

Williams, the “Pragmatic Self” and the Birth of *Al Que Quiere!*

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Recently I’ve been reading Bruce Holsapple’s interesting, very intelligent new book of Williams, *The Birth of the Imagination: William Carlos Williams on Form* (New Mexico 2016) for the purpose of writing a review, but for all of the book’s many virtues I found myself in deep philosophical disagreement with his approach to “The Wanderer” in particular and Williams in general. So my talk has changed its focus. I want to show that Williams dramatizes the discovery of a “pragmatic self” in “The Wanderer” and that discovery makes *Al Que Quiere!* (AQQ) possible.

My problem with Holsapple’s Williams is that he read him in terms of dualistic Modern Philosophy, especially German idealism and its effect, via Coleridge, on Romantic poetry (Hols 37). His discussion of “The Wanderer” is determined by the polarity of Carl Rapp’s 1984 and Hillis Miller’s 1965 treatments, which are essentially metaphysical, both cast in terms of subject/object binaries, and we can question whether Williams has established a “copresence” with the world around him as Miller argues, or whether, as Rapp would have it, Williams has “drawn all things into himself” (qtd. Holsapple 37); that is whether Williams is, as Rapp insists, a late-breaking Romantic idealist. As Holsapple shows, their seemingly opposed arguments are weirdly similar. Miller claims that for the new wanderer, “the world is within rather than at a distance but it is still full of things existing in the exactness of their forms” (qtd Holsapple 35) –objects perhaps? or objects-not-objects...things “copresent,” but, “copresent” or not, Miller was too wary of Kant not to see that these things are not the things themselves as they actually are. Holsapple neatly distills the difference between these two persuasive critics into an argument

between Miller's "immanence" and Rapp's "transcendent" versions, although it seems Holsapple leans more towards Miller's 'immanence' position, as being implicitly more modernist. To give Holsapple his due, his argument about Williams' emphasizes "form" above all,¹ which is not to the purpose here, because the form of "The Wanderer" is not a problem. Although the poet personifies Poetry as being one in whom "age in age is united/ --/ Indifferent, out of sequence, marvelously!" (CP 1, 109) "The Wanderer" is a straight-forward chronological narrative, an initiation ritual in seven parts beginning with first intimations by the young poet that his poetry was inadequate to the complexities of modernity and after several imaginative descents to confront the contemporary world in which his familiar poetic tools fail dismally, the process and poem culminates in the poet's baptism and rebirth in the Passaic river.

In Holsapple's account, Williams rejects romantic aestheticism, "sacrificing his youth" and his desire for pastoral loveliness for urban scenes of "dirt and brutality" thus, through the education received in the poem "one senses the charged beginnings of a gritty new aesthetic" (Holsapple 33). Holsapple sees "The Wanderer" as an initiation from innocence to experience, "suggesting that he now knows himself as both good and evil, just as the goddess [Poetry] knows herself. "That is," he concludes, "the knowledge [the speaker] speaks of gaining, and it's in keeping with aestheticism of the 1890s" (Holsapple 37). While this moral development is justified by the poem when the muse-figure, whom Holsapple calls "the goddess," intones, at the

¹ "My contention is" he writes, "that Williams' experimentation reaches culmination in what he termed 'pure form.'" Reading Williams for propositional content is misleading ; rather, Williams poetry evolves toward a "reordering—restructuring—of perception into pure form" (Hols 6). Such writing gave value to experience, Williams claimed; Holsapple believes that poetry is about "creating value from, rather than receiving value through experience. Williams' imagination, so Holsapple, generates value by some formal transmutation . Williams read—and evidently wrote and invested his imagination in-- form rather than content. (Hols 6).

end of the “Soothsay” section: “‘Good is my over lip and evil/ My under lip to you henceforth” (CP 1, 114), I don’t see this as the ‘lesson’ of the poem and I’m not sure it’s helpful to think of this figure of poetry as “the goddess” either; rather, Williams gesture to good and evil this is an attempt to address a moral problem that attends a revision of the “transcendental ego” that the poem dramatizes.

Then the river began to enter my heart,
Eddying back cool and limpid
Into the crystal beginnings of its days.
But with a rebound it leaped forward,
Muddy, then black and shrunken
Till I felt the utter depth of its rottenness
The vile breadth² of its degradation
And dropped down knowing this was me now (CP 1, 116).

Me, *now*. Not a transcendental subject divorced from a world of disgusting objects, not ‘copresent,’ but at one with, part of the effluent flux, part of a world degraded and polluted by historical events that we can just call “Paterson,” with all that word implies.

So, I think the poem means something different, than Holsapple does and to me, something much more interesting, with important implications for AQQ and the poetry to follow. My Williams is an Emersonian pragmatist in the line of Emerson, Whitman, William James, John Dewey and Kenneth Burke. Pragmatism is, James reminds us, “a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise would be interminable” (WWJ 377). To my mind, Holsapple’s dualistic philosophical approach leads to just the kinds of interminable difficulties pragmatism attempts to evade. In light of this, I find myself compelled to make the pragmatic case for “The Wanderer” as a rejection of Romantic poetics as inadequate to modernity c. 1914 and an announcement of a new sort of pragmatic poetic self. For the choice is not between a

² “...vile breath...” in 1914 version, which seems better (see CP 1, 35).

tender-minded “Romantic idealism” and a more immanent tough-minded “modernism” but between the “transcendental ego” as Romantic subject and the embodied self existing in a world of ‘pure experience’ at a particular historical moment. Rather than a metaphysical entity, we might imagine the transcendental ego as Williams does, as “a young crow” (CP 1, 108) flying above the world, taking it in with a detached, bird’s eye view, but to the pragmatist “the self is a social relation or context, not a substance removed from the vicissitudes of time” (Livingston 294), which can only be discovered, or take action in a social world, the world of “pure experience,” which might be another way of saying “context.” Rather than detached from the world, the pragmatic self is immersed in it—the baptismal event with which “The Wanderer” concludes.

The lesson of the poem is not about good and evil but more like something Williams would write in *The Embodiment of Knowledge*: “To return to anything like values and clarity, we have been forced into vulgarity” (EK 28). That’s the *good* if we must. To me, “The Wanderer” dramatizes Williams’ rejection of any prior Romantic sublime to accept the slime of history, symbolized by the filthy Passaic, polluted with industrial effluents flowing from Paterson upstream. The slime image can be found again as the context for the singing frogs in the second “Pastoral” poem in AQQ. The descent from the sublime to slime is one major difference between the old wandering and the new.

In 1904 James foreclosed the epoch of Modern Philosophy begun by Descartes with his debunking of “consciousness” in his article “Does Consciousness Exist.” Such at least, was the opinion of Alfred North Whitehead in a book that became important to Williams, *Science and the Modern World* (1925, pp. 177-8) to which the fascinating philosophical fragment called *The*

Embodiment of Knowledge is a partial response.³ “Consciousness” is really, James argued, the diaphanous, attenuated, vestige of “soul” designating a metaphysical subject position outside of space and time. This standpoint, “outside of, or independent of ordinary experience” (Rapp qtd Holsapple 37), that Rapp claims Williams like Keats is seeking, is non-existent so far as James is concerned. “Pragmatists cannot imagine a disembodied self, an Archimedean point undefiled by earthly relations of place, time, and cause,” James Livingston explains, but this is “scandalous, because, from the standpoint of the received [metaphysical] tradition, it entails strictly situational ethics” (Livingston 223). Pragmatists cannot imagine an extrasituational or unconditional moral imperative. According to their critics, moral relativism –pure subjectivity— must follow” (Livingston 223). “Genuine morality” so such critics argue, “must be subject to extra-historical rules,” otherwise there are only awkward situations to be worked out for the best.

James’ “Does Consciousness Exist?” is especially helpful because it begins explicitly with a consideration of thoughts and things (WWJ 169), a relationship that Williams also found problematic. Pragmatism denies philosophical dualism and decides that there is only “the world of pure experience” in which thoughts and things are but terms for different *kinds* of experience. James claims that if there is only “one primal stuff or material in the world, and if we call that stuff ‘pure experience’ then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another in which portions of pure experience may enter. The relation itself is a part of pure experience; one of its ‘terms’ become the subject or bearer of the knowledge, the knower, the other becomes the object known” (WWJ 170). Commenting on James, Whitehead sums up simply: “The technical phrase subject-object is a bad term for the fundamental situation

³ Wyndham Lewis also took notice of this book, writing *Time and Western Man*(1927) in response.

disclosed by experience” (Whitehead 188). Dualism is heuristic only. The difference between thoughts and things is the difference between knower and known but it is all one experience. There is only “a world of pure experience” requiring a “radical empiricism” to grasp (Whitehead 180). Something like this, I think, is what Williams would mean when he formulated the deliberately ambiguous “no ideas but in things.” It is certainly what he meant in “Against the Weather,” when he praised formal “looseness” in art and poetry as the “unconfined acceptance of experience” (SE 203).

I’ve already complained that Holsapple seems to derive from “The Wanderer” a moral lesson about the knowledge of good and evil for the initiated poet. To me, AQQ’s free-thinking and happy-go-lucky morality—its vitality—signals a release from straitened bourgeois moral conventions into a more open-minded pragmatic perspective that can embrace situations and people usually marginal –those actual, living “Jews and Ethiopians” for example the poet sees and celebrates when he leaves the Egyptian exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum (CP 1, 84). The palpable sense of liberation one feels in reading AQQ was won through the ordeal recounted in “The Wanderer.” This liberation is not the result of absorbing modernist styles; rather, it is psychological, even existential and political. AQQ is ‘extravagant’ in the sense used by Emerson and Thoreau, it is “extra-*vagant*.” WCW is performing out of bounds; he is walking where the signs say “Keep off the Grass. Throughout this exuberant, truculent and transgressive book, WCW deliberately haunts the margins of the respectable and celebrates the otherwise unspeakable. He crosses social, racial and even sexual lines in various places. viz. “Pastoral (When I was younger),” “Canthara,” the story told him by an old black man about the sexual excitement caused in him witnessing an African “set-dance” still performed in America (CP 1, 78); “Sympathetic Portrait of a Child,” the “murderer’s little daughter,” and “The Ogre” are

about truly disturbing sexual feelings generated by little girls (CP 1, 94-5); “The Old Men” seems to be a satire on aesthetes. They have “studied/ every leg show/ in the city” but they are impotent connoisseurs (CP 1, 96); “Virtue” features the allure of street-walkers (CP 1, 89); finally and notoriously, the poet finds “the old man who goes about / gathering fog-lime in the gutter walks with more majesty than “the Episcopal minister/ approaching the pulpit/ of a Sunday” (“Pastoral” ‘The little sparrows...’ CP 1,71). True to the lessons learned in “The Wanderer” throughout AQQ WCW revels in the vulgar sense of *smell*⁴— It stinks! He loves it! *This is the modern!*

“Is not Whitman the poetic replica of [William] James,” Kenneth Burke asks rhetorically in *Attitudes Towards History* (1937, rev. 1959). We may as well reverse the question, as James is perhaps the philosophical replica of Whitman. In any case, James admired Whitman as a “contemporary prophet” in one of his *Talks for Teachers and Students* (1899) : “He abolishes the usual human distinctions, brings all conventionalisms into solution, and loves and celebrates hardly any human attributes save those elementary ones common to all members of the race” (TT 160). James then proceeds a long swatch—some 1 ½ pages—of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” calling it “a divinely beautiful poem” (TT 160-161).

When Williams, too, turned to “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” as a pretext for “The Wanderer” he did so because, like James, he saw Whitman as a “contemporary prophet,” a soothsayer. He realized that Whitman showed the way for a poet to hold up a mirror to contemporary American life—and, most important, that it was his job as a poet to do so. He saw with James, that Whitman’s affirmations of contemporary existence implied that poets and

⁴ Something Barry Ahearn has noticed. See *WCW and Alterity*.

philosophers needed to come down from their contemplative aeries and make contact with the people of their day. This was neither an easy, not self-evident task, because what was sacrificed in that descent was “quite likely to be defended under the title of ‘beauty’” (SE 202). Later on, in his “Prologue to *Kora In Hell*” Williams would complain about what “stands eternally in the way of really good writing ... The virtual impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose. It is this difficulty that sets a value upon all works of art and makes them a necessity” (SE 11). It’s no accident that the sense of smell—that most vulgar (and exquisite) of the senses, is fore-grounded at the moment of rebirth in “The Wanderer” and later on, in this dog-like, beyond-the-respectable-pale moment in AQQ:

You to come with me
poking into Negro houses
with their gloom and smell!
in among children
leaping around a dead dog!
Mimicking
onto the lawns of the rich!
You!
to go with me tip-toe,
head down under heaven,
nostrils lipping the wind! (CP 1, 64)

Or, even more pronounced in the poem titled, in the imperative; “Smell!” “What tactless asses we are, you and I, boney nose,/ always indiscriminate, always unashamed... Can you not be decent? Can you not reserve your ardors / for something less unlovely?... Must you taste everything? Must you know everything?/ Must you have a part in everything? (CP 1, 92).⁵ The answer is clearly “Yes!” Here we have an ungentle poetic sensibility assailed delightedly and unapologetically by pure experience.

⁵ See Ahearn *WCW and Alterity* p. 97

However, if modern life in America is inescapably vulgar and poetry is concerned with beauty, how can the poet accept modernity and still write poetry? How to be faithful to an “unconfined acceptance of experience” (SE 203) and still make art? This may indeed become formal problem, as Williams will explain in “Tract,” but first the poet’s whole attitude towards his place in the world must be confronted, adjusted, accepted, realized.

In the 1930s, Williams’ friend Kenneth Burke got interested in James and Whitman (and Emerson) for what he calls their “frames of acceptance” –their attitudes towards history that Burke defines as “the more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it” (AH 5). Williams’ stated problem in “The Wanderer”—“How to be a mirror to this modernity?” --is in effect, a way of talking about his “frame of acceptance” in terms of its potential effect on his poetry. These frames, Burke explains, “are not the same as *passiveness*. Since they name both friendly and unfriendly forces, they fix attitudes that prepare for combat. They draw the lines of battle—and they appear ‘passive’ only to one whose frame would persuade him to draw the line of battle differently” (Burke’s italics ATH 20). An attitude is an “incipient program of action” (ATH 20)—this is just what “The Wanderer” is—an incipient program of action. The first evidence of achieved action is AQQ.

So, when he sets “The Wanderer” on the Hudson River Ferry with a seagull that has flown, as it were, directly out of Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” we can say that Williams felt he belonged in this pragmatic tradition too—even if, in 1914, or 1917, he may not have had a name for it. He had adopted a pragmatic attitude towards history and towards poetry. If there is a “modernist turn” evident in AQQ there is also a pragmatic one that expresses a certain “frame of acceptance” or “attitude toward history” for the American poet at a particular epoch, that being

“the corporate reconstruction of American capitalism” bracketing the turn of the 20th c. beginning by the late 1880s. “Modernity” is implicitly figured as corporate capitalism in Williams’ poem as “the great towers of Manhattan,” the new corporate superstructure confronting the poet as he stands symbolically at the prow of the Hudson Ferry on his way to his work.

This frame is routinely called Modernism by literary critics, but I want to orient it towards pragmatism, because this frame, which finds its origins in the “prophets” Emerson and Whitman, is fully articulated by William James and a number of Williams contemporaries besides Burke, some recognizably “modernist” like Wallace Stevens and Gertrude Stein, some not, like Robert Frost, a close student of James.⁶ In short, as others in Williams’ ken were making use of the pragmatic frame of acceptance why shouldn’t Williams himself? That he did so as time went on seems self-evident. *Paterson* is *the* pragmatic long poem, but thinking in terms of Burke’s “frames of acceptance” we can trace Williams pragmatic attitude back to 1917 and even earlier, 1914, when “The Wanderer” was first composed.

Of course, I am not arguing that “The Wanderer” is a poem about pragmatism as such, I am saying that it is doing somewhat what pragmatism does; like James’ Whitman, Williams “abolishes the usual human distinctions”—especially by ignoring the genteel conventions clustered around class and race--“brings all conventionalisms into solution and loves and celebrates hardly any human attributes save those elementary common to all members of the race” (TT 160). That is, the new wandering insists on a new position of the poetic self, not high above, in high-flown romance, but immersed in historical time, in the specifically industrial

⁶ As Richard Poirier and Jonathan Levin argued persuasively in the 1990s.

‘flux’ of the Passaic River, symbolically washing away an older self’s version of the past, which had led to the production of fruitless romances, to experience and hereby write, the present. In a section of *Attitudes Towards History* called “Rituals of Rebirth” Burke points out that “in periods extremely transitional in emphasis,” such as the one in which young WCW finds himself, “art will be found to depict changes of identity” (ATH 317).

There is a consensus that *Al Que Quiere!* is Williams’ first modernist, even “avant-garde” work, a development linked in most accounts to the emergence of modernism in the visual arts. Certainly, poems like “To a Solitary Disciple,” where the speaker teaches the disciple to “grasp/ how the dark converging lines / of the steeple/ meet at the pinnacle” brings to Modernist painting—especially Demuth (Weaver 40); Mike Weaver noticed the book’s affinities with “Ashcan school of realism” long ago (Weaver 39).

There is a political consequence too. How and why did WCW change from a young poet enthralled by the lush language of Keats and Arthurian fantasies of “castles, kings and princes” (A 59) become the plain-spoken, democratic “modernist” that we know as WCW. How did the author of the embarrassing sonnet addressed to Hilda Doolittle “The Uses of Poetry” of 1909, which concludes by suggesting they “close the door of sense” then, “satiated wend,/ On poesy’s transforming giant wing,/ To worlds afar whose fruits all anguish mend” (CP 1, 21) conclude eight years later that “a semi-circle of dirt-colored men/ about a fire bursting from an old ash can” (CP 1, 101) is a fit subject for poetry? How did WCW come to savor the “Pleasures of Democracy” the original sub-title of the book, and leave his fin-de-siecle aestheticism behind? The influence of friends like Kreymborg and the *Others* group is one obvious answer (CCWCW 4, 38-41), but the other is existential. Becoming a modern artist required for Williams a kind of

philosophical rebirth. It required in fact, a new self, and a new understanding of the politics implicit in poetry.

As you know, in his *Autobiography* Williams recalled how this poem “took the place” of a long Spenserian Romance in which a prince has been rescued from the toxic effects of a poisoned chalice at his wedding feast and transported in a dream-vision to a Wagnerian dreamscape of endless forests through which the prince aimlessly wanders. “So he went on,” Williams tells us, “homeward or seeking a home that was his own, all this through a ‘foreign’ country whose language was barbarous” (A 60). He calls this forest “primeval” and we can read it as his own enigmatic unconscious, but it’s more interesting to read it as the forest primeval of Longfellow, his friend Ezra Pound’s maternal ancestor, so we can fully appreciate that the barbarous language of this country was simply the American language. If Williams was to prosper as a poet, he had to go native.

This realization, Williams seems to say, prompted the burning of his Romance, and instigated the writing of “The Wanderer,” which dramatizes his rejection of Keats’s Romantic influence in exchange for the protection of Whitman’s; “I quit Keats just at the moment he himself did—with Hyperion’s scream” (A 61) (actually Apollo’s) that ends “Hyperion: A Fragment,” itself an unfinished influence drama engaged with Milton.⁷ However, Williams

⁷ The phrase “influence drama” shows that I am still in thrall to Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), as laid out in a series of books written in the 1970s and 80s that expound a theory of poetic development in an elaborate psychoanalytic/ Kabbalistic jargon that I no longer fully understand. But Bloom, who is blessed or cursed with a photographic memory, does persuade me that “strong poets” are engaged in agons of influence with their titanic precursors, as Blake and Wordsworth were with Milton and Keats with Milton and Spenser. These dramas are recorded in poems of all but Oedipal struggle with dead masters whose poetic influence is felt, not so much in outright allusion, as at the level of the id-- not the self-critical super-ego (AI 80) –as an unconscious goad, daemon and adversary. Such poems take the form of initiation rituals, a series of tests the poet must pass or die as a poet. Williams implies that Keats reached his poetic limit when he suddenly broke off “The Fall of Hyperion.” He could

survives the tests put his way *not* by the “transforming giant wing” of poesy, but by a plebian seagull, who whops him upside the head (“from behind, / In mid air, as with the edge of a great wing” CP 1, 110), forcing him to really look at the crowds on Broadway and there, at Poetry as it really is c. 1914; that is, as a tattered Bohemienne, a ‘diminished thing,’ “the high wanderer of by-ways”

Walking imperious in beggary!
On her throat is loose gold, a single chain
From among many, on her bent fingers
Are rings from which the stones are fallen,
Her wrists wear a diminished state, her ankles
Are bare! (CP 1, 29)

This figure is not, as WCW says in his autobiography, his Grandmother Emily Dickinson Wellcome but a personification of Poetry that is a conflation of Whitman with the shabby and decadent figure of Poetry herself, a bedraggled streetwalker, somehow still “imperious in beggary” (CP 1, 29); that is, still wielding authority, if in dire straits. This figure of the muse in tatters—Whitman in drag, so to speak-- is WCW’s psychopomp and guide as he readies himself for “the higher courses” of “the *new* wandering” required to be a modern poet.⁸ As I have suggested, becoming a modern poet is not a matter of style, but of devising a pragmatic “frame of acceptance’ that would allow “modernity” with all of its attendant problems and experiential opportunities to become part of the poet. The “higher courses” of which Williams speaks are not

not go any further—at least not at that time, tho’ he tried again with no more ultimate success in “The Fall of Hyperion.” These distinguished poems remain torsos not because Keats’s health as bad, but because he had failed a psychic test, he had come up against the limits of his own poetic power. Though much weaker as a poem, “The Wanderer” is more successful in usurping” a strong precursor—Keats himself-- than Keats was of usurping Milton.

⁸ As Paul Mariani pointed out, this portentous figure of Poetry is an uncannily prophetic vision of his future modernist muse and tormentor, the Baroness, who he would not meet until 1919 (see Mariani 160).

courses in the sublime, but higher in the sense of ‘higher education’; they demand that the poet reconsider the bases of his beliefs—specifically in this case, of “beauty and the self” as Breslin pointed out long ago.

Intriguingly, “The Wanderer” is set up as a series of tests that the poet hoping to become WCW systematically *fails*. In each instance, the poet’s first reaction is rejection of, even revulsion from, the modernity he must learn to mirror. In each case the “ominous, old painted” whore, who the poet persists in calling “marvelous old queen” is his guide, forcing the youngster to attend better. His instinctive “aesthetic shock” (SL 258) must be overcome the poet must learn to accept and affirm the vulgarity of modern life—otherwise, it remains literally unspeakable, and no poetry can result. “The Wanderer” is a demonstration that the poetics of high Romance and of “truth and beauty” the would-be poet has inherited from the Romantic tradition can’t work when confronted by modernity.

Recall that the young poet is sent out on various missions to observe and then attempt to sing modernity. The first is Broadway, famously a haunt of Walt Whitman, where, as we have seen, he meets his guide in human garb, as a corseted old whore (or as I prefer, Whitman in drag) who shows him Manhattan business-men on the path to conventional success the novice might once have envied and rejected as a kind of “death-in-life” —“Empty men with shell-thin bodies/ Jostling close above the gutter” (CP 1, 110) as T.S. Eliot (who may have read “The Wanderer” when it was sent to *The Egoist* in 1914) did of the commuters coming across London Bridge in *The Waste Land*. The bedraggled, sweat-scented figure of Poetry—Holsapple’s Goddess in deep disguise, perhaps-- forces her charge to look again. Her deep knowledge of desire—she’s the knower “of all fires out of the bodies/ Of all men that walk with lust at heart (CP 1, 110) comes not from divine wisdom, but from her experience as a street-walker. In the

original 1914 version, she's "the old harlot of greatest lusting" (CP 1, 30) with likely origins in Baudelaire. It's useful to think of her vocation as a "sex-worker." That's from where the wisdom the poet needs must come, from the streets!

A more obvious failure is the novice's coverage of the 1913 Paterson Silk Strike where he is asked to sing the social body electric. There in the breadline stand the very people who will be Williams' patients and poetic subjects throughout his career, yet he is signally unable to see them as they are, or to render them in verse. In this section we see young Williams gradually lose control of himself as he confronts the urban proletariat. Finally he is reduced to tropes inherited from English Literature; the strikers have "Faces all knotted up like burls on oaks/ Grasping, fox-snouted, thick lipped,/ Sagging breasts and protruding stomachs, rasping voices, filthy habits with their hands" (CP 1, 112), by which I suspect he means that these people pick their noses. "Nowhere you, everywhere the electric!" the would-be poet announces in despair—"Poetry" is glaringly absent. The entire phenomenon of the Strike, the animal-like workers, the vulgarity of the situation reduces the wannabe poet to an all but epileptic "shriek of ecstasy, eyesrolling, tongue hanging out and sudden "--!" (CP 1, 112) indicating speechlessness, reminiscent of Williams' recollection of Keats' failure the end of Keats's "Hyperion" fragment.

This abject failure to articulate modernity and, not incidentally, class-struggle, appearing at the end of AQQ is completely at odds with the book in front of it, where Williams can celebrate "The beauty of/ the terrible faces/ of our nonentities"

colored women
day workers—
old and experienced—
returning home at dusk
in cast of clothing
faces like
old Florentine oak (CP 1, 70).

The face/ oak image links “Apology” and this section of “The Wanderer” but with a world of difference of tone and respect. The oak is Florentine because the face is Italian. Thanks to his baptism in the “filthy Passaic” WCW has found a way of singing the social body electric.

The Passaic is filthy due to industrial pollution from the mills and factories of Paterson upstream. In order to become a poet fit for a “new wandering” the novice must enter history. He must let the river enter his heart so that he can imagine its “crystal beginnings,” its origins, and then leap forward, downstream in time and space to feel “the utter breadth of its rottenness/ The vile breath of its degradation” to understand that “this is me *now*” (my emphasis)—the poet including history. His spirit-guide commands him to slosh this polluted water back and forth within himself till finally he “knows all” and the river “becomes him.” At that moment he sees his old poetic self “borne off under the water” (CP 1, 116). Reborn, Williams bites back his despairing birth-cry and becomes “mostly silent”—the new laconic approach that marks the poems of AQQ and his mature poetry. And so, instead of the endless forest, the poet finds himself beside a polluted river and dying beech trees, victims of urbanization, industry and all the ugly effects of modernity “hallowed by a stench” (CP1, 117).

Ready now to be a mirror to modernity, the newly reborn poet finds his *métier*, for example in his new “Pastoral”

walking the back streets
admiring the houses
of the very poor:
roof out of line with sides
the yards cluttered
old chicken wire, ashes,
furniture gone wrong;
the fences and outhouses

built of barrel staves/ and parts of boxes, all
if I am fortunate
smeared a bluish-green
that properly weathered
pleases me best
of all colors (CP1, 64).

The word “weathered” reoccurs in “Tract” and suggests something experienced, exposed to the elements, what we might call “real.”

If “The Wanderer” tells us how WCW became a modern artist, “Tract” (CP 72-74) is Williams; way of proselytizing his new beliefs. “Tract” is just that. Like a copy of *The Watchtower* dropped off by earnest Jehovah’s Witnesses, Williams’ poem tells his fellow townsfolk how to get right with pragmatic poetics. Here is pragmatism of a common sense sort. If, as James says in *Pragmatism* , “the whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world formula or that world-formula be the true one” (WWJ 379), then what, pragmatically speaking, are the genteel rituals of funerals really about? Obviously, about the showing off of grief, whether it is felt or not. “Tract” is a relentless exposure of such performances, but in so doing it proposes an alternative in pragmatic terms. Ostensibly teaching his fellow “townspeople” how to “perform a funeral” WCW is really teaching all of us how to write in such a way that we can accurately render modernity; he knows we can do it better than a “troupe of artists” because we have the ‘ground sense necessary.’ His first task is to attack decoration. Beginning with the hearse, WCW recommends not black, not white, but “weathered” boards, like a farm wagon. His sole concession to decoration is to permit “gilt wheels” but, really, he’d rather have it a “rough dray” or sledge to drag up to the cemetery. No glass windows for the hearse, “For what

purpose?” no upholstery, no little brass rollers, no wreaths , ‘especially no hot house flowers’ no frills; rather, “A rough plain hearse.../with gilt wheels and no top at all” on which the coffin can lie of “its own weight.” (CP 1, 73). It is easy to see that the stripped-down vehicle being described is in fact, a WCW poem typical of other poems found in AQQ.

“Tract” ends with an interesting and odd exhortation to share, even if it is grief: “share with us—it will be money in your pockets” (CP 1, 74), a dig at our American “bottom-line” mentality that finds a curious echo in James’s famous warning against mere verbalism, “solving names” (WJ 380) in philosophy, the use of what Burke somewhere called “terministic screens” such as “God,’ ‘Matter’ , “reason” ; we might add “modernism,” Romanticism, the self, etc. James says, “if you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash value, set it to work within the stream of your experience “ (WJ 380)—an image wonderfully in tune with the end of “Tract” and also in its invocation of “the stream of experience” timely for considering “The Wanderer” as well.

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