

## **“Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”:** Grecian Echoes in Later Williams

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Williams wrote to James Laughlin in November 1944: “I have long wanted some mind to write of the classics and to handle the classic Greek and Latin material in our language as against the English and English imitators – to whom flock the Pounds and Eliots – like blind fish and bats from the caves.” In addition to his lifelong struggles against free verse as well as against British English and English poetic meter, Williams’ late concerns appear to be how to answer these fundamental questions: “What is time?” “What is love?” “What is poetry?” “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” (1957) is a milestone poem in this respect, embodying Williams’ final understanding of his life as a doctor, poet, and husband. In this presentation, I would like to propose a reading of “Asphodel” that highlights its Greek mythological references, explicit and implicit, showing how they bestow a certain structural and conceptual form on the whole poem. I shall also attempt a comparative analysis of “Asphodel” with Nicolas Calas’ “Narcissus in the Desert” (1939), which makes paradoxical use of Greek mythological figures in a modern adaptation.

Among the many poems of Williams that allude to flowers, “Asphodel” is the only one, to my knowledge, haunted by this particular flower, ‘little prized among the living.’ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘asphodel’ is “made an immortal flower by the poets, and said to cover the Elysian meads (Ἀσφοδελός λειμών).” Traditionally, when the flower asphodel appears in a poem, it is in reference to death or the dead. This connotation is found as early as Homer (‘the meadows of asphodel where ghosts abide,’ *Odyssey*) to as recently as Seferis (‘the dead among the asphodels,’ *Mythistorema*). Why did Williams, still living despite his increasing health problems, make so much of a flower that blooms in the underworld in a poem dedicated to his beloved wife? The evocation of asphodel in a love-poem addressed to someone in this life is a remarkable break with tradition and it generates unease.

“Asphodel” unfolds solemnly like the opening lines of Greek epics. Surprisingly enough, as one listens to the first two triadic stanzas, the ear comes to be attuned to iambs:

<sup>x /</sup> <sup>x /</sup> <sup>x /</sup> <sup>x /</sup> <sup>x /</sup>  
 Of asphodel, that greeny flower,  
     <sup>/</sup> <sup>x /</sup> <sup>x /</sup>  
     like a buttercup  
                     <sup>x /</sup> <sup>x /</sup> <sup>x /</sup> <sup>x /</sup>  
                     upon its branching stem—  
<sup>/</sup> <sup>x x</sup> <sup>/</sup> <sup>x</sup> <sup>/</sup> <sup>x</sup>  
 save that it's green and wooden—  
     <sup>x /</sup> <sup>x /</sup>  
     I come, my sweet,  
                     <sup>x /</sup> <sup>x /</sup>  
                     to sing to you. (1-6: CP2 310; scansion mine)

Timothy Steele discovers this effect in another poem of Williams; he speaks of “the prevalence of iambic rhythms in our speech” which is such that “even so fine a vers-libriste as Williams falls into them, apparently without being aware of it” (263). Given Williams’ incessant negative remarks on iambic pentameter, however, it seems almost impossible that he would have let the traditional prosody re-enter without noticing it. Williams deliberately utilizes the iambics so that the beginning of the poem take on a dignified melody as in Homer’s dactylic hexameter.

As Paul Mariani explains in his biography of Williams *A New World Naked*, asphodel grows “not only in the Old World and—cutting across time and space—in Homer’s hell, but in his own Jersey meadows as well” (672). Indeed, asphodel is a flower both ancient and actual to Williams’ Rutherfordian life. I was intrigued, nevertheless, by Williams’ ‘colorless’ and ‘greeny’ asphodel, even more when I came first to know that the attractive white and pinkish flowers, which I happened to photograph on a Greek island, were in fact the asphodel of Homer. Why should asphodel be described as ‘greeny’?

Neither roses, daisies nor saxifrages can fill the role of asphodels, which invite a mortal to the underworld where dead souls dwell. Their oscillating imaginative bicolor of ‘green’ and ‘wooden’ embodies the poet’s struggles against time, ‘fading memory’ and ‘failing’ poetic power. The apparition of a man resembling Williams’ father in New York’s *underground* compounds the foreboding of decay the flower brings. The man is described in dim shades of color for an entire page; he wears ‘a *brown* felt hat’ and a ‘very *dirty* undershirt’ under ‘a double-breasted *black* coat’ and ‘*brown* socks.’ Though it is not made explicit, the scene is illuminated by the allusion to Book 11 of *Odyssey*, where Odysseus meets the spirit of his mother Anticlea in the underworld.

Williams utilizes various kinds of references in “Asphodel,” ranging from Greek mythological figures to his contemporaries. Tracking themes as far back as ancient

Greece and invoking Homer to celebrate the birth of poetry constitute a vital dimension of Williams' mature poetry, not because he seeks to make his poems heroic but because he believes in the power of 'despised poems':

The sea! The sea!  
Always  
when I think of the sea  
there comes to mind  
the *Iliad*  
and Helen's public fault  
that bred it.  
Were it not for that  
there would have been  
no poem but the world  
if we had remembered,  
those crimson petals  
spilled among the stones,  
would have called it simply  
murder. (183-97: CP2 315)

In "Asphodel," the Trojan War is transformed into the World Wars of the 20th century, with 'Helen's public fault' being associated with the fascination of the flowerlike atom bomb. And yet, the poet praises the birth of poetry amid historical crisis. The sea recalls Aphrodite born of sea foam. Williams, at the end of Book III, addresses his wife Flossie as 'my queen of love.'

Another association of Flossie with Helen, the most beautiful of mortals, testifies to his love for her:

All women are not Helen,  
I know that,  
but have Helen in their hearts.  
My sweet,  
you have it also, therefore

I love you

and could not love you otherwise. (241-47: *CP2* 316)

A woman could cause the legendary war, 'sending so many disinterested / men to their graves.' Williams alludes to Homer's catalogue of ships which depicted the whole of Greece roused up to save that single woman. This sensational and depersonalizing state of the Greek sea-warriors not only overlaps that of soldiers in Williams' own epoch but also overwhelms the tonality of "Asphodel":

a garden. The poem  
is complex and the place made  
in our lives  
for the poem.

Silence can be complex too,  
but you do not get far  
with silence.

Begin again.

It is like Homer's  
catalogue of ships:  
it fills up the time. (221-31: *CP2* 316)

Likewise, Williams' catalogue of memories would not have a *raison d'être* without Flossie. Miscellaneous memories are summoned for her so that he can sing of asphodel to her. Since she is the central figure of "Asphodel," all of the memories of her he has collected converge into that immortal flower.

Reading "Asphodel" with an eye on its occasional Greek mythological references, the reader realizes that Williams' kaleidoscopic resumé of his sparsely remembered life in these pages, with their sparsely arranged lines in a flexible foot, are conjuring up the figure of Odysseus, who circumvented so many obstacles and visited so many islands for ten years before returning to Ithaca. Thanks to his wife Flossie's 'reviving water' permeating his 'crevices' and to Williams' 'revived' memory as one of the young and 'green' newly-wed couple, "Asphodel" conveys the perpetual freshness of their life together.

Asphodel  
has no odor  
save to the imagination  
but it too  
celebrates the light.  
It is late  
but an odor  
as from our wedding  
has revived for me  
and begun again to penetrate  
into all crevices  
of my world. (1033-44: CP2 336-37)

\* \* \* \* \*

Williams' perception of Surrealism in the 1940's, shaped by his English translation of French poems by the Greek-American poet Nicolas Calas (1907-1988), acquired a conceptual significance that pervades the realm of his late poems in *The Desert Music* (1954) and *Journey to Love* (1955). Calas' enigmatic mythological leitmotifs of 'fire,' 'water,' 'light,' 'shadow,' 'mirror' and 'love' recur in "The Descent," "The Ivy Crown," "Shadows" and "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower." Williams' literary relationship with the many-sided Calas, born in Lausanne to Greek parents, brought up in Athens, engaged in Surrealism in Paris, and eventually a permanent resident in America, certainly kindled his eagerness to absorb what was happening outside of Rutherford. Williams was 57 years old when Calas, then Surrealist émigré aged 33, arrived in New York in 1940, and the Greek spirit he brought with him impressed the older poet.

Williams' first proposal to translate Calas' poems into the American idiom dates back to his November 1940 letter: "I'd like to translate one of the poems and then look at it more carefully in English – that is to say American! – when I may be able to formulate what I perceive more ably." Enclosing in a letter the following month the first

translation of a Calas' poem, Williams observes that "it is a fascinating problem to try to put your exact meaning into an equivalent English. I enjoy such work and I enjoy your attack now that I understand it better." As the poets rarely mention the title of the poems, which poem they are discussing is not easy to determine. However, the exchange that ensued reveals Calas' appreciation and hesitations about Williams' translations. The hesitations arose from what seems to have been the trilingual (Greek, French and English) poet's difficulty in recognizing himself when translated a poem of his in a process outside his control. Calas thus betrays his bewilderment, which somewhat resembles that of Narcissus:

What a delightful surprise to get the next day your two letters and the excellent translations! I feel terrible about it! The poems in English look very strange but I am sorry they are often better than the [F]rench text. . . . You say it better. Tant mieux ! But it is a new kind of experience for me. The same one we went through as children when we first learnt to write down our thoughts. We discovered they could be read by somebody else, that they could live without us. It is terrifying. . . . I do not know if that translation is me because I do not know how I look like. As with a photo, there is always the possibility, to find it is bad, so with a translation it may happen we cannot recognize ourselves. (Dec. 6, 1940)

*The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams Volume II* contains four of the Calas' poems that Williams translated from French into English. The title reads: *Nicolas Calas: Four Poems*. According to Williams, "they [the four poems] should not appear one by one but all together as one project. They are difficult to understand until there is a certain headway attained, un élan, a swing" (Jan 6, 1941). Each poem is indeed too enigmatic to be understood straightforwardly and the title of the third one "Narcissus in The Desert" is controversial in itself. A similarly distorted mythological figure is, in fact, also hidden in "Asphodel":

I cannot say  
that I have gone to hell  
for your love  
But often

found myself there

in your pursuit. (132-37: *CP2* 314)

Orpheus did go down to the underworld and see Eurydice, eventually to lose her forever. Williams here humorously confesses that he dares not brag that he has gone to hell because of his poetic might, but somehow he did go there whenever he tried to find Flossie. What role this implicit reference to the unfortunate Orpheus plays is perhaps yet to be explored. What if there exists an Orpheus who has not gone to hell? The same applies to Calas' Narcissus, who is in a dry desert where not a spot of water should be detected. How can it be possible for Narcissus to drown under such circumstances? Here is Williams' translation of "Narcisse dans le désert":

Three faces in a single one

Too much sand for the sun

Sets madness afire

Its liquid shadow sprawls out

A new break asserts itself

The mirror is too keen

At its contact the eyes die of thirst

And turn their looks away

The paper keeps it neutral white as dry as space is

To weld the prop to life

To follow the trail

To make a poem violent as a mirage

With love to drink three faces as one

Plunge thine hair under

And Narcissus will have lived. (1-15; *CP2* 40)

Along with the title, the reader will feel the spell cast by the 'three faces,' which can hardly be associated with the doubleness of this mythology. As Williams' translation,

including the arrangement of lines, is quite loyal to the French original, the supposedly united quasi-Trinitarian ‘three faces’ could be interpreted as no longer ‘a single one.’ The following group of three lines embodies their fragmented image. The next single line depicts something new, uncertain. Could the mirror possibly be invented by ‘a new break’? Calas’ own remark about the Narcissus mythology can be of help:

The importance of the story of Narcissus, from the point of view of phylogenic evolution, lies in the fact that it reveals man’s surprise at recognizing himself. The need to invent a mirror by which to replace water becomes then imperative. Just as much as fire or steam or electric light or the camera, the mirror is a machine, machine meaning nothing else, as its Greek origin indicates, than invention. (*Confound the Wise*, 200)

Water is no longer an essential source for having a reflection of oneself. For the invention of mirror, Narcissus is dragged out of his familiar position to be placed in the desert. What is more incomprehensible is that if ‘the mirror is too keen’ and ‘the eyes die of thirst at its contact and turn their looks away,’ how can Narcissus even look at himself? Because of the lack of archetypal tool and action, Narcissus cannot star in his plot. Calas continues his interpretation of Narcissus:

The psychology value of the myth of Narcissus lies precisely in what has been named after it, Narcissist love. It is from the “machine age,” that is to say from the time the need to invent a mirror is psychologically felt, that the problem of depersonalization arises.

(*Confound the Wise*, 200)

Indeed, in need of reflecting oneself, we look for a mirror, not for a basin or pool. It can be said that the plot of mythology is modified to suit the modern age. The paradoxical utilization of mythological figures both in Williams’ Orpheus and Calas’ Narcissus constitutes an attempt to define the human condition in the modern age.

Whether the last six lines provide a convincing modern adaptation of Narcissus may be doubted, but they are intriguing from the viewpoint of translation. Note the use of to-infinitive verbs occurring four times in succession, with the first three of them at

the head of the line. This reproduces the French verbs faithfully:

Souder l'appui à la vie

Suivre la piste

Faire un poème violent comme un mirage

Boire avec amour ces trois visages en un seul

Innonder tes cheveux

Et Narcisse aura vécu. (10-15)

The only difference from the French is the imperative 'Plunge.' For the infinitive 'innonder', why did Williams not stick to the infinitive by writing 'To plunge'? A sudden modal change in verb at the closing line seems to announce another drastic change in the poet's modern adaptation of Narcissus.

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