

“Prologue”: Williams, Diction, Cadence, Address

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I

I want to put this paper in the context of the course of my reading over the winter and spring 2010-2011, meditating on the theme of this conference, “Life along the Passaic River,” and what might be called an “experiment in criticism” or in “critical reading,” trying to describe the evolving stages of thought and response to a poem that began to seem significant to me in the context of other poems and writings by Williams in the period of the 1930s and 1940s. For the most part I was simply reading through the stories collected in *Life Along the Passaic River* and the poems of Volume II of the *Collected Poems*.

I was meditating first on what Williams seems to have been doing or not doing with language in terms of what we traditionally call poetic diction—notably demotic speech, or ordinary language, or everyday speech and how that either contrasted to or, somewhat paradoxically, became identified with or identical to poetic speech or a kind of poetic speech. Second, I was interested in the cadences of Williams’ lines and of the represented speech in his stories, especially in the ways in which the promise of meaning is sometimes laid out and then thwarted—broken off or reversed—or diverted to a new aim, or simply left unfulfilled. Third, because in a number of these stories and poems the question of who is speaking to whom, who is the narrator or speaker, the linguistic axis of the “me” and “you” of it, I wanted to observe this in action, and most of all to try get a sense of when and how—by what means—a poem by Williams from this period achieved something that could be identified as a purpose, not in the sense of an ulterior purpose, but in the sense of a complete action.

Looking at poems and stories in a period when Williams was explicitly arguing against the interpretation of poems and other literature by theories of ulterior meaning and purpose—Marxian and Freudian interpretive frameworks casting poems and fictions as supplements to a lack or a frustration, working around existential or material gaps by fictive detours, for instance—puts us back into the familiar context of trying to explain what a poem is if not a design with an ulterior purpose. If it is just a design, is it just a manipulation of sounds and images in a pattern that is meaningless or purposeless as some criticism and poetic practice seems to suggest?

Frequently cited as a reductive formulation is Williams’ dictum in the “Author’s Introduction” to *The Wedge* (1944):

A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. (CP II, 54)

But this can be contrasted to the statement in the same “Introduction” that

When a man makes a poem, makes it mind you, he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them—without distortion which would mar their exact significances—into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses. It isn’t what he says that counts as a work of art, it’s what he makes, with such an intensity of perception that it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authentication. (CP II, 54)

Frequently the first of these quotations is taken to indicate that Williams is always and only about the stripping down of any possible utterances, although that doesn’t need to be the implication of the statement or the machine metaphor as metaphor. The phrasing of the second quotation is less often cited and I would say far more problematic for the conventional view of Williams’ poetry and fiction. It is easy enough, because we use words imprecisely as fungible substitutes for each other, to overlook the precise use of language—I don’t say “the precise meaning,” because that would be getting ahead of ourselves—in the writing of someone intent on precision. Specifically, I would point to the phrasing “that they may constitute a *revelation* in the speech that he uses.” “Revelation” invokes the idea that something *hidden* or *undisclosed* is being *uncovered* or *disclosed*. More than just the movement to an indifferent interpretation of an utterance as meaning this or that, debatably, it suggests the union of necessity and truth as in prophetic utterance, tragic recognition, or juridical conviction. As he says, “it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity.” That is, it provides its own evidence of truthfulness and evidence of its own truthfulness.

Even if lacking specific doctrinal, religious content, the tenor of these statements is remarkably theological, as talk of revelation usually is. Even in a literary domain lacking explicit, determinable religious references, it is difficult to imagine tragedy without imagining “a divinity that shapes our ends.” As in Beckett, it just doesn’t happen, constantly. It remains to be seen or understood—remains perhaps permanently so—how far the theological dimension of these statements extends in practice for Williams, but it is there for us to grapple with.

## II

To return to the context of reading through *Collected Poems II* over the course of the last several months, and trying to evaluate the question of poetic diction or lack of poetic diction, I couldn’t neglect the “Author’s Introduction” to *The Wedge*, nor could I fail to note the enactment of the themes of opposition of ordinary and poetic language, of revelation, of cadences in a poem leading toward or away from a culmination, in way that I take to be characteristic of many modernist poems, in a very rigged up poem in the same volume, titled “Writer’s Prologue to a

Play in Verse.” The temptation is immediate, and perhaps deliberately elicited by Williams, to approach the poem as an explanation of method and an extra-textual guide to what is embodied elsewhere in Williams’ poetic practice—perhaps. Yet the rigging shows in evident points of contrast that might warn us away from eliding the two. For one thing, the “Author’s Introduction” prefaces a clearly existing book, whereas the “Play in Verse” of the “Writer’s Prologue” is nowhere evident and there is neither a definite or indefinite article to give further specificity of reference to the writer or writer’s prologue. This might seem a small point, but it begins to have significance in terms of the matter of address in the first line as the speaker addresses readers or listeners, “In your minds you jump from doors...

to sad departings, pigeons, dreams  
of terror, to cathedrals; bowed,  
repelled, knees quaking, to the-closed-  
without-a-key or through an arch  
an ocean that races full of sound  
and foam to lay a carpet for  
your pleasure or a wood that waves  
releasing hawks or crows or  
crowds that elbow and fight for  
a place or anything.

The fairly regular four-beat line, enjambment of syntactical units over line breaks, and the use of alliteration establish a regularity of cadence despite the semantic dispersion which suggests inclusiveness and finally ends up just there: “a place or anything.” The passage calls up what Williams elsewhere calls as a “congeries” (“A Statement,” *Paterson*, xiii) and sees as a challenge to the mind, which immediately—perhaps instinctively—elicits a response:

You see it  
in your minds and the mind at once  
jostles it, turns it about, examines  
and arranges it to suit its fancy.

In other words, to mind begins to compose. Here “the mind” and “you” are apparently two different things and “the mind” appears to have a life or “a mind” of its own, automatic. That distinction sets up a tension between and among terms of the poem: you, we, the mind, speech, poetry, poet, music, and so on. The process goes on, or it doesn’t:

Or rather changes it after a pattern  
which is the mind itself, turning  
and twisting the theme until it gets a  
meaning or finds no meaning and  
is dropped.

An alteration in the direction of thought is signaled by the break in cadence at “Or,” as the purported completion of the act composition, in the previous lines, is restarted and directed to a less certain, more ambiguous end: “gets a meaning or finds no meaning.” The question left by the stranding of “and is dropped” by a line break is whether the two opposed outcomes in the previous line both result in the dropping of the activity, the one having been completed and the other having no completion and, consequently, no real beginning.

I take the first two-thirds of this stanza, already cited, to be the setting up of a problem, which the last third attempts to solve or at least summarize in perhaps more tractable terms. This scattering of experience is a circumstance characterized in the opening of numerous modernist poems (for instance Crane’s “Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge”), and perhaps implicit in a long line of quest poems before the internalization of the quest in poetry: “Where are we [in the mind] and where are we going [in the mind]?” To say that we’ve been here before, and to cite a passage of a century prior to Williams’ poem, is to suggest how allegorizing all this is. Here’s Emerson in “Experience”:

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight....All things glitter and swim. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception.

The response of the dramatized writer to his characterization of this crisis is to outline provisionally an extemporaneous response (“without code”):

By such composition,  
without code, the scenes we see move  
and, as it may happen, make  
a music, a poetry  
which the poor poet copies if  
and only if he is able—to astonish  
and amuse, for your delights,  
in public, face to face with you  
individually and secretly addressed.

“Composition, without code” has its own inner contradictions and tensions, as perhaps do “a music, a poetry,” and “to astonish and amuse,” and

in public, face to face with you  
individually and secretly addressed.

Something is going with the addressee of these lines in relation to the speaker, for the speaker seems to be all public and face to face, while the spectator or reader seems to be all individual and secret in a way that comports with the conventions of theater—both invoked and ultimately flouted by the poem—in which members of the audience sit one by one facing the actors on

stage, but only the actors, again, conventionally give public expression. The language here, where some sort of resolution seems tentatively achieved, is tentatively lofty (“composition without code”) and exploits assorted rhymes and part-rhymes and alliterations.

That “something going on,” I think begins to emerge in the lines following, where references to “we,” “you,” “the mind,” “poetry” “speech,” and “me” begin to complicate themselves syntactically:

We are not here, you understand,  
but in the mind, that circumstance  
of which the speech is poetry.  
Then look, I beg of you, try and  
look within yourselves rather than  
at me for what I shall discover.

The first three of these six lines seems to be written if not in reverse semantic order at least in a complicated syntax that makes it difficult discern the pattern of speech which earlier in the poem was suggested to be identical with the mind. The “writer” is not upon the stage where fictively he might have existed, if the poem actually had been appended to a play to be performed, and so the trope of the play is exchanged for the trope of the mind, “that circumstance of which the speech is poetry.” But these pronouns are themselves, most likely, voiced by a reader sub-vocally performing the poem to get a sense of its nodes of emphasis and shifting sense, including the shifting among those shifters: I, you, we, and me.

Not that the differences are entirely elided, but that they can at times be reversed and, paradoxically, the reader’s relationship to himself or herself, can (somewhat ambiguously) be turned into one of estrangement or discovery, and the purported speaker of the poem becomes more aggressive, as a new action (“what I shall discover”) takes off from the momentary point of balance in the previous stanza:

Yourselves! Within yourselves. Tell  
me if you do not see there, alive!  
a creature unlike the others, something  
extraordinary in the vulgarity,  
something strange, unnatural  
to the world, that suffers the world poorly,  
is tripped at home, disciplined  
at the office, greedily eats money—  
for a purpose: to escape the tyranny  
of lies. And is this all the can think  
of to amuse you, a ball game? Or  
skiing in Van Diemen’s land in August  
--to amuse you! Do you not come here [the theater of the mind? the poem?]  
to escape that? For you are merely

distracted, not relieved in the blood,  
deadened, defeated, stultified.

Fairly direct paraphrase is not difficult: *Unlike the others, you are not at home in the world and are not satisfied with what it offers for release of frustration—sports and extreme travel and leisure—and that is why you come here, to the theater of the mind or the poem: for revelation.*

This is the scenario played out in the stanza that follows, the revelation through language of “you” beyond language, somehow delivered to yourself:

But this! is new. Believe it, to be  
proved presently by your patience.  
Run through the public appearance  
of it, to come out—not stripped  
but if you’ll pardon me, something  
which in the mind you are and would  
be yet have always been, unrecognized,  
tragic and foolish, without a tongue.  
That’s it. Yourself, the thing  
you are, speechless—because there is  
no language for it, shockingly revealed.

Whether the implication of these lines is that the abject self, “the thing you are,” is “shockingly revealed,” in a paradox “*because* there is no language for it,” or the point of these two stanzas is to drive not only to but beyond paradox in order to make the seductive lines that follow appear, at least initially, more conciliatory and even romantic, I’m not sure. Alternatively, “prologues” as a public pronouncement can fade back into soliloquy, private speech overheard, as the metaphoric public space of the theater collapses into the private space of the theater of the mind. But clearly the burden of the poem is to drive toward the demonstration of a revelation that undoes paradox as it undoes language and delivers us—the audience, the reader—to something “without a tongue,” leaves us “speechless.”

Beginning with the opening lines of the next stanza, the cadences return to something much more like those frequently used by Williams to create a romantic, seductive aura—slightly impertinent and insinuating a little more familiarity than polite discourse allows, crossing a personal boundary:

Would it disturb you if I said  
You have no other speech than poetry

The opening lines could suggest casting twentieth century middle class domestic relations as Edenic exchanges between Adam and Eve, but this clear coy sweetness is quickly thickened and the tone and cadences of the verse again become perturbed, until at “you think it’s something

else” the urgency seems both inter-psychic and intra-psychic up through the lines, again about two-thirds of the way through a stanza:

Possibly, an intolerable language [poetry?]  
That will frighten—to which  
you are not used.

Again, the reader/addressee is estranged from poetry which is said at the same time to be “the undiscovered language of yourself.” The proposed remedy seems to have the dangerous edge of pharmacy:

We [allegorical figures? dramatic characters? physicians? poets? dealers?] must make it  
easy for you, feed it to you slowly  
until you let down the barriers,  
relax before it. But it’s easy  
if you will allow me to proceed, it  
can make transformations, give it  
leave to do its work in you.

The relatively elevated diction (“make transformations,” “give it leave”) suggests a persona of some foreign national or a professional—not to say, also, perhaps a creature from a B-movie. The cadences which result from splitting the subject “it” from a main verb twice in two lines and splicing together of three main clauses beginning with “it” with two different referents in four lines result in a pattern of estranged speech, and emphasis on “it” unlikely in vernacular American sentences. The metaphor of dosing and the implied metaphor of the possibility that what works for some “cases” may not work for others, but so much depends upon what one is being dosed with: Ether? Sodium pentathol? Nitrous oxide? Why so much trouble getting something inside out?

The stanza that follows adverts to yet another metaphoric path: that of learning to get beyond the conventional surface of a medium or a genre, to know its inner workings, or as the speaker puts it, “learn the hang of its persuasions”:

Accept the convention as you would  
opera, provisionally; let me go ahead.  
Wait to see if the revelation  
happen. It may not.  
Or it may come and go, small bits  
at a time. But even the chips of it  
are invaluable. Wait to learn  
the hang of its persuasions as it makes  
its transformations from the common  
to the undisclosed and lays that open  
where—you will see a frightened face.

That the commands themselves are provisional is indicated by their brevity combined with the brevity of the independently subordinated clauses.

All of these alternative metaphoric paths to revelation, possible revelation, or partial, intermittent revelation seem to rely on means that work sometimes, perhaps, but not others, or by probability, by the necessity of defective means when a perfect means is not available, and, again perhaps, almost by accident. As Frost says, “what worked for them may work for you.” Perhaps not. Hardly revelation. But finally, the poem culminates with the ecstatic command, surpassing the others, pointing to one sure path:

But believe! That poetry will be  
in the terms you know, insist on that  
and can and must break through everything,  
all the outward forms, to re-dress  
itself humbly in that which you  
yourself will say is the truth, the  
exceptional truth of ordinary people,  
the extraordinary truth. You shall see.

The syntax and cadences of normal speech break down entirely in these lines, up through “to re-dress...” as if the blockage of ordinary discourse just has to be destroyed to make way for “the extraordinary truth.” The outcome is prophetic, not a command but a prediction, “You shall see.”

The next two stanzas set up an exchange of value between all of the oppositions and presumed negations in oppositions implicit earlier in the poem, first imitating the form of runic riddles:

It [poetry? truth?] isn't masculine more than it is  
feminine, it's not a book more than  
it is speech; inside the mind, natural  
to the mind as metals are to rock....

....

This is a play of a husband and a wife.  
As you love your husband or your wife  
Or if you hate him or if you hate  
Her, watch the language! See if you  
Think that it expresses something of  
the things, to your knowledge, that  
take place in the mind and in the world  
but seldom on the lips....



The poem returns to the conventions of the Prologue by the final stanza and what was “unnaturalized,” is naturalized again, but not without recalling Emerson again in the preceding lines as the poem undoes its own oppositions:

If the red slayer think he slays  
Or the slain think he is slain  
They know not well the subtle ways  
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near,  
Shadow and sunlight are the same,  
The vanished gods to me appear,  
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out....

“Brahma” was to Emerson, of course, an allegorical figure, a trope like the writer of Williams’ “Writer’s Prologue,” who enables the imagination of “the secret life that runs through...curious transactions....” to be revealed and then relinquished.

### III

“Watch the language!” “Writer’s Prologue” tries out most of the stances toward issues of poetic diction that one finds in Williams’ statements about poetics as well as those enacted within his poems. In the end, the poem adverts to the one most difficult to reconcile to a rational formula. To say that “you have no other speech than poetry” is as much as to say that “all speech is poetry,” and therefore to make poetry a matter of what occurs “in the mind,” of perception, rather than of the objective characteristics of arrangements of language. This perception is allied to that of “the exceptional truth of ordinary people,/ the extraordinary truth” as it articulates something more than a sentimental journalistic cliché in a democratic society. While the poem engages rational discourse, its purpose is to go beyond both the rational and the sentimental, to reveal what it won’t exactly say is beyond speech and only hints at in the language of “the secret life that runs...through curious transactions.”