority of one who has made the descent.

Like Whitman, William Carlos Williams sought a very personal expression. Whitman in Song of Myself proclaimed himself:

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan, the son  
 Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding  
 No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart  
 from them,  
 No more modest, than immodest.<sup>70</sup>

Whitman was a Kosmos, he saw himself as the centre of the universe. So then did Williams. For him, with perfect harmony, the universal was formed and expressed in local settings. The poet was at the centre of the world and there was no other place to be. The experience of the poet was the experience of the poem and of the reader. "We are locked in a fraternal embrace" wrote Carlos Williams, "the classic caress of author and reader. We are one."<sup>71</sup> Williams' own exploration of his terrain is shared with the reader, the reader "discovers" America with the poet and shares the horror and joy of the response.

As a consequence of that nameless religious experience, the sense of "inner security" that Williams so firmly believed to be his, Williams' response can be passive. He flows with the events. His poetry is as J. Hillis Miller observed, that of "calm description".<sup>72</sup> Williams, like Whitman recorded what he saw and felt without refinement, impressionistically, sometimes frantically. The struggle was to have it recorded, to find the words and get them down. In "The Desert Music" he asks:

How shall we get said what must be said?

Only the poem.

The sense of wonder pervades, of experiencing events for the first time. Tony Tanner refers to a predilection of the American writer for "the strategy of the naive vision, that deliberate attempt to regard reality with minimum reference to previous familiarity and interpretative knowledge, that enduring preference for wonder over analysis".<sup>73</sup>

William Carlos Williams reflects very strongly this tendency to the naive Edenic vision, the sense of wonder. "Not merely does one chase after newness for the sake of sensation" he wrote, "or abandon the old because it is stale. There is a necessity to reinvestigate our means of expression in every age...unless every age claims the world for its own and makes it so by its own efforts in its own day...no one can be said to have lived .... The pieces show my own efforts to possess my world".<sup>74</sup> In "The Orchestra" Williams expresses this ecstatic possession.

I love you. My heart is  
innocent.

And this the first  
(and last) day of the world  
(DM, PB. 82)

It is in this that Williams most radically attempts to restate his experience. With an uncluttered mind he explored his environment anew, seeing the poetic, or rather, seeing poetry in the neighbourhood of Rutherford, New Jersey. Williams, by his resignation to despair, makes his descent into the filthy Passaic in order to rise again with new vigour. Europe is irrelevant; the iambs, the sonnets irrelevant.

"In discussing the need for a new point of view and a new language," writes Tanner, "American writers often cited the superior virtues of the vernacular. This is understandable. They 'craved a sense of reality' [Emerson] and thus they also wished for words which would register the circumpressure of the experienced world, words full of the shape of things, heavy with the weight of things".<sup>75</sup> Williams shows this craving for reality. His language is plain, his prosody sought to capture the cadences of spoken speech. His poetry is heavy with the shape of things, it is poetry built with nouns and verbs not with adjectives. It can be, and often is, contemplative, but it is poetry full of activity as well.

The persistent impulse to record the sense of wonder, "to set up the strong present tense" to use Emerson's phrase, is a guiding one in William Carlos Williams. It is this that for him marks his authenticity as a writer. The environment demanded this response and Carlos Williams intuitively felt it. In his all pervasive present his writing examines new relationships or attempts to separate and examine components. The much-quoted poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" reveals this.

so much depends  
upon  
a red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain  
water  
besides the white  
chickens.<sup>76</sup>

By separating the elements Williams gives them new meaning. He dissects and examines each tissue, each object as he goes. "So much depends" as we are made to see, on one thing's relatedness to another and so much depends also on the poet spacing his observation, just as he spaces them and highlights them with his typographical arrangement. William Carlos Williams' poetry is not concerned with orthodox notions of the 'poetic'. A good poet, he says "doesn't select his material. What is there to select? It is."<sup>77</sup>

Of Williams' method, Tanner notes a defensive gesture by the poet to "unravel a complex experience and reduce it to its component parts".<sup>78</sup> In "The Red Wheelbarrow" Williams "is content to clear away everything between the eye and the wheelbarrow and the chickens. The poet does nothing except 'indicate reality'. What depends on the wheelbarrow? We are not told. There is no attempt to elucidate, to extrapolate a lesson, to legislate about life or speculate about the universe".<sup>79</sup> He clears away, excludes that which might blur, he enforces "reverent concentration". "It is naive in a technical sense",<sup>80</sup> says Tanner. This approach predominant in Williams, Tanner sees as a defence, a means of coping. "It is a symptom of disorientation" he writes, "in a world of melting beliefs, of disintegrating systems, a universe which seemed recalcitrant to one harmonious integrating explanation, the bewildered poet might take refuge in examining only the palpable fragment. Substituting momentary awe for systematic theology, he may well think that only by paying attention to particulars will he be

able to gain for himself any orientation and stability in the world".<sup>81</sup>

Williams would be the first to acknowledge that fragmentation exists. His epic poem "Paterson" is in itself a vast work clamouring to find a whole with fragments of prose, quotation and poetry. Encyclopaedic and personal, its method is, as the Preface states:

To make a start  
out of particulars  
and make them general, calling  
up the sum by defective means—  
Sniffing the trees,  
just another dog  
among a lot of dogs. What  
else is there

(Paterson<sup>82</sup>)

But Williams' own modesty belies the completeness of his vision. His earlier works similar to "The Red Wheelbarrow" could be dismissed, or at least explained, in the manner that Tanner chooses. These poems reflect the poet's concern with minutiae to explain the whole, or to contribute to the whole, but it would be an injustice to the poet to assume that this is the sum of his achievement. As the following chapters of this thesis indicate, Williams' poetry in The Desert Music and Journey to Love is far from perfunctory and slight. As the preface in "Paterson" indicates the poet "made a start" with his short poems that were completely spare in the absence of connotation and poetic effect. But this, I think, can be regarded as the beginning of articulation. The early poems are

the beginning of his possession of the world, a world that became more whole and consistent as his writing progressed. Williams moves from disorientation consequent of the descent into coherence and authentic statement in his poetry. The specific poems that I am concerned with in these chapters transcend the concern with "the palpable fragment" that Tanner suggests. Williams contains much more. His poems show in their deceptively simple and unpretentious diction and content a richness on examination that suggests no inability by the poet to be systematic. There is the freshness and naiveté that Tanner offers as a virtue but there is, I would contend, also the virtue of a very complete apprehension of human experience in Williams' work. In the following chapters I have grouped the poems according to thematic similarity and have attempted to show the richness of suggestion, the use of familiar ideas from the Renaissance for example, interpreted and internalised by the poet as new utterances but also as acknowledgements of the literature and ideas of the past. This is not the plundering of Europe; it is a process of rediscovery demanded by the new environment in America. The traditional figures of the Dance and the use of music are familiar in the Renaissance but Williams evokes them anew. They appear in "The Desert Music" and in "The Orchestra" in terms that Williams finds indigenous to America. They are not degradations or parodies of the ideas of Spenser and Sir John Davies rather they are rediscoveries and revaluations of these themes.

William Carlos Williams, as I have suggested, considered that all was grist to the poet's mill. A freedom for form and

content he demanded as early as 1917.<sup>83</sup> In his enthusiasm to express a wholeness, in the synthesis of "The Desert Music", in finding harmony in "The Orchestra" or even in finding the simple truth of "The Red Wheelbarrow", he was reluctant to make divisions in his experience. The unformed lump in "The Desert Music", the cripple, must be accommodated. For this reason Williams rejected the notion of the "anti-poetic" in connection with his verse. Wallace Stevens in his Preface to Williams' Collected Poems (1921-51) published in 1934 wrote "this passion for the anti-poetic is a blood passion and not a passion of the inkpot....To a man with a sentimental side the anti-poetic is that truth, that reality to which all of us are forever fleeing".<sup>84</sup> This comment, as Edith Heal pointed out<sup>85</sup> maddened Williams as a negative observation, one that insisted that the "poetic" still remained a defined body of response. William Carlos Williams was eager to kill such notions. Ideas of the 'poetic' smacked of the legacy of Europe." We are sick of our elders and their pseudo-classicism"<sup>86</sup> he wrote. Everything is poetry whether it is a red wheelbarrow or the epiphany of the green glass of a broken bottle.<sup>87</sup>

Pictures from Brueghel demonstrates clearly the depth and stature of Williams' capability. In this volume his prosodic development in his use of the "variable foot"-the long triadic line, the natural speech line broken into three steps or segments—is seen at what Williams considered to be his best. He called the poem "The Descent" his solution to the problem of modern verse<sup>88</sup> because of the mastery of measure he felt himself to

have achieved. These poems are not crammed with 'local colour', they are not curiosities from Rutherford. His authenticity is deeper than that, it is an honesty and integrity that radiates within each poem, an originality and freshness that Williams could still maintain at a high level even when nearly in his seventies. In these poems William Carlos Williams shows himself intact with all his senses waking, a frail man, incapacitated by illness but still striving to possess and express authentically his experience as an American, a doctor and a man. He had suffered and seen suffering:

I can do nothing  
but sing about it

And so I am assuaged  
from my pain.

("To a Dog Injured", DM, PB. 86)

Williams long poem "The Desert Music" reflects his confrontation with America and its problems for the artist. America was not a waste land but a fertile desert, replenished by the music, the art, the flow of life. Williams is perplexed at "so sweet a tune, built of such slime". But the slime is also an appropriate image for it was from primordial slime that all life emerged. It, then, has a elemental connotation, one that connotes the descent, the return to the inarticulate mud.

In the poems in Pictures from Brueghel Williams shows himself as an American with an identity, not trapped in his locality but able to descend into his locality as an authentic matrix; a ground in harmony with the language, the ideas, and the imagination of the poet. The poet as much a part of things as

the trees and the stones, proceeded to make poetry of his own everyday life, not idealised or oversentimentalised but presented with all the reality and sureness of a surgeon's scalpel.

William Carlos Williams wrote, not about home where the buffalo roamed, not of corncrib America, certainly not of America the beautiful, but of an environment as it was, new and challenging to him, that captured him as a person. As man and poet the task is lonely and can be painful. Williams' commitment to a new view of his surroundings made him bitter towards those whom he felt ducked the issue. "When I was halfway through the Prologue [to Kora in Hell], Prufrock appeared", he recalled,

"I had a violent feeling that Eliot had betrayed what I believed in. He was looking backward; I was looking forward. He was a conformist with wit and learning which I did not possess. He knew French, Latin, Arabic, God knows what. I was interested in that. But I felt he had rejected America and I refused to be rejected and so my reaction was violent. I realised the responsibility I must accept. I knew he would influence all subsequent American poets and take them out of my sphere. I had envisaged a new form of poetic composition, a form for the future. It was a shock to me that he was so tremendously successful; my contemporaries flocked to him—away from what I wanted. It forced me to be successful".<sup>89</sup>

Williams was highly conscious of his innovation and fully aware of its costs, all must be renounced, all destroyed; he must, like Kora, go down into Hell. But by this paring of dead material the poet sees new patterns, new designs. For Williams:

The descent

    made up of despairs  
                     and without accomplishment  
 realizes a new awakening:  
                     which is a reversal  
 of despair.

    ("The Descent", DM, PB. 74)

It is part of the intention of this essay to explore Williams' commitment to innovation in form and content, innovation attuned to his times and surroundings. His writing, highly idiosyncratic as it is, is also American in its *loquacity* and enthusiasm; though its freshness is not simplistic, its naiveté not sentimental. The whole canon of his work and especially the poems of The Desert Music collection and "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," reveal the quest by Williams to possess his world. He had seen, and much of his poetry documents, a failure by Americans to comprehend the world:

    The language, the language  
                     fails them  
 They do not know the words  
                     or have not  
 The courage to use them

Paterson<sup>90</sup>

Williams sought to renovate an ebbing diction, to give courage and enthusiasm for new forms. He diagnosed an ailing poetic heritage in his country and sought in his long literary career to remedy it. He devised new measures and indefatigably tried to delve into his surroundings and his reactions to them. He was influenced by his 'American-ness' in no narrow, parochial way. Writing to Ezra Pound he exclaimed: "I'm no more senti-

mental about 'murika' than Li Po was about China or Shakespeare about Yingland or any damned frog about Paris. I know as well as you do there's nothing sacred about any land. But I also know (as you do also) that there's no taboo effective against any land, and where I live is <sup>is</sup> more a 'province' than I make it. To hell with youse. I ain't trying to be an international figure. All I care about is to write".<sup>91</sup> The sense of "inner security" and the reconciliation to the peculiar demands of his locality were what fortified William Carlos Williams. America was to be reckoned with, it was not to be ignored, but ultimately the task was to write.

I am a poet! I  
am. I am. I am a poet, I reaffirmed, ashamed

("The Desert Music", DM, PB, 120)

## CHAPTER 2

"HOW SHALL WE GET SAID WHAT MUST BE SAID?"

(DM, PB. 103)

In his two anthologies The Desert Music (1954) and Journey to Love (1955), two general preoccupations are apparent in William Carlos Williams' work. The first is the relationship between the poet and his world, especially a world of suffering and change. The other is old age and the power of love, linked with the imagination. Most of the poems, especially in The Desert Music, meet one or other of these somewhat rough descriptions. Williams reveals himself as an old and contemplative poet but as always, one striving for a truer form, a more "fit" medium. James Gujmond refers to this progressive element in Williams' work, this concern for change and improvement, as a series of "peaks", "a number of periods when he possessed extremely intense visions of his relationship to his American environment. These peaks are the seminal moments of Williams' life as an artist, the times when 'love and the imagination / are of a piece' for him".<sup>1</sup> He continues to discern a number of periods after these 'peaks' which he refers to as 'descents'. The use of this specific term he cites in Paterson II, iii and it is highly suitable that he

should apply it to Williams' method and career as a poet. The 'descent' as I have previously observed, is an image for the action of a New World writer. The relinquishing of the outworn, the submergence in the inarticulate, is the very essence of the regeneration of the American artist. Even the accomplishment of the 'peak' is followed in William Carlos Williams' poetic process by a 'descent', to explore and rigorously test his achievement. The 'descents', wrote Guimond, are periods "when he applied the themes and techniques of his seminal works to the phenomena of his environment. At the end of these descents are 'depths', periods characterised by very chaotic or prosaic works when Williams could see no poetic alternatives to "classic imitation or rightness" and "a loose nothing, a rhythmical blur, a formlessness" which he considered equally abhorrent".<sup>2</sup> These 'depths', however, produced "seeds for new artistic growth, for ascents back to new peaks, new 'marriages' with his world".<sup>3</sup> It is then apparent that the image of the descent is operating on a number of levels, as a means of describing the response of the American, of the initiate, and William Carlos Williams' own response as a poet. His writing shows the profile of descents and peaks, the thrusts forward and their subsequent reevaluation.

The Desert Music collection represents paradoxically, both a 'peak' and a 'descent'. Prosodically it is a 'peak' work. It employs, consciously, forms that Williams had laboured a lifetime to perfect. But it documents the descent, into age and death, of the poet himself. Its cadences are sombre and

almost liturgical, its mood<sup>is</sup> one of meditation and its themes turn on inward landscapes. There is a spirit of resignation, not the existential resignation that Williams speaks of, the "inner security" described to Marianne Moore, but a tired, wry sense of finality.

But I  
am an old man. I  
have had enough.  
("For Eleanor and Bill Monahan"  
DM, PB. 85)

Williams in his descending triads is reminiscent of Prospero who of his final return to Milan said: "Every third thought shall be my grave".<sup>4</sup>

But The Desert Music poems and those of Journey to Love are far from being decadent repetitions of earlier glories. One is reminded of Yeats' great Last Poems, works that showed his genius even up to his death. These works by Williams, while they lack the youthful vigour of his more boisterous early writing, reveal a wrinkled, droll good humour and the same unerring attention to detail and nuance that characterises all his writing. His poems have a quiet dignity, there is none of the canting old man; he does not play the sage. His attention is still personal, his responses still fresh, now given greater urgency since time is short:

A sweetest odor!  
Honeysuckle! And now  
there comes the buzzing of a bee!  
and a whole flood  
of sister memories!  
Only give me time,  
time to recall them  
before I shall speak out.  
Give me time,  
time.  
("Asphodel", JL, PB. 154)

The sense of finality forced Williams to more universal statement. "The Red Wheelbarrow" was no longer sufficient. Williams could less often see, as Blake had,

"a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower"<sup>5</sup>

His world had become more multitudinous, the particular less frequently depicted<sup>the</sup> all. His long poems, especially "The Desert Music" and "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower", were more cosmic in their scope, they sought to complete his vision, not portray fragments of it. These two major works dealt with more complex and more abstract themes than much of the earlier poems. Like Paterson, "The Desert Music" embraced a mass of material, his technique was of collage, his view panoramic.

"On June 18 I shall read a new 17 page poem at Harvard", Williams wrote to Professor Louis Martz, "It is an important event for me. Since my illness I have been working on it. It has taken up most of my spare time...whether rightly or wrongly, I feel that many of my culminating ideas as to form have entered into this poem".<sup>6</sup> The poem was "The Desert Music". He ~~was~~ to read it at Harvard at the invitation of Phi Beta Kappa at their Annual Literary Celebration on June 18, 1951. Of its production, Williams wrote: "It has taken me a month or more to write it, transcribe it, have it typed, correct it and polish. That took about all the drive I had".<sup>7</sup> Williams' illness had incapacitated him. "I did not have another heart attack;" he wrote to Robert Lowell in 1951, "...this time it was the coco that went off: I had a mild apoplectic stroke. It disabled my right side and knocked out my speech—for a time".<sup>8</sup> The

return to speech and mobility left Williams, he says, with "a clearer head".<sup>9</sup> A sense of reprieve, that he had not died, or worse, been permanently mentally incapacitated, seems to have given impetus to Williams' labours. His struggle for new measure was greatly dramatised by his own struggle to re-establish articulation physically.

The contrast of the poet's artistic creation and the ugliness and suffering of the real world is dramatised even in the title of "The Desert Music". The land is a desert in need of water but it produces a music that is precious and unique. The desert is not, however, a waste land, it is not Eliot's depraved and decaying terrain, impotent and paralysed in its erotic responses. There is not the finality in Williams' desert. On the contrary, his desert is still in the state of primordial "slime", referred to in "The Desert Music". The desert is not solely an erotic one like Eliot's nor evidence of a sick society. Rather, to employ the birth image he himself uses in "The Desert Music", the desert is Williams' environment about to be born. The desert that Williams indicates requires only new perceptions, an awareness of the dance that can be revealed in a poem. Williams' art is the music that awakens the desert of his environment. It is transformed. After all, he says:

A new world  
is only a new mind.  
And the mind and the poem  
are all apiece.

("To Daphne and Virginia", DB, PB. 76)



an inhuman shapelessness,  
Knees hugged tight up into the belly  
Egg-shaped!

The human figure expresses an unborn child curled in the foetal position, its use as a life symbol is underlined by the specific description "Egg-shaped!" The figure is also an expression of death and disease, an expression of a failed and corrupt society:

The law? The law gives us nothing  
but a corpse, wrapped in a dirty mantle.  
The law is based on murder and confinement  
long delayed,

But the poet sees his art as combining and explaining paradox. Williams grapples with ideas which are like the cripple, formless but vital. "How shall we get said what must be said? / Only the poem."

Only the counted poem, to an exact measure:  
to imitate, not to copy nature, not  
to copy nature

In his insistence Williams repeats his imperatives:

NOT, prostrate, to copy nature....

This poem is not to hold the mirror up to nature, it is not an imitation as Aristotle may have it. This poem imitates nature in that it is a created organism, independent and vital. "To copy nature is a spineless activity; it gives us a sense of our mere existence but hardly more than that. But to imitate nature involves the verb: we then ourselves become nature, and so invent an object which is an extension of the process."<sup>10</sup> It has the power of movement, of physical incarnation. His poem is a dance. It moves parallel with events, it dances with the cripple;

two and two with him—

sequestered there asleep,...

It has a reality of its own but Williams does not evade the dilemma when the poem confronts the actual. "Only" becomes not "alone" but "except" when he writes:

Only the poem  
                   ... sticks  
 in our throats.

The formless lump on the bridge, the "anti-poetic" defies him as a poet, his words stick in his throat. He is aware of a different music, not that of his muses, but an "insensate music". Both, he discovers, are part of the dance.

I cannot escape  
 I cannot vomit it up

The poem then moves into a more specific explanation of Williams' responses as a poet to this deformity. "Leaving California to return east" he writes:

the fertile desert,  
                   (were it to get water)  
 surrounded us, a music of survival, subdued, distant,  
                   half heard; we were engulfed

The desert is potentially fertile physically and also responsive as he notes, to "a music of survival", that renders it habitable for his emotions and humanity. His awareness of this potential spurs Williams to harness it:

—to tell  
 what subsequently I saw and what heard  
                   —to place myself (in  
 my nature) beside nature  
                   —to imitate  
 nature (for to copy nature would be a  
                   shameful thing)  
 I lay myself down....

The sense of shared exploration with the poet is stressed with his "I lay myself down". He commits himself, with his integrity and physically, in writing his poem.

The tone of the poem *henceforth* is that of the tourist being led by a guide:

The Old Market's a good place to begin:  
Let's cut through here—

And the reactions expressed are those of wonder and consternation. Fragments of the verse reveal Williams' skill at rendering spoken speech:

That's the bull ring  
Oh, said Floss, after she got used to the  
change of light .

But the sights are those of squalor, deprivation and violence:

Oh its all right at  
this time of day but I saw H. terribly  
beaten up in one of those joints...  
... Penny please! Give me penny please, mister.

Don't give them anything.

. instinctively  
one has already drawn one's naked  
wrist away from those obscene fingers  
as in the mind a vague apprehension speaks  
and the music rouses .

In the face of the anti-poetic, the grotesque, there is only 'vague apprehension' verbally, but nonetheless "the music" rouses the poet. He becomes more attuned to this environment and to how it must be authentically represented. The poem sprawls physically and descriptively, almost cinematically:

Come in  
and look around. You don't have to buy: hats,  
riding boots, blankets .

His eye falls, indiscriminately, at random. A number of glimpses quickly replace one another—a young Indian woman and her baby, three young girls laughing, a gaggle of tourists "middle-aged, middle-western / their arms loaded with loot, whispering / together."

Throughout the poem these random glimpses, it becomes clear, fall into two kinds: those of innocence and decorum and those of vice and squalor.

They had the mayor  
up last month for taking \$3000 a week from  
the whorehouses of the city.

In the club they stray into, the customers range from paunchy, crass Americans 'got up as cowboys' to:

quiet family groups, some with  
children, eating....

And this "other music", that of simple and decorous beauty is established in the vignette of one of the cooks:

his shirt sleeves  
rolled up, an apron over  
the well-pressed pants of a street  
  
suit, black hair neatly parted,  
a tall  
good-looking man, is working  
absorbed, before a chopping block ....

These two threads, two kinds of "music" are seen combined in the central figure of the strip tease dancer. Williams' treatment is not equivocal but rather his reaction is one of

perplexity. In the brisk movement of events that he impressionistically relates he finds himself at a table in a bar just before a strip tease begins. His first reaction is blunt—"You'd have to be / pretty drunk to get any kick out of that." She is some old "worn-out trouper from the States." Well past her best, her body sags—"Look at those breasts." But the immediate male response to a body no longer physically fresh mellows into sympathy :

She gyrates but it's  
not what you think,  
one does not laugh  
to watch her belly.

She is not ridiculous to Williams. He finds an affinity of some kind with her. Her eyes "bill/and coo by grace of / a certain candor. She/ is heavy on her feet." But for Williams this suggests her heaviness is not to be deplored, it implies fortitude and strength. The distinction between her and her surroundings becomes apparent. Her accompanying musicians are not playing her music :

She  
at least knows she's  
part of another tune,  
...That gives her  
one up . one up  
following the lying  
music .

There is another music. The bright-colored candy  
of her nakedness lifts her unexpectedly  
to partake of its tune .

The poet is perplexed by this situation he finds himself

reacting so unexpectedly to. The dance becomes:

Andromeda of those rocks,  
the virgin of her mind  
    ...in her mockery of virtue  
she becomes unaccountably virtuous .  
    though she in no  
way pretends it .

His verbal quibbles begin to upset him. Williams is defeated by his experience:

'Let's get out of this.'

As he, he ponders, 'merely playing the poet.'

Do I merely invent  
it out of whole cloth?

Then, in the subsequent stanza, he expresses the essence of the poem's theme:

What in the form of an old whore in  
a cheap Mexican joint in Juarez, her bare  
can wagging crazily can be  
so refreshing to me, raise to my ear  
so sweet a tune, built of such slime?

Here is his recognition of the success of the dance, the power of the poem to encapsulate unexpected beauty. He has not contrived the situation, he has merely been receptive to it. In the face of the banal, the "expressionless dingdong you dish up", he perceives and responds to another music. William Carlos Williams, much influenced by Keats in earlier work, reveals some affinity to Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
are sweeter; therefore ye soft pipes, play on;  
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd  
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.<sup>11</sup>

The poem shifts from the "cheap joint" to Williams and his wife sharing a meal with acquaintances. As in Paterson Williams indulges in the familiar question and answer dialogue between the poet and the uninitiated, but in "The Desert Music" he jars a little in his egoism. The digression, however, remains justified, since we share Williams' response to his potential material, we gain access to his mind as he discovers the poetry, the "music" about him.

As the poem closes, the cycle starts to repeat itself:

Penny please, mister.

Penny please. Give me penny.

and amidst "the expressionless ding-dong" of the Latins' music he has one final unnamed epiphany :

But what's THAT?

the music! the  
music! as when Casals struck  
 and held a deep cello tone  
 and I am speechless .

Faced again with the unformed lump of humanity on the bridge:

armless, legless,  
 headless, packed like the pit of a fruit into  
 that obscure corner . . . .

Williams "discovers that he is now able to integrate it successfully into his poem by recognising its place in the dance of life. The lump represents the necessary, ultimate relief from all the musics of existence. He is the bass note of life, 'the / music! as when Casals struck / and held a deep cello tone'.<sup>12</sup>

The figure is compared to the pit of a fruit, "a child in the womb prepared to imitate life". The image of birth is

continued. The "music" guards the figure, it is a "mucus", an amniotic fluid that protects the child and eases birth. It is this music representing a kind of cosmic dance that similarly eases the production of the poem for Williams. The "unheard music" combines the usually fragmented apprehension of phenomenal experience. In a moment it is harmonised and this allows the poetic process. It is this recognition of harmony that causes the rapid affirmation:

I am a poet! I

am. I am. I am a poet, I reaffirmed, ashamed

This brief "lonely" moment of epiphany surrounds Williams and this finally frees and integrates the poetic experience:

The dance!

The poem becomes detached and separate from the poet

The verb detaches itself

seeking to become articulate .

The poem is made, "to get said what must be said".

In his letter to Martz, Williams spoke of "culminating ideas in form" being enacted in the poem. However, in retrospect, Williams became less interested in "The Desert Music" itself as he became more tenaciously preoccupied with form. Of the period after the cerebral attack, when he wrote The Desert Music and Journey to Love poems, Williams commented: "My whole interest in poetry now was in developing the concept I had discovered—the variable foot—based on the model of the poem in Paterson, Book Two, Section Three. Now, consciously, I knew what I wanted to do ...the other poems in "Desert Music" are more important than the title poem because they consciously use what I had discovered".<sup>13</sup>

The question of prosody is basic to Williams' search for authenticity. It lay at the root of the problem of American letters. Of Americans and their language he wrote in Paterson:

—the language  
is divorced from their minds,  
the language . . . the language!<sup>14</sup>

In his efforts to reduce and remove this divorce of Americans from their environment and each other William Carlos Williams sought to renovate poetry. In a letter to his son Eric in 1942, Williams shows evidence of dissatisfaction with his achievement: "I have wanted to link myself up with a traditional art, to feel that I was developing individually it might be, but along with that, developing still in the true evolving tradition of the art. I wonder how much I succeeded there. I haven't been recognised and I doubt that my technical influence is good or even adequate".<sup>15</sup>

It was not until ten years later that Williams achieved a systematic form that satisfied his intention to render the sound of American speech adequately. Williams had frequently complained that verse could not be free, as had both Eliot and Ezra Pound. Whitman had tended to abuse his freedom Williams felt. "Whitman was right in breaking our bounds," he wrote, "but, having no valid restraints to hold him, went wild. He didn't know any better. At the last he resorted to a loose sort of language with no discipline about it of any sort and we have copied its worst feature, just that".<sup>16</sup>

As Williams indicated, it was not "The Desert Music" itself that resolved the dilemma of form although, as has been shown,

the preoccupation "to get said what must / be said", with "the counted poem, to an exact measure", was already very intense. Instead, the poem that Williams described as "my solution to the problem of modern verse"<sup>17</sup> was "The Descent". This poem, which Williams wrote as a part of Paterson Book II (published 1948) was achieved with little real enthusiasm by the poet, until he examined it later. "The poem brought about—without realising it at the time of writing—my final conception of what writing should be".<sup>18</sup> He stresses that the new form was accidental: "several years afterward in looking over the thing I realised I had hit upon a device which I could not name when I wrote it".<sup>19</sup> In writing a verse that was ordered Williams had then to confront the problem of rigidity in form, "so it came to me" he said "that the concept of the foot itself would have to be altered in our new relativistic world".<sup>20</sup> The key notion was then that the foot be "variable", in fact neither free nor rigid, simply variable. The reference to "our new relativistic world" is enlarged upon in his essay on Measure - Statement for Cid Corman. "Relativity" he wrote, "gives us the cue. So again, mathematics comes to the rescue of the arts. Measure...becomes related again with the poetic. We have today to do with the poetic, as always, but a relatively stable foot not a rigid one".<sup>21</sup> This search for measure William Carlos Williams saw as the only real preoccupation in new verse and as an American searching for the authentic expression of his society; he saw it as the way out of Egypt. "There will be other experiments" he concluded, "but all will be directed toward the discovery of a new measure, I repeat, a new

measure by which may be ordered our poems as well as our lives".<sup>22</sup>  
 What Williams recognised was a social revolution that needed a literary revolution at its vanguard. "The very grounds of our beliefs have altered".<sup>23</sup>

Williams' use of the term "measure" is not always clear but it seems to have held prime importance for him. In a letter to Richard Eberhart, Williams proved more explicit than usual on the subject. "By measure", he wrote,

"I mean musical pace. Now, with music in our ears the words need only to be taught to keep as distinguished an order, as chosen a character, as regular, according to the music, as in the best of prose .

By its music shall the best of modern verse be known and the resources of music. The refinement of the poem, its subtlety, is not to be known by the elevation of the words but —the words don't much matter—by the resources of music:

To give an example from my own work

Count: not that I ever count when writing but, at least the time must be capable of being counted, that is to say measured—(believe it or not)—at that I may, half consciously, even count the measure under my breath as I write. —

(approximate example) ["To Daphne and Virginia"]

(1) The smell of the heat is boxwood

(2) when rousing us

(3) a movement of the air

(4) stirs our thoughts

(5) that had no life in them

(6) to a life, a life in which

Count a single beat to each numeral. You may not agree with my ear, but that is the way I count the line. Over the

whole poem it gives a pattern to the meter that can be felt as a new measure. It gives resources to the ear which result in a language which we hear spoken about us every day".<sup>24</sup> This new prosody was, in Williams' writing, to reverse the relationship between form and content. Earlier, Williams had used a rhythmic unit entirely dictated by the subject expressed. "The rhythmic unit was not measured by capitals at the beginning of a line or periods within the lines", he said, "[it] usually came to me in a lyrical outburst. I wanted it to look that way on the page. I didn't go in for long lines, because of my nervous nature I couldn't. The rhythmic pace was the pace of speech, an excited pace because I was excited when I wrote...the lines were short not studied".<sup>25</sup>

By the time he wrote the poems in The Desert Music, however he was eager to exercise more rigour, more control. In the use of the variable foot Williams saw his poetry finally held to heel. "Now I had it" he told Edith Heal, "—a sea change. The verse must be coldly, intellectually considered. Not the emotion, the heat of life dominating, but the intellectual concept of the thing itself".<sup>26</sup>

William Carlos Williams, with his experiments with a new prosody felt that the American measure was being attained. He could authentically encapsulate his experience and express it in an orderly and regulated way. He had escaped the fraudulence he felt was concomitant with adoption of European forms, and had formulated a way of saying that had integrity and a rationale behind it.

The theorising that Williams made about his writing

however, can never, ultimately, be said to be entirely clear. We can deduce from his examples but their meaning isn't vividly apparent. Stanley Koehler interviewing Williams in 1962 when the poet was suffering from impeded speech and mobility after a stroke, noted that The Desert Music volume was propped open at the poem "The Descent". His comments on the discussion that he had with the poet accurately and realistically describes the relation of Williams theorising on metre to his writing. "The question whether one had to assume a fixed element in the foot as a basis for meter" noted Koehler, "drew only a typical Williams negative, slightly profane, and no effort was made to pursue this much further. As a result, the notion of some mysterious 'measure' runs through the interview like an unlaidd ghost, promising enough pattern for shapeliness, enough flexibility for all the subtleties of idiom. No wonder a copy of 'The Descent' was in evidence as we began; for however much one may argue about the theory of his verse, it is hard to resist the performance".<sup>27</sup> Certainly the performance of "The Descent" even Williams felt hard to resist. To Koehler's question "you don't think anything after 'The Descent' goes beyond it?" the poet replied: "No I always wanted to do something well with it, but I didn't know how".<sup>28</sup> "The Descent" stands as a culminating poem in Williams' oeuvre. Its form could not be altered and its content reflected an enduring preoccupation from the stance of age and illness. As I have indicated, the image of the descent is familiar, often basic, in Williams' writing. In the chapter entitled "Descent" in In the American Grain, he had stressed 'we must sink'. In this poem

Williams deals with the descent into old age and death. But it is also the descent as contemplation. Like others in the collection, this poem has less of the quicksilver clarity of his earlier poems. The tendency in this later work is to be more speculative, discursive and, Doyle suggests, even "faltering".<sup>29</sup> There is often no tight exploitation of language, nothing that reveals "texture" or "tension" or "ambiguity", or any of the shibboleths of the new criticism. The poet ambles, language is loose, colloquial and plain. The poem is an exploration more than a resolution; rhetorical rather than tightly patterned. "The Descent" is that of the poet, into himself, into the unknown, and ultimately, into death. For Williams, old and frail, contemplation becomes a major form of rejuvenation:

Memory is a kind  
of accomplishment,  
a sort of renewal  
even

an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places...

The poet finds novelty, the power of change in the renewal, the rediscovery of the past. The memory finds new elements lost in the indistinguishable flow of events past. Since his mind, his imagination, is constantly changing, constantly revaluing experience, the places not ~~not~~ only new but

of new kinds—  
since their movements  
are toward new objectives  
(even though formerly they were abandoned).

As conditions change so then the events apparently static are transformed. Even defeat and despair can benefit, can widen understanding since:

the world it opens is always a place  
 formerly  
 unsuspected. A  
 world lost,  
 a world unsuspected

As has been stated, the relationships of man and woman and more particularly, Williams' own love relationship with his wife Flossie, are predominant concerns in his later poetry. The poet, preoccupied with death, and partly immobilised by strokes, contemplates love and death together. Using evening and night as expressions of age and death, Williams depicts his love, not the boisterous erotic love of his earlier verse as in his early "Love Song":

I lie here thinking of you:

The stain of love  
 is upon the world  
 yellow, yellow, yellow  
 it eats into the leaves,  
 smears with Saffron  
 the horned branches that lean  
 heavily  
 against a smooth purple sky!<sup>30</sup>

In "The Descent" and following poems, William Carlos Williams is concerned with love stirring the imagination, that transforms age and physical decay <sup>back</sup> into previous glories, that <sup>at</sup> vivifies marriage with the past as well as the present.

With evening, love wakens  
                   though its shadows  
                                   which are alive by reason  
 of the sun shining—  
                   grow sleepy now and drop away  
                                   from desire .

The poet in old age sees love begin to clear, it is freed from the erotic, the shadows that a life-giving sun casts. A new love, more spiritual, more precious to the poet, but final in the face of death, is revealed:

Love without shadows stirs now  
                   beginning to awaken  
                                   as night  
 advances.

The descent into old age and annihilation awakens new strengths, a greater understanding. It is this that reverses despair :

The descent  
                   made up of despairs  
                                   and without accomplishment  
 realizes a new awakening:  
                                   which is a reversal  
 of despair.

The failure of accomplishment, in effect actually accomplishes deeper experience. That which "we cannot accomplish", that which "is denied to love" and that which "we have lost in the anticipation", all that apparently thwarts the poet, infirm and despairing, is reversed in the epiphany of the descent. The descent gives new meaning, offers new facts and hopes to be considered; it is, even in the face of death, a mental and spiritual renewal :

                  endless and indestructible.

### CHAPTER 3

#### "A NEW WORLD IS ONLY A NEW MIND"

The title poem of The Desert Music has as its main concern a search for harmony and the discovery of the power of the poet to see new worlds. Elsewhere he says:

A new world  
is only a new mind.  
And the mind and the poem  
are all apiece.

("To Daphne and Virginia" DM, PB. 76)

As I have stressed, so much of the theme of "The Descent" is relevant to all Williams' later writing where "a world lost, / a world unsuspected, / beckons to new places". (DM, PB. 73)

Such new places and new experiences depend on the receptivity of the poet and his ability to discern new relationships. "The Orchestra" quite explicitly represents a bid to find harmony. The orchestra is "The precise counterpart / of a cacophony of bird calls". A disparate and varied group of people all equally share the sun's beams— "drudges and those / who live at ease, // women and men upon the old, / upon children and the sick // who are about to die" Williams compared their dissimilarity to the "wood-winds / clarinet and violins" which "sound a prolonged A!" with the cello which "raises his bass note / manfully in the treble din." The instruments like the people, are:

together, unattuned  
seeking a common tone.

As in "The Desert Music"—two kinds of music must be harmonised, to find a common tone. The cello is again Williams' image. As Casals' "deep cello tone" was the central resonance in "The Desert Music", so it is repeated in "The Orchestra". Williams then continues to state explicitly: "Love is that common tone / shall raise his fiery head / and sound his note." By love all unlike things are held in a unity despite the "insensate music" that is heard in "The Desert Music". The purpose of the orchestra, Williams insists, "is to organise those sounds / and hold them / to an assembled order ./ in spite of the 'wrong note'". The 'wrong note' is that which would try and subvert harmony; like the "formless lump" in "The Desert Music" it needs to be contained and reconciled.

The receptivity of the poet to the sound is closely examined. "Is there a sound addressed not wholly to the ear?" he asks. The poet discovered not only harmony in the music but a wholeness in his faculties:

We half close  
our eyes. We do not  
hear it through our eyes.  
It is not  
a flute note either, it is the relation  
of a flute note  
to a drum. I am wide  
awake. The mind  
is listening.

This last line "the mind is listening" reflects much of what Williams sought to express in these late poems, a sense of

spiritual and artistic wholeness, enabling him to find places "heretofore unrealised" ("The Descent").

The actual music from "The Orchestra" is repetitive—"it is a principle of music/to repeat the theme". Just as the theme is repeated, so the poet also repeats his own diction:

it is a principle of music  
to repeat the theme. Repeat  
and repeat again,

The theme, writes Williams, is difficult, "but no more difficult / than the facts to be/resolved". The work of art must penetrate beyond intellectual appreciation once the 'facts' are resolved, then true apprehension follows—"thought is dissolved / in tears". The visceral response, the genuine response can be disturbing:

Our dreams  
have been assaulted  
by a memory that will not  
sleep.

Or, in Williams' case, his dreams are assaulted by his search for form, for prosodic harmony, that will not allow him peace.

The movement of the poem tends to be elliptical but the basic parallel of harmony and resolution in music and harmony and resolution in life is well made. The poet finds the common tone not by mere assertion but by experiencing this wholeness and communicating it with an unabashedly lyrical and beautiful exclamation?

I love you. My heart  
is innocent. And this  
the first day of the world!

These lines express perfectly Williams' capacity for statements of great spareness and beauty. His calculation never leads to the gaucheness that could so easily accompany such personal and innocent emotion. The poet reveals great sophistication with his craft to evade sentimentality of a cloying or maudlin kind. He has perfect harmony with his material and his "music".

The inclusion of a prose statement echoes the experiments in Paterson at integrating both poetry and prose to establish an overall poem. "Man has survived hitherto because he was too ignorant to know how to realise his wishes. Now that he can realise them, he must either change them or perish" —these lines set what has been a personal realisation into a public context. Williams shifts from the particular to the universal and indicates the responsibility for all to confront new situations with innocent hearts, truly calling for "the first day of the world." Two threads then, run through "The Orchestra". There is the natural twittering, and its counterpart in the unattuned instruments seeking common tone. Over this is impressed the mind of the poet responding with all his faculties and emotions to the dance, the music of experience. In spite of the "wrong note", in spite of deformity and suffering, the world is full of potential and fruitfulness. Even the aging Williams can exclaim: "this is the first day of the world".

This is the recognition of harmony, not just through the ear, but to quote Williams from In the American Grain, with minds "intact—with all [the] senses waking".<sup>1</sup> It is this personal receptivity that gives the poet power "to realise his

wishes", that Williams enthusiastically affirms as a positive and powerful apprehension of the world, one that co-ordinates and orders his experience enabling him to control both form and content:

The birds twitter now anew  
                                   but a design  
   surmounts their twittering.  
 It is a design of a man  
                                   that makes them twitter.  
   It is a design.

The mood of these lines again is one of reconciliation and harmony, of a man attuned and in possession of "a common tone".

The concern for harmony in both "The Orchestra" and "The Desert Music" has clear antecedents in Renaissance literature. Sir John Davies' poem "Orchestra - or a Poeme of Dauncing" has been described by E.M.W. Tillyard as "the perfect epitome of the universe seen as a dance".<sup>2</sup> In this poem Antinous, a suitor, maintains that "as the universe itself is one great dance comprising many lesser dances we should ourselves join the cosmic harmony. It was creative love that first persuaded the warring atoms to move in order. Time and all its divisions are a dance".<sup>3</sup> In "The Orchestra" Williams' response compares to Davies', but his understanding reflects a permanent 'immersion' that adapts the experience and makes it his own. Unlike Eliot he does not plunder the Renaissance

for actual ideas and phrases, instead he follows his doctrine of the descent, sheds his European trappings and paradoxically rediscovers essentially the same experience and image as Sir John Davies through his own idiom and with disarming honesty — "and this is the first day of the world". It is expressed anew but with a cognizance of the past.

It has been noted by Linda Welshimer Wagner<sup>4</sup> that the structure of "The Orchestra" is of interest. Its theme is in fact enacted in the five part symphonic structure of the poem. Williams first movement provides all the themes to be inter-related in the poem. They are love, music, and nature expressed in the triad:

Love is that common tone  
                                 shall raise his fiery head  
   and sound his note.

This is followed by what Wagner calls an 'adagio'<sup>5</sup> movement which begins by declaring the purpose of the orchestra and ends with the slow moving 'yawning' cadences: "But the ear /

in a half-reluctant mood  
                                 stretches  
   . . . and yawns.

The lines themselves enact the ideas discussed in them and in contrast the poem shifts to an allegro of violins which "enliven the scene, / pizzicato". In the fourth movement the themes are reintroduced as in a symphony: "For a short / memory or to / make the listener listen /." The facts are difficult so the point is made by repetition. Then the *coda* follows the short prose statement that Wagner, from evidence of the poet's own

recordings, shows to be read rapidly in a percussive manner.<sup>6</sup> The final section is a resolution. The themes of love, nature and music are resolved as the poem itself is resolved. Just as in a symphony, so in the poem "a design surmounts [the] twittering":

It is a design of a man.

While this view of the technical structure imposes a different medium on to the poem, Wagner's analogy is convincing.

The principle of the poems in "The Desert Music" "To get said what must be said" is expressed in their technique. The difficulty inter-relating complex themes is surmounted by the poet's structuring of his motifs. The long flowing triads make condensation difficult. He can interpolate abrupt statement but the overall effect is rather one of discursiveness and inter-relatedness to embrace all the implications that the poet wants to indicate. It is through the structure of his poems that the fullest meaning is derived. As has been indicated above, the content in these last poems is derived from the form rather than vice versa.

The poem entitled "The Host" continues Williams' preoccupation with the role and power of the poet. This time it is expressed in terms that are broadly religious:

There is nothing to eat,  
                                   seek it where you will,  
   but<sup>of</sup> the body of the Lord.

In this Williams does not subscribe to any narrow religious interpretation. His agnosticism he had made clear, or at least his refusal to accept orthodox religion:

it is all

according to the imagination!

Only the imagination

is real! They have imagined it,

therefore it is so. . . .

Of these lines Michael Hamburger wrote "Here Williams is not even speaking primarily about poetry or art, but about religious belief--which to him, a non-believer, is imagination".<sup>7</sup>

Just as the imagination offers wholeness, so does religion in the imaginations of the Negro evangelist, the two nuns and the white-haired Anglican. "The body of the Lord" is the whole phenomenal world--"The blessed plants / and the sea, yield it / to the imagination // intact". Unity and harmony is achieved by the power of their imaginations. "A new world" wrote Williams "is only a new mind. / And the mind and the poem / are all apiece". The mind and the poem are the foci for one man's apprehension of a reality. When he writes; "Only the imagination / is real!" he shows the mind and the poem to be all of a piece. To a poet like Williams the mind that enjoys, rather than suffers, reality is the mind that creates poetry. For him there is no such notion as the impersonality of the poet. Poetry, for him, is not gained by Eliot's formula; "The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates".<sup>8</sup> Williams rejoices in the combination of personal experience and the movement towards the universal in its expression in the poem. New worlds become new poems in Williams, or rather, the new moments in the world of reality are transmuted into new

moments in his poems. The linking of the world, the tangible and the phenomenal, with the mind, the abstract and the insubstantial, gives a clear view of Williams' process of writing. The mind is not separated from the world, from experience, as for instance, Eliot would have it. With William Carlos Williams the mind and the world become concrete. He states this specifically in Kora in Hell: "a thing known passes out of the mind into the muscles".<sup>9</sup> Says Miller: "He thinks with his muscles and bones rather than with ideas: 'I have heavy bones: I am afraid—there's little here for me—gravity must drag me down—over the horizon—I'm too slippery!'"<sup>10</sup> These lines are echoes of Yeats in the significantly titled poem "A Prayer for Old Age" :

God guard me from those thoughts men think  
In the mind alone;  
He that sings a lasting song  
Thinks in a marrow-bone.<sup>11</sup>

One is also reminded of Tanner's comments, quoted above, that Williams' words were "full of the shape of things, heavy with the weight of things".<sup>12</sup> The celebrated and oft-quoted catch-cry: "No ideas but in things" reflects Williams' concern for honesty and directness in his writing; this is expressed in a later poem "A Sort of a Song" :

Let the snake wait under  
his weed  
and the writing  
be of words, slow and quick, sharp  
to strike, quiet to wait,  
sleepless.

-through metaphor to reconcile  
 the people and the stones.  
 Compose. (No ideas  
 but in things) Invent!  
 Saxifrage is my flower that splits  
 the rocks.<sup>13</sup>

As a poet in "The Host", he offers a sacrament. The guests only have reality by permission of his imagination and his invention—"it is all/according to the imagination!... They have imagined it, // therefore it is so." The power of the mind to be a new world, of the poet to "invent it out of whole cloth" (DM, 116), is affirmed strongly :

No one was there  
                   save only for  
                                   the food. Which I alone,  
 being a poet,  
                   could have given them.

                                  ("The Host", DM, PB.94)

The poet has the power to will and to take away. It is the strength of the imagination. The resources of the poet, however, can have considerable limitation placed upon them. In "To a Dog Injured in the Street" and "The Yellow Flower" he examines the relationship between the poet and the often sordid events in the real world. The poet's imagination cannot conquer suffering, it will persist despite his efforts :

It is myself  
                   not the poor beast lying there  
                                   yelping with pain  
 that brings me to myself with a start— . . . .

The poet, with his experience as a physician cannot be oblivious to suffering and pain, both in his immediate environment and

elsewhere. He speaks of an awakening like the explosion of a bomb, "a bomb that has laid / all the world waste". Later this sense of shock, of ominous portent, is repeated in "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower": "the bomb / has entered our lives".<sup>36</sup>

The 'bomb' exists, corruption exists but Williams does not let it overrule, he seeks rather to counteract it with positives :

I can do nothing  
but sing about it  
and so I am assuaged  
from my pain.

The poet writes of beauty, not as escape but after he has experienced corruption and pain. He writes of René Char, the French poet, and: "all he must have seen // and suffered / that has brought him / to speak only of / sedgy rivers, / of daffodils and tulips. . . ."

Of René Char, Williams wrote with clear admiration, "I am impressed with his completely relaxed address to the words, the luxuriance of his imagination, yet the sobriety of his intelligence and mood. He is a man who adapts to any form or no form at all with perfect indifference, writing regularly lines which scan perfectly or not according to the occasion, whatever it is. I envy and at the same time salute and love him. I wish I were more like him, but how he has survived the bruising existence he has been through and come out from it sweet in disposition with his love for humanity undimmed is more than I can say".<sup>14</sup> It is the recognition that the bomb has entered our lives that gives the poet of simple life and experience more urgency—Williams' works aspire to be songs of

experience, aware of the state of the world but not too pessimistic to be deterred or limited by it. This is the prerogative of poetry: ~~we~~

should be lost  
without its wings to  
fly off upon.

("To Daphne and Virginia" DM, PB.75)

"To a Dog Injured in the Street" consists of a number of powerful memories which he has when confronted by the "poor beast...yelping with pain". Williams recalls two events when he was a child, both mentioned in his Autobiography. On one occasion their English setter named Norma had been suckling her puppies when Williams had "kicked (them) around thinking they were rats that were biting her"<sup>15</sup> —he repeats the story in his poem. The other event, that remained for him a vivid incident of wanton destruction occurred also in his early childhood—"I saw some hunter who had killed a rabbit take a sharp knife and laughing stab it into the poor creature's body just under the tail," he wrote; "It made me ill".<sup>16</sup> The event is carefully rendered in the poem with all the brevity and concision required to express Williams' shock and disgust at these sexual violations:

I remember also  
a dead rabbit  
lying harmlessly  
on the outspread palm  
of a hunter's hand.  
As I stood by  
watching  
he took a hunting knife  
and with a laugh  
thrust it  
up into the animal's private parts.  
I almost fainted.

Williams ponders on his train of thought but adds: "The cries of a dying dog / are to be blotted out // as best I can".

Williams, as he indicated in "The Descent", falls back on the resources of memory to assuage all ills and to renew perspective. It is the poet who must come to terms with such events as this ordinary but poignant instance of an injured dog.

Again he addresses René Char:

you are a poet who believes  
in the power of beauty  
to right all wrongs.  
I believe it also.

It is the power of the poet's character and his imagination that can right these wrongs with honesty and compassion. The poet must face up to events.

With invention and courage  
we shall surpass  
the pitiful dumb beasts.

The poet invokes Char as if he were making supplication to a saint. After his plea for invention and courage, Williams closes the poem with the liturgical finality of a benediction:

let all men believe it,  
as you have taught me also  
to believe it.

"The Yellow Flower" has links with "To a Dog Injured in the Street" but its complexity is more subtle and its progression more elliptical. As indicated below, the symbol of the flower is central to much of Williams' later writing. The flower is used literally but in various contexts represents: a source of pleasure, in "Asphodel"; man without cupidity, <sup>and</sup> the good wife;

the "feminine principle" in "For Eleanor and Bill Monahan". The flower also represents fact, <sup>and</sup> the poet's gift of a poem and the work of the imagination. It is these latter meanings that are connoted in "The Yellow Flower". It is a work of art but also it represents the bounty of heaven, it is a "sacred" flower. The mustard flower is used specifically in the New Testament in the parable of the mustard seed. Mathew 12, verse 31 reads: "The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field".

The yellow flower is also a symbol of eternity; it is circular and segmented and its use by Williams can be related to the celebrated flower sermon of Buddha who simply and silently held before his followers a yellow flower.

The poem begins abruptly, desperately:

What shall I say, because talk I must?

Yet again the aging poet reveals his need to speak, to get said what must be said. He continues in this poem as in "To a Dog Injured in the Street", to confront the dilemma of the "wrong note", the presence and prevalence of deformity and suffering, 'What shall I say,' he asks: "That I have found a cure / for the sick? // I have found no cure / for the sick."<sup>1</sup> But the mood of despair as always is shortlived, Williams rapidly moves back into elation and hope. He holds the "crooked" flower as an icon; a thing of beauty "which only to look upon / all men / are cured." The flower, as so often before in his work, represents aesthetic perfection, it is a

reminder of the divine in man's realm:

for which all men  
sing secretly their hymns  
of praise. This  
is that sacred  
flower!

But the flower, though embodying beauty and innocence, superficially the very antithesis of the "wrong note" or the "formless lump" of "The Desert Music", has a number of limiting artificialities. It is a hothouse plant, preserved from the vicissitudes of life. It owes its survival to the fact that it is held under glass but it has a singular quality, a power that Carlos Williams readily concedes. What, he asks :

can be the reason  
that it has picked me out  
to hold me, openmouthed,  
rooted before this window  
in the cold,  
my will  
drained from me  
so that I have only eyes  
for these yellow,  
twisted petals . ?

The concern with the contortion of the petals brings Williams into a subtle and complex comparison with Michelangelo's late and unfinished sculptures. "But why the torture / and the escape through / the flower?" He asks. The words 'torture' and 'escape' imply Williams affinity to the Renaissance notions of art as capturing and releasing the spirit of the creator through his works. He sees in the contorted petals an **epiphany**



The sheer impact of his sensory experience compels the artist to free himself and infuse into the inanimate the force of his creative impulse. Carlos Williams as a poet frees himself to speak, to make poetry as:

Michelangelo through his hands  
had the same, if greater,  
power.

The poet does not claim the stature of the Italian artist but affirms that the impulse is the same even if the embodiment of it is not as formidable.

But the poem shifts its attention back to the relationship between the work of art and the phenomenal experience that it denotes. Williams cannot accept Michelangelo's achievement without reservation, he must

account for,  
the tortured bodies  
of  
the slaves themselves  
and  
the tortured body of my flower  
which is not a mustard flower at all

Unlike Michelangelo he cannot <sup>totally</sup> accept the transmutation of art into divine manifestation. Michelangelo wrote: "If bold, foolish men think that beauty, which moves every sane intellect and transports it to heaven itself, is born of the senses, let them know that our weak vision cannot of itself ascend from the mortal to the divine, but remains always below. For it is vain to think that it can be raised without the help of grace".<sup>1</sup> It was this amplified and sacramental view of art that brought with it such

difficulties for Michelangelo. He was imprisoned by the grandness of his ideals and his art, the sheer scope of the "Slaves" project for Pope Julius' tomb was, to say the least, formidable. It was no wonder that time and energy and human resources were doomed to leave the "Slaves" half imprisoned in their marble, rough hewn, heavy and finally overwhelming in the task they represented.

William Carlos Williams uses the special connotations that the "Slaves" have for Michelangelo's whole career. They represent the hope of great artistic achievement but also the limitations of a mortal artist. Williams exploits the similarities between himself and Michelangelo, but without pretension. As Michelangelo laboured on his last works in the "Slaves" so Williams struggled to "free" himself; to get said what must be said, before the descent into death. "What shall I say, because talk I must" he announces at the beginning of the poem. He is faced with the same dilemma as even the greatest of all Renaissance artists. He is faced with incompleteness and death; he is threatened with his verses half hewn in amorphous slabs as Michelangelo's statuary remained.

The yellow flower he concludes, has come to represent something other. It is not a mustard flower at all

but some unrecognized

and<sup>no</sup> earthly flower

The flower denotes for the poet a new experience, and a new struggle to render that experience through his senses and finally through poetry. But just as the flower is exotic,

so in the ways that he responds, his experience is exotic. The final synthesis must be for Carlos Williams to make the experience more authentic, more truly his own. William Carlos Williams' duty first and last is honesty to himself and to his experience. The poem must be his personal statement but it is his task to understand the nature of this sacramental flower, this life symbol and relate it to his experience. What then remains for him is to take this "unearthly" flower and let it bloom for him

for me to naturalize  
                                   and acclimate  
   and choose it for my own.

While Carlos Williams may not wholly agree with a divine idea of art as Michelangelo represented it, he emphatically affirms the energy of <sup>the</sup> creative impulse.

In "Deep Religious Faith" he ruminates on this theme further. This religious faith, as has been shown in "The Host", is not of a doctrinal kind, it refers rather to sense of wholeness, a mind "awake" as he expressed it in "The Orchestra". "Past death / past rainy days / or the distraction//of lady's —smocks all silver-white;" this faith persists, beyond even he says, "the remote borders / of poetry itself". This impulse "if it does not drive us, / it is vain".

The strength and intensity of this 'faith' is the central factor of the imagination. It is a power of mind quite beyond even "the remote borders" of poetry but it is that which generates the great manifestations of the imagination:

it is  
 that which made El Greco  
 paint his green and distorted saints  
 and live  
 lean.

It takes other forms, not merely that of creation but also of sensitive appreciation of art and humanity:

It is what in life drives us  
 to praise music  
 and the old  
 or sit by a friend  
 in his last hours.

This deep religious faith is at the heart of the doctrine of the descent. The poet is an initiate, like the young man in "The Wanderer" indicated earlier. The reconciliation of opposites—the two streams of the Passaic and the two kinds of music in "The Desert Music"—constitutes a whole view. To find a reconciliation between these unlike forces requires "the common tone" that harmonises all things :

All that which makes the pear ripen  
 or the poet's line  
 come true!

Invention is the heart of it.

Without this faculty, without an awake mind "the citizens are imprisoned". This religious faith, as Williams describes it, is what gives artistic achievement its purpose and definition. Without it

The rose  
 may not be worshipped  
 or the poet look to it  
 for benefit.

This is the special capacity of the poet, to possess his experience and express it, but this capacity, he regrets, has been much diminished. There is less inclination to make a whole response, a tendency to fragmentation and mere analysis. "Shame on our poets", chides Williams,

impressed  
by the "laboratory,"  
they have forgot  
the flower!  
which goes beyond all  
laboratories!

William Carlos Williams, though he ranted to HD "There is nothing sacred about literature, it is damned from one end to the other",<sup>19</sup> still nonetheless concedes that it serves a unique and very precious function. More mellow, more thoughtful in his old age, Williams is less iconoclastic but remains quietly firm in his insistence on the direction of poetry. It must serve the imagination and it must seek new forms and reach new heights. "Shame on our poets" writes Williams with scorn:

They have quit the job  
of invention. The  
imagination has fallen asleep  
in a poppy-cup.

While it is true that "The Desert Music" poems are characterised by a discursive and elliptical quality, it is also true that considerable subtlety of meaning is discernible. "The Yellow Flower", for instance, repays careful scrutiny in the complexity and beauty of its theme.

More simply but equally effectively, the short poem "The

"Artist" reveals the familiar Williams facility with minutiae. The theme of the poem is, once more, the Dance, the moment of harmony when all is resolved and in accord. But Williams' own statement of this epiphany escapes such prosaic summary. Williams' dancer Mr. T. is hardly prepossessing. He stands in his soiled undershirt "his hair stranding out / on all sides". It is interesting to note in passing the suitability of the name, Mr. T. The letter 'T' itself suggests typographically the stance of the dancer. The irony of the man in his old singlet performing a balletic movement of perfect grace is well established but with gentle restraint. This is not a parody of the Cosmic Dance but an enactment of it. The fact that Williams' dancer is not ultimately grotesque is the measure of the poem's merit.

The Dancer stands with his "heels together"

arms gracefully

for the moment

curled above his head.

After this moment of stillness the movement begins

Then he whirled about

bounded

into the air

and with an entrechat

perfectly achieved

completed the figure.

The dance is 'perfectly achieved' and perfectly complete.

Williams with economy and grace establishes the central proposition. Then the poem shifts to compare the agility of the 'artist' with the immobility of Williams' mother seated

in her invalid's chair, "taken by surprise", we are told, she "was left speechless". The point is deftly made—the artist has the ability to perform and delight those who are unable to perform themselves. The title "The Artist" places Williams' proposition in a more general context, Mr. T. is not merely the dancer but is all artists. This, however, neither obscures, nor is overshadowed by, the particular nature of the event and the poem's setting. The poem ends with a fine representation of the cadences of colloquial speech, achieved as effortlessly as Mr. T's entrechat.

Bravo! she cried at last  
                                   and clapped her hands.  
                                   The man's wife  
 came from the kitchen:  
                                   What goes on here? she said.  
                                   But the show was over.

The epiphany is brief and only accessible to some. The precious quality of such a moment of perfection is neatly established by this intrusion by the man's wife.

It would be dangerous to overrate this, in many respects, very minor poem but it would be equally remiss to overlook it. It represents an enduring quality in William Carlos Williams' writing that goes beyond his theorising or prosody—a capacity for freshness and simplicity. Earlier, with "The Red Wheelbarrow" and the cat in the jam closet,<sup>20</sup> Williams had represented with deft accuracy a momentary glimpse. But in this late poem he shows also a greater depth of meaning and a sophisticated use of the symbolism of the dance. The honesty

and moderation of the poem confirm Williams' authenticity as a poet entirely at ease with his material. The poems in The Desert Music all represent the poet in the dance to find 'the common tone' but "The Artist" perhaps alone represents his entrechat.

Examining The Desert Music it is possible to discern obvious recurrences and preoccupations. The documentation of the descent into age and the ever present discussion of the poem and its demands and responsibilities are prominent, as also is the poet's concern with love and the influence of women on the imagination. The collection also is infused with an overall need to harmonise and synthesise experience as images of music and the dance in "The Orchestra" and "The Desert Music" seek to do. It is then, something of an anomaly to find "Theocritus: Idyl I (A version of the Greek)" contained among such apparently unlike poems. However on closer inspection this piece is quite in accord with the mood of other poems in the collection. While it is an insufficient comment, it is fair to describe Williams' writing as pastoral; not in any specific nymphs-and-shepherds way but in the lyric and frequently rural nature of his work. Rutherford, New Jersey seems in many ways an adaptable environment for a provincial poet, it is neither rigidly urban nor rural, but offers Williams a chance to develop either stream. His poems such as "To Daphne and Virginia" and "To a Dog Injured in the Street" evoke a kind of suburban pastoralism if such a hybrid could be permitted to exist. Williams, it would seem was able to take

his influence from both city and country life and could adapt either to his needs. It is crucial to Carlos Williams' view that such a term as pastoral be applicable to his work. It is testimony that the viable European forms can be adapted to his purposes as an American writer and can find adequate restatement in new terms.

In the "Theocritus: Idyl I", there is a hint that Dr. Williams hankers to present the image of cultural respectability that T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound had affected so easily. Williams rejected "those who know all the Latin and some of the Sanskrit names, much French and perhaps one or two other literatures"<sup>21</sup> but one suspects he feels, on occasions, defensive.

In 1952 when Williams and his wife were visiting friends, the Abbotts in New York, the poet suffered a serious stroke. While incapacitated, Williams told Paris Review interviewer Stanley Koehler, a Mrs. Gratwick had read to him from Theocritus.<sup>22</sup> "Theocritus was always strong in my mind" Carlos Williams commented. "But I wasn't capable of hearing it in the Greek. I'm in an unfortunate position, because I don't have the original language...I started to take Latin at Horace Mann [a high school in New York], but the teacher was withdrawn to my infinite regret. That was the end of that—all my life, that was the end. And I always regretted too that I didn't know Greek".<sup>23</sup> Of Theocritus itself, Williams commented: "The pastoral nature of it gave me a chance to spread myself. It was Greek, and it appealed to me; and it was a wonderful

chance to record my feeling of respect for the Greek classics".<sup>24</sup>  
 But Williams recorded his respect for the Greeks in a characteristically personal and unaffected way. His subject is from Theocritus, to be sure, but his treatment is idiosyncratic, colloquial and strenuously non-academic. It is not difficult to see a poet, long enamoured of the pastoral as his early influence, Keats, had presented it, would respond with energy and enthusiasm to the topic himself. As he said, revealingly, it "gave me a chance to spread myself". The interest of the poem lies, I feel, in the ease with which Williams handles what could be a pretentious or academic exercise. The exchanges between Thyrsis and the Goatherd are unmannered and brisk:

Thyrsis

Will you not, goatherd,  
                   in the Nymph's name  
                                   take your place on this  
                                   sloping knoll  
 among the tamarisks  
                   and pipe for me  
                                   while I tend my sheep.

Goatherd

No, shepherd,  
                   nothing doing;  
                                   it's not for us  
 to be heard during the noon hush.

It is a measure of Williams' facility with spoken speech that he can avoid excess and the "false note". The brief lines in Paterson in a different context:

Oh, Geeze, Doc, I guess it's all right  
 but what the hell does it mean?<sup>25</sup>

show how naturally the representation of idiomatic speech came to him. That the poet can use "nothing doing" in his rendering of Theocritus as easily as he uses speech in his regional poem Paterson shows a capacity for genuine expression, authentic expression, undictated by context or mode. The poet is his own, his most enduring wish. "Theocritus: Idyl I" is clearly in harmony with other poems in the collection. Its final lines poignantly express the aging poet's own past songs

I would gladly  
                                   give this cup  
   if you, my friend,  
 will sing for me  
                                   that delightful song.  
                                   I hold nothing back.  
 Begin my friend,  
                                   for you cannot,  
   you may be sure,  
 take your song,  
                                   which drives all things out of mind,  
   with you to the other world.

The poem that drives all things out of mind remains, and Carlos Williams is intensely concerned with his legacy as an American poet. He had wondered to his son how much he had succeeded. "I haven't been recognised!" he wrote, "and I doubt that my technical influence is good or even adequate".<sup>26</sup> It was perhaps this discontent, even late in his literary career, that prompted Williams to strive more. He cannot take his song to the other world and in this knowledge he continued to write even greater poetry. The imminence of the descent into death gave the poet energy and drive that one with more time to kill

would not require or respond to. His songs were to be heard and admired and Williams seems determined even in old age to make them worth the attention. The vivacity of the lines in "Theocritus" is that which informs all Williams' work. The sense of freedom, of liberation for the word and for the senses, is keenly explored.

"The Mental Hospital Garden" is also a poem that presents the fullness of life. It is a celebration of summer by a man who is faced only with winter and death and as such, is a tribute to his extraordinary resources to still respond youthfully to life. It is this same deep human feeling that makes "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" a moving and formidable achievement.

The spirit of St. Francis that invests the garden is one that is significant to Williams. In an essay printed in Contact magazine in 1921 he wrote "I should like to make St. Francis of Assisi the patron saint of the United States, because he loved the animals. The birds came to him not for wheat but to hear him preach, even the fish heard him...here was a common stem where all were one and from which every paired characteristic branched".<sup>27</sup> A saint who could bring all facets of creation together would have immediate appeal for Williams. St. Francis epitomises the "common tone", the harmony of the spheres and of all created life. Williams throughout the Desert Music collection is concerned in some way or other with harmony and the significance of the dance. "The Orchestra" states this most explicitly and is explicit also on the need

for action. Since a new world is a new mind Williams calls for both. His admonition in "The Orchestra" that since man can realise his wishes, he must change them or perish, is continued and extended in "The Mental Hospital Garden". The garden is a metaphor for creation and as the title suggests the poem is preoccupied with the mind and its capacities. Williams' diagnosis for the world's "mind" is that it requires the therapy of the mental hospital; it is incomplete and "unattuned / seeking a common tone." Later in "Asphodel" this poverty of feeling is repeated. "Our hearts", he writes, "gasp dying / for want of love" (JL, PB. 170) The poem then begins with explicit statement of the "inadequacy and narrowness of experience and emotion.

It is this dilemma that Williams characterised as the American one; fed by the ever pervading presence of Puritanism, "it remains, a bad breath in the room".<sup>28</sup> In the American Grain had presented the problem and the choices offered. D.H. Lawrence's review described them, there was "recoiling into individual smallness and invertecence", the Puritan way; and there was another way "by touch: touch America as she is; dare to touch her, and this is the heroic way".<sup>29</sup> This heroic way is what Carlos Williams repeatedly invites the reader to follow and express. If all were to follow this way then the common tone would be sounded. "The Orchestra" says it:

Love is that common tone  
                                   shall raise his fiery head  
   and sound his note.

Similarly then the warmth and fertility of summer and the

benevolence and vitality of St. Francis, inform and heal the illness in the mental hospital garden. The garden is illuminated by the kindly spirit of St. Francis. He is the image of harmony and fruitfulness :

from his plenty  
 he fed them all.  
 All mankind  
                                 grew to be his debtors,  
 a simple story.  
 Love is in season.

"Love is in season", in fact love is always in season for Carlos Williams and its capacity for renewal and its importance to him as a poet is even more fully explored and exploited in "Asphodel". It is love both erotic and spiritual that makes Williams' experience whole, that makes him intimate his eternity :

My heart  
 is innocent. And this  
                                 the first day of the world.

The erotic element is strong in "The Mental Hospital Garden" —the floral imagery is sexual :

hyacinth time  
                                 in  
 the hospital garden,  
                                 the time  
   of the coral-flowered  
 and early salmon-pink  
                                 clusters,...

In this scene that Williams uses floral description but in an ordered, medieval way. But this Franciscan tranquility is

punctuated by a lively sensuality:

the young couples  
 embrace .  
 as in a tale  
 by Boccaccio.

Indeed it is this sensuality that is the mode of salvation. "St. Francis forgive them" says Williams, "/ and all lovers". The celebration of Eros leads on to a greater awareness, a power of mind and spirit:

They have seen  
 a great light, it  
 springs from their own bawdy foreheads.

The bawdy and the spiritual are not mutually exclusive. Williams, like Whitman, contains multitudes. The garden, formerly bereft, is now filled with light; filled with the bounty of St. Francis. The lovers live:

by the Holy light of love  
 that rules,  
 blocking despair,  
 over this garden.

But the illumination is too strong at first—"Blinded by the light / they walk bewildered". The light is an important metaphor in the poem: "The broad sun / shines!" and Williams echoes the lines from The New Testament: "The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, thy body also is full of light".<sup>30</sup>

The capacity for freshness and innocence in Williams' work is the consequence of the naive or innocent eye. In this Williams is closely linked to his culture and its ideals. On

American naivete, Tanner writes "the accent and the emphasis is distinctly American and does not involve the idealization of mere immaturity but rather a feeling of some valuable unencumbered simplicity of response".<sup>31</sup> William Carlos Williams even near death still strove for this unencumbered simplicity which he defiantly and passionately believed to be his authentic response as an American and knew to be his visceral response as a man. "The Mental Hospital Garden" embodies much of the spirit of his late writing. It is an expression of the discovery of a new mind, of worlds lost and unsuspected. The lovers, in short, undergo a descent and so they are restored to health.

Reawakened

after love's first folly

they resemble children

roused from a long sleep.

Summer is here,

right enough.

The movement beyond the confines of the garden to places "heretofore unrealised" ("The Descent") is beautifully expressed in the image of the young girl at the end of the poem. Here we see Williams' strength as a writer and the fullness of his faculties. He presents a portrait of one with a mind intact and all senses waking, and nothing better could epitomise the poet himself:

One

emboldened,

parting the leaves before her,

stands in the full sunlight,

alone

shading her eyes

as her heart

beats wildly

and her mind

drinks up

the full meaning

of it

all!

## CHAPTER 4

### "THE FEMININE PRINCIPLE"

The theme of love and the relationship between men and women is central to The Desert Music poems and even more so in the explicitly titled Journey to Love. The latter title reveals much of Williams' attitude. Love was to be a journey, in the mind and in the imagination. It is no shallow celebration of Eros although he is responsive and committed to the importance of erotic love—for that was a measure of one's boldness to touch and to explore; the qualities he admired in Boone and Houston, men in the American grain. But his view of love was to be considered in conjunction with what he called the "feminine principle."<sup>1</sup>

In Paterson, the single male protagonist is contrasted by "innumerable women". Williams wrote significantly in Book I: "A man like a city and a woman like a flower.... Innumerable women, each like a flower".<sup>1</sup> The use of the analogue between women and flowers recalls the 'sacred' "Yellow Flower" and as will be evident, is highly relevant to the poem "To Eleanor and Bill Monahan" where he writes:

Mother of God

I have seen you stoop  
to a merest flower  
and raise it  
and press it to your cheek.

(DM, PB. 84)

The feminine principle is crucial to the artistic process; it is the local, concrete 'society' or 'place' where universally valid art can begin. In 1946 he wrote: the artist "will continue to produce only if his attachments to society continue adequate. If a man in his fatuous dreams cuts himself off from that supplying female, he dries up his sources...heading straight for literary sterility".<sup>2</sup>

The 'divorce' that Williams characterises, especially in Paterson is a consequence not only of the artist's separation from society but the alienation of male and female as well. When the female and male principles do not complete each other, this is further evidence, as he says in "Asphodel", that "the bomb has entered our lives."

Williams made clear the need for "marriage", communication between the sexes in his Autobiography. "Men", he wrote, have given the direction to my life and women have always supplied the energy".<sup>3</sup> This was Williams' blueprint for a good society or culture where women supplied emotional potency to life and men—particularly artists and scientists—provide it with direction and purpose.

In a short story entitled "A Night in June" Williams indicated the kind of rapport between men and women that he himself had felt. The story concerns his practice as a

doctor. He is delivering an Italian woman's ninth child, the union between doctor and patient is one of science and humanity. They do not communicate in spoken language—she speaks too little English <sup>rather</sup> rather by a mutual emotional responsiveness. The doctor in the story demonstrates the power of <sup>the</sup> feminine principle in the description of the actual delivery of the child. He is aided by the mother's sister-in-law who gives him both physical and emotional strength: "Go ahead, I said. Pull hard. I welcomed the feel of her hands and the strong pull. It quieted me in the way the whole house had quieted me all night.

This woman in her present condition would have seemed repulsive to me ten years ago—now, poor soul, I see her to be as clean as a cow that calves. The flesh of my arm lay against the flesh of her knee gratefully. It was I who was being comforted and soothed".<sup>4</sup>

Because this communion of men and women was the mainstay of his life and profession, Williams feared terribly its breakdown. In the "Jacataqua" chapter of In the American Grain the female is shown as spiritually barren, only a brood animal or shallow 'pal' to men.<sup>5</sup> "Women" he says "—givers (but they have been as reservoirs, empty)....They are our cattle, cattle of the spirit—not yet come in. None yet has raised benevolence to distinction. Not one to 'wield her beauty as a scepter'".<sup>6</sup> The minds and sexuality lack all joy and, as in the early poem "To Elsie", all they can do is fearfully give or withhold themselves physically:

—succumbing without  
emotion  
save numbed terror

under some hedge of choke-cherry  
or viburnum<sub>7</sub>

With this failure in women, imaginative Americans uninspired by the flesh and spirit, "lose all desire for contact with the 'soil' of reality", observes Guimond. "They refuse their responsibility of 'husbandry' of improving their environment by giving it purpose and direction".<sup>8</sup>

Williams believed that this lack must be avoided at all costs. The men in the American grain offered a lead but their view was still not complete. The idealists were thwarted or incomplete—Poe tended to the eth<sup>e</sup>real, the active men like Boone ~~to be~~ solitary and primitive. Neither could properly lead to a true "marriage" with the environment. Both were partly right but they required the strength of the feminine principle. Carlos Williams stressed, writes Guimond, that: "Men must devote their whole powers to the creation of a 'language', a valid culture which will produce communication between the male and the female, the mind and the flesh, the human and his environment. Only through such a "language" will men be able to serve the female soil of their lives and be nourished by it".<sup>9</sup>

William Carlos Williams' affirmation of the feminine principle then, is found both in his polemic and his personal life, his poetry and his practice. He frequently refers to his need for this female energy perhaps because it was something

that he came dramatically to know only in his late teens.

In his Autobiography Williams stresses his early lack of female company—"I never had a sister, no aunts and no female cousins, at least within striking distance. So that aside from mother and grandma I never knew a female intimately for my entire young life. That was very important. It generated in me enough curiosity to burn up fifty growing boys".<sup>10</sup> It was just this intensity that never waned or became clinical in his long career as a pediatrician. While he says women gave him energy it is clear that one woman in particular was important to him—his wife Florence. "Flossie, my wife...is the rock on which I have built"<sup>11</sup> he wrote, and his greatest love poetry has been written in dedication to her. It is a gauge of Williams' capacity as a poet that from his suburban experience in Rutherford he could produce such fine poetry with not a Beatrice but a Flossie. William Carlos Williams' celebration of his love for her produced poetry<sup>which</sup> in temperament and treatment is masterly. The poetry that Williams has written about women especially in the collections that I am primarily concerned with, concentrates on specific women that he knew. "To Daphne and Virginia" for instance is about his two daughters-in-law and "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" is addressed to Flossie, his wife. These particularly personal poems however, find a more general focus when viewed in conjunction with poems such as "For Eleanor and Bill Monahan" that reveals a more primal and more complex interest in "the female principle of the world".

The particular tension that he discerns is established from the outset in "To Daphne and Virginia". Theirs is a life "in which // two women agonise:/ to live and breath is no less". Two streams of thought ran through this poem; one is concerned with Williams' relationship to these women as a man, the other with his relationship as a poet. He is constantly concerned with his viewpoint as poet:

Be patient that I address you in a poem,  
   there is no other  
   fit medium.

The mind  
   lives there.

Williams is aware that his experience as a man, and an old man at that, separates him in viewpoint from the young women but the "box odour", like the music in "The Desert Music", unites them. He can stabilise his ideas "while this healing odor is abroad / one can write a poem".

As a contemplative, the power of mind is Williams' concern as is its ability to be stimulated by the imagination. "The mind is the cause of our distresses/", he writes "but of it we can build anew". The resources of the mind are our salvation - they, combined with the 'common tone' of love, are what redeems the young people in "The Mental Hospital Garden". Elsewhere, in "The Descent", Williams strives to make positive value out of despair by mental exploration. But the mind, says Carlos Williams in "To Daphne and Virginia", can fly too easily to:

a woman's world,  
   of crossed sticks, stopping  
 thought.

Williams continues on this theme with the lines that I have discussed elsewhere:

A new world  
is only a new mind.  
And the mind and the poem  
are all apiece.

But despite the digressions on this capacity for mental renewal the major interest is in the:

Two young women  
to be snared,  
odor of box,  
to bind and hold them  
for the mind's labors.

The olfactory stimulus is strong and Williams finds that it is this that helps to hammer his thoughts into a unity. But the 'snaring' of these two women is not simply capturing them in the poem; the metaphor denotes the confrontation of man and woman, both emotional and sexual.

Williams' attitude is ambivalent. His personal response to women seems often different from other men. His lines in "For Eleanor and Bill Monahan" are revealing: "I confess / to being / half man and half/woman" (DM, PB. 84). He is now Tiresias with knowledge of both men and women, Tiresias who "foresuffered all"<sup>12</sup>—this would be a consequence of his long experience as a doctor who must be more aware of the needs of both sexes, who must be in possession of more humanity and understanding than most men. But in Williams' case the bisexual characteristic goes deeper than a mere literary persona. It reflects a strong psychic identification with

women, one that leads to his passionate and moving exclamation at the end of "For Eleanor and Bill Monahan":

The female principle of the world  
     is my appeal  
                     in the extremity  
 to which I have come.

(DM, PB, 86)

The strong need he has of the feminine principle, of the support and response of a woman, is *clearly* stated in this poem:

I have seen the ivy  
     cling  
                             to a piece of crumbled  
 wall so that  
     you cannot tell  
                             by which either  
 stands: this is to say  
     if she to whom I cling  
                             is loosened both  
 of us go down.

(DM, PB, 84)

Williams, then, reveals a strong psychic need for the female presence, one that is further confirmed by his professional experience. Women provide a healing balm, they foster life which was also a crucial duty for Dr. Williams. In the American Grain had reflected some of Williams' dismay at the role of women in America. They were "Pioneer Katics" even Poe had only febrile "Moonflowers"—poets and women were the test of a society "Never a woman: never a poet. That's an axiom" he wrote.<sup>13</sup> Williams recognised that women could not be divorced from the society. It was insufficient to have them only as brood animals that were to be loved and left by



more penetrant, infinitely  
 more penetrant.

And finally, "in that sense not to be resisted".

He returns to his image of confrontation between the male and female forces and shows the disparity between them. There is, "in the hard / give and take / of a man's life with / a woman" he writes "//a thing which is not the stress itself.

but beyond  
 and above

that,

The words typographically indicate a separation and a confusion of direction beyond and above. This reflects the impulse in a man to cast himself indiscriminately, the centrifugal movement to new places and to new women. Williams speaks of that:

something that wants to rise  
 and shake itself

free . . . .

'We are not innocents", he stresses

We are not chickadees  
 on a bare limb  
 with a worm in the mouth

The worm, the corruption, Williams indicates, "is in our brains":

and concerns them  
 and not food for our

offspring . . . .

The 'us' for the poet, reflects some men, those eschewing the female principle. These are described in "For Eleanor and Bill Monahan" as those "who as they live

fling caution to the  
 wind and women praise them  
 and love them for it.  
 Cruel as the claws of  
 a cat . . . .

The worm is not food but a blight, like Blake's "invisible worm" it destroys not only the body but the imagination. The worm is in our brains and it is a threat to man and poet. It

waits to disrupt  
our thought  
and throw it  
to the newspapers  
or anywhere . . . .

The destructive impulse disrupts thought and causes panic, forces men to bare their private selves, disturbs and challenges their prerogative to be free, to fling caution to the wind.

But the conflict of sexes is not one-sided:

There is, in short  
a counter stress,  
borne of the sexual shock  
which survives it.

This sexual shock is referred to in Carlos Williams' Autobiography as a basis for art. "Sex is at the bottom of all art" he quotes from a conversation, "[God] is unity, but to accomplish simultaneity we must have two, multiplicity, the male and the female, man and woman—acting together, the fecundating principle".<sup>14</sup>

The tension between male and female, Heraclitean action and reaction, is tempered enough, however, for the poet to address it:

At least  
while this healing odor is abroad  
one can write a poem . . . .

The closing lines of "To Daphne and Virginia" are located more specifically and in a rural and pastoral setting Carlos Williams

finds parallels and analogues for his predicament. On an old farm is a pet goose, inquisitive and vigorous, even destructive; he is:

penned in,  
or he would eat the garden,...

But the goose is graceful in his retirement, he is:

a very quiet old fellow  
who writes no poems . . . .

Having introduced this image of the goose Williams' emphasis then moves to alternatives in age—"Men / against their reason / speak of love". Sometimes, as in Carlos Williams' case, "when they are old". In the time near death, to be retrospective, to descend to worlds lost and worlds unsuspected, for Williams the man and the poet: "It is / all they can do".

Or else he can submit to pure sensual existence, be resigned to the moment, write no poems, have neither past nor future, either watch or be like:

a heavy goose  
who waddles, slopping  
noisily in the mud of  
his pool.

In "For Eleanor and Bill Monahan" Williams addresses himself more generally to his world of women. Daphne and Virginia were daughters-in-law, specific women and part of his family. In the "Monahan" poem the poet invokes Mary herself:

Mother of God! Our Lady!  
the heart  
is an unruly Master:  
Forgive us our sins  
as we  
forgive  
those who have sinned against  
us.

The "variable" foot demonstrates here its flexibility lending itself effectively to the liturgical movement of these lines. Again the poem presents a religious motif but without doctrinal significance. Mary as in the Marian poems of the Middle Ages represents a lady of secular as well as spiritual perfection. She is the mother of the earthly and a lady to be served loyally.

The poem bursts with ripeness, with "impossible spring-time" as in "The Mental Hospital Garden". Once more love is "the common tone". But the submission to her Holy rule, the attainment of resolution and peace can come only with difficulty and tribulation:

We have not come  
easily  
to your environs  
but painfully  
across sands  
that have scored our  
feet.

The concern with suffering is again at the forefront for the poet. The doctor and the man in Carlos Williams respond to suffering but the response is stoic. In "To a Dog Injured in the Street" he affirms "the power of beauty / to right all wrongs" and "The Yellow Flower" shows the poet resolutely facing reality—he has found no cure for the sick but offers renewal and hope in "that sacred flower":

which only to look upon  
all men  
are cured.

It is the power of invention, the resources of the artist that Williams shows as the redeeming principle.

With invention and courage  
we shall surpass  
the pitiful dumb beasts,

he wrote in "To a Dog Injured in the Street"—but a need for a test of the resilience and strength of invention is affirmed in "For Eleanor and Bill Monahan":

That which we have suffered  
was for us  
to suffer.

Williams' world does not attempt to exclude suffering, it is rather to be accommodated. In winter time, in the seasons and in the poet's own seasons,

the birds who know how  
to escape suffering  
by flight  
are gone.

But Williams is only too aware that he must with invention and courage face all adversity:

Man alone  
is that creature who  
cannot escape suffering  
by flight .

Rather it is the power of "that sacred flower", man's response to the common tone that is the solution. Just as René Char transmuted his personal tribulations and suffering "to speak only of / sedgy rivers / of daffodils and tulips" so Williams turns to his idealised women—the Mother of God, yet Beatrice and Flossie as well, to attain their insights, their view of

of the world. It is their creative, benevolent nature that he wishes to learn from. The female principle becomes, then, an adjunct to his male energies.

Mother of God

I have seen you stoop  
to a merest flower  
and raise it  
and press it to your cheek.

The 'merest' flower suggests the Elizabethan sense of 'mere' as perfect. The flower like "The Yellow Flower" reflects the circle of eternity and harmony and it is the "fecundating principle" of women that Williams shows is what completes and makes more humane both life and art.

You are a woman and  
it was  
a woman's gesture.

His attention in the poem moves from Mary to his own wife Flossie. She is old, like him but to his mind and his imagination she has her youthful vitality. She has still the flower of her youth and is still a source of energy and love for some of Carlos Williams finest writing. With great tenderness and humility Williams addresses her:

You have no lovers now  
in the bare skies  
to bring you flowers,  
to whisper to you  
under a hedge . . . .

His wife however in spirit has all her youth and with his imagination Williams relives his early life with her:

"Memory is a kind // of accomplishment, / a sort of renewal".

As he wrote in "The Orchestra", Williams' heart is innocent; in the eternizing process of the imagination it is again "the first day of the world":

you are young  
                   and fit to be loved.  
                                   I declare it boldly  
 with my heart  
                   in my teeth  
                                   and my knees knocking  
 together.

But despite his trepidation, despite perhaps a feeling of being doting and foolish he persists. "Yet I declare it" he writes "and by God's word / it is no lie", to confirm the strength of the feminine principle and in a plea for humility and humanity he adds: "Make us/humble and obedient to His rule". In the recorded recitation<sup>15</sup> of these lines Williams' voice cracks and trembles with deep emotion indicating how crucial they were to him.

To a man so full of admiration at this great capacity for warmth and succour in women it is difficult to comprehend their response to destructive maleness, the men: "Cruel as the claws of / a cat . . ." Williams has clearly no sympathy for this value in men but as always is insistent to acknowledge that it must exist. The images of brute force are again presented in "Asphodel" with the statue of Colleoni's horse ridden by an armoured man bearing a phallic sword. The poem ends meditatively. Williams reveals himself as an old man unimpressed by progress. The moon has been vulgarised by man's attempts to conquer it by technology, although the

later poem "Heel and Toe to the End" celebrates Yuri Gagarin's successful orbit of the earth's atmosphere as a moment of liberation:

heel and toe he felt  
as if he had  
been dancing

(PB. 69)

But in "For Eleanor and Bill Monahan" Williams' interest is not in centrifugal forces, in the restless energy to go beyond frontiers. He is old now. "What // do they think they will attain / by their ships / that death has not // already given / them?" he asks. Rather: "Their ships / should be directed // inward upon"—upon what? Williams does not pretend to know, only that his attention is drawn to the mind, the imagination, the inward landscapes "heretofore unrealised" ("The Descent"). He breaks off, he is tired and seeks a return to sanctuary:

But I  
am an old man. I  
have had enough

It is in this state of peaceful submission that he closes his poem: "The female principle of the world / is my appeal / in the extremity // to which I have come" he writes. He returns to the womb, as in "Asphodel" he returns to the source of life, the sea. His lines fall slowly and deliberately and he ends his poem with a prayer from the anonymous Maria hymn Hail Holy Queen or Salve Regina:

O clemens! O pia! O dolcis!  
Maria!

The poet again shows perfect facility in his use of his material.

The ancient Latin hymn and the liturgical tone of the poem combine easily and beautifully with the personal dedication to his wife. This poem makes explicit, assertions that previously Williams had only hinted at. The poet turns to the female principle to complete his world and give it energy. Men had given him the direction in his life, he had said, but it was women that gave him energy. His acclamation of the female principle is both spiritual and erotic. He requires the humanity and strength of women to foster life and art but he requires the erotic intensity of women also. Williams had affirmed the importance of women elsewhere in In The American Grain. They contributed elements that a society cannot ignore, that the poet cannot ignore. The society's capacity to incorporate and be enriched by the feminine principle is the index of its strength and completeness. The analogue of women to the flower, and the flower to life and art is explicit and emphatic in Williams and one he gives great importance in this poem and later in "Asphodel". "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" predominates in the collection Journey to Love (1955). Williams commented "The one poem 'Asphodel, That Greeny Flower' has been noticed and enjoyed by many people. The reviews of the book made me very happy".<sup>16</sup>

This "one" poem, as Williams calls it, is in many respects a climactic work in Williams' career. Its preoccupations relate to many of the shorter poems written at the same time but none of these have the impact and sustained strength of "Asphodel". It is a last poem, Williams' final attempt to get said what

must be said:

There is something  
something urgent

I have to say to you  
and you alone

"with fear in my heart" he writes

I drag it out  
and keep on talking  
for I dare not stop.

The poem is a love poem to Flossie but it also is an expression of Williams' cosmos. It is his final peace with the world and this is made clear by the image of Asphodel itself; it is the sacred flower of Elysium, the abode of the blessed after death and a state of ideal happiness. Williams in this poem seeks stasis and peace through memory and reconciliation with the past. He is reminded by the odour of the dried Asphodel of "a whole flood / of sister memories!" Like the 'odor of box' in "To Daphne and Virginia", Williams finds the power of smell a springboard for the imagination:

It is a curious odor,  
a moral odor,  
that brings me  
near to you.

The odour of the Asphodel gives him a unity of mind and response. He recalls past pleasures and experiences. For all is recaptured and unified:

The whole world  
became my garden!

Williams contains his world in the image of the garden. This image that he used earlier in "The Mental Hospital Garden" could

be derived from Guillaume de Lorris' garden in Le Romaunt de la Rose , even Eliot's rose garden in Burnt Norton . But the garden image is extended in "Asphodel" in ways that go beyond these earlier poems. The garden is a protean image used <sup>in</sup> unconventional ways. One important metaphor he employs is the sea as a garden:

But the sea  
                   which no one tends  
                                   is also a garden  
 when the sun strikes it  
                   and the waves  
                                   are wakened.

In an earlier, almost surreal poem entitled "Flowers by the Sea" the poet expresses the sea not as a garden but a flower, in fact as more like a flower than flowers themselves:

—Chicory and daisies  
 tied, released seem hardly flowers alone  
 but color and movement—or the shape  
 perhaps—of restlessness, whereas  
 the sea is circled and sways  
 peacefully on its plantlike stem.<sup>17</sup>

This curious relationship of the sea to a garden is continued with the comparison of starfish to flowers. The sea is, however, in itself an important image. It is long associated with the cycle of birth and death; it is a source of life but also its goal. It is a strong feminine image, one that Williams underlines with his associated images of the flower and the garden.

The garden symbols are interwoven in a complex way. "Love is something else, / or so I thought it, // a garden which expands" he writes. The mind is also expressed as a garden."

It is the mind

the mind

that must be cured

short of death's

intervention,

and the will becomes again

a garden.

Such patterning and interchange of images shows great sensitivity and sophistication in Williams' work. In "Asphodel" he writes on both a cosmic and personal level and the interpenetration of these two gives the poem a disturbing impact. He evokes an eerie dreamlike scene and in it locates himself and his wife. The effect is vividly visual suggesting naturalistic and cosmic disorder. The couple watch as a storm comes up and it has the apocalyptic overtones of both death and revelation:

The storm unfolds.

Lightning

plays about the edges of the clouds.

The sky to the north

is placid,

blue in the afterglow

as the storm piles up.

It is a flower

that will soon reach

the apex of its bloom.

The storm is a portent of death but also it is an epiphany in the mind, it is a flower that blooms but it suggests also the hydrogen bomb. Later this paradox is made explicit:

I am reminded  
                   that the bomb  
                                 also  
 is a flower  
                   dedicated  
                                 howbeit  
 to our destruction.

But even the "mere picture / of the exploding bomb" he writes,  
 "fascinates us / so that we cannot wait / to prostrate ourselves  
 // before it." Man is easily destructive, "Cruel as the claws  
 of/a cat".

The storm is one of great passions also. Williams con-  
 templates the relationship between the Iliad and "Helen's  
 public fault // that bred it". Without one the other would not  
 have existed. The storm brings all manner of chaos with it:

                  but we remain  
                                 after the thoughts it roused  
 to  
                                 re-cement our lives.

It is just this disordering, imaginative disorder that the  
 poet employs to re-cement his life through poetry. Love,  
 "the common tone" is what aids the poet, combined with memory.  
 "When I speak / of flowers" he writes:

                                it is to recall  
   that at one time  
 we were young.  
                                 All women are not Helen,  
   I know that,  
 but have Helen in their hearts.

It is this feminine principle that he upholds and that, he  
 stresses, informs all his work;



It is in this frame of mind, one attuned to love and harmony that Williams makes his final diagnosis of his world. He is critical and unforgiving, "A trance holds men/" he writes, "They are dazed // and their faces in the public print / show it". Disorder is evident, it is the work of the bomb:

The measure itself  
has been lost  
and we suffer for it.

As Williams untiringly indicates, when society is out of key so also is its "music", its measure. He calls more firmly and urgently in "Asphodel" for love that is "the common tone". He sees a society craving love, and stultifying for lack of it:

It is ridiculous  
what airs we put on  
to seem profound  
while our hearts  
gasp dying  
for want of love.

Instead the 'trance' prevails and the blind lead the blind. We follow as children followed "The Pied Piper / of Hamelin" says the poet, adding with acrimonious brevity, "but he / was primarily // interested only in rats."

Williams in "The Orchestra" had offered two principles, one for contemplation and one for action. He had presented a view of harmony, despite the "wrong note" that is so frequently apparent; he affirms the design of a man, man's art and the need for it. But he also offers the social challenge, the bid to action. Men, especially with the threat of the hydrogen bomb, show how they can realise their wishes but since they are

so frequently evil and self serving, their heads so "full of cupidity", they must change these wishes or perish. These two impulses run through all Williams' late poems and are seen combined also in "Asphodel". He offers his diagnosis but offers no narrow or clear cut solution; he has too much wisdom to assume one. Rather he enacts in his poems situations of stress that imply wholeness and harmony; he dramatises his own experience and from this we discover his measure and his common tone. In this poem Williams directs the reader subtly and urgently to his values, to draw from the feminine principle, to eschew the bomb and embrace with the imagination and the body "the flowers of the race". These are not those "full of cupidity" but these with minds intact, with all their senses waking, the men and women that Williams all his life applauded and recommended, those in the American grain who were to rediscover Eden, who with innocent eyes would relive the first day of the world.

Williams' achievement in "Asphodel" reflects how much in tune the poet was with his environment. His locality was completely internalised, he could draw on the resources of Rutherford, New Jersey. Rutherford's language was his, its movements were his. His situation was simultaneously all important but also entirely irrelevant—he was so sufficiently his own man. In Book II of "Asphodel," the poet who felt as much a part of things as trees and stones, makes explicit the empathy and harmony he enjoys in the calm and contemplation of old age. The lines significantly reveal Williams' consistency.

He is still discovering his identity, he still vigorously undergoes the descent, the paring away of the ephemeral and the bogus. In his ambling long sentences he deliberates and ponders; he is changeable, artfully imprecise but is always intensely concerned to get to the heart of the matter and to tell it as it is, not merely as it appears to be:

Approaching death,  
     as we think, the death of love,  
                     no distinction  
any more suffices to differentiate  
     the particulars  
                    of place and condition  
with which we have been long  
     familiar.  
                    All appears  
as if seen  
                    wavering through water.  
                    We start awake with a cry  
of recognition  
                    but soon the outlines  
                    become again vague.  
If we are to understand our time,  
                    we must find the key to it,  
                    not in the eighteenth  
and nineteenth centuries,  
                    but in earlier, wilder  
                    and darker epochs . . .  
So to know, what I have to know  
                    about my own death,  
                    if it be real,  
I have to take it apart.

(JL, PB. 162)

I have quoted lengthily from "Asphodel" here but it is a crucial and revealing passage. Williams pleads his age and

the loss of faculties but he also evinces a wholeness and a wisdom that he had sought so long. There is no distinction between the particulars of place and condition, his landscape is internal. Rutherford becomes everywhere and nowhere. Williams' 'key' to understanding his time is the one that he stressed and repeated so often. It is the descent to his roots not in 18th and 19th centuries, not in the salons and museums of Europe, but in the bloody loam itself. It is in darker epochs that the truth of all human experience lies; it is also discoverable in the self. Williams seeks to be authentic within himself and in his relationship with his land. We must marry and touch the land; this as Lawrence said,<sup>18</sup> was to be the adventure in the New World. Williams had said it all earlier in that crucial essay entitled "Descent" in In the American Grain: "we must go back to the beginning, it must all be done over; everything that is must be destroyed"<sup>19</sup>. Even to know himself, even to examine his own death he must descend: "I have to take it apart".

But the Code of "Asphodel" even puts a lie to death. In dual images of heat (the heat of hell and the heat of the bomb) and light (the body filled with light from Luke, and the light of the bomb's flare), Williams shows the triumph of the common tone. "Laugh and play / in an eternity" he enjoins. It is a matter of a strength of mind able to contain multitudes; "the heat will not overtake the light" he writes:

That's sure.

That gelds the bomb,  
 permitting

that the mind contain it.



The lines "Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song" from Spenser's Prothalamion are as fit to describe and suggest Williams' own wedding as any royal nuptials. It is the final memory of his own wedding day, of his timid bride," so pale:

and ready to faint

that I pitied

and wanted to protect[her]

That detains the poet. His memories are like the dry flower, still scented, still able to stir his emotions. It is the new world of the new mind that Asphodel points to, the "spaces heretofore unrealised" :

Asphodel

has no odor

save to the imagination .

But the reality of the imagination is permanent. It is this that causes Carlos Williams even in illness and near death to celebrate and rejoice in his experiences. This is the index of Williams' control and strength as a poet. All his experience is grist to his mill and all is transformed wholly by the mind of the artist. The experience and the poem are <sup>derived</sup> from one identity. Williams responds not merely with gestures but the tight control of an authentic artist. The process of the imagination is endless and self perpetuating; it is like his love, "penetrant~~ly~~ infinitely / more penetrant" than that in a young man. Williams faces death like life, with an energy and vigor too deep for tears, with his mind intact and all his senses waking:

It is late  
but an odor  
as from our wedding  
has revived for me  
and begun again to penetrate  
into all crevices  
of my world.

## CHAPTER 5

"AND THIS THE FIRST (AND LAST) DAY OF THE WORLD".

The achievement of William Carlos Williams is aptly phrased in the last lines of the Coda in "Asphodel". 'Odor' and the power of memory have, he says:

begun again to penetrate  
into all crevices  
of my world.

(JL, PB. 182)

This is just what his poetry sought to do, to explore and describe all the crevices of his mind and his world. It is also notable that he should say "begun again"—this is not merely a poet in old age speaking. This is also the same man who, in In the American Grain published thirty years earlier, had said "we have no other choice : we must go back to the beginning".<sup>1</sup>

This return to the time-honoured descent is a continual and persistent exercise. Williams had insisted that his art had been one of constant revision and renewal. Even in his essay On Measure—A Statement for Cid Corman published in 1953 he had written: "What I want to emphasise is that I do not consider anything I have put down there as final. There will be other experiments but all will be directed toward the discovery of a new measure, I repeat, a new measure by which may be ordered our poems as well as our lives".<sup>2</sup> With

Williams the struggle for expression was not to be abandoned even near the end of his formidable writing career. The essence of his view of the relativity of all knowledge and experience forbade him to become complacent with his achievement.

As has been indicated in the first chapter of this thesis, Williams' concern for the establishment of authentic American forms and statements stemmed both from an historical perception and from a personal one. From his own experience and from the immersion in such topics as those presented in In the American Grain Williams concluded there was "a source IN AMERICA for everything we think or do".<sup>3</sup> It was this that gave the poet his orientation but his use of his locality was idiosyncratic. Williams' success was in the certainty and authority of his personal individuation. He found his own identity, his freedom to make his particular statement, to say:

I am a poet! I

am. I am.

("The Desert Music", DM, PB. 120)

Williams' problem was to find and employ the desert music, to humanise and properly express the moods and colours of his environment. He saw the desert in "The Desert Music" as potentially fertile "(were it to get water)" and within this desert lay its redemption, in:

a music of survival, subdued, distant, half  
heard ....

("The Desert Music" DM, PB. 110)

This was his task as poet, to employ and explore this music of survival. It was this that would humanise and enrich the society. Williams had compared the establishment of American

writing to that of a flower. Poe was to be understood "only in a knowledge of his deep roots. The quality of the flower will then be seen to be normal, in all its tortured spirituousity and paleness, a desert flower with roots under the sand of his day".<sup>4</sup> The same image Williams used of his own writing when in 1951 he suggested as a title for his Autobiography, "Root, Branch & Flower".<sup>5</sup> Williams' poems, his "flowers" were to be securely rooted both in his environment and experience and they were also to be rooted in the fittest medium.

Williams' achievement then was two fold. He evolved not only indigenous themes but also indigenous forms. Williams was persistent in his insistence that there was a new state of affairs to be reckoned with. Just as the first Europeans in the New World saw birds with rusty breasts and called them robins, so Americans even up to Williams' own time had similarly betrayed their new environment. The true desert flower was something different, something nobody counted on. Williams in a letter, contemporary with the publication of The Desert Music, expressed enduring and deep rooted attitudes about American letters: "The fullness of the devastating discovery that my native language was not English and the significance of that fact to the mind was slow to dawn on me. For instance, the very transition of the step in the preceding sentence from 'America'<sup>[sic.]</sup> to 'the mind' has taken me a lifetime."<sup>6</sup>

It is just this progression that makes Williams' achievement distinctive. The transition from the environment and an understanding of it, to a free expression of the self is the mark of Williams' authenticity. His poems in The Desert Music

and Journey to Love are not specifically regional, not explicitly the products of Rutherford, New Jersey; they are rather the works of an artist completely liberated, completely at ease with his material.

The capture of "The Desert Music" was not easily attained; it demanded the most rigorous descent, and the risk of possible inarticulateness. Finding new words did not come easily. For Williams, incapacitated by illness, speech was physically arduous, but ultimately he found success:

In our family we stammer unless,  
half mad,

we come to speech at last....

Only after immersion to the teeth, to the very eyes in the filthy Passaic can the poet break down what he saw as a "divorce" between words and ideas and between one person and another. This "divorce" was both aesthetic and social and Williams was deeply concerned with both realms. For him one was a consequence of the other. The failure of American Society, "to MARRY, to touch—to give because one HAS"<sup>7</sup> was one that expressed itself in the poverty and sham of much American art. As I have shown in discussion of The Desert Music and "Asphodel," Williams blamed for this failure those who were emotionally and mentally crippled. His prescription was simply and vigorously restated—"a new world" he wrote in "To Daphne and Virginia", "As only a new mind / and the mind and the poem // are all apiece". The 'new mind' was evinced by Williams both technically and thematically. The Desert Music and "Asphodel" are centrally concerned with the mind. "The mind is the cause of our distresses" he writes in "To Daphne and Virginia", "but of it we can build anew". The

imagination is all important. In "Deep Religious Faith" he regrets that "the/imagination has fallen asleep / in a poppy cup". Williams asserted, both in "The Host" and "Asphodel", that "only the imagination is real"; his concern for a "mind awake," as he termed it in "The Orchestra," was compulsive. This was needed to end the "divorce". Williams upheld the idea that poetry has an important part to play in the regeneration of the mind:

It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.

Elsewhere, in "The Host" he compresses the notion of the imagination as the ultimate reality and poetry as that which 'feeds' it;

No one was there  
save only for  
the food, which I alone,  
being a poet,  
could have given them.

What also Williams could give was a new measure, one that could be adapted to a new world, one totally relative in its conceptions. The Desert Music shows his successful and constant use of the triadic "variable" foot, the device that he felt the most 'fit' medium. This technique gave his poems interrelation and continuity. They at times sprawled towards conclusion, at others, darted back and forth exploring paradox and complexity. The lines enjamb but nonetheless enable the poet to separate his details as was his customary practice epitomised in "The

Red Wheelbarrow". The triadic line falls slowly and deliberately in many of the poems, especially "Asphodel". There is a meditative quality, a discursive sometimes longwinded tendency which suggests that although the triads can have vigour, they are also the lines of a departing man, a Prospero near the abjuration of his art.

But the urgency to get said what must be said endures :

I drag it out  
and keep on talking  
for I dare not stop

("Asphodel" JL, PB. 154)

The importance of The Desert Music can be established equally by consideration of its themes as by its prosody. The poems range more freely, they seek to make a wider statement. As I noted earlier, Williams' brushes with death in his cerebral attacks gave him a sense of reprieve, one that he capitalised upon in his art. Williams saw more work mapped out for him to complete. "As a result of the enforced illness and opportunity for thought" he wrote, "...I have brought hard down on the facts of the situation which can no longer be delayed in the bringing of it to a final summary. I must now, in other words, make myself clear. I must gather together the stray ends of what I have been thinking and make my full statement as to their meaning or gist".<sup>8</sup> These comments, written in 1951, echo his letter, quoted above<sup>9</sup> speculating on his influence on his contemporaries. The realisation that time was short forbade the poet to mince his words.

The Desert Music and "Asphodel" show his striving to

make a "full statement". "The Desert Music" itself enacts the whole dilemma of the American artist and his true rendering of his locale. The poet finds a new mind in the epiphany of the strip-tease dancer in Juarez. He is able to "marry" the opposites of beauty and deformity just as the early seminal poem "The Wanderer" had enjoined the reader to be aware of the descent into the pure and the abhorrent streams of the "filthy Passaic". Williams, in poems like "The Orchestra" and "The Host" shows a deep concern for harmony, for the imagination to complete his vision. He cannot be aware of only one music but must accommodate and ultimately surmount the other music and all the suffering and grotesqueness it implies. Williams' own personality and his long career as a pediatrician gave him a deep sense of humanity that could empathise with an old broken down whore or even a dog injured in the street.

This humanity was often insufficient, as even the poet recognised:

I have found no cure  
                                 for the sick .  
   but this crooked flower  
 which only to look upon  
                                 all men  
   are cured.

("The Yellow Flower", DM, PB. 89)

The flower, the protean image that he uses both literally and as a metaphor for art, the poem, the poet's craft, for women and for the feminine principle, is seen as a strength, one that allows him a limited optimism. The basic concern to harmonise in these last poems is an enactment of what Williams

thought to be a paralysing deficiency in his society. The failure to "marry" was forever a source of distress to him. The "divorce" was, he argued, so easily overcome, "the new mind" so easily attained. He stressed in an explicit image of harmony; a need for "a common tone" without which people are "unattuned" and directionless; "love is that common tone" he asserts fiercely and his poetry is testimony of the depth of his faith in its regenerative power.

The recurrent images of music, the dance and the flower are, as I have suggested, traditional images for cosmic and personal harmony and some antecedents have been noted. Williams refused, however, to merely filch these influences as he considered men like Eliot and Pound "content with the connotations of their masters," had done. Rather, he assimilates his material and refines and redefines it in an artistically more assertive way. Williams descends into his material; what he expresses is more vibrant, ultimately more human. His image of the Dancer, as the aging whore in Juarez or as Mr. T. resplendent in his soiled undershirt, is <sup>a</sup> far cry from even the ethereal Yeatsian symbol of perfection. But Williams' creations are not cheap parodies or grotesques. His figures have all the authority and impact of their antecedents, their particular representations do not detract from their function as analogues. There is nothing quaint or folksy about Williams' material, it deals unsentimentally and with sophistication with complex and vital human concerns. Williams is not a 'low life' poet nor does the 'trash-can school' tag rest easily on him. He enjoys

a facility with his locality that goes beyond a mode or affectation. A letter to Robert Lowell reveals that the poet himself recognised that his apprehension was genuinely primal. "[Pound] too was an orchid in my forest", he wrote, "he had no interest, really, for my trees, no more than did Eliot. They both belonged to an alien world, a world perhaps more devoted than mine, more removed from my rigors. I have always felt as if I were sweating it out somewhere low, among the reptiles, hidden in the underbrush, hearing the monkeys overhead. Their defeats were my defeats, I belonged to them more than to a more mobile world...."<sup>10</sup> While it is too prosaic to describe this as literal testimony of Williams' 'descent', it nonetheless points a primal concern relevant to his view of form and content in poetry. Williams asserts a more sturdy personality than Pound or Eliot whom he described as 'orchids' —too frail for Williams' 'desert'.

This sense of oneness with the bass note of life, with the vibrancy of that Laurentian 'underbrush' evident in the quotation above, is persistent in Williams' writing. This resignation to existence, the sense of "inner security" he described to Marianne Moore, has been noted above, where the poet felt as much a part of things as stones and trees. It is in this respect that the notion of individuation is relevant. The psychologist Jung in collaboration with sinologist Richard Wilhelm has examined the notion of individuation in a work entitled The Secret of the Golden Flower. In this the psychological process of individuation in the West and forms of oriental mysticism were compared. The Golden Flower

rests on the main premise that the cosmos and man ultimately obey common laws. The same laws rule for the one as for the other, and from the one a way leads to the other. The psyche and the cosmos are related to each other like the inner and outer worlds. Therefore man participates by nature in all cosmic events, and is inwardly as well as outwardly interwoven with them. Jung noted a similar process and revelation in individuation, which he described: "It is as if a stream that was losing itself in marshy tributaries suddenly discovered its proper bed, or as if a stone that lay upon a germinating seed were lifted away so that the sprout could begin its natural growth".<sup>11</sup> The personality is liberated and made whole, becomes individual but not individualistic. It is just this development, this search for direction that is apparent in William Carlos Williams. Jung's analogies of the stream and the seed are appropriate for Williams' use of the Passaic and the image of the desert flower, which could be extended to represent the poet himself, a notion explicitly mentioned in his title for his autobiography.

As further amplification to this individuating process the themes of "The Orchestra" and "The Yellow Flower" - the latter employing the same mystic overtones as the Chinese work The Golden Flower - and "For Eleanor and Bill Monahan", provide ample examples. The notion of the "common tone" both as a personal and a cosmic principle is one that the poet asserts as a solution to the "divorce". The poet's concern to recognise and embrace the feminine principle as a vital concomitant to life and art has also been stressed. The balance of separation of the self and the immersion of the self in the environment is the essence of individuation and the essence of Williams' authenticity as a poet.

The late poems successfully express this balance and exemplify Williams' most revealing remark, that success "comes after a lifetime's efforts"<sup>12</sup> and that the artist "has to live...live long in the world".<sup>13</sup> The Desert Music and Journey to Love are culminating works that, through study in relative depth I hope I have established, represent what the poet had hoped, a "full statement", a 'marriage' with his world. These volumes contain poems not easily arrived at but which were the consequence of arduous and rigorous descents by the poet to present his material with the authentic spirit of change on it. These last poems never lose their authority nor do they lose the true voice of the poet. He is in fact more in control of these works than earlier; the form rules content now, not vice versa as had been the case. The poems are comprehensive but not simplistic, there are no shallow aphorisms. Williams is neither a strident nor a meek sage. Instead he draws sensibly and sensitively from his own experience. It is then, a further measure of his achievement that his poems resist becoming egocentric statements of particular but not general relevance. Williams, however, is subjective but not prohibitively so; he speaks in his own voice but it is also a protean one.

The essence of Williams' achievement is his insistence on a wholeness in his perception, that his mind be intact and all his senses waking. This receptivity took him a lifetime to develop. As Tanner<sup>14</sup> observed, the concern in "The Red Wheelbarrow" was to perceive the 'palpable fragment' which somehow would suggest the whole. But the late poems of

The Desert Music and Journey to Love go beyond this. There is still the innocent eye but the comprehension is cosmic. The poet experiences his world with crispness and careful accuracy that is expressed as discovery. This, he exults "is the first (and last) day of the world". Such an exclamation, in its context in so central a poem as "The Orchestra", is no shallow posturing but a genuine and powerful statement of timelessness, one that the poet has earned only through his humanity and his artistic discipline. It is not an egocentric statement but one of unabashed honesty. It is this same humanity, combined with Williams' usual modesty, that prompted his comment: "I must make the new meter out of whole cloth, I've got to know the necessity back of it. I am not driven by the search for personal distinction, I don't want to appear in person. But I want to see the unknown shine, like a sunrise. I want to see that overpowering mastery that will inundate the whole scene penetrate to the last jungle. It can be detected in the remote province of a Paterson as well as elsewhere".<sup>15</sup>

The concern to come to terms with his environment, 'to know the necessity back of it' is a motivating principle for Carlos Williams. In my first chapter I have tried to show by examples from In the American Grain and a number of essays and letters how crucial the poet felt this understanding to be. Only by reducing himself to first principles, by 'wholly' discovering the value and purpose of the descent could his best work come. "Piece by piece we must loosen what we want" he had said, so that piece by piece he could rebuild a new prosody and a new mind. I have been concerned to show Williams' reconstruction

to be both technical and thematic. He was as much preoccupied with "how to get said" as with "what must be said" although it is unprofitable to try too often to separate these two concerns when they are so closely inter-related. It was just this tendency to fragment that had contributed to the "divorce". The Desert Music and "Asphodel" were efforts to make "full statement" prosodically and thematically with the poet's concentration on harmony and the feminine principle.

The image that Williams indicated in the letter above of "the unknown shine, like a sunrise" is echoed in "Asphodel". The dawn and the afterglow become one and the same, and that the glow is of the bomb and the flower, is evidence that Williams has been able to embrace both a force of good and one of evil, that the "divorce" has been overcome:

The sky to the north  
                   is placid,  
                                   blue in the afterglow  
 as the storm piles up  
                   It is a flower  
                                   that will soon reach  
 the apex of its bloom.  
                   We danced

("Asphodel", JL, DB. 157)

This overpowering image of epiphany and foreboding suggests precisely the adventure in the New World. It is Williams' capacity to present it in all its grandness that indicates that his aim was achieved; "I want to see that overpowering mastery that will inundate the whole scene penetrate to the

last jungle".<sup>16</sup> The poet's imagination had penetrated these jungles because he had dared to confront them. Like Poe, Williams recognised "the hard, sardonic, truculent mass and the New World, hot, angry, was in fact, not a thing to paint over, to smear, to destroy ... [Williams] conceived the possibility, the sullen, volcanic inevitability of the place".<sup>17</sup>

But Williams' response was not to unleash as a consequence a chain of sullen and volcanic reactions. He furthered the process. After the illumination Williams sought to humanise his environment, he related to his locality by individuation. Rutherford became his focus and Williams transmuted 'all the energy of the inevitability of the place' into a sophisticated but suburban pastoralism, one that took cognisance of all elements of existence but stressed those of regeneration and grace. Williams contained his world but this did not deter him from seeking new worlds:

of new kinds—

since their movements

are towards new objectives....

("The Descent" DM, PB, 73)

William Carlos Williams achieved genuine expression especially in his late poems by his capacity to renew and regenerate in a way totally in harmony with his personality and humanity. His "flowers" are rooted both in his personality and his locality; they accrue from the intimation of humanity and eternity that Williams expresses in "The Orchestra":

I love you. My heart is  
innocent.

And this the first

(and last) day of the world.

## APPENDIX I

### "DESCENT"

At fifteen years of age Samuel Houston, born 1793, Scotch-Irish, ran away from his brothers of whom he was a charge and joined the Cherokee Indians of Western Tennessee. He lived with them until eighteen, then reascended to the settlements for school....The primitive destiny of the land is obscure, but it has been obscured further by a field of unrelated culture stuccoed upon it that has made that destiny more difficult than ever to determine. To this latter nearly all the aesthetic adhesions of the present day occur. Through that stratum of obscurity the acute but frail genius of the place must penetrate. The seed is tough but the chances are entirely against a growth. It is possible for every vestige of virtue from the New World to be lost, like the wood pigeon.

Houston was one of the few men of his time suited mentally, morally, physically for dominant achievement. Governor of Tennessee, 1829, he married Eliza Allen of a prominent family of Sumner County, of that state. After three months she left him. None knows the reason, both remained silent. He wrote, "Eliza stands acquitted by me." The brief duration of the marriage, the violence and permanence of the separation, the prominence of Houston and the lack of all information forthcoming concerning the incident give it an **arresting** character. Surmise will suit the fancy: he accused her of a romantic

attachment; she accused him of worse; or there was, more likely, a disproportion between them; a man of primitive vigors loosed upon her in private, she was overborne by him in some manner, or she refused to be overborne.

He, swept off his feet by the emotional recoil from the misfortune, first pleaded with her father to intercede for him that his wife might return; failing in this, he resigned the governorship of Tennessee, left everything behind him and took the descent once more, to the ground. He rejoined the Cherokees, now removed to Arkansas. The state was in an uproar, people spoke badly of him; there was nothing too bad for them to say. His wife divorced him and remarried. For a while he took to drink....He turned back to the Indians, it is the saving gesture —but a gesture of despair. Poe can be understood only in a knowledge of his deep roots. The quality of the flower will then be seen to be normal, in all its tortured spirituousity and paleness, a desert flower with roots under the sand of his day.

Whitman had to come from under. All have to come from under and through, a dead layer.

But this primitive ordeal, created by a peculiar condition of destiny (the implantation of an already partly cultured race on a wild continent) has a plant in its purpose, in its lusts' eye, as gorgeous as Montezuma's gardens of birds, wild beasts and albino natives in wooden cages.

But he who will grow from that basis must sink first.

If he goes to France, it is not to learn a do re mi fa sol. He goes to see a strange New World.

If not definitely a culture new in every part, at least a satisfaction. He wants to have the feet of his understanding on the ground, his ground, the ground, the only ground that he knows, that which is under his feet. I speak of aesthetic satisfaction. This want, in America, can only be filled by knowledge, a poetic knowledge, of that ground, since this is difficult, due to the hardships which beset the emergence of a poet: A poet is one related to a basis of material, aesthetic, spiritual, hypothetical, abnormal—satisfaction,...since this is so, the want goes for the most part unsatisfied in America or is satisfied by a fillgap. The predominant picture of America is a land aesthetically satisfied by temporary fillgaps. But the danger remains: Taste is so debauched in the end that everything of new will be forgotten and—

In spite of size its genius is shy and frail, the loveliest, to be cherished only by the most keen, courageous and sensitive. It may die.

Meanwhile, taste is pandered to somehow....Among the Indians Houston lived, from the time of his separation from his wife, eleven years. He was adopted into the tribe; he, maintaining silence upon the calamity which had overtaken him, preferred to be among those who accepted him for what he was and let no rumor of his past affect them. It came from the ground like water. He took an Indian woman for his wife.

The instigation to invasion is apparent: ready profit. The excuse also is apparent: progress. The refusal of these things is like feathered darts on armor. We are tyros in what we are glad to believe are the fundamentals of artistic understanding.

We crave filling and eagerly grab for what there is. The next step is, floating upon cash, to wish to be like the others. Now come in the Universities, the conformists of all colors from the arch-English to the Italian peasant and his goats.

It is imperative that we sink. But from a low position it is impossible to answer those who know all the Latin and some of the Sanskrit names, much French and perhaps one or two other literatures. Their riposte is: Knownothingism. But we cannot climb every tree in that world of birds. But where foreign values are held to be a desideratum, he who is buried and speaks thickly—is lost.

There is nothing for a man but genius or despair. We cannot answer in the smart language, certainly it would be a bastardization of our own talents to waste time to learn the language they use. I would rather sneak off and die like a sick dog than be a well known literary person in America—and no doubt I'll do it in the end. Our betters we may bitterly advise: Know nothing (i.e., the man on the street), make no attempt to know. With a foreign congeries of literary claptrap, come without courtesy to a strange country and make for yourself a smooth track to the pockets of the mob by catering to a "refined" taste and soiling that which you do not know how to estimate. Courtesy would at least bid him be informed or keep still....

Those who come up from under will have a mark on them that invites scorn, like a farmer's filthy clodhoppers. They will be recognized only from abroad, being so like the mass out of which they come as to be scorned from anear, etc., etc., etc... After the many years with the Cherokees, having settled down

thoroughly, this time, Houston rose again: defeated Santa Ana at San Jacinto and received the soubriquet, "Sam Jacinto," Governor of Texas, U.S. Senator during a long term, several times mentioned for the presidency, married again, several children, when in deep thought whittled pine sticks, tigerskin best, blanket, sombrero, joined Baptist Church, opposed secession of southern states, lived to have Lincoln recognize him by offer of a Major-Generalship, which he refused.

However hopeless it may seem, we have no other choice: we must go back to the beginning; it must all be done over; everything that is must be destroyed.

from: In the American Grain (New York: 1925), pp.212-215.

APPENDIX II

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"ST. JAMES' GROVE"

And so it came to that last day  
When, she leading by the hand, we went out  
Early in the morning, I heavy of heart  
For I knew the novitiate was ended  
The ecstasy was over, the life begun.  
In my woolen shirt and the pale-blue necktie  
My grandmother gave me, there I went  
With the old queen right past the houses  
Of my friends down the hill to the river  
As on any usual day, any errand.  
Alone, walking under trees,  
I went with her, she with me in her wild hair,  
By Santiago Grove and presently  
She bent forward and knelt by the river,  
The Passaic, that filthy river.  
And there dabbling her mad hands,  
She called me close beside her.  
Raising the water then in the cupped palm  
She bathed our brows wailing and laughing:  
"River, we are old, you and I,  
We are old and by bad luck, beggars.  
Lo, the filth in our hair, our bodies stink!  
Old friend, here I have brought you  
The young soul you long asked of me.  
Stand forth, river, and give me  
The old friend of my revels!  
Give me the well-worn spirit,  
For here I have made a room for it,  
And I will return to you forthwith  
The youth you have long asked of me:  
Stand forth, river, and give me  
The old friend of my revels!"

And the filthy Passaic consented!

Then she, leaping up with a fierce cry:  
"Enter, youth, into this bulk!  
Enter, river, into this young man!"  
Then the river began to enter my heart,  
Eddying back cool and limpid  
Into the crystal beginning of its days.  
But with the rebound it leaped forward:  
Muddy, then black and shrunken  
Till I felt the utter depth of its rottenness  
The vile breadth of its degradation  
And dropped down knowing this was me now.

But she lifted me and the water took a new tide  
 Again into the older experiences,  
 And so, backward and forward,  
 It tortured itself within me  
 Until time had been washed finally under,  
 And the river had found its level  
 And its last motion had ceased  
 And I knew all—it became me.  
 And I knew this for double certain  
 For there, whitely, I saw myself  
 Being borne off under the water!  
 I could have shouted out in my agony  
 At the sight of myself departing  
 Forever—but I bit back my despair  
 For she had averted her eyes  
 By which I knew well what she was thinking—  
 And so the last of me was taken.

Then, she, "Be mostly silent!"  
 And turning to the river, spoke again:  
 "For him and for me, river, the wandering,  
 But by you I leave for happiness  
 Deep foliage, the thickest beeches—  
 Though elsewhere they are all dying—  
 Tallest oaks and yellow birches  
 That dip their leaves in you, mourning,  
 As now I dip my hair, immemorial  
 Of me, immemorial of him  
 Immemorial of these our promises!  
 Here shall be a bird's paradise,  
 They sing to you remembering my voice:  
 Here the most secluded spaces  
 For miles around, hallowed by a stench  
 To be our joint solitude and temple;  
 In memory of this clear marriage  
 And the child I have brought you in the late years.  
 Live, river, live in luxuriance  
 Remembering this our son,  
 In remembrance of me and my sorrow  
 And of the new wandering!"

from: "The Wanderer", The Collected Earlier  
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