

POETRY IN THE PROSE OF *IN THE AMERICAN GRAIN*  
BY WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

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The greatest importance of William Carlos Williams as a poet is his unabated and lifelong struggle for a language which would be capable of reflecting purely American reality: its thought, life, and culture. It is in this respect that he exerted the greatest and most widespread influence on the American poets of the younger generation. One of the most important qualities which Williams saw as essential for American poetry is the fact that to be really alive it should be based on and reflect everyday American speech. On the other hand the language of poetry must remain imaginative, and the poet's own rigors should give it certain qualities which would grant its full citizenship in the realm of poetry. The poem as a whole should be a unit structurally. On a larger scale it will embody a certain kind of 'poetic' conception that may be extended to the whole frame of the poet's perception, of which it is a metaphoric 'projection' in the medium of language.

For my present discussion of Williams I have chosen the prose work *In the American Grain*. This book belongs to his earlier period of writing, but nevertheless reflects a mature poetic sensibility. The perceptions and tone of this book are those of a poet, and its whole approach points the way into his poetry.

Speaking of Pound and his interest in one of the most prosaic or 'un-poetic' problems (usury), Williams remarked that only a poet, through his imaginative insight and grasping of the essence, can reveal the full meaning of the problem of humanity. Here Williams was referring to Pound's poetry, but it was not poetic 'form' he was speaking of so much as a certain insight of the kind which is, in turn, revealed by *In the American Grain*. In this book he intended to use this insight to grasp the meaning of American history. He wanted to rescue the understanding of the past from the dryness, boredom, lifelessness and therefore mendacity of official histories, as he viewed them. As a coun-

termethod to academic ways of treating the past, Williams proposed his own vision of it, which he presents in *In the American Grain*.

The very title of the book reveals metaphorically the essential conception behind Williams' thought. "Grain" implies an organic structural principle which is natural to the materials employed — something inseparable from the pattern of life. The American grain Williams writes about is a genuine, primary culture which is characteristic of the American land.

The historical sources employed by Williams in *In the American Grain*, and the comparable materials embodied in his poems, undergo a poetic process of creative transformation. There are several of characteristic features of this poetic metamorphosis to be found both in Williams' poetry and his prose. One of them is the practice of lifting ordinary or seemingly insignificant things to a poetic level and with the help of imagination viewing them in a new light. As a result, they become unique and individual while at the same time, through their essential quality they illustrate the universal and the general. They acquire the character of "epiphanies", understood in a very general sense, and in this aspect Williams' prose resembles his poems. The method may be described briefly as a projection of a sudden flash of light on a person or event while the situation immediately preceding or succeeding is left in darkness. Moreover, the reader is confronted with a real experience of a person or action that is presented not as a summary or abstraction but in the process of actual living; thus the "abstract" meaning is conveyed indirectly through concrete dramatization of experience. The great men presented in *In the American Grain* are treated by Williams as real human beings, likely to be driven by the needs of their flesh or sudden impulses of "imprudent" imagination. The dramatic effects are heightened by Williams' stylized language. His aim is to reproduce the original idiom of his characters.

*In the American Grain* also employed the crucial principle which Williams followed consistently in his poems — namely: "No ideas but in things". The book seems to illustrate this concept in prose. Consequently it elucidates, in terms of his own poetics, Williams' notion of the poetic repossession of history. Again, the majority of the essays are not dry statements but dramatizations of individual personalities. Williams tried to save those characters from oblivion by presenting them as real human beings, and at the same time making them illustrative of more general, timeless, and universal ideas. The most striking example of the "poetic" method can be seen in "Red Eric", where the language is a stylization of the Old English vocabulary and tone. The whole dramatic situation is reminiscent of the life and thinking of the

Old English, Scandinavian or Germanic people. Thus, by introducing his subject to the reader by way of actual human experience, regardless of its historical remoteness, Williams was able to convey its fresh, vital immediacy.

One of the foremost notions of Williams' poetic creed is a proper apprehension of the concept of wholeness (as opposed to disparity or fragmentation) as the superior organizing principle of viewing the world, man, nature, art — the whole universe. The most important theme which contributes to Williams' exploration of the idea of wholeness is the relationship between the male and female principles. I shall limit myself to a succinct enumeration of their basic connotations as employed by Williams.

The female principle is associated, naturally enough, with fertility and life, and moreover, with creative imagination. On the other hand, masculinity is seen as basically rational, and creative only through contact with female. When isolated it may be perfect and beautiful, but it remains sterile and unproductive. To generalize and simplify Williams' idea of universal wholeness: it is only through the fusion, "marriage", occurring between the male and female principles, sometimes even becoming identification, that a valid, unified and perfect whole may be obtained. In view of these considerations, certain qualities of *In the American Grain*, which might at first seem incongruous can be understood. It is especially the theme of male-female relationship that colours Williams' apprehension of American culture. Williams presents America (the land) as the embodiment of the female principle, symbolizing the cultural potentialities awaiting the proper fertilization. Sometimes Williams goes so far as to personify America as an alluring figure of a woman, beautiful but dangerous. Dangers await all newcomers: "the terrible beauty of the New World attracts men to their ruin" (p. 155). In "De Soto and the New World" de Soto's journey inland is dramatized as a dialogue between him and America, the woman who lures him. Such identification of America as woman, city, rocks, river bears great resemblance to the varying identities of the protean hero in *Paterson*, Williams' most ambitious later poem, or to one of the earliest "The Wanderer", in which the speaker follows several women who are incarnations of the Muse, and finds his artistic "baptism" in the waters of the Passaic. This relatedness points to the link between Williams' poetry and prose and reflects the lifelong consistency of the metaphoric cast of his thought.

Sir Walter Raleigh's attraction to the New World is also expressed in the aesthetic, sensual and even sexual terms of admiration for a beautiful woman: "Of the pursuit of beauty . . . plunging his lust into the

body of a new world" (p. 59). The concept of the land as female is not confined to America. Thus England is also seen in terms of the same motif. Williams strengthens the identification by introducing the figure of Queen Elizabeth: "Raleigh was not England, as she was . . . she held him as a woman, she, the Queen" (p. 61). In fact, the whole of the Sir Walter Raleigh essay is built upon the interrelating and shifting associations basically referring to the female principle: the queen, England, Elizabeth-Virginia. Williams plays deftly with those notions, so that it is possible to understand his thoughts on various levels. The personal relationship between Raleigh and the queen constitutes one of these levels.

As in his poetic theory Williams advocated unified combination of imagination and rationality as equal and indispensable factors in the poetic process, so, in his symbolic concept of male-female relationship does he assert a similar, organically necessitated equality.

It is not difficult to infer that the newcomers to the New World represent the male principle — associated with rationality or even consciousness. In view of Williams' general idea of the relationship between the male and female principles, it follows that without intervention of man, the land — however beautiful and fertile — remains the beauty of unrealized and useless fecundity. But, in order to be creative and fertile this intervention must take place in the way Williams' great men colonized America. That is it requires immediate and close contact, by which is implied the love of the land, awareness and response to its "orchidean beauty", Indian-like courage and strength. Williams speaks once more of devotion to the land in terms of sexual relationship or, more profoundly, the union of marriage. Hence his numerous references to marriage and use of such words as "embrace", "giving", "possession", "touch", all of which significantly and continually recur in his poetry and, at the same time, remind us of his insistence upon concrete expression. "It is *this* to be moral, to be positive, to be peculiar, to be sure, generous, brave — to Marry, to *touch* — to *give* because one Has, not because one has nothing . . ." (p. 121). In the life-stories of Eric, Raleigh, Columbus, de Soto, Boone, and Houston Williams saw perfect examples of man's strife to attain this wholeness through direct contact with America (as land and female). However their attempts were thwarted, as in the case of Raleigh and Columbus, by the intervention of other lands' (female) interests, that of England and Spain, respectively.

Williams extended the idea of the land as the "female" element in the origin of a true culture to the conception of the Indians as, metaphorically, America's children. His conception of America as a woman

thereby gains a considerable deepening of meaning and also accounts for his frequent cherishing of the Indian-like attributes of people like Boone, Houston and Père Sebastian Rasles.

In "Jacataqua", the figure of a beautiful Indian princess, combines different levels of symbolic references to America: as female, Indian, land. The reciprocal admiration between Jacataqua and the young Burr reflects Williams' idea of the positive approach to the land. In another essay Burr is described as being loved "by all that is divine on earth, by children, women, soldiers" (p. 192).

The most adequate attitude toward the American land, in which Williams saw the proper characteristics of true Americans, is thought of by Williams as identification with America, or being one part woman. Talking of Rasles, for instance, Williams speaks of "keeping the thing whole within him almost a woman's tenderness" (p. 70). Here we see the reflection of Williams' idea of wholeness and emphasis on the female element. Similarly, sketching the figure of Lincoln, he writes of "a woman in an old shawl — with a great bearded face and a towering black hat above it . . ." (p. 234). The above passages representing perfect wholeness, a unity of male and female elements in one person, are a further evidence of the link between Williams' poetry and prose. The theme is fully developed in *Paterson*: Paterson, the hero, in his various shifts of identity, undergoes, among others, a metamorphosis into a woman, and by combining the two elements, he transcends sexuality (understood as a tension or fight between the two sexes) and emerges as a full human being — the poet — superior to other people because capable of a unified vision of life. In the same way *In the American Grain* speaks of the priests of Tenochtitlan as the symbol of "acknowledgement of the deep sexless urge of life" (p. 33). Thus, on the metaphoric level, Williams presents his main idea of the true American culture: the perfect fusion of America (the female) and its inhabitants (the male) results in a "sexless", sublimated cultural product — the legitimate, living culture at once energetic and nourishing. Williams saw the Spanish conquest and the Puritan colonization as the distortion of the male-female motif. He visualized the destruction of the old Aztec culture performed by the Spanish predators as a rape executed on the body of America. The Puritans' aim was different, but they lacked enough courage, openness and sensitivity to accept the New World's beauty. Therefore, they clung to the unrelated culture they brought with them. They are seen as divorced from the land, lacking or even fearing touch, "blocked". Williams discovered similar characteristic features in his contemporaries, whom he saw as direct descendants of the Puritan forbearers.

Sometimes Williams shifts his exploration of the problem of American culture to a different metaphoric level by treating the female principle concretely as an American woman. The cause of the ills of present society he sees in the "spiritual barrenness of the American woman" (p. 181) and he describes the malaise of his times in terms of the lack of physical contact between man and woman. The most devastating and dangerous relics of the Puritan tradition he sees in the education which has misdirected the natural potential wholesomeness of the average American and, what is more, has brought about the atrophy of the American female: "she (the American Woman) is made to feel that there is something *wrong* about her, not the reckless but fundamentally *wrong*" (p. 182). The natural goodness, health, fertility of the Indians are opposed to the sterility and false education of the Americans — women especially — in *Paterson*.

A further affinity between Williams' poetry and the prose of *In the American Grain* lies in their comparable imagery. As a matter of fact, the majority of the essays are entirely or partially poetic-prose passages. There are passages of pure lyricism, such as the invocation to the Muse, which is a recurrent element of the Raleigh essay and most important to its structure:

Of the pursuit of beauty and the husk that remains, perversions and mistakes, while the true form escapes in the wind, Sing o Muse; of Raleigh, beloved by majesty... Sing! and let the rumor of these things make the timid more timid and the brave desperate... Sing! and make known Raleigh... (p. 59).

Sing, o Muse and say, there is a spirit that is seeking through America for Raleigh in the earth, the air, the waters, up and down, for Raleigh that lost man: seer who failed, planter who never planted, poet whose works are questioned, leader without command, favorite deposed — but one who yet gave title for his Queen, his England, to a coast he never saw but grazed alone with genius (p. 62).

In these incantatory passages Williams conveyed his admiration and respect for Raleigh, as well as enormous sympathy for his failure. The specific tone and atmosphere of the essay are expressive of his attitude toward Raleigh. Williams renders his feeling by particularly rhythmic sentences, repetitions, enumerations and, sometimes, rhetorical and somewhat archaic language.

Perhaps the most frequent imagery which Williams employs in his poetry is related to flowers — various stages of their growth, their different parts (blossoms, stalks, leaves) their place in gardens, and so on. These occur on various levels, starting with almost literal descriptions and proceeding to symbolic meanings. Similarly, *In the Amer-*

*ican Grain* employs flower imagery which helped Williams to charge his prose statements emotionally and symbolistically. His frequent use of flowers and his concomitant concepts of natural growth suggest a strong association with the use of "grain" in the title.

It is almost impossible to give a full list of connotations and associations engendered by Williamsian flower-images. Among the most frequent are those related to beauty, female (as principle and as woman), land, America, life success, love. Thus, for instance, Williams expresses his high praise of Rasles and his successful life among the Indians in terms of a flower in full blossom, implying its fertility, naturalness and therefore goodness and morality:

Already the flower is turning up its petals. It is *this* to be *moral*: to be *positive*... to create, to hybridize, to crosspollenize (p. 121).

Or,

The world is a parcel of the Church so that every leaf, every vein in every leaf, the throbbing of the temples of that mysterious flower... Consigning his creed to a wordly flower in Rome whose perfume should draw all bees, Rasles laboured to have them know that garden (p. 120—121).

The Indian is presented in similar terms as "the flower of this world", rooted deeply in the American soil and therefore representative of the native culture. Even Columbus' discovery of the New World, and its fatal consequences, are presented in flower-imagery:

But now, with the maritime success of that period, the western land could not guard its seclusion longer; a predestined and bitter fruit existing, perversely before the white flower of its birth, it was laid bare by the miraculous first voyage. For it is as the achievement of a flower, pure, white, wax-like and fragrant, that Columbus' infatuated course must be depicted, especially when compared with the acrid and poisonous apple which was later by him proved (p. 7).

In this passage we have not only the image of the white flower referring to America's orchidean beauty; but an imaginative treatment of the male-female relationship, with the bitter fruit resulting from the contact. The poisonous apple refers to the period of systematic destruction of America, the rape of the land performed by the Spanish expeditions following Columbus' discovery — the first and innocent voyage. Columbus himself achieved the white flower, since he was one of the "true" European discoverers, responding aesthetically to the natural beauty of the land and its inhabitants. The subsequent ruin with its bitter-fruit was not personally caused by Columbus, but existed "perversely before," predestined by the evil in human nature.

The Puritans are treated as incomplete flowers, "unproductive of that openness which would have been to them as a flower to the stalk" (p. 129). In this metaphoric statement Williams conveyed the essence of his view of the Puritans and the double nature of their character. The daily tasks of their hard lives as settlers brought them into close contact with the land; they sprouted roots, it is true. But, however rugged and hard working they may have been, they merely became stalks. Incapable of being attracted by the beauty of the land, unable to develop "tenderer humanities", they looked into the cold Puritan heaven. In this situation Williams saw the origin of the unrelated and alien element of American culture; the flower of full achievement, of true possession, was not for the Puritans or their descendents.

One of the most important evils of his society Williams saw in the absolute absence of "the beauty of the spirit", which he describes as "a great flowering, simple and ungovernable as the configuration of a rose — that should stand with the gifts of the spirit of other times as a standard to humanity" (p. 174). He deplored the Puritan stalk, which could not flower. Of the American women, with their "spiritual barrenness": "There has never been women, save pioneer Katies; not one in flower save some moonflower Poe may have seen, or an unripe child" (p. 178).

In the pieces in *In the American Grain*, as in *Paterson*, Williams' aim and method are very much related. The primary culture, the consciousness of which he tried to restore to the present, is shown as embedded in the nature of the life of the Indians and their pioneer equivalents. Thus Williams was recovering the core of the past by approaching it with the ultimate goal in mind and by his method of presenting this life in its concreteness — as actually, dramatically lived.

The way he dealt with the materials of the past reminds one of his poetic practices. As has been shown, in writing *In the American Grain* he applied the method of depicting immediate experience through concrete and particular "things". Thus, by giving us the raw experience of the pioneer life, Williams presented it in all its vitality and, at the same time, made it an epitome of his general idea of culture.

Much may be said about the differences between Williams' prose and poetry and by no means do I intend to equate them. However, the metaphoric and symbolic cast of thought and language used in the book are identical with those of poetry and therefore point out the ultimate affinity between the two<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are taken from: William Carlos Williams *In the American Grain* (New Directions : New York, 1956).