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“The Legacy of William Carlos Williams in the Poetry & Politics of Wendell Berry”

*The poem is important, but  
Not more than the people  
Whose survival it serves*

from “In a Motel Parking Lot, Thinking of Dr. Williams”

In this paper I seek to bring to bear on the study of William Carlos Williams some lessons gleaned from parallels with Williams in the work of contemporary ecopoet Wendell Berry. By examining Berry’s explicit discussions of the heavy influence Williams had on his work and his life (especially in the area of both men’s dedication to their geographical “local” environments) and by looking at poems by each that seek to address and instruct their fellow citizens (in the case of Williams’s “townspeople poems” and Berry’s “Mad Farmer” sequence) I hope to open up new avenues of understanding about 1) the relationship between these two major American poets, 2) their respective use of rhetoric in poetry as a tool for civic engagement, and 3) their shared awareness of the value not only of the local, but the natural as well.

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Though he first made his name as a poet in the 1970s, Wendell Berry has come to be known as one of the most prolific and insightful voices of the environmental movement, working in nearly every genre of writing available to him. But for as many books as he publishes and lectures he gives, his day-to-day lifestyle is still that of a humble Kentucky farmer, living on a fifth-generation family farm and eschewing modern technology. He corresponds exclusively by snail mail, writes on a typewriter, and follows the seasons of his milieu by harvesting the corn,

tobacco, and other crops that grow near his home. Though rarely remarked upon by critics (other than in his own writing, as we'll see in a moment) Berry shares many traits with William Carlos Williams, both in his life and in his work. Like Berry, Williams lived a life of intentional local-dwelling in a then-quiet community, spent most of his day in the hard work of attending to his patients, and both (using typewriters) produced poetry that celebrate the everyday world they encounter in their respective immediate environments.

Berry would be the first to concede the similarities – and indeed did just that in his 2011 study *The Poetry of William Carlos Williams of Rutherford*. He opens that book by discussing the “personal debt” he owes to Williams, and describes its depth in a narrative of how he first came to Williams’s work, relatively late, after he had finished his formal education at Stanford University. Returning home for a summer in the family cabin on the banks of the Kentucky River, Berry had with him three volumes of Williams’s work: the *Collected Earlier Poems*, the *Collected Later Poems*, and the then-new *Journey to Love*. It was serendipitous that Berry spent so intense a period reading Williams for the first time in the circumstances of returning to the land of his forbears. Berry spends a significant portion of his book on Williams praising his commitment to what Berry terms “local adaptation” which he describes as the act of “discovering where one is in relation to one’s place (native or chosen), to its natural and human neighborhood, to its mystery and sanctity, and with discovering right ways of living and working there” (9).

The idea of individuals dwelling not in a global environment but a local one is central to his poetry – and perhaps even more so to his political philosophy. In a 1992 interview in *New Perspectives Quarterly* Berry that argued in the 21st century context

local economies are being destroyed by the 'pluralistic,' displaced, global economy, which has no respect for what works in a locality. The global economy is built on the

principle that one place can be exploited, even destroyed, for the sake of another place... We must support what supports local life, which means community, family, household life—the moral capital our larger institutions have to come to rest upon. If the larger institutions undermine the local life, they destroy that moral capital just exactly as the industrial economy has destroyed the natural capital of localities—soil fertility and so on. (31).

This is hardly surprising talk from a man who is known for being an active voice against large-scale agriculture, and in favor of the preservation of the earth's natural resources through a closer connection to it. What is useful for us as scholars is to discover the large role Williams played in forming these ideas in the mind of a young college graduate and future “heavy hitter” in the eco-movement.

When Berry argues that Williams's work should more appropriately be understood as the product of local adaptation, he notes that it was “*from his example I learned to put my own work under that heading, to see it not as an end in itself but as part of a necessary, if never finished or finishable, effort to belong authentically where my life had put me*” (9, emphasis mine). This echoes moments in Williams's own oeuvre in which he acknowledges that same value of his immediate place in “authentically belong[ing],” such as the last pages of Book II, section 2 of *Paterson* where he asks:

Why should I move from this place  
where I was born? knowing  
how futile would be the search  
for you in the multiplicity  
of your debacle. The world spreads  
for me like a flower opening — and  
will close for me as might a rose —

wither and fall upon the ground  
and rot and be drawn up  
into a flower again... (79)

The imagery of the world's flower opening, only to fall and rot and be drawn up again makes an easy parallel to Berry's example above of soil fertility as just one facet of the value of local

adaptation. Further, Williams's philosophy of the local reaches back even further, to a 1927 profile of Kenneth Burke, in which he claims that "one has to learn what the meaning of the local is, for universal purposes. The local is the only thing that is universal," (*Selected Essays* 179).

Of course the idea of the local is nothing new to contemporary readers or to Berry. From bumper stickers ("Think Globally, Act Locally") to the slow food movement, one of the underlying assumptions of modern environmentalism is that ecological awareness begins in one's immediate surroundings. But, while the political implications of local, sustainable food, or resources are now routine within the green/"eco" movement, in Williams's time such a philosophy was exactly that – more philosophical than literal or actionable. As Berry notes, "His commitment to one small part of the world made him radical in a way that he may only partly have recognized – that undoubtedly is more recognizable now than it was, even to him, during his lifetime...an issue that by now is becoming prominent and urgent" (29). For the purposes of this discussion, though, I'd like to highlight the implications of this local adaptation for their poetry's role in the larger sphere of the civic and political landscapes of their respective periods.

According to Berry, and evident in some clear examples from Williams own work, one inevitable consequence of lifelong dedication to a single place is an active and passionate political heart for that place. In the course of his dedicated life in Rutherford, Berry notes, Williams "lived by the terms of a community involvement more constant, more intimate, and more urgent than that of any other notable poet of his time" – in part because "[a] doctor who ministers to his home community and his neighbors is...always and at the same time, a neighbor and a citizen" (23). Berry later adds that "Poetry – which for other poets was personal or 'cultural' – became for Williams a civic obligation, a kind of work relating to community membership and neighborhood...so his poetry sometimes has a spokesmanly didacticism" (30).

The most ready examples of just such “spokesmanlike didacticism” can be found in a handful of poems from early in Williams’s career (1914-1916), in which the speaker takes on the role of one addressing his fellow Rutherfordians directly – his “townspeople.” There are seven such poems, of which “Tract” (“I will teach you my townspeople / how to perform a funeral”) is perhaps the best known and most often anthologized/taught (*CP I 70*).<sup>1</sup> In the earliest of these poems, “Gulls” (written in 1912), we find Williams’s persona opening with a heightened, and somewhat indignant, awareness of the consequences of his choice to remain in Rutherford:

My townspeople, beyond in the great world,  
are many with whom it were far more  
profitable for me to live than here with you.

...  
I remain! Therefore, listen!  
For you will not soon have another singer. (67)

Self-consciously, in this opening stanza, Williams expresses an awareness of the contrast he already felt between himself and his University of Pennsylvania classmates (and fellow poets) Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle, both of whom had moved to London four years earlier in 1908. Eventually – especially with the success of the expatriate T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* in 1925 – Williams would feel, even more acutely, the ramifications of the missed “profit” that might have served him if he were to be a part of the European expat community. It is, in fact, somewhat remarkable how early he was taking note of the consequences of his staying in Rutherford, while artists he knew were off gathering the experiences and social contacts that would help to launch their literary careers.

Rhetorically, though, Williams seems to feel that his decision to stay imbues him with some increased authority: “I remain! Therefore listen!” (line7) he tells his townspeople. He

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<sup>1</sup> The others, noted here with their corresponding page numbers in the *Collected Poems Volume I*, are: “Invitation” (40), “Epigramme” (52), “Naked” (54), “Gulls” (67), “Foreign” (79), and “Riposte” (95).

offers himself as a precious commodity in that the community, which “will not soon have another singer” – creating a separation of sorts from that community, that will be given greater clarity later in the poem. He is drawing a contrast between himself as an artist (“singer”) with the opportunity of departure to more “profitable” places – and the more provincial “townspeople,” who remain in one place not by choice but out of either limited opportunity or resources. It should be recalled here that Williams and his brother Edgar – at their mother’s insistence – had spent a year and a half attending school in Switzerland and living with relatives in France, and therefore had already developed a sort of cosmopolitanism that their more rural counterparts would not have had. Williams’s voice in the poem seems to in fact condescend to the townspeople, emphasizing his authority with the overly-instructive “First I say this” of line 9 and “And the next thing I say is this” of line 15. His attitude toward those around him seems to be one of a young, brash superiority.

I think part of the lesson of the poem is, in fact, in its failure to connect the individual poet to the town’s larger group. The separation Williams creates between himself and his townspeople is as undermined by the grammatical subjects as it is by his posturing tone: the words “I” “me” and “my” appear a collective thirteen times in the space of twenty-seven lines; the collective (somewhat accusatory?) “you” appears eight times. The only time the speaker brings himself grammatically together with the townspeople is to invoke the struggle to avoid conflict: “it is not necessary for us to leap at each other,” he says, in what is essentially the “lesson” of the poem. As we’ll see in Berry, and again later, in a more successful Williams poem of the local, there’s a lesson to be learned from this approach to teaching one’s fellows.

That ultimate (somewhat moralized) instructive lesson finds Williams seeking to establish a kind of civic tranquility. The middle stanzas contrast the image of three gulls “from

above the river” with the figure of the more extraordinary, dominant – and higher-up – “eagle...circling against the clouds” (lines 19, 15). The multitudinous gulls would seem to stand in for the townspeople, contrasting with (and notably below) Williams’s unique and solo eagle-figure. The poem takes place against the backdrop of the cacophony of the gulls’ cries mixed with Easter hymns, a point of contention for the speaker – in fact the writer’s main impetus for writing it. In MacGowan’s note on the poem in *Collected Poems Volume 1* he quotes Williams calling “Gulls” a “religious poem.” Williams told John C. Thirwall in 1952, “Living across from the Episcopal Church...I was conscious that I was looked on askance for not conforming.” That nonconformity found its praxis in Williams having been raised Unitarian, but not practicing a particular variety of worship in his adult life (482). This stands in contrast to the crowd celebrating Easter. He told Thirwall, “On Sunday I used to hear the responses” of the Episcopalians celebrating mass, “and my blood boiled when I heard the general confession. I didn’t feel like a sinner and they didn’t mean it,” (482). Despite their differences, however, Williams calls for – and seems to want to instruct his townspeople on – a tranquility to settle over the birds: “You see, it is not necessary for us to leap at each other” he says (line 25). From the model of the natural world of the gulls and the eagle, Williams attempts to draw an example by which he and his fellow Rutherfordians may live, in peaceful coexistence. Poetry here can try to be used, Williams hopes, to help solve the problems of a sometimes troubled human world, defined by its differences.

Like Williams’s “townspeople” collection, Wendell Berry has a cluster of poems that function as a kind of sequence, in which he also utilizes the platform of poetry as a place for potential political instruction: his Mad Farmer poems. Written over three decades, and spread

among and over four collections of poetry, starting with *The Country of Marriage* in 1963, Berry's Mad Farmer persona is by turns funny, fierce, calm, and cajoling – and makes proper use of both definitions of “mad,” as slightly crazy and more than a little angry. The poems vary in their subjects as well as their tone, are sometimes told in first person, sometimes third, and ultimately describe a man who runs contrary to societal expectations. The clearest statement of his beliefs comes in “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front” – a kind of list poem of imperatives the Mad Farmer offers to his own, more loosely-defined townspeople, namely the “friends” of line 12. As in Williams's poem, lines are drawn between groups of people, but Berry's Farmer does an interesting, and perhaps more universalizing, job of bringing the persona together with his local colleagues, in opposition to the “they” of line 9 – a kind of nameless cluster of modern commercial/industrial interests:

When they want you to buy something  
they will call you. When they want you  
to die for profit they will let you know.

These lines come at the end of the first stanza, which is itself a contradiction – it's a series of false imperatives, leading the reader into initially misunderstanding the true goal of the Farmer's advice, as it's followed by some forty more lines of opposite advice. It's a technique that both marks the Farmer as a little mad and a lot contrary, while disorienting the reader in a rhetorical move that keeps us on our toes, demanding closer examination of the lecture at hand.

That lecture is a series of more than thirty imperative sentences, one after another, of varying length, and content ranging from the abstract to the specific. “Invest in the millennium” we're somewhat bafflingly told in line 24, followed immediately by, “Plant sequoias.” The former is advice hard to follow, the latter instruction oddly specific. Similarly, much of the advice is meant to salve not just problems of today, but also with an eye and a mind to the

(sometimes distant) future, in lines such as “Say that your main crop is the forest / that you did not plant, that you will not live to harvest” and “Put your faith in the two inches of hums / that will build under the trees / every thousand years” (lines 25-27, 31-33). In keeping with his contrary nature (one of the poems in the larger series is entitled “The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer”), the farmer tells – not asks, but tells – us repeatedly to do things that undermine the institutions of our mainstream society: “every day do something / that won’t compute[...]As soon as the generals and the politicians / can predict the motions of your mind, / lose it” (12-13, 50-52). The effect of the repeated and varied imperatives is a aural rhythm at once pleasing and somewhat soothing, nigh on trance-inducing. The advice itself is general enough to be appealing, while sometimes impractical to follow: “Listen to carrion[...]Practice resurrection.” Notably, the imperative form offers Berry the chance to eschew the danger Williams found in “Gulls” in the trap of the grammatical subject – the poem includes not a single “I” and relatively few “you”s, instead treating its audience as being in party with the poet.

While I’m arguing that the didactic poet-to-his-community format of Berry’s Mad Farmer is a kind of political inheritance from Williams, it’s clear that the personae take very different approaches from each other: Williams’s is somewhat more off-putting because of the separation he establishes between himself and his listeners – while ironically calling for peace between them; Berry’s is more warmly offering advice meant to redirect the reader into a lifestyle that brings him or her into greater harmony with the Farmer himself, with each other, and with the land they inhabit together.

Given their respective locals, of course, the audiences of both poems are at odds – Williams is clearly speaking directly to his literal townspeople in Rutherford, while Berry is more generally addressing nearly any reader who happens upon him. Ironically – especially

given Berry's praise for Williams's sense of the local, and Berry's devotion to the meaning of that as an actual, literal community, it is Williams who is more specifically addressing his lived-in, real, and geographical local. (And while Berry's address to the human race is effective in a broad way, one would like to see him practice more of the poetics he preaches, possibly limiting his "friends" to include less than the entire race.) The authors' didactic techniques differ in how they advise their respective communities, but ultimately Berry's seems the more openly received by the reader, in part because Berry seems to more easily unify himself with the reader/listener, and, I think, because the goal of his lesson is a more clearly universalized one. Not simply "it is not necessary to" fight amongst ourselves, but instead offering a message designed to show people how they may/should come together as one on this earth. Empathy is a powerful rhetorical and pedagogical tool, and Berry uses it to good effect.

By way of comparison, another poem in which Williams reaches out his fellow townspeople offers us a different, and, I think, somewhat more appealing, Berry-like vision of his relationship with his local community – while simultaneously bringing us back to the concepts of dwelling *and* the natural world. His "Invitation," from 1914, is short enough to quote in its entirety:

We live in this flat blue basin,  
We and the meadow things, my townspeople,  
And there beyond where the snow lies  
In ochred patches float the smoke-grey towers.  
Has it never struck you as curious  
That we do not all leave this place?  
Surely we are blest  
With a noteworthy wisdom, my townspeople!  
Let us be conscious and talk of these things. (*CP I* 40)

Here Williams is again talking about his decision to stay in Rutherford, but he now (two years after writing "Gulls") has a different, more community-building take on it. While his self-doubt

about his decision may remain (“Has it never struck you as curious / That we do not leave this place?”), I hesitate to read Williams’s “Surely we are blest / With a noteworthy wisdom” as fully ironic, in part because of his telling use of grammatical subjects. Note the four appearances, in nine lines, of “We” - and one of “us.” Meanwhile, the only “my” is part of the inclusive phrase “my townspeople” and there’s not a single “I to be found – a stark contrast from the self-centered and condescending rhetoric of “Gulls.” “Surely” this offers us a glimpse at a more successfully communal, Berry-like, audience-appeasing way of addressing one’s local townspeople. Even the didactic message itself, in a way that may have taught Berry how to do it so well, is a willful, directive to a positive, community-building behavior: “Let us be conscious and *talk* of these things.”

I offer “Invitation” not just a contrast to “Gulls,” or as a way of showing what lessons Berry may have learned from Williams in how to teach a town’s people, but also as a way of providing us one more lens through which to understand Berry and Williams as sympathetic to each other: that is, the use of the natural world. In “Gulls” I argued Williams found a model for human behavior in his eagle and gulls (separated though they were). In Berry’s Mad Farmer “Manifesto” we see the natural world understood as a locus for dwelling in the long-term, a place for a community not just to get along in, in the moment, but to thrive in for generations, into the “crop” that we “will not live to harvest,” possible generations from now. Combining the traits of these two poems, in “Invitation” it’s interesting to note Williams’s extension beyond just himself and his fellow humans, to include a communion and community with nature itself. As Berry at one point notes in his study of Williams, the latter “kept trying to extend the reach and comprehensiveness of his art, and so to make a language ‘to reconcile / the people and the stones’” (23). Here we see Williams making a small success of that early on when he “extends

the reach” of the inclusiveness of community to include even the “meadow things” and “where the snow lies” in his gathering together. And if, as it’s said, nothing brings people (and plants?) together like a common enemy – there, beyond the river, in “ochred patches” lie the “smoke-grey towers” of the city. Against the opposition of the city (just as Berry set his poem against the modern capitalist-industrial “they”) Williams aligns himself, his fellow Rutherfordians, and even the natural landscape they inhabit – the “meadow things” – all as one. I’ve discussed at this conference before the affinity I find in Williams for the natural ecosystem of the ground on which you and I sit and stand right now. Here again, I see Williams predicting and pre-dating modern ideas of ecological interpenetration between the human and the nonhuman, by eliding the two together on an equal plane.

But what value can we place on this sympathy between poet and place? What are the implications of a teacher-artist inhabiting a local, and instructing others of that local to see themselves as part of a unified natural whole? Berry usefully speaks to this in his discussion of Williams’s “local adaptation” by pointing out the consequences of such a relationship to place.

He notes,

Anybody who in the age of industrialism makes common cause with a place, and who looks, will see that it is always under threat of damage or destruction for the sake of money...A number of times Williams refers to peasants or “peasant traditions,” not out of sentimentality or an interest in folklore, but because they represented a kind of culture, authentically local and self-sustaining, that could protect even the poor from exploitation by an economy gone crazy” (54-55).

As I’ve argued elsewhere, Williams has similarly prescient and contemporary awareness of this kind of exploitation – such as in his citation in *Paterson* Book I of the true historical account of the discovery of a Queen pearl in a creek in Paterson, and the subsequent decimation of the local mussel population, in the inexhaustible search for more.

Indeed, in Berry – as in other ecopoets of today such as W.S. Merwin, Gary Snyder, Rachel Blau DePlessis, and Mary Oliver – we see the re-enactment of themes and ideas that Williams was working with, 30-50 years ahead of his own time. Berry remarks:

If we think now of the conviviality between the work of an ecologically literate, locally committed poet such as Gary Snyder and this kind of science in agriculture and forestry, we become aware of an incipient and necessary cultural change that authenticates Williams'[s] example in a way he could not have anticipated. We are [now] seeing the emergence of *stewardly* arts and sciences, submitted to the service and good keeping of home place" (35, emphasis mine).

In Williams and his civic-poetic personae, as in Berry's *Mad Farmer*, we find a fascinating application of the rhetoric of poetry used to larger, sometimes eco-political ends. In his own time, Williams sometimes felt a frustration with how unsuccessfully his higher (indeed, eagle-high) cosmopolitan ideas were received by his more provincial local townspeople. However, that never stopped him from seeking new ways and new words by which to reach them. As we read his work in the context of our twenty-first century world, it behooves us to do better, to listen more closely, and with the kind of sensitivity that can allow the power of the poetry to be made political. It is, as Williams said, difficult to get the news from poems. Difficult – but not impossible.

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