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A Social Philosophy of William Carlos Williams

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SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS - KOELLE

THE SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

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INTRODUCTION

What this thesis seeks to clarify is how William Carlos Williams as a poet and short story writer feels about, and speaks for, his fellow men. A poet makes words out of his feelings. The feelings determine what the words will be.

Williams' chief poetic concern is with technique. He has concerned himself with--though never wholly conformed to--schools of poetry such as Imagism, while influenced by Ezra Pound, and the stream-of-consciousness type of writing, while influenced by Gertrude Stein and James Joyce. He has tried to show a picture of the world (in his Paterson) similar to Pound's Cantos. Together with Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens, Williams has been called an Objectivist, and is perhaps the foremost proponent of this technique today. A fusion of these influences makes Williams' poetry what it is today.

In the poetry which has as its subject form emerges the essential man: the doctor, the healer, the humanitarian, the grass-roots believer in the dignity of all human life. This is not the conscious reformer and dialectician of the 1930's. Williams is no

Spender, Auden, or Day Lewis. His reaction to the Depression in the United States in the 1930's was not that Marxist theories put into practice would save the world. It was, rather, the traditional American reaction, a "reverence-for-life," which made Williams look at the facts of the economic situation and start to remedy it by means of love and good will for all individuals.

Dr. Williams started with himself by having love and good will and respect for human dignity in his relations with the poor people around his home, Rutherford, New Jersey. By presenting these poor people in his poems, the poet, in a sense, pleads for them. He does not threaten, however, for politics as such do not exist for him--only people.

Where the poet's sympathy and concern for those less fortunate than himself is most markedly shown is in the poetry written during the 1930's. The best place to find these poems is in Williams' The Collected Earlier Poems, since practically all of the early original collections are out of print. Of the poems that may be said to have "social" implications, slightly more than ten percent (36 out of 298) deal directly with the poor and underprivileged. In later work, the percentage is not so high if one considers complete poems, but is

nevertheless significant. In addition, Williams' use of colloquial language is an indication of his interest in and respect for the mass of men.

I shall attempt to demonstrate that Williams is one of the few poets today who has a genuine concern for the underprivileged groups in America, and that this concern runs through his work as a doctor and a poet. His life and his writings demonstrate his concern, rather than being shown by political attitudes, which he has consistently avoided.

William Carlos Williams was greatly influenced by Walt Whitman, and it is this tradition in American poetry that he preserves and carries on. Williams like Whitman, has said over the years, "I hear America singing."

. . . . .

While Dr. Williams is undoubtedly one of the eminent poets living today, and one of the most highly regarded poets of the twentieth century, neither his poetry nor his prose is as well known as they deserve to be. A brief resume of his life will follow, so that his work may be understood and considered in the context of his life.

William Carlos Williams was born in 1883 in

Rutherford, New Jersey, where he still lives. His father came from England and his mother from Puerto Rico.

Williams went to schools in France, Switzerland, and Horace Mann High School in New York City before attending the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, from which he was graduated in 1906. He interned at the Old French Hospital in New York City and at Nursery and Child's Hospital, which was in what was called the Hell's Kitchen section of New York. The internship was followed by a year in Europe, at the University of Leipzig and elsewhere, during which time Williams extended his friendships to include many of the American and English writers then living on the Continent.

After that year, Williams returned to New Jersey, married Florence Herman of Rutherford, and began to practice medicine in that city.

Williams was 26 years old when his first small volume of poems was published by a local printer. The second book of poems, The Tempers (1913), was published in London. In the years following, up to 1957, Dr. Williams has published 36 volumes of prose and poetry. These include novels, such as In the Money and White Mule; plays, such as A Dream of Love; essays, such as In the American Grain; and short stories, such as Life Along the

Passaic River. In 1951, The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams appeared.

At present, Dr. Williams lives, as always, in Rutherford, and continues to write.

CHAPTER I

A VISIT WITH WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

The writer was at the home of William Carlos Williams, 9 Ridge Road, Rutherford, New Jersey on Sunday, June 10, 1956. The talk is here reported approximately the way it took place in order to preserve Dr. Williams' personality and reactions. Very little attempt has been made to make the ideas consecutive, the conversation less rambling than it was, or to follow a specific question along to its conclusion, as such a method would falsify the procedure of our conversation.

. . . . .

Dr. William Carlos Williams lives in a plain, old-fashioned, two-story, clapboard house in Rutherford, New Jersey. Now in his seventies, Dr. Williams is vigorous, sparkling, friendly and kind. If one were to pick out his most distinguishing feature it would be his eyes, which are tremendously alive and light up his whole face.

Dr. Williams had just awakened from his afternoon nap when I arrived at his home. After pleasant small talk, we started the serious conversation by talking about his family background. On a wall in the living room hangs a beautiful picture--possibly from the early days of photography--of Dr. Williams' mother, as a young woman. This woman, termed by Dr. Williams as "unusual" was born in Puerto Rico. Dr. Williams' father was an Englishman who never became an American citizen. In connection with his father and England, Dr. Williams spoke about the Godwins, Wollstonecraft, and Keats, and described the death of Keats to me.

I inquired whether his mother's interest in painting had influenced him. He replied that this was indeed so, and we wandered around the house looking at his mother's paintings. One was the face of a child done in oil, containing many colors, particularly quite red lips. The face was striking and full of expression. Another one in a corner of the dining room was a painting of a flower vase with flowers in it, and one rose outside the vase. Dr. Williams commented on how beautifully the vase was painted, as the glass appeared very transparent. We stood in front of it for quite a while.

I inquired whether he had ever wanted to be a

painter.

"Yes," Dr. Williams replied; "both my brother and I painted when we were young. My brother became an architect. I thought about painting, sculpture, and literature. Literature takes the least materials--there is nothing to carry around but a pencil."

Poetry became Dr. Williams' medium, and it was this, particularly free verse, that he spoke most enthusiastically about.

"There is no such thing as free verse," I was surprised to hear him explain; "it is a contradiction of terms. Poetry has to have basic metrical pattern. Set poetic forms are not necessary, but a basic metrical pattern is. It may be loose."

Since I thought that Dr. Williams did use free verse, I asked, "Why do you use free verse?"

"Because of Whitman," Dr. Williams said. "I was, however, first influenced by Keats in high school." Dr. Williams then spoke about the excellent high school he attended in New York City, Horace Mann, and of his English teacher, Uncle Billy Abbott. Dr. Williams had only three years of high school, and then went right into medical school. While in high school he mainly read Keats. His father often read Shakespeare to him, and as a consequence he knows Shakespeare very well.

We looked at a set of green leatherbound volumes of Shakespeare on the bookshelves of the living room that reached up to the ceiling. This was the set his father used to read from.

Returning to Whitman, Dr. Williams emphasized:

"Here is where free verse comes from. Whitman used American themes. He liberated the subject and form of poetry." Then Dr. Williams quoted the first few lines of Song of Myself, slowly almost meditatingly.

"Iambic pentameter," he said, "is much too set a form. It exists mainly to fill up the line." Dr. Williams started writing his short lines on prescription blanks, and when he had a few minutes he wrote up a poem. He did not have the patience to make a long regular line.

"I hate iambic pentameter," he said. "It is artificial. Capitals are artificial. They were started by Dryden. I discarded them long ago. They only exist to conform to pattern in poetry." Dr. Williams emphasized his disrespect for patterns and precedents. He asked, "Why do you need poetic pattern?" and, "Why do you need capitals?"

I inquired why Dr. Williams' early verse had a long line, and the later a short line.

"My early poetry," he replied, "has the long line,

yes, but I came to see progressively that this was unnecessary."

The movement towards free verse started in the 1920's, when he wrote most Dr. Williams went on to explain. At this time began Imagism, which led into Objectivism. He spoke of Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound as early Imagists.

Dr. Williams spoke sadly about his friend Ezra Pound, mentioning particularly his "brief fame with Personae and Exultations," seeing him in Paris in the 1920's, and being at the University of Pennsylvania together with him.

This led to a discussion of Symbolism and some comments on Mr. T.S. Eliot. Dr. Williams said:

"Eliot's symbols are private. They don't speak to everybody. I want poetry that everybody can understand."

I asked why Dr. Williams kept up vers libre. He replied:

"It is easiest, most suitable for American English. It is not traditional, but it expresses democracy, the democratic principles and forging ahead."

Our discussion of vers libre reminded Dr. Williams about a forthcoming dictionary of poetic terms. He explained that he wrote the sections on vers libre and Objectivism for it, and appeared much pleased about this. When he started Objectivism, all the other poets were

writing "Objectivist" poetry. He continued using it.

Dr. Williams maintains that he has no real training in language. He experimented with new forms in Europe in the 1920's. At this time there was much experimentation in new forms, not only in literature, but in many different kinds of art, and indeed in forms of living. Dr. Williams had many friends in Europe in the 1920's who were painters, and was very close to them. After being graduated from medical school, Dr. Williams then explained, he went to Europe and particularly to Germany to see Koch and Ehrlich, the famous German doctors.

During our talk, someone came to the door to give Dr. Williams a questionnaire about a new high school for Rutherford. This led Dr. Williams to remark that it is wrong for one religious group to control Rutherford or its schools.

He is equally definite about his political views. Dr. Williams emphasized several times, upon my specific inquiry: "I am not a Socialist." His approach is simply that of a doctor. He likes the poor people around Rutherford, such as the Italians and Negroes. In this connection, Dr. Williams expressed opposition to Mr. T.S. Eliot. Dr. Williams is anti-British, against having privileged classes, and opposed to all forms of snobbery and social climbing. On the other hand, he is very much

in favor of the American ideals of equality. "I discussed these in my book In the American Grain," he said. "This is about the great men in the United States, starting not with Columbus, but with the real founder of America, Red Eric, and continuing to Abraham Lincoln."

Dr. Williams was always interested in socialism, but he never took part in it as a political movement. He had socialist friends. He said, "This socialistic trend has to be in a democracy." He mentioned several times that he was never connected with the Socialists proper. His political interest is centered in the poor people around Rutherford and in his desire to help them better their conditions.

Mrs. Williams keeps the only complete collection of her husband's works in existence, behind glass in a desk secretary. We examined some of the books, in particular the last published book of Paterson, bound in red leather. Paterson is "fun" for Dr. Williams, and he intends to write a further book on it only if it remains fun.

Marked interest was shown by Dr. Williams when I mentioned a recent M.A. thesis on Wallace Stevens, written at the University of New Mexico, and we discussed whether it would be a good idea to combine him and Stevens. He concluded that it would not be good.

Dr. Williams then showed me a new Modern Library College Edition of modern American poets which has recently been published and which includes his poems. This edition he prefers to the one by Louis Untermeyer currently in use at many colleges. He also mentioned at this point, that I might wish to see his friend, Mr. Winfield Scott of Santa Fe, who has a good library of his works.

The afternoon was at an end all too soon, and I took leave of Dr. and Mrs. Williams with regret. I stepped out of that old house into the empty Sunday streets of Rutherford. It was one of those completely grey New York days, and an uncomfortable drizzle blanketed the town. I thought: Only the skies look grey and old today. Surely there must be lasting springtime in the ever-youthful heart of Dr. Williams.

CHAPTER II

SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE SHORT STORIES

> I lived among these people. I knew them and saw the essential qualities, (not stereotype) the courage, the humor (an accident) the deformity, the basic tragedy of their lives--and the importance of it. You can't write about something unimportant to yourself. I, was involved.[1]
>
> William Carlos Williams

The poetry of William Carlos Williams is open to conflicting interpretations. Included in Williams' work are some poems dealing with aspects of his social philosophy--with his attitude toward the workers in industrial New Jersey, the underprivileged, the newly and not-so-newly arrived immigrants, the people hit by the Depression of the 1930's, and the plain tramps. The short stories of Dr. Williams, however, are clear, and less liable to conflicting interpretations. If it may be

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[1] William Carlos Williams, A Beginning on the Short Story (Yonkers, New York: The Alicat Bookshop Press, 1950), p. 10.

presumed that there is consistency in Dr. Williams' thought, an analysis of his short stories will serve as a help and guide to the social philosophy in his poetry.

Of the fifty-one stories in the book Make Light of It,[2] Dr. Williams' collected stories, twenty-nine, or approximately sixty percent, are concerned directly with how Williams feels about people who are not rich, secure, socially accepted, or even just middle class. The twenty-nine stories may be divided as follows:

Seven stories are concerned with immigrants or recent immigrants who are not yet totally assimilated into the American pattern of living. Of these, two stories are about people from Italy: "A Night in June," and "Ancient Gentility"; one story deals with a recent immigrant from Finland: "The Zoo"; two stories are about people from Poland: "Four Bottles of Beer" and "World's End"; one story contains parts of narratives about former Dutch and Scotch people: "Danse Pseudomacabre"; and one story is concerned with Jews: "A Face of Stone."

Four stories from the collection have to do with groups discriminated against on account of race. One of these, is about an American Indian: "Above the River";

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[2] Make Light of It contains three groups of stories published separately and at different times. These are, The Knife of the Times, Life Along the Passaic River, and Beer and Cold Cuts.

the other three are about Negroes: "The Colored Girls of Passenack--Old and New," "At the Front," and "World's End."

Three stories are concerned with the neglected and sick children of the poor: "The Girl With the Pimply Face," "Jean Beicke," and "The Insane."

Seven stories deal with the occupations of the ignorant masses of Americans. Of these, one is a story about soldiers: "The Right Thing"; another is about sailors: "In Northern Waters"; another is a story about a washerwoman: "Frankie the Newspaper Man"; another is concerned with a pig farmer of Secaucus, New Jersey: "Lena"; another is about a housewrecker: "Comedy Entombed 1930"; yet another is about people who keep country inns: "Country Rain"; and another story is about a subway switchman and various other workers: "A Good Natured Slob."

Seven stories are concerned with hoboes, tramps, people who are out of work, persons hit by the depression, hitchhikers, gangsters, and a doctor who is a drug addict. These are: "An Old Time Raid," "A Descendant of Kings," "Old Doc Rivers," "The Dawn," "Round the World Flyers," "The Old World," and "Under the Greenwood Tree."

The story "The Paid Nurse" shows how management injures workers through vicious medical policies.

When Make Light of It was published in 1950, Robert G. Davis, in a review in The New York Times Book Review said: "The human material here is fascinating; the circumstances unusual."[3] Further, Davis notes that "the anecdotes . . . are highly flavored and sometimes brutal." In Davis' opinion, "the form is almost nothing, the human facts everything." In short, "the whole book . . . has a keen, rich, tough humanity. Minimal and transparent though the medium is, it lets Williams define precisely his attitude toward his material."

"His attitude" is the crux of the stories. Time magazine, in its review of Make Light of It, observed that "unlike a lot of his literary contemporaries, Williams knows people and likes them."[4]

The (London) Times Literary Supplement in its review of American Writing To-Day says of Williams' short stories:

> William Carlos Williams is another whose collections, The Knife of the Times, Life Along the Passaic River, and Beer and Cold Cuts, have an authentic flavour of American life. Dr. Williams' stories, like his poems, give at first sight, the impression of random jottings, but they are in fact far from being just that, as consideration of such stories as "The Knife of the Times," "The Use of Force" and "The Girl with the Pimply Face" reveal. They are instinct with humanity,

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[3]Robert Gorham Davis, review of Make Light of It, by William Carlos Williams, The New York Times Book Review, (December 17, 1950), 1.

[4]"Stories by the Doc," Time, December 4, 1950, p. 107.

> and their casual tone and offhand manner are in fact the fruit of a long involvement in the lives of the poor immigrants and Negroes in the New Jersey industrial towns he has lived in all his life."[5]

The "instinct" and affection that Williams has for people are at no time more important than when he writes about children neglected during the Depression years. An outstanding example of this is the story "Jean Beicke." In the story, a sick, destitute infant dies because the doctors are not able to diagnose her illness correctly. Somehow, in spite of the fact that they have cared for an over-abundance of such neglected babies, the doctor and nurses have come to love this helpless piece of cast-off humanity. Vivienne Koch in her critical study of Dr. Williams' work[6] believes that such an attitude on the part of the medical staff has to do with "the miracle of human personality," as illustrated by the following passage from "Jean Beicke":

> Somehow or other, I hated to see the kid go. Everybody felt rotten. She was such a scrawny, misshapen, worthless piece of humanity that I had said many times that somebody ought to chuck her in the garbage chute--but after a month watch-

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[5] "The Art of the Short Story. Principles and Practices in the United States," The Times Literary Supplement, September 17, 1954, p. xl, col. 5.

[6] Vivienne Koch, William Carlos Williams (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1950), p. 221.

> ing her suck up her milk and thrive on it--
> and to see those blue eyes in that face--well,
> it wasn't pleasant.[7]

Discussing Make Light of It in Perspective magazine, Mona Van Duyn points out that Williams has really three attitudes which become levels of meaning in the story "Jean Beicke." He sees the baby, clinically, from a doctor's point of view, as a sociological phenomenon which is part of the inevitable waste of the Depression of the 1930's, and as a human being with feelings and intelligence.[8] Jean Beicke is shown, alternately, as a case and as a person.

In another story about a child, "The Girl With the Pimply Face," the doctor-narrator is called to the home of a Russian immigrant family. He treats the sick baby, and during the same visit is attracted by the tough straightforwardness of the teenage daughter. The doctor advises her how to take care of her bespotted face. After the visit, he hears from his colleagues that the grownups of this family are alcoholics, that they neglect their children, and that the teenage daughter

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[7] William Carlos Williams, Make Light of It (New York: Random House, Inc., 1950), p. 163.

[8] Mona Van Duyn, "To 'Make Light of It' As Fictional Technique: William Carlos Williams' Stories," Perspective, VI (Autumn-Winter, 1953), 235.

is already selling herself. It is the opinion of the family's former doctor that Williams need not have shown sympathy for such people, that they actually "took him in." Curiously enough, this aspect of the situation is of no account to Williams, who gives us to understand that he had had the reward he sought--that of seeing the girl become healthier. He does not mind that he may have been "taken in." "It is this type of subtle revaluation of a crass popular morality which reveals Williams as a writer with the greatest responsiveness to the questions of social ethics,"[9] maintains Vivienne Koch.

It is significant that Mona Van Duyn sees Williams' attitude as the author of these stories as inseparable from that of the doctor who participates in the action. Therefore, we are forced to trust his values. These are,

> a love of the cocky, wiry, tough, spit-in-your eye youngster or baby, who gives evidence of the still unbroken human spirit (The Girl With the Pimply Face, Jean Beicke); an appreciation for tenderness even in its most primitive, its most submerged, or most misdirected forms; (majority of the stories) and an enormous and unshockable openness to experience.[10]

The "unshockable openness to experience" applies

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[9] Koch, op. cit., pp. 220-221.

[10] Van Duyn, op. cit., p. 233.

particularly to the story "A Face of Stone." It is blatantly obvious that from the very start Williams is opposed to the hero and heroine of his story, as witnessed by the opening lines:

> He was one of these fresh Jewish types you want to kill at sight, the presuming poor whose looks change the minute cash is mentioned. But they're insistent, trying to force attention, taking advantage of good nature at the first crack. You come when I call you, that type. He got me into a bad mood before he opened his mouth just by the half smiling, half insolent look in his eyes, a small, stoutish individual in a greasy black suit, a man in his middle twenties I should imagine.[11]

Clearly, Williams is not in sympathy at this point in the story with the young Jewish immigrant couple who have come to him so that he may examine their baby. Williams' reaction to them is that "people like that belong in clinics,"[12] not in his office. Vivienne Koch notes that the "overtones of the doctor's distate for these uncooperative and unattractive people is expressed in terms of 'racial prejudice.'"[13]

These people exhibit many of the characteristics of depressed, persecuted minorities. They distrust the doctor, wear unclean clothes, and speak ungrammatical English. The young woman, because she has been constantly

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[11] Williams, Make Light of It, p. 167.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Koch, op. cit., p. 219.

mistreated, has acquired "a face of stone." Yet, as the doctor gets to know them better on repeated visits--even though he sees no need for them to come--his attitude changes.

In the beginning Williams' attitude is the sort Sidney Alexander observed in reviewing Williams' Selected Essays, when he notes that Williams thinks "a Jew has a clothing store and looks to you wondering what he can sell, and you feel he has these people sized up. A nasty feeling. Unattached."[14]

By the middle of the story Williams tells us that it is "no use getting excited with people such as these." Here is the turning point in his attitude. He is no longer hostile toward the couple. As he hears further about their hardships he becomes more and more sympathetic. Finally, he gives advice to the young woman not only for the baby, but also for her own health problems. She, in turn, sees that he, the doctor, is sincere and then "for the first time since I had known her a broad smile spread all over her face . . ."[15]

That is the end of the story. The reader feels that this immigrant couple, while they will have many struggles, will adjust to life in America. They and

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[14]Sidney Alexander, "Apostle of Impulse," Commentary, IX (January, 1955), 96.

[15]Williams, Make Light of It, p. 176.

Commentary, IX (January, 1951).

Williams have, during the story, adjusted to each other, and have laid the groundwork for living successfully and peacefully side by side in Rutherford (or anywhere else) in the years to come.

In discussing "A Face of Stone" Vivienne Koch observes that at its conclusion

> a social miracle of a sort has been accomplished. Two opposed sets of impulse, training and value as represented by the worn, small-town American physician (working in a milieu remarkably like Williams' own Rutherford), and the obdurate, immigrant couple are brought into conflict. The outcome is that each begins to accept something from the other's realm of meaning.[16]

Philip Rahv, in Image and Idea, has summed up Williams' short stories well by pointing out that they "are exceptional for their authenticity and told not to provoke but to record."[17] In "A Face of Stone" not only has a moral issue been raised and recorded, but it has also been answered.

In her review of the book, Mona Van Duyn felt that "this is less a group of stories than a personal record, a socially-sensitive memoir."[18] While the statement refers to all of the stories in Make Light of It,

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[16] Koch, op. cit., pp. 219-220.

[17] Philip Rahv, Image and Idea (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1949), p. 152.

[18] Mona Van Duyn, op. cit., p. 231.

it is particularly valid for "A Face of Stone" and "A Night in June," both stories about immigrants.

In the story "A Night in June," we meet a family of Italian immigrants now living in Rutherford, "recently come from the other side," who can "scarcely talk a word of English."[19] These people are poor and live surrounded by essentials only (the father has to go to the police station to use a telephone), but the reader gets the impression that everything in the house is clean. The doctor-narrator delivers the ninth child to the family. Everything about the story is as simple as the people themselves. Or as Philip Rahv puts it:

> These notations in a doctor's notebook, these fragments salvaged from grime and squalor, these insights gained during the routines of humble labor--such would only be given the lie by the professional mannerisms of authorship, its pomposities and braggadocio.[20]

After delivering the baby the doctor goes home. It has been just another case.

Nowhere is Williams' attitude towards people more apparent than in the "story" called "Life Along the Passaic River." Actually, this is no conventional story

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[19] Williams, Make Light of It, p. 136.

[20] Rahv, op. cit., p. 151.

at all, but a panoramic view of life along the Passaic River during the Depression.

The people living beside the banks of the river are acutely aware of economic pressures and the sense of "what things cost." That is why their children are "all over the city as soon as they can walk and say, Paper!"[21] Many adults are out of work--this being the Depression--and so they spend their time sitting on the steps of the "Y.M." They include many racial and nationality groups--"black Wops," pot-bellied "Polacks," smiling Negroes, and Jews "trying to undersell somebody else or each other."[22]

Williams sees into this economic and human tragedy, and sympathizes deeply with the unfortunate situation that the people find themselves in, and with the people themselves. He reverses the usual American attitude of condemning a person for being a loafer. Instead, he sympathizes with such a one by saying, "he's up against it; he's got to be what he is."[23]

Philip Rahv, in Image and Idea has pointed this out:

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[21] Williams, Make Light of It, p. 109.

[22] Ibid., p. 111.

[23] Ibid., p. 112.

> For what could be more dismal than life in these small industrial towns of New Jersey? The mills are worked by immigrant labor . . . the doctor visits these uprooted households, often angry at himself because of the tenderness in him that reaches out to these people, quite as often resigned to doing his job, to immersing himself in the finalities of human life.[24]

All the people in this sketch are presented with understanding and gentleness. We meet the boy paddling his canoe down the muddy, industrial, waste-filled Passaic ("he's got that old look to his face"[25]), the young hitchhiker, the "kind you don't mind picking up,"[26] a "six-footer, looking like the usual bum in the vaudeville shows,"[27] and, in all, the sort of people that led Babette Deutsch to comment on Make Light of It as follows:

> The collection as a whole points up to the fact that the author admires the right kind of toughness and himself has the capacity to take it . . . It is characteristic that Williams doesn't ask questions. He makes statements. Here is the crux of his stories. What are you going to do with guys and girls, scenes and situations like these? Why want to do anything with them? Except not miss them.[28]

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[24] Rahv, op. cit., p. 152.

[25] Williams, Make Light of It, p. 112.

[26] Ibid., p. 110.

[27] Ibid., p. 111.

[28] Babette Deutsch, "Gusty Tales From Over Passaic Way," New York Herald Tribune (December 3, 1950), p. 5.

Mona Van Duyn comments in a similar vein,

> The title for his [Williams'] collected stories, Make Light of It, defines, in one of its senses, the kind of understatement which he habitually uses in dealing with the loss, waste, pathos and tragedy he sees in human lives. Make light of it, what else can you do as a doctor or as a member of society, except break your heart.[29]

This implies that the poet illuminates the lives of the poor so that others may see in them what he sees.

Of the stories dealing with Williams' attitude towards Negroes in the collection Make Light of It, the best one is "The Colored Girls of Passenack--Old and New." This incorporates, as do many of the stories, an autobiographical approach. For example, the story opens with what was probably more fact than fiction: "Georgie Anderson came to our house in 1895 or thereabouts when my brother and I were from ten to twelve years of age."[30] In telling us about the life of this Negro woman as a servant in his family, Williams emphasizes her strength, vitality, vivacity, and good looks. He then recalls other Negroes that he met in later years in his practice whom he liked and admired and who were good workers and pleasant people. Everything is told in a factual and documentary way--without sentimentality--but Williams' affection for these people comes through effectively.

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[29] Van Duyn, op. cit., p. 230.

[30] Williams, Make Light of It, p. 50.

For example, in speaking of a servant girl who had been his patient Williams observes that "everybody knew and liked her. She was always independent, always smiling, an individual by herself never in the least embarrassed or subservient in her manner."[31]

This is certainly an unusual way to write about the American Negro, especially when she is poor and in a subservient position, as this particular servant girl obviously was. This is the sort of thing James Laughlin comments upon in reviewing Life Along the Passaic River:[32]

> It's all there, so sharply, so lovingly set down--the lives of the poor--well, that's putting it very easily: the lives of the living would be better, the lives of the suffering, muddling, confused, ever hopeful living.[33]

Perhaps the most significant thing about Williams that James Laughlin records in "A Publisher's Report" comes with a comment about the last scene of Williams' play Many Loves and about the short stories:

> If any writer gets closer to the real feel of American life than Williams does . . . I have not discovered him. This is the stuff, this is what we are, and it's my guess that fifty years

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[31] Ibid., p. 54.

[32] The group of stories entitled Life Along the Passaic River, which was at one time published separately, is referred to here, not the individual story of the same name.

[33] James Laughlin, "A Publisher's Report," Briarcliff Quarterly, III (October, 1946), 189.

> from now people will be reading Williams just as we now read Flaubert's accounts of the way life was with the French bourgeoisie.[34]

While it would be possible to point to the humanitarian elements that make up many more, and indeed most of the stories in the collection Make Light of It, those already discussed will be sufficient to indicate the nature of the others. Because Williams seems to deserve study more as a poet than as a writer of prose, this discussion has sought mainly to clarify his social philosophy through another medium.

At the time these stories were written, Dr. Williams felt that they were the best medium for his ideas. This view he expressed in an address delivered in 1950 to the students of the University of Washington, at which time he also noted: "Nobody was writing about them, anywhere, as they ought to be written about."[35] "Them" refers to the masses of Americans overcome by misfortunes, social and economic, through the Depression.

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[34] Ibid., p. 189.

[35] Williams, A Beginning on the Short Story, p. 11.

In short, Williams felt

> It was my duty to raise the level of consciousness, not to say discussion, of them to a higher level, a higher plane. Really to tell.[36]

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[36] Ibid.

CHAPTER III

THE POEMS, EXCLUSIVE OF PATERSON

Dr. Williams' poetic productivity began in 1909, when a privately printed pamphlet called Poems appeared,[1] and extends to the present time. His creative period in the short story is confined mainly to the 1930's. Is there a "social" message in Williams' poetry? This chapter will discuss those poems which may be considered "social."

Williams has lived and written through several wars, a depression, two attempts at world peace organizations, the birth of the atomic age, and the growth of the mechanized-dehumanized society depicted by Aldous Huxley, Karel Capek, and George Orwell. Yet his "moral and human attractiveness"[2] has remained constant. The

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[1] Poems, Williams' first published poetic effort, appeared in 1909, privately printed by a Mr. Howell at Rutherford, N.J.

[2] William Carlos Williams, Selected Poems, ed. Randall Jarrell (New York: New Directions, 1949), p. xix. Mr. Jarrell concludes his introduction of these selected poems with: "That Williams' poems are honest, exact, and original, that some of them are really good poems, seems to me obvious. But in concluding I had rather mention something even more obvious: their generosity and sympathy, their moral and human attractiveness."

poet did not accept Communist or Socialist ideologies as did Stephen Spender, W.H. Auden and Day Lewis. He has not retreated into fascism as has Ezra Pound, into religion as has T.S. Eliot, or into a regional movement as have John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren. Instead, Williams has gone his own way.

One of the poet's main themes has been summed up effectively by Dr. Williams in his short preface to the group of essays In The American Grain:

> It has been my wish to draw from every source one thing, the strange phosphorus of the life, nameless under an old misappelation.[3]

The writer will seek to "rename the things seen" because he sees them "nameless under an old misappelation." At the same time, Williams has not been indifferent to the world of the twentieth century, although his approach to its complexities has differed from that of the poets just mentioned.

Williams presents the sights and sounds of America for the reader's attention and sympathy--not politically, but socially and humanly. He affirms that he, the doctor, the citizen, the neighbor, and the humanitarian, believes in the dignity of all human life,

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[3]William Carlos Williams, In the American Grain (New York: New Directions, 1956), unnumbered page, preface.

regardless of an individual's economic status. The setting for the expression of these ideas happens mostly to be suburban New Jersey, that is, Dr. Williams' immediate environment, the Rutherford-Paterson-Passaic area, although it is clear that this microcosm represents to him the macrocosm.

In the Collected Earlier Poems, 36 out of 289 poems show Williams to be clearly in sympathy with suffering people and the poorer element in the United States. This sympathy refers to the subject content of the poems, rather than to the language which Williams uses, because his use of language is aimed in a different direction. Collected Earlier Poems includes poems written from 1909 to 1939. Collected Later Poems, which deals with the 1940's, has not so many poems with specific "social" implications. Journey to Love and The Desert Music, the two books of poetry published by Dr. Williams in the 1950's (up to 1957) outside of the long work, Paterson, still include some poems of social awareness--a few poems in each collection--but this element seems to be de-emphasized in them.

While Williams' theories on language are not the concern of this thesis, it is pertinent to point out that he has, all his life, written in the American English in use around him. He firmly believes that the

language of the masses is the important and living language. For example, he wrote about a Negro friend that "language grows in the original from his laughing lips . . . It is water from a spring to talk with him--it is a quality. I wish I might write a book of his improvisations in slang."[4]

Just as Dr. Williams feels that the unrefined language of the masses is the important language, so he also feels that the poor people he meets every day in his medical practice around industrial New Jersey are the important people. This is apparent in one of the poet's earliest published poems called "The Strike," wherein he shows marked sympathy with the workers. Here "they," the workers, are seen with

> . . . low, sloping foreheads
> The flat skulls with the unkempt black or blond hair,
> The ugly legs of the young girls, pistons
> Too powerful for delicacy!
> The women's wrists, the men's arms red
> Used to head and cold, to toss quartered beeves
> And barrels, and milk-cans, and crates of fruit![5]

These people are not held up as a warning, as is Edwin Markham's "The Man With the Hoe"; they are simply shown as sufferers of a strike.

"Sicilian Emigrant's Song"[6] is another one of

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[4] Ibid., pp. 210-211.

[5] William Carlos Williams, The Collected Earlier Poems, (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1951), p. 7.

[6] Ibid., p. 35.

William's early efforts. As its name implies, a Sicilian emigrant to the United States sings a gay song about the land of his birth. He contrasts "Blue is the sky of Palermo" and "the orange and fig" with "Grey is the sky of this land" and "I see no trees." Yet, while he sings with some regret, the main emotion and mood is one of gaiety, which is emphasized by the two-couplet refrain

O-eh-lee! La-la!
Donna! Donna!

which in a cheerful and lighthearted way "shapes the song pattern of his [Williams] poem to the point of involuntary participation."[7] The point of the poem, in the context of this thesis, is that Williams writes warmly enough about this immigrant that we may share this unimportant man's feelings.

With the publication of the collection of poems An Early Martyr in 1935 the social implications of Williams' poetry became apparent. At this time, states Vivienne Koch in her critical study of Dr. Williams' poetry, "the economic and social pressures on writers, as on other Americans, were operating to move them in

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[7]Anne Hamilton, The Seven Principles of Poetry, (Boston: The Writer, Inc., 1940), p. 135.

the direction of 'class consciousness.'"[8] Miss Koch, maintains, however, that it "must be emphasized that Williams, for all his ill advised and often brash polemical writing during this period, never directly affiliated himself with any party or programmatic politico-literary group."[9]

In reviewing An Early Martyr and Other Poems in Poetry in May, 1936, T. C. Wilson writes:

> In the new poems though he does not explicitly commit himself to any definite ethos, his growing social consciousness has given him a firm basis both for the selection and interpretation of his subject matter.[10]

Further the reviewer notes:

> such poems as these seem to me much more authentically "proletarian" than most of the verse now being printed under that label.[11]

Robert Fitzgerald in a review of a later group of poems, Adam and Eve and the City, referred to An Early Martyr, a group of poems which was published a year before Adam and Eve and the City, in the following manner: "Many of the poems were strong because their

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[8] Vivienne Koch, William Carlos Williams, (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1950), p. 75.

[9] Ibid., p. 76.

[10] T.C. Wilson, "The Example of Dr. Williams," Poetry, XLVIII (May, 1936), 106.

[11] Ibid.

subject matter was deep in social tragedy."[12]

Vivienne Koch finds the title poem of the An Early Martyr collection "appreciably the weakest," because in it Williams makes too obvious concessions to a "conventional economic determinism"[13] in order to explain the actions of the young thief in the poem. The poem "An Early Martyr" concerns a youthful thief who sends postcards to the police to come and arrest him. He is confined to an insane asylum, then released because the institution is overcrowded.

> But the set-up
> he fought against
> Remains--[14]

The "set-up" in this case is the society that permitted him to become so ill without helping him, and the "bought Courts" that refused to let him testify "why he stole from/ Exclusive stores." Williams is indignant at the senselessness of such a situation and asks that the young thief be

> a factory whistle
> That keeps blaring--
> Sense, sense, sense![15]

"An Early Martyr" and "Item," a poem dealing

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[12]Robert Fitzgerald, "Actual and Archaic," Poetry, XLVIIII (November, 1936), 94.

[13]Koch, op. cit., p. 77.

[14]Williams, Collected Earlier Poems, p. 86.

[15]Ibid.

with the horror of war, are felt by Ruth Lechlitner in a review in Poetry to be the poet's own passionate indictment against the social order.[16] In mentioning these two poems in her review of the Complete Collected Poems (1906-1938), Miss Lechlitner believes that they should stand as a model for the "social" poets. She also notes that as early as the publication of the collection Al Que Quiere in 1920, Williams' poems began to have social implications. His comments on the times are "characteristically revealed as a personal quirk for the simple, rugged, non-ostentatious that makes him--along with his love for pioneer virtues--a primitive at heart." Along with this, "he shows increased interest in people as vital components of the American scenic pattern."[17]

T.C. Wilson believed "Item" to be the best poem that Dr. Williams had ever written.[18] It is quoted here in its entirety:

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[16]Ruth Lechlitner, "The Poetry of William Carlos Williams," Poetry LIV (September 1939), 333.

[17]Ibid., p. 329.

[18]Wilson, op. cit., p. 107. This review appeared in 1936 and so refers to the poems written up until then.

Item

This, with a face
like a mashed blood orange
that suddenly

would get eyes
and look up and scream
War! War!

clutching her
thick, ragged coat
a piece of hat

broken shoes
War! War!
stumbling for dread

at the young men
who with their gun-butts
shove her

sprawling--
a note
at the foot of the page[19]

By 1935 when the poem appeared Dr. Williams had lived through the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the rise of European totalitarianism with its accompanying slaughter. The woman in the poem is a victim who appears as a pitiful remnant of a decent human being. The fact that all this is only an "Item," that is, "a note/ at the foot of the page" gives us to understand how commonplace war has become in our time, worthy only of a brief mention among other commonplace items. Quite obviously, Williams is enlisting his reader's feelings

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[19]Williams, The Collected Earlier Poems, p. 95.

in the poem.

While Dr. Williams is concerned with cruelties like war, he is most concerned with injustice in America, principally in his own immediate environment. An outstanding example of this is the poem "To a Poor Old Woman," from the An Early Martyr collection (1935). The poem is one of Williams' masterpieces.

Lloyd Frankenberg in Pleasure Dome writes that Williams' "poems of social protest, such as 'Paterson: The Strike! and, in The Broken Span (New Directions, 1941), 'Impromptu: The Suckers,' spring from indignation, and from a warm human sympathy most immediately conveyed in 'To a Poor Old Woman.'"[20] Equally pertinent are the words of Leland Miles, who wrote in the CEA Critic after a visit by Dr. Williams to Hanover College: "Over and over again since his visit, I asked myself: What does this man signify?" He is a "rebel, an elbower of currents, a sort of twentieth century Wordsworth, who sees beauty in common objects, but above all a human beig [sic] with a compassion and pity for suffering so great that it continually rends him asunder."[21]

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[20] Lloyd Frankenberg, Pleasure Dome (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), p. 293.

[21] Leland Miles, William Carlos Williams," CEA Critic, XV (May, 1953), 7.

The title already sets the tone for this human tragedy

To a Poor Old Woman

munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her

You can see it by
the way she gives herself
to the one half
sucked out in her hand

Comforted
a solace of ripe plums
seeming to fill the air
They taste good to her[22]

It can be seen that the phrase, "They taste good to her" is repeated four times, three of them in succession. Thus we are made aware of the possibility that the taste of the plums may be the old woman's greatest pleasure. The taste comforts her, and if such a simple sensation is such a great pleasure for her, it is obvious that she has few other pleasures, if any. The picture of the old woman is in sharp focus here, and enlists the reader's sympathy. R.P. Blackmur in The Expense of Greatness feels that

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[22]Williams, The Collected Earlier Poems, p. 99.

> in Dr. Williams at his best you get perceptions powerful beyond the possibility of backing; the quotidian burgeoning without trace of yesterday; the commonplace made unique because violently felt.[23]

In another of his works, Language as Gesture, Blackmur further discusses Dr. Williams' poems, but here it is in such a way that I wish to take exception to his words:

> Dr. Williams has no perceptions of the normal, no perspective, no finality--for these involve, for imaginative expression, both the intellect which he distrusts and the imposed form which he cannot understand. What he does provide is a constant freshness and purity of language which infects with its own qualities an otherwise gratuitous exhibition of the senses and sentiment of humanity run-down--averaged . . .[24]

This underestimates a poem like "To a Poor Old Woman" considerably. Williams sees the tragedy of the old woman, her being and actions react upon his feelings, and so the poet conveys the feeling to the reader. There is, however, no plea for bettering the old woman's condition here. The facts are presented, and Williams shows once again his awareness of a social tragedy.

"To a Poor Old Woman" may be compared to another

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[23] R.P. Blackmur, The Expense of Greatness (New York: Arrow Editions, 1940), p. 233.

[24] R.P. Blackmur, Language as Gesture (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1952), pp. 349-350.

poem called "To an Old Jaundiced Woman."[25] The old jaundiced woman is seriously ill, and apparently in danger of dying. She repeats three times in the poem (and probably all day long) "I can't die," as though convincing herself, protesting that she cannot die, or crying out against what seems inevitable. Williams wants us to feel with her as he does, to feel her pain, note her unattractiveness, and partake in her protest.

A matter-of-factness and very lack of protest is marked in the poem, "Proletarian Portrait," another poem from the An Early Martyr group. It is a strongly objectivist poem. This is the only place I have seen the word "proletarian" used by Dr. Williams in his poetry.

Proletarian Portrait

A big young bareheaded woman
in an apron

Her hair slicked back standing
on the street

One stockinged foot toeing
the sidewalk

Her shoe in her hand. Looking
intently into it

She pulls out the paper insole
to find the nail

That has been hurting her[26]

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[25] Williams, The Collected Earlier Poems, p. 268.

[26] Ibid., p. 101.

It can be seen that this is not a poem of ideologies. Here is just a picture taken from any Main Street, U.S.A., but it is the poorer citizen of Main Street that is depicted, not the woman with a choice of mink coats. Babette Deutsch writes of Dr. Williams:

> A sensibility attuned to the more delicate as to the more sordid tones and overtones of ordinary life here and now, an instinct for the world as precise as a scalpel, for the image as fresh as rain-wet roses, plain as a pump, vigorous as a Big League pitcher's arm, these are among the gifts of William Carlos Williams.[27]

In "Proletarian Portrait" this sensibility is apparent in the small actions and ordinary appearance of the "young bareheaded woman." What she does and is, is undistinguished and yet there she is on the street.[28]

While "Proletarian Portrait" is a picture of a member of an economic class, the poem "Sunday" gives the reader the sounds of this same group. The poem shows a remarkable ear for common speech and everyday sounds. Every line contains a different "Sunday" sound. The

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[27]Babette Deutsch, "The Gifts of William Carlos Williams," Briarcliff Quarterly, III (October, 1946), 202.

[28]It is noteworthy that Wallace Stevens writes in the same magazine (Briarcliff Quarterly, October, 1946, p. 201) in a similar vein (to Babette Deutsch): "Williams is a writer to whom writing is the grinding of a glass, the polishing of a lens by means of which he hopes to be able to see clearly. His delineations are trials. They are rubbings of reality."

sounds appear to be recorded in the stairwell of an apartment house, undoubtedly one of the innumerable old-fashioned, dark and dank ones in the New York-New Jersey area which are tenanted by the poor. Dr. Williams has effectively captured the fragmentary words and sounds here with such lines as

> "Over Labor Day they'll
> be gone"
> "Jersey City, he's the
> engineer--" "Ya"
> "Being on the Erie R.R.
> is quite convenient"
>
> "No, I think they're--"
> "I think she is. I think--"
>
> "German-American"
> "Of course the Govern--"
>
> . . . . . .
>
> A distant door slammed.
> Amen.[29]

Robert Beum, in Perspective feels that

> In a day when chewing-gum is sold in heroic couplets and underarm deodorant extolled to the tune of a Chopin prelude, Williams has had the good fortune to hammer out something which is not susceptible to parody; the violent argot in which he is often cast is the only possible method of working back to sensitivity and imagination.[30]

"Sunday" definitely is "hammering out" something: The

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[29] Williams, The Collected Earlier Poems, p. 109.

[30] Robert Beum, "The Baby Glove of a Pharaoh," Perspective, VI (Autumn, 1953), 220.

unglamarous sounds of poor people in their leisure hours. Such poems do not make Dr. Williams a "social" poet. They simply show him to be sincerely interested in poor people.

The poem that most seriously makes some critics and students of Williams believe him to be a "social" poet is "The Yachts," perhaps the outstanding poem of the An Early Martyr group, and one of Williams' most frequently anthologized poems.

The Yachts

contend in a sea which the land partly encloses
shielding them from the too heavy blows
of an ungoverned ocean which when it chooses

tortures the biggest hulls, the best man knows
to pit against its beating, and sinks them pitilessly.
Mothlike in mists, scintillant in the minute

brilliance of cloudless days, with broad bellying sails
they glide to the wind tossing green water
from their sharp prows while over them the crew crawls

ant-like, solicitously grooming them, releasing,
making fast as they turn, lean far over and having
caught the wind again, side by side, head for the mark.

In a well guarded arena of open water surrounded by
lesser and greater craft which, sycophant, lumbering
and flittering follow them, they appear youthful, rare

as the light of a happy eye, live with the grace
of all that in the mind is fleckless, free and
naturally to be desired. Now the sea which holds them

is moody, lapping their glossy sides, as if feeling
for some slightest flaw but fails completely.
Today no race. Then the wind comes again. The yachts

move, jockeying for a start, the signal is set and they
are off. Now the waves strike at them but they are too
well made, they slip through, though they take in canvas.

> Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows.
> Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside.
> It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair
>
> until the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind,
> the whole sea become an entanglement of watery bodies
> lost to the world bearing what they cannot hold. Broken,
>
> beaten, desolate, reaching from the dead to be taken up
> they cry out, failing, failing! their cries rising
> in waves still as the skillful yachts pass over.[31]

Opinion as to whether this poem does have social implications has been divided. Babette Deutsch, for example, in Poetry in Our Time emphasizes that "The Yachts" is not a social allegory, because an allegory "demands that a definite significance be attached to the images, as though they were walking sandwich men."[32] She contends that

> the yachts, the sea, the hands seeking to clutch at the prows, the broken, beaten bodies whose failing cries rise in waves "as the skillful yachts pass over," cannot be thus plainly placarded. The virtue of the poem is that it leaves one with a sense of mingled delight and compassion, the one qualifying the other, the mixed attitude with which one accepts life itself.[33]

Randall Jarrell, on the other hand, in his acute obser-

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[31]Williams, The Collected Earlier Poems, pp. 106-107.

[32]Babette Deutsch, Poetry in Our Time (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1952), p. 103.

[33]Ibid., pp. 103-104.

vations in the introduction to Williams' Selected Poems, notes that the poem "The Yachts" is a "paradigm of all unjust beauty, the necessary and unnecessary injustice of the world."[34] "The Yachts" is seen by T.C. Wilson as an example of integrity and increasing strength and development that is today [1936] unrivalled.[35] Thus, these three critics, Babette Deutsch, Randall Jarrell and T.C. Wilson, do not agree with the social-allegory theme. Vivienne Koch leans toward seeing in the yacht race that the "human contender cannot keep pace with or merge into the beautiful, self-contained dynamism of the ideal."[36] She contends that the poem may be interpreted on two levels, that is, as either "a judgment on the nature of the ideal," or as a "moral allegory."[37]

Assuming that "The Yachts" may be a moral allegory it can be interpreted as follows.[38] "The Yachts," which has a uniform three-line stanza with all lines approximately the same length, presents a much more regular appearance than most of Dr. Williams' poems. This

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[34] Williams, Selected Poems, p. xix.

[35] Wilson, op. cit., p. 108.

[36] Koch, op. cit., p. 82.

[37] Ibid.

[38] The interpretation of the poem which follows must be credited, in part, to Dr. W.D. Jacobs, and thus is not wholly original with the writer.

regularity seems to emphasize the yachts' trimness and well-made neatness. The yachts may represent the privileged moneyed class for whom it is easy to look "well-made." They are contrasted throughout the poem with the crew, who may represent the moneyless people. The yachts

> contend in a sea which the land partly encloses
> shielding them from the too heavy blows.

That is to say, the wealthy compete with each other, but under the protection of their money, so that they are not exposed to the real storms of life, the "ungoverned ocean," which the poor people must face.

The yachts are "mothlike" and live through the "brilliance of cloudless days"; that is, they live idly and as ornaments, while the working "crew crawls." The crew does all the work that makes the yachts look so beautiful. On a different level, the people who work in factories ("ant-like") make it possible for the businessman to reap profits from their labors, and these profits in turn make it possible for the businessmen to live in luxury.

Of course, only a relatively few people can be privileged and parasitic in any society, and thus the yachts are "surrounded by/lesser and greater craft." Compared to these, "they appear youthful." Naturally, wealthy people do not wear out with hard work and become

old so quickly as poor working people do. So the masses pay the price for the youthful looks and happiness of the few, as they guard the "arena of open water." Occasionally, the waves strike even at the yachts (verse 8), but they are able to "slip through, though they take in canvas." Following the interpretation that the poem is indeed a moral allegory, verse 8 suggests that the rich are also affected by bad times, though probably to the extent of selling a few stocks. The poor, at such times, simply go under economically; they are "cut aside" by the rich, and are left to the mercy of relief rolls, or charity.

Taking into consideration the time of publication of this poem (in the An Early Martyr collection, 1935),[39]

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[39]The events surrounding the publication of An Early Martyr are of significance here, and have been recorded by Dr. Williams in his Autobiography (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 299:

"A strange person named (an alias, I think) Ronald Lane Latimer, of Columbia University, at the same time started to issue a few books under the insigne, The Alcestis Press. And John Coffee was being thrown out of basement bars when he began to prate his social sermons there. He had been a fur thief working the big department stores, selling the furs afterwards to give to charity and his impoverished friends.

It was the depression, I'll say!

Latimer published for me An Early Martyr superbly, lavishly printed on rag paper, dedicated to John Coffee, who had been arrested and sent to Matteawan Hospital for the criminally insane--without trial--to prevent him from getting up in court and saying his say as he had intended to do, that he was not insane, but that he was robbing to feed the poor since the city was doing nothing for them."

the idea that the meaning of the poem lies in the social protest it implies seems valid. This was the time when one-third of the nation was inadequately housed and fed, and the second World War was in the making. Other poets were becoming directly affiliated with various communistic and socialist groups. Williams continued to live and practice medicine in Rutherford, N.J. and to protest verbally only about where he saw the world heading.

> No one
> will believe this
> of vast import to the nation[40]

Williams had written in a poem called "Pastoral" which came out in Al Que Quiere, 1920. A few years later when the depression came, the plight of the poor did become important.

Williams describes the houses of the poor in "Pastoral" thus:

> I walk back streets
> admiring the houses
> of the very poor;
> roof out of line with sides
> the yards cluttered
> with old chicken wire, ashes
> furniture gone wrong;
> the fences and outhouses
> built of barrel-staves
> and parts of boxes, all . . .[41]

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[40] Williams, The Collected Earlier Poems, p. 121.

[41] Ibid.

Perhaps it could be said: These houses, too, are important. Not only the houses of the rich are worthy of note, but the shacks in the slums are too, because people live in them, the important people for Dr. Williams.

Vivienne Koch believes that "Pastoral" is a rejection of the common standards of success, in this case the owning of nice homes, in favor of the poorer, more obscure and powerless dignity that the poor people have.[42] In Poetry in Our Time Babette Deutsch notes that in Williams' poetry "there is no effort to flatter, to cajole, to enchant the reader. Williams seems to be content with the clear line, the pure color. Or the mangy line, the dirty color, if he is looking at the uglier details of the sick room, or the roads that take him to and from it."[43] The "back streets" in "Pastoral" are the roads that take Dr. Williams to his patients.

Another interesting comment is made by Paul Rosenfeld in his Port of New York, subtitled "Essays on Fourteen American Moderns." He states that Williams'

> capacity for identifying himself with people in their own terms has made him, on one plane a successful physician, diagnostician, and healer.

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[42]Koch, op. cit., p. 18.

[43]Deutsch, Poetry in Our Time, p. 100.

> It is his own health for which he is fighting in other bodies, careless of their cries and cringings. On another, it has made him an artist: turned his existence over to him as stuff for contemplation.[44]

One of the prime examples of Williams' identification with "people in their own terms" is the poem

Libertad! Igualidad! Fraternidad!

> You sullen pig of a man
> you force me into the mud
> with your stinking ash-cart!
>
> Brother!
>
> --if we were rich
> we'd stick our chests out
> and hold our heads high!
>
> It is dreams that have destroyed us.
>
> There is no more pride
> in horses or in rein holding.
> We sit hunched together brooding
> our fate.
>
> Well--
> all things turn bitter in the end
> whether you choose the right or
> left way
> and--
> dreams are not a bad thing.[45]

The dreams of equality have not been realized by the poor of the United States, says the poet. After the dreams had taken away the subservience of the poor toward

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[44]Paul Rosenfeld, Port of New York (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924), p. 107.

[45]Williams, The Collected Earlier Poems, p. 134.

their richer neighbors, the poor have nothing in return to fill the vacuum, except the eventual political choice of right or left. The speaker in the poem is complaining about a member of his own class who came to terms with reality and is now pushing an ash cart. He himself has not made a choice of action and can only say at best, wistfully--"if we were rich/we'd stick our chests out." Both the speaker and the ash can pusher are caught in the economic trap.

"The Poor" is the title of two of Williams' poems. In one poem, the poor hate the school physician, because he is

> . . . constantly tormenting them
> with reminders of the lice in
> their children's hair . . .[46]

and in the other their "anarchy" delights the poet. The poor still seem to have the energy and independence to do what they want, particularly

> . . . the old man
> in a sweater and soft black
> hat who sweeps the sidewalk
>
> his own ten feet of it
> . . .[47]

Williams does not always refer to the poor collectively. Sometimes he treats them as individuals. For

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[46] Ibid., p. 206.

[47] Ibid., p. 415.

example, among the poems dealing with individual poor people are two about working girls. One is a waitress and the other is a housemaid. In "The Waitress" the poet says:

> The benefits of poverty are a roughened skin
> of the hands, the broken
> knuckles, the stained wrists.[48]

In "To Elsie" we see a child of "mountain folk from Kentucky/or the ribbed north end of Jersey"

> sent out at fifteen to work in
> some hard-pressed
> house in the suburbs--[49]

This poem starts with the mucy-quoted lines

> The pure products of America
> go crazy--

Why does Elsie "go crazy" though she is from what is presumably an environment free from the stresses of modern urban living? The poet suggests that the people Elsie comes from include deaf-mutes, thieves, "devil-may-care men" "young slatterns" all in all, not a desirable background or the best kind of people. In her childhood she was surrounded by some of the dregs of human society. When she comes at fifteen to work for "some doctor's family" (possibly Williams' own family) she is able to express "with broken/brain the truth about us"--the sad

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[48] Ibid., p. 445.

[49] Ibid., p. 270.

fact that others let such an environment as the one she grew up in exist. Obviously there is something wrong when a girl has to grow up "so hemmed round/with disease or murder."

In "Sympathetic Portrait of a Child" a murderer's child is introduced:

> The murderer's little daughter
> who is barely ten years old
> jerks her shoulders
> right and left
> so as to catch a glimpse of me
> without turning round.[50]

She has "skinny little arms" and a "little flowered dress." Naturally, Williams considers her father's crime in his relation to the child. He calls her the "murderer's little daughter," not simply any little girl, and concludes the poem with

> Why has she chosen me
> for the knife
> that darts along her smile?[51]

It is apparent that the poet is able to like the child for herself, even though he sees her in relation to her father's crime.

In his Literary Essays Ezra Pound has expressed his view of Williams' attitude toward this type of people He comments:

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[50] Ibid., p. 155.

[51] Ibid.

> Where I see scoundrels and vandals, he [Williams] sees a spectacle or an ineluctable process of nature. Where I want to kill at once, he ruminates, and if his rumination leads to anger it is almost an inarticulate anger, that may lend colour to style, but which stays almost wholly in the realm of his art. I mean it is qualificative, contemplative, does not drive him to some ultra-artistic or non-artistic activity.[52]

While I agree that Williams does "ruminate" in his poems, I do not agree that his anger is almost inarticulate, unless to be articulate means here to be oriented towards a particular political side. Such a poem as "The R R Bums" is articulate.

The R R Bums

Their most prized possession
their liberty--
Hands behind a coat
shiny green. Tall, the eyes
downcast--
Sunlight through a clutter of
wet clouds, lush weeds--
The oriole!
Hungry as an oriole.[53]

Railroad tramps must have been a very common sight in the 1930's. Since the picture is true to life the reader cannot escape that "long shudder of recognition,"[54] when he reads the poem, and hence it is articulate. As far as Williams' non-artistic activities are concerned,

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[52]Ezra Pound, Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, ed. T.S. Eliot (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1954), p. 392.

[53]William Carlos Williams, The Collected Later Poems (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1950), p. 133.

[54]Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 217.

what could be more non-artistic--and usefull--than seeing to the medical needs of the poor and underprivileged around Rutherford?

In a poem of a much later period entitled "Childe Harold to the Round Tower Came," Williams shows what Pound might have called a "scoundrel":

> Obviously, in a plutocracy
> the natural hero
> is the man who robs a bank
>
> Look at him, the direct eyes,
> the forehead! Clearly
> he is intelligent . . .[55]

The poet is able to admire the thief for what he is, and not for what he is not.

This poem appears in The Collected Later Poems which begins with 1944 and ends around 1950. F.O. Matthiessen's review of The Wedge, the first group of poems in this collection, appears in his book Responsibilities of the Critic. It is noteworthy that Matthiessen believes that

> the best poems are those that depend on the intimate knowledge of humanity that Williams has gained as a doctor to working people in an industrial town. Like Lawrence he has wedged deep into the mingled gentleness and violence of love. He can also demonstrate the validity of his axiom "No ideas but in things!"

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[55]Williams, The Collected Later Poems, p. 133.

> by creating unforgetable pictures of ditch-diggers in a sewer or of a woman facing him with the demands for an abortion.[56]

The poems referred to are "A Vision of Labor: 1931," and "A Cold Front." The latter begins

> This woman with a dead face
> has seven foster children
> and a new baby of her own in
> spite of that. She wants pills
>
> for an abortion . . .[57]

Dr. Williams has undoubtedly taken this case from among the ones he has had to deal with day after day. Matthiessen points out that "Williams has followed the Whitman tradition in opening up ever fresh material from common existence."[58] What could be more "common" than such a fate (eight children, and another one on the way) among poor people? Yet this case is somewhat special, as seven of the children are adopted. Williams happens to have chosen to practice among such poor people instead of joining the specialists on Park Avenue in New York. Therefore his subjects are poor women who demand abortions, and include such people as Chinese laundrymen, Negroes and Indians.

In The Collected Earlier Poems we meet an attractive, "young, agile, clear-eyed" laundryman, who

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[57] Williams, The Collected Later Poems, p. 57.

[58] Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 129.

wishes to have "Your husband's shirts to wash, please for Wu Kee."[59] As a subject for a poem, this is quite unusual, and reflects the kind of people that Williams is interested in. The poem certainly differs radically from Ezra Pound's interest in things Chinese.

Turning now to a poem about another minority group, "A Negro Woman" is the first, and in my opinion, best poem of a recent collection by Dr. Williams, Journey to Love (1954). It begins:

A Negro Woman

carrying a bunch of marigolds
wrapped
in an old newspaper:
She carries them upright,
bare-headed.[60]

The significant word seems to be "upright." The woman carries the marigolds upright, and she herself is dignified.

In the poem "Navajo" from the same collection the poet puts the emphasis on the word "erect." The poem deals with an Indian woman of the Southwest whom Dr. Williams must have seen on his travels. She walks in the desert brush parallel to the highway, with her head bowed toward the ground; yet her

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[59] Williams, The Collected Earlier Poems, p. 204.

[60] William Carlos Williams, Journey to Love (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 3.

. . . blood walking
erect, the
desert animating
the blood to walk
erect by choice
through
the pale green
of the starveling
sage[61]

Williams perceives and acknowledges that she is proud of her heritage, even though her head is physically bowed.

. . . . . .

The poems discussed in this chapter represent a relatively small part of Williams' poetic productivity, when one considers his long career as a poet. They reflect the part of his poetic life closest to his life as a doctor. Many of them come directly from this source. It should be mentioned that there are other poems reflecting Williams' interest in the poor than the ones discussed here. I have omitted the less successful ones and the ones that repeat some aspect of the same idea.

Dr. Williams told me that he never was a Socialist and has no interest in politics. His interest

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[61]Williams, The Collected Later Poems, pp. 101-102.

is solely in the impoverished people around his home, Rutherford, N.J. I believe that this sensitivity to the sufferings of the people around him is borne out by his poetry. This element is most significant in the poems written by Dr. Williams during the Depression years.

While the poet ostensibly wishes to let the reader draw his own conclusions from the picture he has shown, the words he uses (or frequently the title, such as "To a Poor Old Woman" or "Sympathetic Portrait of a Child") indicate the way he wants the reader to react. Part of this effect comes through the use of adjectives, and part through the total description. For example, in one of Dr. Williams' most recent poems, "The Desert Music," he inspects an unfortunate being who is a "sack of rags someone/has abandoned". . . on the Juarez-El Paso International Bridge. The poet looks at this "inhuman shapelessness" while his companions wait. Here again it is significant that the poet stops and looks and does not simply pass an unseeing glance over the head of the human sack of rags.

Because the poor around Rutherford are Dr. Williams' daily medical concern, and because he chose to practice medicine among, they are of great interest to him. The following chapter will discuss Dr. Williams' interest in America and American history as shown in his long work Paterson. In the poems already discussed, how-

ever, it is hoped that Williams' attitude toward individual Americans is seen, some of whom are immigrants who make up the "melting pot" of America which the poet celebrates.

Considering this aspect of his poetry, Williams is a "democratic" poet. Randall Jarrell has pointed out that "Williams loves, blames, and yells despairingly at the little Men . . . because he feels, not just says, that the differences between men are less important than their similarities--that he and you and I, together, are the Little Men.[62] Without regard to political dogma, Williams makes poems about the people who are rarely made the subjects of poems by present-day poets. He presents his people as unfortunate human beings deserving the sympathy of the more fortunate, and thereby shows his own sensitivity to social injustice and inequality.

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[62]Williams, Selected Poems, p. xiii. This is in the introduction to these selected poems which is written by Randall Jarrell.

CHAPTER IV

PATERSON

> One might say that Williams has but one fixed idea, as an author; i.e., he starts where an European would start if an European were about to write of America: sic: America is a subject of interest, one must inspect it, analyse it, and treat it as subject.[1]
>
> Ezra Pound

Paterson, Dr. Williams' longest and most ambitious work, is composed of four books which were published separately and at different times (in 1946, 1948, 1949, and 1951). Here the books of Paterson will be considered as parts of a whole rather than as entities in themselves. It must be borne in mind that Paterson as it stands may not be finished. Dr. Williams told me that he is considering writing another book of Paterson (Paterson V) which may alter the validity of any statements made here.

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[1] Ezra Pound, Literary Essays of Ezra Pound ed. T.S. Eliot (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1954), p. 392.

In the context of this thesis the poem Paterson is an "ideogram." Or from a somewhat different point of view, Paterson uses the "ideogramic method" which Ezra Pound defined in his Guide to Kulchur with the following illuminating comment:

> At last a reviewer in a popular paper (or at least one with immense circulation) has had the decency to admit that I occasionally cause the reader "suddenly to see" or that I snap out a remark . . . "that reveals the whole subject from a new angle."
>
> That being the point of the writing. That being the reason for presenting first one facet and then another--I mean to say the purpose of the writing is to reveal the subject. The ideogramic method consists of presenting one facet and then another until at some point one gets off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader's mind, onto a part that will register.[2]

The subject revealed in Paterson is America. Specifically it is the history of America as seen in the microcosm of the town Paterson and its surroundings and the people who have inhabited it in the past and some of those who at present make up Paterson.

People have always been of great importance and interest to Williams, though not his greatest literary interest. Williams' greatest literary interest has been, and still is, the forging of a poetic language that is truthful for him. The language we use at present

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[2]Ezra Pound, Guide to Kulchur (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1952), p. 51.

does not represent reality as Williams sees it. He sees facts around him every day and wants to set these facts down in words. But they must be new words or old words put together in a new way or something else entirely, but not the words that the nineteenth century used which we still use. In the "Author's Note" to Paterson Williams states:

> Part One introduces the elemental character of the place. The Second Part comprises the modern replicas. Three will seek a language to make them vocal . . .[3]

Here is the key to Williams' central literary interest. The poet seeks a language that will be not only truthful for its own sake but make vocal the look of misery on the faces of the poor, the masses, and the ordinary Americans whose emotions are educated by the cinema and worn-out religions, and whose mental development is left to the mercy of John Dewey.

Paterson will be considered here, as it reflects Williams' sympathy for people, and in the light of its "economic exhortations" mainly derived from Ezra Pound and unidentified sources which "are so placed, as in Part II of Sunday in the Park that their immediate relation to the 'minds beaten thin by waste' is demon-

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[3]William Carlos Williams, Paterson (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1946-1951), unnumbered page.

strated with a concurrent sympathy for and disapprobation of the 'amnesic crowd (the scattered)'".[4]

It should be noted that on the page preceding the preface of "Book I" of Paterson, we are told in an invocation by the poet that the poem will be "a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands." This has been interpreted to mean "a translation of the classics into conduct both moral and social,"[5] but could also mean a vernacular epic of real life.

In Paterson, and especially in Paterson IV, Williams examines the meaning of the moral life in our times. Even though Paterson IV appeared last, it therefore seems appropriate to discuss it first.

"Book IV" of Paterson begins with two characters who have Greek names--Corydon and Phyllis. That is where the Greek part of it ends, however, and where the "reply to Greek and Latin" begins. This is a realistic epic of life of some ordinary people, not a story of Gods, nymphs or privileged Grecians. Phyllis is a working girl from Ramapo, New York. She comes to New

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[4]Guy Davenport, "The Nuclear Venus: Dr. Williams' Attack Upon Usura," Perspective, VI (Autumn-Winter, 1953), 185.

[5]Ibid., p. 190. Mr. Davenport goes on to say that the present position of Latin and Greek "as ornament or peripheral knowledge" is in effect a denial of their worth.

York City to work and earn her own living as a masseuse. Her father back in Ramapo is an alcoholic who is concerned because his daughter lives in the big "evil" city and begs her to come home. Phyllis is tired of the hopeless environment her home offers and writes her father a series of letters on the same general thought. Her first letter is typical of them all:

A Letter

> Look, Big Shot, I refuse to come home until you promise to cut out the booze. It's no use your talking about Mother needs me and all that bologney. If you thought anything of her you wouldn't carry on the way you do. Maybe your family did once own the whole valley. Who owns it now? What you need is to be slapped down.
>
> I'm having a fine time in the Big City as a Professional Woman, ahem! Believe me there's plenty of money here--if you can get it. With your brains and ability this should be your meat. But you'd rather hit the bottle . . .[6]

As an antithesis to Phyllis, the working girl, there is Corydon her employer, an idle rich woman who desires to enter into an immoral relationship with Phyllis. Whereas Phyllis lives entirely in facts and in the present, her employer lives in the dream world of a dilettante. She spends her time writing poetry to and about Phyllis.

Phyllis is involved with a married man--Dr.

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[6]Williams, op. cit., p. 178.

Paterson. The Mr. Paterson of the earlier books has become Dr. Paterson by the fourth book, and is again, Williams himself. The reason he is called Paterson at all, is explained by Dr. Williams in the "Author's Note"--"a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody."[7]

Phyllis' love affair with Dr. Paterson seems hardly to touch her emotionally. She lives in a world of facts, so much so in fact, that she can write coldly and without affection to her father

A Letter

> I don't care what you say. Unless Mother writes me, herself, that you've stopped drinking--and I mean stopped drinking--I won't come home.[8]

The aspect of life that seems to touch Phyllis most deeply is the economic one. She is saving money to go to the Western United States to get away from the entire negative situation that she is in--her employer, her doomed love affair, and her father's futile appeals to her to come home. Her motivation is economic and therefore rather detached, while that of her employer comes from boredom.

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[7] Ibid., unnumbered page.

[8] Ibid., p. 186.

This section is an example of Dr. Williams' interest in economics in Paterson IV. Throughout the four books the economic exhortations of Ezra Pound stated in some form are evident as a great influence. As has been pointed out by Guy Davenport, In Paterson "Books III" and "IV" money and usury become the subject of bald prose statements. These books appear to be rooted in Pound's Cantos, his Guide to Kulchur, and six pamphlets on money.[9] Pound took his material from such books as Alexander Del Mar's Barbara Villiers, Or a History of Monetary Crimes, and Estace C. Mullin's A Study of the Federal Reserve. As Mr. Pound's monetary theories are a lengthy study in themselves they will not be further elaborated here.

Already in Paterson II the theme of money and usury, here shown as a "racket" which cheats the people, is introduced and reminds one of Pound:

> In other words, the Federal Reserve Banks constitute a Legalized National Usury System, whose Customer No. 1 is our Government, the richest country in the world. Every one of us is paying tribute to the money racketeers on every dollar we earn through hard work.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The people must pay anyway; why should they be compelled to pay twice? THE WHOLE NATIONAL

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[9] Davenport, op. cit., p. 185.

> DEBT IS MADE UP ON INTEREST CHARGES. If people ever get to thinking of bonds and bills at the same time, the game is up.[10]

The people who are the victims of this system are very much in evidence in all four books of Paterson. There is Mr. Paterson himself first of all, presumably Williams himself, who appears at various times and in various forms. In "Book IV" he is Dr. Paterson. In "Book III" he appears as a man "diseased with slums and factories and the spritlessness of industrial society,"[11] who has retired to the city library to look at old records there.

Paterson encompasses many other ideas rooted in the defects of an industrial society. Louise Bogan uses the term "poetic sociological investigations" about Paterson IV, which she feels has proved, together with the poetry of Stevens, Moore, Tate, Ransom, Warren and Cummings, that American poetry has attained "civilized breadth, without losing, in any appreciative degree, its vital essence."[12] Robert Lowell, in discussing the

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[10] Williams, op. cit., pp. 91-92.

[11] Hayden Carruth, "Dr. Williams' Paterson," The Nation, CLXX (April 18, 1950), 331. Mr. Carruth believes that the meaning of "Book III" comes out best by considering the symbols. He writes "Paterson, then, is a city and also a man, a giant who lies asleep, whose dreams are the people of the city, whose history is roughly coterminous with, and equal to, the history of America."

[12] Louise Bogan, Achievement in American Poetry (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951), p. 100.

essence of Paterson II more specifically, asserted in The Nation:

> "Paterson" is Whitman's America, grown patheric and tragic, brutalized by inequality, disorganized by industrial chaos, and faced with annihilation. No poet has written of it with such a combination of brilliance, sympathy, and experience, with such alertness and energy. Because he has tried to understand rather than excoriate, and because in his maturity he has been occupied with the "raw" and the universal, his "Paterson" is not the tragedy of the outcast but the tragedy of our civilization.[13]

This statement can be substantiated by reading almost at random any section of the four books of Paterson other than those purely concerned with language or monetary evils, although money troubles are, after all, a major source of affliction for poor people.

Let us first consider who these people are who have "grown pathetic and tragic, brutalized by inequality, disorganized by industrial chaos, and faced with annihilation," and then see how Williams has written of them with sympathy. As far as can be determined from the fragments of prose and poetry that make up "Book I" the people who stand out as individuals other than only as scraps of information are:

A woman poet who has given some poems to Williams

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[13]Robert Lowell, "Paterson II," The Nation, CLXVI (June 19, 1948), 693.

to comment upon, who is so poor as to need the assistance of public welfare workers.[14] A poor shoemaker, David Hower, with a large family, out of work and money.[15] A Mrs. Cummings of Newark who drowned in the Passaic Falls two months after her marriage.[16] Sam Patch, a boss over cotton spinners, who jumped from heights into rivers.[17] A young colored woman who would like to have a baby.[18] A water company employee who spotted a body in the Passaic Falls.[19] A Mr. Cornelius Doremus, a farmer, who lived 1714-1803.[20]

Of most significance there is what appears to be a letter from and about a man identified only as "T" whose family is apparently in poor and unpleasant circumstances. This is the sort of hard-luck story that patients must have told Dr. Williams every day over the years. The writer's mother is ill, but it is stressed that she "has always tried to do her part, and she is always trying to do something for her children."[21]

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[14] Williams, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

[15] Ibid., p. 17.

[16] Ibid., pp. 23-24.

[17] Ibid., pp. 25-27.

[18] Ibid., pp. 44-45.

[19] Ibid., pp. 45-46.

[20] Ibid., p. 48.

[21] Ibid., p. 37.

The sister has been "chopped on by the surgical chopper,"[22] but even so she is a "good worker and thorough going."[23]

In setting down these details that make up what is essentially family gossip, Williams reveals what he has been concerned with in forty years of medical practice. His sincere concern with the ordinary day-to-day life of people and their welfare is evident. Partly this is true because he speaks their language in rhythmic poetic forms as well as in poetic prose. For example, as the whole poem Paterson moves forward by association, the line "A summer evening?"[24] appearing shortly after the letter just quoted, leads the poet to report a typical conversation he may have heard on a summer evening in an unfashionable part of Paterson.

> A summer evening?
>
> A quart of potatoes, half a dozen oranges,
> a bunch of beets and some soup greens.
> Look, I have a new set of teeth. Why you
> look ten years younger .[25]

Paterson I may be summed up in the words of Randall Jarrell, perhaps the poem's most enthusiastic critic, who states that there has "never been a poem more American" and that it seems to him the best thing

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[23] Ibid., p. 38.

[24] Ibid., p. 39.

[25] Ibid.

that Williams has ever written ("I read it seven or eight times, and ended lost in delight").[26]

In Paterson II the poet described as Mr. Paterson engages in the usual activity of suburban dwellers--he spends "Sunday in the Park." All around him he sees the citizens using up their leisure time. One can hardly say they are enjoying Sunday, because the theme of "Book II" is the word "blocked"; that is, these people merely exist. What is meant by "blocked" is explained by one line nine lines further on (after the word blocked): "An orchestral dullness overlays their world."[27] They, are the suburban small factory workers who have one bright thing in the world--which at the same time is the cause of their being blocked. Four cryptic lines at the beginning of this section state:

> In its midst rose a massive church. . . And it all came to me then--that those poor souls had nothing else in the world, save that church, between them and the eternal stony, ungrateful and unpromising dirt they lived by . . . . .[28]

In this world in Paterson II we are in a typical park scene. It is almost like one of Picasso's large canvasses (say, "Guernica") which one can best

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[26] Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 212.

[27] Williams, op. cit., p. 78.

[28] Ibid.

take in in sections because it is too big to see close up in one perspective. The people in the park are pathetic and brutalized in some way. There are "three middle aged men with iron smiles" who "stand behind the benches."[29] There is also the park evangelist who deprecates himself in order to get attention:

> This is what the preacher said: Don't think about me. Call me a stupid old man, that's right. Yes, call me an old bore who talks until he is hoarse when nobody wants to listen. That's the truth. I'm an old fool and I know it.
>
> BUT . !
> You can't ignore the words of Our Lord Jesus Christ who died on the Cross for us that we may have Eternal Life! Amen.[30]

The point the preacher is trying to bring across is that money is evil ("It did not make me good"), and that therefore people should give money up and amass spiritual riches only. The park preacher is as pathetic the way Williams describes him as his kind is in real life. He is complete with devout assistants, singers, and a voice of thunder that can also plead. No one listens to him. His harangue is stereotyped and lifeless. His personal history, on the other hand, is worth listening to, and gives a clue as to where Williams' interest

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[29] Ibid., p. 80

[30] Ibid., pp. 82-83.

in the poor evangelist lies:

> I wasn't born here. I was born in what we call over here the Old Country. But it's the same people, the same kind of people there as here and they're up to the same kind of tricks as over here--only, there isn't as much money over there--and that makes the difference.
>
> My family were poor people. So I started to work when I was pretty young.[31]

This immigrant has been described by Louis Martz in the Yale Review as the "last faded apostle of charity." He is the symbol that binds together all the rest, prose and poetry.[32] In fact, Martz asserts that the poor evangelist preaching to sparse and bored audiences is the hero of the whole book.

It would be more logical to think of Mr. Paterson, sometimes Dr. Paterson, as the hero, if there is one at all. He is the one who is confronted in "Book I" (Section III) by a young colored woman who wishes to have a baby. Vivienne Koch in her study of William Carlos Williams calls this sketch of "subterfuge and desperation," the kind of personality sketch which Williams handles so well, the "double negation of human potentiality effected by fear and caste."[33] Directly

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[31] Ibid., p. 83.

[32] Louis Martz, "Paterson Two," Yale Review, XXXVIII (September, 1948), 150.

[33] Vivienne Koch, William Carlos Williams (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1950), p. 131.

following, this potentially fertile human being is contrasted to a rich house which has everything including a private herd, a swimming pool ("empty!"), orchids that grow "like weeds uncut, at tropic/heat while the snow flies" and a special maid who grooms the pet Pomeranians "who sleep." Obviously riches are contrasted as sterile compared to the young colored woman.

The impoverished people, the victims of those who amass riches are constantly with us throughout Paterson. They have to bear with the "hideous industrial present" that Mr. Paterson observes in such lines as

> Half the river red, half streaming purple
> from the factory vents, spewed out hot,
> swirling, bubbling. The dead bank,
> shining mud .
>
> What can he think else--along
> the gravel of the ravished park, torn by
> the wild workers' children tearing up the grass,
> kicking, screaming? . . .[34]

It is not an attractive picture that Mr. Paterson sees. All around him things are ugly because of poverty and misuse. The children of the wild workers tear up the grass and misuse the park not, however, because they are inherently bad. Their park simply does not receive the same care that the lawns of the rich receive, and the children themselves cannot be given the care by their

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[34]Williams, op. cit., pp. 48-49.

parents that they should have.

While the nature of an ideogram defies its being summed up, it is possible to make a general statement about Paterson I-IV. Like Ezra Pound in his Cantos and other works, Williams is deeply concerned in Paterson with economics. He spends comparatively little space, however, on the theories of economics; he devotes much space to actual examples of how the misuse of money harms people. While Pound's theories are from books, Williams' are both from books (some directly from Pound), but more important from life--that is, the lives of the poor workers in the suburban New Jersey area who are exploited for other people's benefit. Williams does not state outright that this exploitation is bad. He implies it by presenting how the people live. Guy Davenport thus infers that Williams' "predominant emotion is pity for the people Whitman celebrated."[35] The crowd of citizens in the park are victims of a pervasive vulgarity. Somehow the poet feels that this is all wrong. Yet the town Paterson and the poem Paterson are part of the American scene. Williams is concerned with American virtues and values in the poem, although it is by no means only regional. Time

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[35]Davenport, op. cit., p. 186.

will show to what extent it is universal.

So, through the use of anecdotes and flashes of insight Williams sums up his America and reiterates one of the themes that has concerned him throughout his poetic life:

> Minds beaten thin
> by waste--among
> the working classes SOME sort
> of breakdown
> has occurred.[36]

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[36] Williams, op. cit., pp. 66-67.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

A reporter from a medical journal recently interviewed Dr. Williams and entitled his article on the visit "Physician Writer Finds Poetry in Patients."[1] A doctor, particularly a general practitioner, has the opportunity to meet many people from many walks of life, "usually in trouble and because of that more than usually revealing." The reporter therefore stressed what I have also tried to point out--that it is in his professional daily contact with people that Williams has found the material for his poetry, and from that contact comes his feeling for people.

Another part of Williams' art appears in those poems and stories which bring forward his belief in America and things American, which, I suggest, arises from his own family background. Ezra Pound perceived this, and in his usual emphatic way noted, "Carlos Williams has been determined to stand or sit as an American,"[2] because, of course, his parents were not

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[1] "Physician Writer Finds Poetry in Patients," Scope Weekly, December 12, 1956, p. 11.

[2] Ezra Pound, Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, ed. T.S. Eliot (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1952), p. 390.

native Americans. Williams' father was originally from England and his mother was originally from Puerto Rico; the poet therefore may have felt that he could do with some more "melting" into the "melting pot" that makes up the United States. Pound noted that Williams "claims American birth, but I strongly suspect that he emerged on shipboard just off Bedloe's Island and that his dark and serious eyes gazed up in their first sober contemplation at the Statue and its brazen and monstrous nightshirt."[3]

It is significant that during the years when most young American poets were migrating to Europe in the 1920's, Williams, except for a visit to Europe, continued to work and write in Rutherford, New Jersey. In other words, he not only believed in the spiritual health of America and wrote about it, but showed his belief by living in his country. He was able in a period of over forty years, to deliver some 2,000 babies and write nearly 3,000 poems, stories and plays[4] and still retain his "moral and human attractiveness."

Again it should be remembered that Williams' main poetic concern is with language, and that this thesis deals with his secondary interest, people.

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[3] Ibid.

[4] "Physician Writer Finds Poetry in Patients," op. cit., p. 11.

However, when he observes "Life Along the Passaic River," or points out the joy a poor old woman has in eating plums out of a paper bag, he remains in the tradition and footsteps of Whitman. He has faith in and is a supporter of American democracy. Perhaps this is connected with Williams' poetic technique, Objectivism. Rather than argue about the disintegration of his own person as T.S. Eliot did in his early work, Williams looks outward from a fact. His people and places are primarily facts. The back streets that the poor live in, their run-down houses, their persons even unto their "flat skulls with the unkempt black or blond hair," are facts. Millions of such persons inhabit the United States and Williams notices them--and ennobles them to a significant degree-by making them the subjects of his prose and poetry. Therein lies his contribution to American poetry.

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