

Joshua Keiter

William Carlos Williams Society Conference

17 June 2011

“Poetry Is a Rival Government Always in Opposition to its Cruder Replicas”:

Williams Carlos Williams’ Contact with Politics in the 1930s

Until recently, critics have hesitated to view William Carlos Williams as a political poet, regarding him rather as a quintessential modernist, concerned solely with the aesthetic aspects of his art. Few doubt that Williams *had* politics, as David Frail explains, but even though he voted Democratic,

he was disinclined to participate in organized political action or thought.

Moreover, although he occasionally went on “enthusiasms,” as one of his sons puts it, such as for Al Smith in the late 1920s or Social Credit in the 1930s or consumer cooperatives in the late 1930s and 1940s, they were not activities we would call revolutionary (though in his Republican hometown they easily seemed “radical”). Nor was the little writing he did about them all that sophisticated; nor do they seem to have shaped his poetry. Compounding his apparent naïveté and lack of interest is his constant emphasis on the writer’s concern with form and the necessity of his freedom from political “dogma.” (Frail 1)

This evident indifference to social movements, especially Communism and Marxism during the Depression, alienated Williams from Left-leaning writers (including his longtime friend Ezra Pound), and maintained the preconceived notion of Williams as a poet’s poet, dedicated to his

small town medical practice, and only occasionally venturing into New York City to visit his artist friends. But while Williams remained unaffiliated to any particular political party, his association with Louis Zukofsky (a recognized Communist) and the Objectivist movement of the 1930s reveals that Williams acknowledged and indeed responded to the political and social demands put upon poetry and art during the Depression. A close reading of Williams' essays and poems of the 1930s further demonstrates his conviction to the social nature—not just the social aspects—of poetry and art. But because Williams was first and foremost a poet and a physician, he chose to diagnose the ills of society through his own poetic invention, as well as his aesthetic articulation and development, maintaining that only a transformation of the poetic imagination could enact a revolution of the social landscape. Only when poets truly make *contact* with the stuff of their world, and penetrate the social order and its deprived and downtrodden victims, can they begin to call for change in society. As David Frail elaborates,

[Williams'] desire for concreteness led him to view all experience in terms of one's aesthetics. Williams manifested his own aesthetics in his efforts to show that poetry could compete with science and philosophy and politics not only as a way of experiencing the world but as a set of principles according to which social life could be organized. (Frail 9)

Poetry and aesthetics indeed remain paramount to Williams' concerns and inclinations during the 1930s—but Williams, like many artists, came to recognize and respond to the ways in which the Depression “aestheticized politics and politicized aesthetics” (Johnson 184). Ultimately Williams challenged his own poetry to become a medium for social and political concerns, not through simplistic party dogma but objective contact with the world through new poetic forms.

Much of the resistance to viewing Williams as a political poet stems from the Left's opposition to the goals of the modernist project as a whole. Because of the predominance of radical writers during the 1930s, endorsement or rejection on their behalf of Williams' poetry could make or break his political status and reputation. Ironically, pro-Communist writers share many of the same aesthetic values with a poet like Williams, but claim that their allegiance to the primacy of political matters makes their work more potent. In the summer 1934 issue of *Dynamo* Sol Funaroff, using the pseudonym Charles Henry Newman, asks "How Objective is Objectivism?", praising the "clear, precise images and firm poetic lines" of this school of poetry, but dismissing the effort "to minimize the interpretive function of the poet by frequent use of objective nouns for descriptive purposes rather than 'as poetically legitimate verbal means for analogy, for symbolical or metaphorical concept.' ... Hence, the Objectivists' method fails to organize and coordinate experience most clearly in a social context" (Wald 209). Such emblematic criticism indicates the fixed nature of the Left's political convictions—that is, the party or political doctrine comes first, through which all poetic observation and thought is filtered. The object of the poem must relate back to larger social institutions, and moreover offer absolute solutions. Funaroff displays these prejudices in turning his attention to Williams:

William Carlos Williams applies his technique of observation to a social object, but falls short because his tools are unable to cope with such a breadth and width of material: "He sees details of poverty but he does not recognize or relate to its cause." Reciting a familiar theme, Funaroff concludes: "Today, the poet... must transform himself from the detached recorder of isolated events into the man who participates in the creation of new values and of a new world, into the poet who is proud to give voice to this new experience." Characteristically, Funaroff affirms

the modern yet draws back from the brink of modernism in his partisanship on behalf of a realist vision. (Wald 209)

Funaroff's objection to Williams' "detachment" reflects the dualistic tendencies of many Leftist (and modernist) writers—that is, to differentiate between art and society and to compel the revolutionary artist to advocate the notion of art for society's sake, rather than art for art's sake. Apparently, poets cannot have it both ways—either they are for society, or their own aesthetics. Muriel Rukeyser articulates this dilemma for the modernist social poet in no uncertain terms:

whether to insist upon first premises, even though that means a static repetition of familiar ideology, or to exercise full imagination and the resources of language in an endeavor to contribute a new dimension to poetry, though that attempt, in its inevitable intellectual concentration, must deny a social audience. (Wald 309)

Both Funaroff and Rukeyser mistakenly interpret an emphasis on poetic invention as the "inevitable" detachment from and denial of the social ramifications of art. Williams, however, in his 1930s writings, counters both Leftists and many modernists in his intent to fuse the social and the poetic, claiming that without invention, without *contact*, the poet lacks not only a legitimate and worthy voice, but indeed the capacity for social commitment.

By the same token, Williams rejected Marxism almost as vehemently as the Communists rejected his poetics. In a letter to the editors of *The Partisan Review* from April 1936, Williams makes his views quite clear and eloquent:

My opinion is that the American tradition is completely opposed to Marxism. America is progressing through difficult mechanistic readjustments which it is confident it can take care of. But Marxism is a static philosophy of a hundred years ago which has not yet kept up—as the democratic spirit has—through the

stresses of an actual trial. ... My opinion is that our revolutionary literature is merely tolerated by most Americans, that it is definitely in conflict with our deep-seated ideals. I think the very premises of the revolutionary writers prevent an organic integration with the democratic principles upon which the American spirit is founded. (*The Selected Letters* 157-158)

Here Williams aligns himself, however obliquely, with a democratic, liberal, individualistic American ideology (which in turn informs his poetics). Consistent with this democratic ideology, Williams berates Marxism and Communism for its emphasis on abstract theorizing (Beck 121), putting it most bluntly in a letter to Fred and Betty Miller from 1934: “They are only thinking in ‘big terms’ whereas the history of the country and the local dynamite that is embedded in it will blast them to hell and gone before they have had time to wipe their asses after the first shit” (Mariani 360). Both of the above instances illustrate Williams’ intense repudiation of political dogma informing and directing both poetry and social life—particularly a dogma that is incommensurate with actual local experience. As John Beck in *Writing the Radical Center* summarizes Williams’ opinions of democratic principles: “If liberty involves revolution, it will come from within conditions, out of its own ground with its own idiom, not in the form of some imported ideology nor by being cut off from the roots of experience and taking refuge in dogma” (Beck 108). Williams’ solution is for the poet to make *contact*, “an elemental, unmediated relationship between the self and its world, an originary experience which represented the ‘authentic,’ the ‘true,’ and the ‘essential,’” as defined by Bob Johnson in “A Whole Synthesis of His Time” (Johnson 190). John Beck more succinctly and significantly recognizes Williams’ *contact* as “a fusing of form and content in writing and, by extension, in life” (Beck 122). Without direct experience, and without attempting to shape that experience as precisely and

objectively as possible, letting the content (and context) influence the form and vice versa, revolutionary writing becomes “little more than blunt sloganeering strung along the pentameter” (Beck 122). As Beck elaborates:

Williams knew that dogma was not, nor would it ever be, poetry. Any attempt to formulate a radical social position in writing must come through a transformation of the very structure of that writing. Without formal innovation, without technique, poetry will remain, regardless of its “message,” fundamentally conservative in function. (Beck 122)

The “transformation” that appealed most to Williams in the 1930s was, of course, Objectivism, and especially the ideas espoused by Louis Zukofsky as articulated in “Program: ‘Objectivists’ 1931.” According to Zukofsky, the poet’s responsibility is “to place everything—everything aptly, perfectly, belonging within, one with, a context” (qtd. in Beck 123). In this regard, the poet must remain “objectively perfect,” not to re-present reality, but to embody it. John Beck consummately summarizes Zukofsky’s account:

Each word forms, and is formed by, its context. The poet’s job is to work with the “historic and contemporary particulars,” to shape the form. To shape the poem, which is “things as they exist,” is to shape reality, to direct and not just to follow. Thus, poetry is a form of social engagement, because words are not removed from social reality but are elements of that reality. . . . The poem is in history, it has a time and a place, and the meaning of the poem derives from that time and place, “a moment when you believe something to be true, and you construct a meaning from those moments of conviction.” The construction of this meaning is “bound up with events and contingencies,” and because of this, whatever direction the

poet may lead the poem is part of his or her social existence: any deviation from “particulars” is an abdication of “sincerity” and an evasion of engagement. (Beck 123-124)

This interpenetration of poet, context/environment, and aesthetic object provided Williams with the foundation for a social poetry grounded in concrete particulars that he believed most revolutionary writers of the time sorely lacked. As the Objectivists’ and Zukofsky’s views gestated in Williams throughout the decade, he would develop them in his essays and demonstrate them in his poetry in an effort to determine the practicality of objective poetry.

In “The Basis of Faith in Art” and “Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist,” two essays from 1937 and 1939 respectively, Williams afforded himself the opportunity of reflecting on his own poetic and social inclinations from the perspective of the turbulent 1930s political landscape. “The Basis of Faith in Art” consists of an imagined conversation between Williams and his brother, an architect, on the social nature of art. Williams begins his argument with a statement of conviction concerning art’s usefulness, echoing Objectivist principles:

A man writes as he does because he doesn’t know any better way to do it, to represent exactly what he has to say CLEAN of the destroying, falsifying, besmutching agencies with which he is surrounded. Everything he does is an explanation. He is always trying his very best to refine his work until it is nothing else but “useful knowledge.” I say everything, every minutest thing that is part of a work of art is good only when it is useful and that any other explanation of the “work” would be less useful than the work itself. Don’t worry, the artist will die and his work be explained later. Then other times will require new artists.

You talk as if art should be a department of government—like public health, etc.

Poetry is a rival government always in opposition to its cruder replicas.

(*Selected Essays* 180)

Here Williams definitively counters the idea that the Objective poet becomes a detached observer and describer of events—indeed the poet assumes the role of explainer, in the only way possible: through dissociation from the “besmutching agencies”—those in power and those who would aim to overthrow that power. But if poetry is a “rival government,” how can poets ensure that their voices remain public—on a practical level, that their words stay in print and widely distributed? This issue personally affected Williams, as at the time his own works were printed in small numbers with a limited distribution (Mariani 369). But Williams could not let economic factors motivate his views, since those factors conflicted with his conception of the artist’s role; indeed, Williams acknowledges the limits of the *revolutionary* nature of poetry. As John Beck concedes, “If Williams does not make big instrumental revolutionary claims for his work it is because he cannot. Writing poetry is not class war. The power of art, rather, lies in its ability to transform experience, not the ownership of the means of production” (Beck 124). Williams takes issue with revolutionary poets because they are too influenced and motivated by these extrinsic forces and voices when their focus should remain on their—literally—individual role in the transformation of society’s conscience and consciousness:

“Who shall tell him how or what he must write? His very function as a servant of society presupposes his ability to see clearly beyond the formulations of his day and to crystallize his findings in a durable form for social confirmation, that society may be built more praiseworthily.” (*Selected Essays* 194)

Moreover, because of the poet's status as a *servant* of society (pointedly not a leader or follower, theorist or insurgent), and ability to operate on an individual level, poets must concentrate on what they can actually accomplish, with the means afforded them, both in form and content:

“The artist, an individual, a worker, the type of a person who is creative, who has something to give to society must admit all classes of subject to his attention—even though he hang for it. This is his work. Nothing poetic in the feudal, aristocratic sense but a breaking down, rather of those imposed tyrannies over his verse forms. Technical matters, certainly, but most important to an understanding of the poet as a social regenerator. The facts are enclosed in his verses like a fly in amber.” (*Selected Essays* 194)

Thus, Williams calls for a re-conception of both subject matter and structure, arguing that a “breaking down” of “imposed tyrannies” in one necessitates the same in the other. Again, Williams seeks not only to represent society, but to embody it—and refocusing poetry towards “all classes of subject,” and particular constituents and plights of those classes, should reflect the “facts” of society's own refocus and regeneration—and vice versa.

In “Against the Weather” Williams develops his ideas regarding the primacy of structure, arguing not only against blind obedience to party dogma, but also for the proper place of propaganda in art, asserting again that poets must bind subject matter and structure in a one-to-one relationship, both equally revolutionary:

Who cares anything about propaganda, about alliances with the broad front of a life that seeks to assert itself in any age when lived to the hilt—unless the best thought is built newly, in a comprehensive form of the day, into the structure of the work? And if such a basis is accepted then, indeed, propaganda

can be thoroughly welcomed. Built into the structure of a work, propaganda is always acceptable for by that it has been transmuted into the materials of art. It has no life unless to live or die judged by an artist's standards.

But if, imposing an exposed, a depleted, restrictive and unrealized form, the propagandist thinks he can make what he has to say convincing by merely filling in that wooden structure with some ideas he wants to put over—he turns up not only as no artist but a weak fool. (*Selected Essays* 218)

That is, not only the conviction inherent in the message, but also the manner of its communication reveals and measures the strength of the poet, and the viability of the poet's argument. Williams continues to insist that poets can only "take sides" by demonstrating—not in the streets, but exhibiting the transformation of the resources before them:

All I say is that, unless all this is already in his writing—in the materials and structure of it—he might better have been a cowhand. The effect of the aristocratic revolution that the artist knows is necessary and intended—must be in his work, in the structure of his work. Everything else is secondary, but for the artist *that*, which has made all the greatest art one and permanent, that continual reassertion of structure, is first.

The mutability of the truth, Ibsen said it. Jefferson said it. We should have a revolution of some sort in America every ten years. The truth has to be redressed, re-examined, re-affirmed in a new mode. There has to be a new poetry. But the thing is that the change, the greater material, the altered structure of the inevitable revolution must be *in* the poem, in it. Made of it. It must shine in the structural body of it. (*Selected Essays* 216-217)

The new mode, the new poetry, became Williams project in the 1930s—not only in the modernist aesthetic to “make it new,” but now in the delineation of the “inevitable revolution” of structure and subject, form and content, art and society.

Owing to the perhaps admittedly immense challenge implied by his essays, Williams’ poetic output during the 1930s was limited—he only published two new volumes of poetry during the decade, focusing instead on fiction and prose. Ironically, many poems from *An Early Martyr and Other Poems* (1935) have become Williams’ most anthologized and recognized. Consequently, taken out of their immediate context, their innovative impact has diminished. Even a perusal of the poems’ titles, however, reveals Williams’ preoccupations during the Depression: “To a Poor Old Woman,” “Proletarian Portrait,” “To Be Hungry Is to Be Great,” “You Have Pissed Your Life.” Characterized by short, unadorned descriptions of emblematic individuals who belong to identifiable classes (self-evident in the titles: the proletariat, the poor, the old, the hungry), these poems challenged not only accepted notions of poetic decorum and tone, but also the typical response to encountering such poverty and deprivation. The utter lack of apparent explanation, of relating the poetic subject back to a social cause, Williams presents in “Late for Summer Weather”:

He has on
an old light grey Fedora
She a black beret

He a dirty sweater
She an old blue coat
that fits her tight

Grey flapping pants
Red skirt and
broken down black pumps

Fat Lost Ambling
nowhere through

the upper town they kick

their way through
heaps of
fallen maple leaves

still green—and
crisp as dollar bills
Nothing to do. Hot cha!

(*Collected Poems* 384)

Only a merest hint of the economic reality these characters face enters the poem at the very end, and even then in an associative, oblique (and uncharacteristic) analogy which fails to appeal to any political solutions or calls for social amelioration. This evidently poor hobo couple, in their tattered gear, seems just to be having a good time. Robert von Hallberg, in “The Politics of Description,” suggests that poems such as “Late for Summer Weather” and “To a Poor Old Woman” (“munching a plum on / the street ... They taste good to her”) assert

that political organizing and activities are beside the point, that they are not, as was commonly claimed during the decade, the necessary means to happiness.... [R]ather than helping to organize and propagandize the economic underdogs, ideologues would do well simply to appreciate the immediate access the poor have to simple human pleasure. (Hallberg 145)

Appreciation does not equate to complacency and stasis, however. As Zukofsky points out, the Objectivists write to create “a strictly objective estimate of all the class forces” (qtd. in Hallberg 146). Williams claimed that even the deceptively simple poems such as those that make up *An Early Martyr and Other Poems*, in their emphasis on description, are “analytical rather than merely appreciative, that even apparently neutral description was part of a larger program” (Hallberg 146). Williams intimates what this program entails in “A Poem for Norman MacLeod,” the penultimate poem of the volume:

The revolution
is accomplished
noble has been
changed to no bull

After that
has sickered down
slumming will
be done on Park Ave.

Or as chief
One Horn said to
the constipated
prospector:

You big fool!
and with his knife
gashed a balsam
standing nearby

Gathering the
gum that oozed out
in a tin spoon
it did the trick

You can do lots
if you know
what's around you
No bull

(Collected Poems 401)

“Noble” (as Hallberg [147] observes, “from the Latin root meaning knowable, known”), thoughts and theories such as Communism and Marxism can only go so far, and moreover have no place in the poem. Indeed, “no bull” is the only criterion for knowledge, and action—based in the local. And while Williams may exaggerate in proclaiming the revolution “accomplished,” the objective particulars and details with which poetry now may engage effectively validates such a statement. That is, the remedies for society are immediately present but require the poet’s acute observations to bring them to attention, as in the balsam Chief One Horn knew to secrete: “You can do lots / if you know / what’s around you.”

Williams' writings from the 1930s serve to illuminate long neglected yet integral aspects of the modernist project as a whole, but more importantly they speak volumes to our current critical moment. Indeed, the aesthetic and political concerns that Williams voices during the Depression foreshadow what Cary Nelson in *Repression and Recovery* terms the broader cultural struggle:

over whether poetry can be an effective and distinctive site for cultural critique, over whether poetry will offer readers subject positions that are reflective and self-critical, over whether poetry can be a force for social change, over what discourses poetry can plausibly integrate or juxtapose, over what groups of readers will be considered valid audiences for poetry, over what role poetry and the interpretation of poetry can play in stabilizing or destabilizing the dominant values and existing power relations in the culture as a whole. (245)

And like Williams, poets and critics should recognize that any totalizing structure or easy fix draws our attention away from the local and immediate reality that surrounds us, away from the struggle itself. Williams recognized and affirmed the conflict and tension between art and society, took it upon himself to put that conflict into words, and of course he called it poetry—among other *things*.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Ahearn, Barry. *William Carlos Williams and Alterity: The Early Poetry*. Cambridge, Cambridge U P, 1994.
- Beck, John. *Writing the Radical Center: William Carlos Williams, John Dewey, and American Cultural Politics*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2001.
- Bremen, Brian A. *William Carlos Williams and the Diagnostics of Culture*. New York: Oxford U P, 1993.
- Filreis, Alan. *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties, & Literary Radicalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1994.
- Frail, David. *The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987.
- Hallberg, Robert Von. "The Politics of Description: W. C. Williams in the 'Thirties.'" *ELH* 45 (1978): 131-151.
- Johnson, Bob. "'A Whole Synthesis of His Time': Political Ideology and Cultural Politics in the Writings of William Carlos Williams, 1929-1939." *American Quarterly* 54.2 (June 2002): 179-215.
- Mariani, Paul. *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked*. New York: Mc-Graw Hill, 1981.
- Nelson, Cary. *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945*. Madison: The U of Wisconsin P, 1989.
- . *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left*. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Thurston, Michael. *Making Something Happen: American Political Poetry Between the World Wars*. Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 2001.

Wald, Alan M. *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left*. Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 2002.

Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*. Eds. A. Walton Litz & Christopher MacGowan. Volume 1. New York: New Directions, 1986.

———. *Selected Essays of Williams Carlos Williams*. New York: Random House, 1954.

———. *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*. Edited with an Introduction by John C. Thirlwall. New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957.