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Century American Poetics

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2004,

— WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS —

(1883–1963)

With the exception of a few sojourns in Europe and an education pursued in New York City and Philadelphia, William Carlos Williams spent his life in the town of his birth—Rutherford, New Jersey. Yet his background was quite cosmopolitan. He was the son of William George Williams, a cultured businessman who was born in England and came to the United States with his mother at the age of five, but chose never to abandon his British citizenship. Because his father's work as an advertising manager for a perfume manufacturer required long stretches of travel abroad, the poet was raised in Rutherford by his British grandmother, Emily Dickinson Wellcome, and his mother, Raquel Hélène Rose Hoheb Williams, a woman of Basque, Spanish, Dutch, and Jewish ancestry whom his father had met in Puerto Rico. Although she acquired some English, she preferred to speak Spanish, especially at home, and to practice the French she had learned while studying art in Paris. Williams's interest in celebrating an American language whose vigor derives from actual speech was perhaps initiated in his childhood home listening intently to the blend of languages around him. Despite his later emphasis on his American identity, he imbibed significant doses of European culture during his childhood. In 1897, when Williams was fourteen, his mother took him and his younger brother to Europe for a year-long stay and sent them to private schools, first in Geneva and then in Paris.

After their return to the United States in 1899, Williams attended Horace Mann High School, a prestigious private school in New York City. Although Williams's parents enrolled him in a course of study that emphasized science, he excelled in his English courses, for which he read poetry from Chaucer to Tennyson and discovered the Romantics, especially John Keats, whose work he began to imitate. Along with Keatsian imitations, he also filled notebooks with long-lined, cadenced effusions in the style of Whitman: "I wrote my immortal thoughts in those books, whatever they were. If I had an opinion about things about me, I'd jot it down, and occasionally it would take the loose form of verse. I was reading Keats at the time. Keats was my favorite." The pleasure he found in writing determined the course he would take for the rest of his life. In addition to the career in medicine that his parents expected, he would become a poet.

1941

In 1902 he enrolled in the school of dentistry at the University of Pennsylvania but soon switched to the medical school. Even in the midst of his demanding studies, he continued to write. His commitment to poetry was encouraged by his new friend Ezra Pound, whom he met during his first semester. The friendship, though strained at times, lasted for sixty years until Williams's death. Pound introduced Williams to other poets, such as Hilda Doolittle (H. D.), and, above all, offered astringent criticism that helped Williams drop the nineteenth-century affectations clogging his early poetry. After finishing his course work at Penn in 1906, Williams interned in New York City for two years. Despite a grueling schedule, he produced a blank verse epic, modeled on Keats's *Endymion*. Although Williams never published his pseudo-Romantic epic, he subsidized a short collection simply entitled *Poems* (1909), containing twenty-seven poems, a third of them in blank verse, the rest in rhymed stanzas. After Williams sent him a copy of the book, Pound wrote back from London, declaring, "Individual, original it is not. Great art it is not. . . . There are fine lines in it, but nowhere I think do you add anything to the poets you have used as models. . . . You are out of touch." Urging him to update his reading, in subsequent letters Pound alerted Williams to the incipient Imagist movement. Williams soon changed his style so radically—going on to champion what Pound advocated in a 1913 letter as "the simple order of natural speech"—that he dumped the remaining copies of the book and never republished any of the poems. In old age he remarked that there was nothing "of the slightest value in the whole thin booklet—except the intent."

Williams's intent held firm through studies in pediatrics undertaken during the winter of 1909 and 1910 in Germany and through the work of establishing a private practice in Rutherford after his return. Even marriage in 1912 to Florence ("Flossie") Herman, and the birth of his two sons soon after, did not diminish his efforts. His poems appeared in several of the Imagist anthologies and in little magazines such as *Poetry*, *Others*, and the *Egoist*. His second book, *The Tempers* (1913), was transitional, but his third book, *Al Que Quiere!* (1917), established the parameters he would explore for the rest of his career: a style grounded not on traditional metrics but on the vigor of American speech and a celebration of the particular, of quotidian details that his critics would call antipoetic but that Williams saw as the essence of poetry; and an emphasis on the mind and the imagination.

Williams's lifelong fascination with painting, prompted by his mother's background in the arts and his own amateur forays into painting, carried over into his poetry. He later remarked that "because of my interest in painting, the Imagists appealed to me. It was an image that I was seeking, and when Pound came along with his drive for the image it appealed to me very strongly." His friendship with the artist Charles Demuth, whom he had met in Philadelphia, helped attune him to the Modernist revolution in painting, as did his visits to the 1913 Armory Show and New York galleries. His engagement with the work of painters such as Cézanne, Matisse, Duchamp, and the Cubists taught him to think of poetry not as representational, but as a form of design that forces readers to look at both the world and their own habits of perception differently. Thus, Williams's focus on "things" in his poetry (and his well-known aphorism "no ideas but in things") involves not static depiction, but active processes of observation: the mind in motion.

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Williams's work in medicine also nourished his poetry. In interviews and essays, he sometimes made analogies between the habits of observation he developed as a doctor and his aims as a poet, claiming that the poet's business is "not to talk in vague categories, but to write particularly, as a physician works, upon a patient, upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal." In the midst of a thriving medical practice—between house calls, hospital visits, seeing patients in his office, and delivering babies—he claimed time to write not only poetry, but also novels, short stories, essays, plays, experimental prose, and autobiography, publishing almost fifty books during his lifetime. In the introduction to his *The Autobiography* (1951) he described his method:

Five minutes, ten minutes, can always be found. I had my typewriter in my office desk. All I needed to do was pull up the leaf to which it was fastened and I was ready to go. I worked at top speed. If a patient came in at the door while I was in the middle of a sentence, bang would go the machine—I was a physician. When the patient left, up would come the machine. . . . Finally, after eleven at night, when the last patient had been put to bed, I could always find the time to bang out ten or twelve pages. In fact, I couldn't rest until I had freed my mind from the obsessions that had been tormenting me all day.

As Williams neared forty, he published two books of improvisatory, experimental prose, *Kora in Hell* (1920) and *The Great American Novel* (1923), a book of new poetry, *Sour Grapes* (1921), and *Spring and All* (1923), a remarkable series of poems interspersed with brusque, annunciatory, and sometimes contradictory prose meditations on his goals as an artist. Seeking "to refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live," he concluded that "there is but a single force—the imagination." Yet Williams also celebrated poetry's potential to "affirm reality," for he argued that the imagination's "unique power is to give created forms reality, actual existence." At the same time he stressed that the imagination does not "avoid reality, nor is it a description nor an evocation of objects or situations[;] . . . poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it—it affirms reality most powerfully." The *Spring and All* poems test these ideas. The urgency of Williams's voice, moreover, moves the poems forward through feeling, a passion for discovery similar to the enthusiasm he attributed in the essays of his next book, *In the American Grain* (1925), to the men who explored the New World.

Williams thought of himself as akin to those explorers, for he aimed to chart a "New World" in his poetry: American subjects and American speech. For him, dedication to American themes was a moral choice, and he set himself against the expatriate Modernism of T. S. Eliot, whom he thought had turned poetry in the wrong direction:

I had a violent feeling that Eliot had betrayed what I believed in. He was looking backward; I was looking forward. He was a conformist, with wit, learning I did not possess. He knew French,

Latin, Arabic, God knows what. I was interested in that. But I felt he had rejected America and I refused to be rejected. . . . I realized the responsibility that I must accept. . . . I had envisaged a new form of poetic composition, a form for the future.

Although Williams's opposition to Eliot sprung from profound philosophical and temperamental differences, it also arose, as Williams freely acknowledged, from professional jealousy. After *The Waste Land* (1922), critics had canonized Eliot as the premier Modernist poet, and Williams felt overlooked. But Williams's "violent reaction" was also grounded on his opposition to what he saw as Eliot's pessimism, dependence on European traditions, and adherence (even in his free verse) to an iambic norm.

During the Great Depression conditions worsened for Williams, as they did for most Americans. In the 1920s he had invested in the stock market, hoping that his profits would enable him to retire early. The crash of 1929 ended those hopes. As the depression deepened, his medical practice grew even more burdensome. He often waived his fees for patients who were unable to pay, and he had to put in additional hours to make ends meet. Like many writers of the era, he grew interested in the possibilities for political poetry, and he wrote a number of poems, such as "The Yachts," that implicitly attack class injustices in America. Yet he also drew fire in leftist journals for his refusal to commit himself unreservedly to radical causes, and he remained skeptical of poetry about public events. By the middle of the decade, just after he had turned fifty, he found new opportunities for publication. In 1934, the poet Louis Zukofsky arranged for the Objectivist Press to publish Williams's *Collected Poems 1921-1931*. Although the book appeared under the imprint of yet another small press, it gave Williams the chance both to consolidate his mature work and to receive homage from the Objectivists, a group of young writers led by Zukofsky, who considered Williams a crucial Modernist poet and credited him for inspiring their own poetry of concrete particulars. Only in 1938, however, when James Laughlin's New Directions press published *The Complete Collected Poems*, did Williams's work become widely available. "All my life I've been hoping to get a regular publisher to put my stuff out in a more or less uniform style," Williams wrote at the time. He found that publisher in Laughlin, who considered him the cornerstone of New Directions.

Among the many volumes that Williams published with New Directions was his long poem *Paterson*, which was released in five books, the first appearing in 1946, the last in 1958. Setting himself against *The Waste Land* and Pound's *Cantos*, yet also borrowing collage techniques from these two poems, Williams looked back to Whitman in hopes of writing an American epic both local and inclusive. His solution was to focus on a particular place, the city of Paterson, New Jersey, and to fuse that place with an Everyman figure, Dr. Paterson. Williams explained: "*Paterson* is a long poem in four parts—that 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—any city, all the details of which may be made to voice his most intimate convictions." Those details include not only the characteristically rapid movements of Williams's own verse and prose, but extracts from newspapers, historical documents, and private letters from friends.

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From a letter written to Richard Eberhart. Carlos Williams, ed. John C. Thirlwall (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 10.

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Williams struggled to create the right form not only for a long poem but also for a prosody (or "measure," as he preferred to call it) responsive to American language, for he associated traditional accentual syllabic prosody with British English. Throughout his career Williams argued that no verse is free and strove to articulate a prosodic system that matched the rhythms of American speech. Yet his impulse for invention and novelty chafed against his wish to develop a quantifiable system. As he aged and attracted followers, he increased his efforts to discover a specifically American prosody, and, in essays such as "The Poem as a Field of Action" (1948), he envisioned an elastic system that allowed room for change. While writing *Paterson*, he hit on a concept that he would call "the variable foot," a triadic, step-down line that first emerged in "The Descent," a poem that was originally part of Book 2 and that he fully developed in late poems such as "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower." Although the step-down line seems more a style of free verse than a new system of prosody, Williams's emphasis on process and motion, on capturing the subtleties of American speech, and on using the whole page as an active "field" of composition influenced a wide range of poets, including Zukofsky, George Oppen, Lorine Niedecker, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, and Robert Lowell.

Due in part to the advocacy of this new generation of poets, toward the end of his life Williams began to gain institutional recognition: honorary degrees, invitations to lecture, a book contract with Random House, the 1953 Bollingen Prize (shared with Archibald MacLeish), and the 1963 Pulitzer Prize, awarded posthumously for *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962). Yet his later years involved hardship. Forced to give up his medical practice after a series of debilitating strokes, Williams fought to continue writing, teaching himself to type with his left hand because his right hand was incapacitated. He was offered the post of poetry consultant to the Library of Congress in 1952, but the appointment was revoked after the librarian of Congress received protests from literary editors complaining about both Williams's purported communist sympathies and his public defense of Ezra Pound. His wife's devoted care during these difficult years also prompted the poet to feel intense remorse over extramarital affairs he had had during the course of their marriage. His late poems, published in *The Desert Music* (1954) and *Pictures from Brueghel* often contemplate renewal, both of love and of the power to write. These poems, the publication of a single-volume edition, *Paterson* (1963), and increased attention to his early lyrics contributed to the marked rise in Williams's literary fortunes after his death.



## A NEW MEASURE

I have never been one to write by rule, even by my own rules. Let's begin with the rule of counted syllables, in which all poems have been written hitherto. That has become tiresome to my ear.

From a letter written to Richard Eberhart. May 23, 1954. Published in *The Selected Letters of William S. Williams*.

Finally, the stated syllables, as in the best of present-day free verse, have become entirely divorced from the beat, that is the measure. The musical pace proceeds without them.

Therefore the measure, that is to say, the count, having got rid of the words, which held it down, is returned to the *music*.

The words, having been freed, have been allowed to run all over the map, "free," as we have mistakenly thought. This has amounted to no more (in Whitman and others) than no discipline at all.

But if we keep in mind the *tune* which the lines (not necessarily the words) make in our ears, we are ready to proceed.

By measure I mean musical pace. Now, with music in our ears the words need only be taught to keep as distinguished an order, as chosen a character, as regular, according to the music, as in the best of prose.

By its *music* shall the best of modern verse be known and the *resources* of the music. The refinement of the poem, its subtlety, is not to be known by the elevation of the words but—the words don't so much matter—by the resources of the *music*.

To give you an example from my own work—not that I know anything about what I have myself written:

(count):—not that I ever count when writing but, at best, the lines must be capable of being counted, that is to say, *measured*—(believe it or not).—At that I may, half consciously, even count the measure under my breath as I write.—

(approximate example)

- (1) The smell of the heat is boxwood
- (2) when rousing us
- (3) a movement of the air
- (4) stirs our thoughts
- (5) that had no life in them
- (6) to a life, a life in which

(or)

- (1) Mother of God! Our Lady!
- (2) the heart
- (3) is an unruly master:
- (4) Forgive us our sins
- (5) as we
- (6) forgive
- (7) those who have sinned against

Count a single beat to each numeral. You may not agree with my ear, but that is the way I count the line. Over the whole poem it gives a pattern to the meter that can be felt as a new measure. It gives resources to the ear which result in a language which we hear spoken about us every day.

1954

## THE POEM

Let's begin by quoting Mr. Auden you're no longer living in ancient

I'm going to say one thing to through that I've succeeded in m: as a field of action, at what pitch :

As Freud says bitterly in the f speaking of the early opposition to

—the aversion of scientific me learning something new

we shall learn that is a characterist will *copy* "the new"—but the tires old, disfigures every journal: I sai rather, avoiding thought, to return Anatole France put it in Freud's tin

It is next to impossible to bri into our language. But does anyon to break in half in our language? V quantitative character as against ou exhausted or even tried? I doubt it.

I offer you then an initiation, baked proposal—since I cannot fol but I do it with at least my eyes c presenting it as well as I can to you

I propose sweeping changes fre structure. So now you are beginning with the iambic pentameter as pre through with the measured quatrain stanza, the sonnet. More has been c been specifically named for what it that I can do here is to call attention t foot—pointing out the evidence of sc

At this point it might be profite subject from a new point of view) to tu it is not in the direct path of my esse matter of the poem. In this let me ac of the dream—as a fulfillment of the poem is a dream, a daydream of wi action and purposive action of a less

It has had in the past a varying gressively varying choice of subject n we are talking of the *recent* past.

Originally delivered as a lecture at the University of  
William Carlos Williams (New York: Random House)  
\* *Les savants ne sont pas curieux*: the scholars

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## THE POEM AS A FIELD OF ACTION

Let's begin by quoting Mr. Auden—(from *The Orators*): "Need I remind you that you're no longer living in ancient Egypt?"

I'm going to say one thing to you—for a week! And I hope to God when I'm through that I've succeeded in making you understand me. It concerns the poem as a field of action, at what pitch the battle is today and what may come of it.

As Freud says bitterly in the first chapter of his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, speaking of the early opposition to his theory:

—the aversion of scientific men to  
learning something new

we shall learn that is a characteristic quite as pronounced in literature—where they will *copy* "the new"—but the tiresome repetition of this "new," now twenty years old, disfigures every journal: I said a field of action. I can see why so many wish rather, avoiding thought, to return to the classic front of orthodox acceptance. As Anatole France put it in Freud's time, "*Les savants ne sont pas curieux.*"\*

It is next to impossible to bring over the quantitative Greek and Latin texts into our language. But does anyone ever ask *why* a Latin line in translation tends to break in half in our language? *Why* it cannot be maintained in its character, its quantitative character as against our accented verse? *Have all* the equivalents been exhausted or even tried? I doubt it.

I offer you then an initiation, what seems and what is actually only a half-baked proposal—since I cannot follow it up with proofs or even *final* examples—but I do it with at least my eyes open—for what I myself may get out of it by presenting it as well as I can to you.

I propose sweeping changes from top to bottom of the poetic structure. I said structure. So now you are beginning to get the drift of my theme. I say we are *through* with the iambic pentameter as presently conceived, at least for dramatic verse; through with the measured quatrain, the staid concatenations of sounds in the usual stanza, the sonnet. More has been done than you think about this though not yet been specifically named for what it is. I believe something can be said. Perhaps all that I can do here is to call attention to it: a revolution in the conception of the poetic foot—pointing out the evidence of something that has been going on for a long time.

At this point it might be profitable (since it would bring me back to my subject from a new point of view) to turn aside for a brief, very brief discussion (since it is not in the direct path of my essay) of the materials—that is to say, the subject matter of the poem. In this let me accept all the help I can get from Freud's theory of the dream—as a fulfillment of the wish—which I accept here holus-bolus. The poem is a dream, a daydream of wish fulfillment but not by any means a field of action and purposive action of a less high order because of that.

It has had in the past a varying subject matter—almost one might say a progressively varying choice of subject matter as you shall see—I must stress here that we are talking of the *recent* past.

Originally delivered as a lecture at the University of Washington in 1948. Collected in *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1954).

\**Les savants ne sont pas curieux.*

1954

And let me remind you here to keep in your minds the term reality as contrasted with phantasy and to tell you that the *subject matter* of the poem is always phantasy—what is wished for, realized in the “dream” of the poem—but that the structure confronts something else.

We may mention Poe’s dreams in a pioneer society, his dreams of gentleness and bliss—also, by the way, his professional interest in meter and his very successful experiments with form. Yeats’s subject matter of faery. Shakespeare—the butcher’s son dreaming of Caesar and Wolsey. No need to go on through Keats, Shelley to Tennyson. It is all, the subject matter, a wish for aristocratic attainment—a “spiritual” bureaucracy of the “soul” or what you will.

There was then a subject matter that was “poetic” and in many minds that is still poetry—and exclusively so—the “beautiful” or pious (and so beautiful) wish expressed in beautiful language—a dream. That is still poetry: full stop. Well, that was the world to be desired and the poets merely expressed a general wish and so were useful each in his day.

But with the industrial revolution, and steadily since then, a new spirit—a new *Zeitgeist* has possessed the world, and as a consequence new values have replaced the old, aristocratic concepts—which had a pretty seamy side if you looked at them like a Christian. A new subject matter began to be manifest. It began to be noticed that there could be a new subject matter and that that was not in fact the poem at all. Briefly then, money talks, and the poet, the modern poet has admitted new subject matter to his dreams—that is, the serious poet has admitted the whole armamentarium of the industrial age to his poems—

Look at Mr. Auden’s earlier poems as an example, with their ruined industrial background of waste and destruction. But even that is passing and becoming old-fashioned with the new physics taking its place. All this is a subject in itself and a fascinating one which I regret to leave, I am sorry to say, for a more pressing one.

Remember we are still in the world of fancy if perhaps disguised but still a world of wish-fulfillment in dreams. The poet was not an owner, he was not a money man—he was still only a poet; a wisher; a word man. The best of all to my way of thinking! Words are the keys that unlock the mind. But is that all of poetry? Certainly not—no more so than the material of dreams was phantasy to Dr. Sigmund Freud.

There is something else. Something if you will listen to many, something permanent and sacrosanct. The one thing that the poet has not wanted to change, the one thing he has clung to in his dream—unwilling to let go—the place where the time-lag is still adamant—is structure. Here we are unmovable. But here is precisely where we come into contact with reality. Reluctant, we waken from our dreams. And what is reality? How do we know reality? The only reality that we can know is MEASURE.

Now to return to our subject—the structure of the poem. Everything in the social, economic complex of the world at any time-sector ties in together—

(Quote Wilson on Proust—modern physics, etc.)

But it might at this time be a good thing to take up first what is spoken of as free verse.

How can we accept Einstein’s theory of relativity, affecting our very conception of the heavens about us of which poets write so much, without incorporating its essential fact—the relativity of measurements—into our own category of activity: the

poem. Do we think we stand England does? Relativity applies the world.

What, by this approach I am only to disengage the elements of new measure or a new way of measuring economic world in which we are always a different world from the present.

According to this conception insist. Imagism was not structural.

The impression I give is that it will be far-reaching in their effects (toward the task) is all that conceals.

What is it? I make a clear analysis of the verse. That it may possibly care—I have here to defend that care.

I hope you will pardon my definition: It may be said that I wish to condition, honoring it and serving it and not disfigurement—confirming.

Set the overall proposal of all the possibilities of depicting reality more than in the past—in order to or surmise that we do. Vocabulary by psychology and all its dependence more we have to have, in our day ratus. We are lacking in the means use of the products of chemistry I lacked. Our poems are not subtly the poem cannot let our feelings th

(Note: Then show (in what case) by a review of early twentieth

We seek profusion, the Mass—grasping at all kinds of things—as if only to look at it the better.

If any one man’s work lacks to artist, we might well think of the output. It is as though for the most need to build up a mass, a conglomerate them—Brazilian brilliants—that sh

Now when Mr. Eliot came along his blackbird’s voice to the flock, (over it for his selections) or 2. To ready distinction (to turn his back in what to him was the same language literature—a short cut, in short.



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so much, without incorporating its es-  
—into our own category of activity: the

poem. Do we think we stand outside the universe? Or that the Church of  
England does? Relativity applies to everything, like love, if it applies to anything in  
the world.

What, by this approach I am trying to sketch, what we are trying to do is not  
only to disengage the elements of a measure but to seek (what we believe is there) a  
new measure or a new way of measuring that will be commensurate with the social,  
economic world in which we are living as contrasted with the past. It is in many  
ways a different world from the past calling for a different measure.

According to this conception there is no such thing as "free verse" and so I  
insist. Imagism was not structural: that was the reason for its disappearance.

The impression I give is that we are about to make some discoveries. That they  
will be far-reaching in their effects.— This will depend on many things. My address  
(toward the task) is all that concerns me now: That we do approach a change.

What is it? I make a clear and definite statement—that it lies in the structure  
of the verse. That it may possibly lie elsewhere I do not for a moment deny or  
care—I have here to defend that only and that is my theme.

I hope you will pardon my deliberation, for I wish again to enter a short by-  
path: It may be said that I wish to destroy the past. It is precisely a service to tra-  
dition, honoring it and serving it that is envisioned and intended by my attack,  
and not disfigurement—confirming and *enlarging* its application.

Set the overall proposal of an enlarged technical means—in order to liberate  
the possibilities of depicting reality in a modern world that has seen more if not felt  
more than in the past—in order to be *able* to feel more (for we know we feel less,  
or surmise that we do. Vocabulary opens the mind to feeling). But modern in that  
by psychology and all its dependencies we *know*, for we have learned that to feel  
more we have to have, in our day, the means to feel *with*—the tokens, the appa-  
ratus. We are lacking in the means—the appropriate paraphernalia, just as modern  
use of the products of chemistry for *refinement* must have means which the past  
lacked. Our poems are not subtly enough made, the structure, the staid manner of  
the poem cannot let our feelings through.

(Note: Then show (in what detail I can) what we may do to achieve this end  
by a review of early twentieth-century literary accomplishments. Work done.)

We seek profusion, the Mass—heterogeneous—ill-assorted—quite breathless—  
grasping at all kinds of things—as if—like Audubon shooting some little bird, really  
only to look at it the better.

If any one man's work lacks the distinction to be expected from the finished  
artist, we might well think of the *profusion* of a Rabelais—as against a limited  
output. It is as though for the moment we should be profuse, we Americans; we  
need to build up a mass, a conglomerate maybe, containing few gems but bits of  
them—Brazilian brilliants—that shine of themselves, uncut as they are.

Now when Mr. Eliot came along he had a choice: 1. Join the crowd, adding  
his blackbird's voice to the flock, contributing to the conglomerate (or working  
over it for his selections) or 2. To go where there was already a mass of more  
ready distinction (to turn his back on the first), already an established literature  
in what to him was the same language (?) an already established place in world  
literature—a short cut, in short.

Stop a minute to emphasize our own position: It is *not* that of Mr. Eliot. We are making a modern bolus: That is our somewhat undistinguished burden; profusion, as, we must add in all fairness, against his distinction. His is a few poems beautifully phrased—in his longest effort thirty-five quotations in seven languages. We, let us say, are the Sermons of Launcelot Andrewes from which (in time) some selector will pick *one* phrase. Or say, the *Upanishad* that will contribute a single word! There are summative geniuses like that—they shine. We must value them—the extractors of genius—for what they do: extract. But they are there; we are here. It is not possible for us to imitate them. We are in a different phase—a new language—we are making the mass in which some other later Eliot will dig. We must *see* our opportunity and increase the hoard others will find to use. We must find our *pride* in *that*. We must have the pride, the humility and the thrill in the making. (Tell the story of Bramante and the building of the dome of the Duomo in Florence.)

The clearness we must have is first the clarity of knowing what we are doing—what we may do: Make anew—a reexamination of the means—on a fresh—basis. Not at *this* time an analysis so much as an accumulation. You couldn't expect us to be as prominent (as *read* in particular achievements—outstanding single poems). We're not doing the same thing. We're not putting the rose, the single rose, in the little glass vase in the window—we're digging a hole for the tree—and as we dig have disappeared in it.

(Note: Pound's story of my being interested in the loam whereas he wanted the finished product.)

(Note: Read Bridges—two short pieces in the anthology: 1. The Child 2. Snow.)

We begin to pick up what so far is little more than a feeling (a feeling entirely foreign to a Mr. E. or a Mr. P.—though less to them than to some others) that something is taking place in the accepted prosody or ought to be taking place. (Of course we have had Whitman—but he is a difficult subject—prosodically and I do not want to get off into that now.) It is similar to what must have been the early feelings of Einstein toward the laws of Isaac Newton in physics. Thus from being fixed, our prosodic values should rightly be seen as only relatively true. Einstein had the speed of light as a constant—his only constant—What have we? Perhaps our concept of musical time. I think so. But don't let us close down on that either at least for the moment.

In any case we as loose, disassociated (linguistically), yawping speakers of a new language, are privileged (I guess) to sense and so to seek to discover that possible thing which is disturbing the metrical table of values—as unknown elements would disturb Mendelyeev's table of the periodicity of atomic weights and so lead to discoveries.

And we had better get on the job and make our discoveries or, quietly, someone else will make them for us—covertly and without acknowledgment—(one acknowledges one's indebtedness in one's notes only to dead writers—preferably long dead!).

We wish to find an objective way at least of looking at verse and to redefine its elements; this I say is the theme (the radium) that underlies Bridges' experiments as it is the yeast animating Whitman and all the "moderns."

That the very project itself, qu consciousness, to a clear statement (Variegations) But one thing, a sense made is becoming apparent. For opened sense it gives us that catastrophe the human *mind*, in art, in the arts fully. But it is *possible*. That is what Or better, physics.

It appears, it disappears, a she catations affront us, all the gnomes h

Note: Proust: (Wilson) He l equivalent on the full scale fo this merely to show a possib science—intelligently consid

Now for an entirely new issu presents to me a deciding issue. H the context of this theme.

There is no modern poet so means. He can do anything—excep citizen of this country. He is truly, come here for nothing or, if you k that he *had* to come. Don't put it c first occur to you—that he hates E his career—his career as a writer, may disagree with me in some of t he is a writer to whom writing is h goes on, in the end absorbs *all* his l

Auden might have gone to Fra Rimbaud to Ceylon or Timbuctoo. a citizen. Now the crisis, the only poet, to that would be that he h means—something that England cc plicitly to find an answer—in ano has found it. I wonder why? Mini poets of our age and one of the mo

But when he writes an ode to a wrote them for the Olympic heroes spite of the subject, which you mig And a bad sign to me is always a re poet's work. You can put it down a sense, begins to devote himself to th to an end of his poetic means.

What does all this signify? That for it looked as if this were the plac instability in the language where i Mr. Eliot once said that no poetic c

That the very project itself, quite apart from its solutions, is not yet raised to consciousness, to a clear statement of purpose, is our fault. (Note: the little Mag: Variegations) But one thing, a semiconscious sense of a rending discovery to be made is becoming apparent. For one great thing about "the bomb" is the awakened sense it gives us that catastrophic (but why?) alterations are also possible in the human *mind*, in art, in the arts. . . . We are too cowed by our fear to realize it fully. But it is *possible*. That is what we mean. This isn't optimism, it is chemistry: Or better, physics.

It appears, it disappears, a sheen of it comes up, when, as its shattering implications affront us, all the gnomes hurry to cover up its traces.

Note: Proust: (Wilson) He has supplied for the first time in literature an equivalent on the full scale for the new theory of modern physics—I mention this merely to show a possible relationship—between a style and a natural science—intelligently considered.

Now for an entirely new issue: Mr. Auden is an interesting case—in fact he presents to me a deciding issue. His poems are phenomenally worth studying in the context of this theme.

There is no modern poet so agile—so impressive in the use of the poetic means. He can do anything—except one thing. He came to America and became a citizen of this country. He is truly, I should say, learned. Now Mr. Auden didn't come here for nothing or, if you know Auden, without a deep-seated conviction that he *had* to come. Don't put it down to any of the superficial things that might first occur to you—that he hates England, etc. He came here because of a crisis in his career—his career as a writer, as a poet particularly I should say. Mr. Auden may disagree with me in some of this but he will not disagree, I think, when I say he is a writer to whom writing is his life, his very breath which, as he or any man goes on, in the end absorbs *all* his breath.

Auden might have gone to France or to Italy or to South America or following Rimbaud to Ceylon or Timbuctoo. No! He came to the United States and became a citizen. Now the crisis, the only crisis which could drive a man, a distinguished poet, to that would be that he had come to an end of some sort in his poetic means—something that England could no longer supply, and that he came here implicitly to find an answer—in another language. As yet I see no evidence that he has found it. I wonder why? Mind you, this is one of the cleverest, most skilled poets of our age and one of the most versatile and prolific. He can do anything.

But when he writes an ode to a successful soccer season for his school, as Pindar wrote them for the Olympic heroes of his day—it is in a classic meter so successful in spite of the subject, which you might think trivial, that it becomes a serious poem. And a bad sign to me is always a religious or social tinge beginning to creep into a poet's work. You can put it down as a general rule that when a poet, in the broadest sense, begins to devote himself to the *subject matter* of his poems, *genre*, he has come to an end of his poetic means.

What does all this signify? That Auden came here to find a new way of writing—for it looked as if this were the place where one might reasonably expect to find that instability in the language where innovation would be at home. Remember even Mr. Eliot once said that no poetic drama could any longer be written in the iambic

pentameter, but that perhaps jazz might offer a suggestion. He even wrote something about "My Baby," but it can't have been very successful for we seldom hear any more of it.

I wish I could enlist Auden in an attack, a basic attack upon the whole realm of structure in the poem. I have tried but without success so far. I think that's what he came here looking for, I think he has failed to find it (it may be constitutional with him). I think we have disappointed him. Perhaps he has disappointed himself. I am sure the attack must be concentrated on the *rigidity of the poetic foot*.

This began as a basic criticism of Auden's poems—as a reason for his coming to America, and has at least served me as an illustration for the *theory* upon which I am speaking.

Look at his poems with this in view—his very skill seems to defeat him. It need not continue to do so in my opinion.

Mr. Eliot, meanwhile, has written his *Quartets*. He is a very subtle creator—who knows how to squeeze the last ounce of force out of his material. He has done a good job here though when he speaks of developing a new manner of writing, new manners following new manners only to be spent as soon as that particular piece of writing has been accomplished—I do not think he quite knows what he is about.

But in spite of everything and completely discounting his subject matter, his *genre*, Eliot's experiments in the *Quartets* though limited, show him to be more American in the sense I seek than, sad to relate, Auden, with his English ears and the best will in the world, will ever be able to be.

It may be the tragedy of a situation whose ramifications we are for the moment unable to trace: That the American gone over to England might make the contribution (or assist in it) which the Englishman come to America to find it and with the best will in the world, is unable to make.

Thus the Gallicized American, D'A——, according to Edmund Wilson in *Axel's Castle*, with the iambic pentameter in his brain, was able, at the beginning of the symbolist movement in Paris to break the French from their six-syllable line in a way they had of themselves never been able to do. There is Ezra Pound also to be thought of—another entire thesis—in this respect. I see that I am outlining a year's or at least a semester's series of lectures as I go along.

Now we come to the question of the origin of our discoveries. Where else can what we are seeking arise from but speech? From speech, from American speech as distinct from English speech, or presumably so, if what I say above is correct. In any case (since we have no body of poems comparable to the English) from what we *hear* in America. Not, that is, from a study of the classics, not even the American "Classics"—the *dead* classics which—may I remind you, we have *never heard* as living speech. No one has or can *hear* them as they were written any more than we can *hear* Greek today.

I say this once again to emphasize what I have often said—that we here must *listen* to the language for the discoveries we hope to make. This is not the same as the hierarchic or tapeworm mode of making additions to the total poetic body: the mode of the schools. This will come up again elsewhere.

That being so, what I have presumed but not proven, concerning Auden's work, can we not say that there are many more *hints* toward literary composition in the American language than in English—where they are inhibited by classicism and "good taste." (Note the French word *tête*, its derivation from "pot.") I'd put

it much stronger, but let's not be important things pressing for atten-

In the first place, we have to *Language*, which American language dent (the *formative* years—very im- room but his own tongue outside of

We mean, then, American—ti Europe *in their ears*—willy-nilly—v presumably Mr. Auden came here t hints toward newness of which I h- tory but these things offer a point ment lies before us at this point.

I said "hints toward compos- guage. What it does mean, I think Primarily it means to me opportun making of the poem.

It is a chance to attack the lan- guage is serious in a way that Engli serious—in a way no dialect could t ing phase, the productive phase—a Dante, Rabelais in their day.

It is there, in the mouths of th- ing new means for expanded poss- structure—the most important of a

To the English, English is Engli- us this is not so, not so *if* we prove i he wins!! But that leads to mere cor- hash is *not* the business.

A whole semester of studies is graduate studies—with theses—ex- too much and advocate the exper- God's creation, the objective is not- There were enough experiments it s first instance but that was not the c-

And again let me emphasize that- ognized for years—here *and* in Engla- late and *use* the underlying element o- to speak outright. Do you not see no- all these years? And why it has been s- does not admit of the slightest structu-

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it much stronger, but let's not be diverted at this point, there are too many more  
 important things pressing for attention.

In the first place, we have to say, following H. L. Mencken's *The American  
 Language*, which American language? Since Mencken pointed out that the American stu-  
 dent (the *formative* years—very important) is bilingual, he speaks English in the class-  
 room but his own tongue outside of it.

We mean, then, American—the language Mr. Eliot and Mr. Pound carried to  
 Europe *in their ears*—willy-nilly—when they left here for their adventures and which  
 presumably Mr. Auden came here to find—perhaps too late. A language full of those  
 hints toward newness of which I have been speaking. I am not interested in the his-  
 tory but these things offer a point worth making, a rich opportunity for develop-  
 ment lies before us at this point.

I said "hints toward composition." This does not mean realism in the lan-  
 guage. What it does mean, I think, is ways of managing the language, new ways.  
 Primarily it means to me opportunity to expand the structure, the basis, the actual  
 making of the poem.

It is a chance to attack the language of the poem seriously. For to us our lan-  
 guage is serious in a way that English is not. Just as to them English is serious—too  
 serious—in a way no dialect could be. But the dialect is the mobile phase, the chang-  
 ing phase, the productive phase—as their languages were to Chaucer, Shakespeare,  
 Dante, Rabelais in their day.

It is there, in the mouths of the living, that the language is changing and giv-  
 ing new means for expanded possibilities in literary expression and, I add, basic  
 structure—the most important of all.

To the English, English is England: "History is England," yodels Mr. Eliot. To  
 us this is not so, not so *if* we prove it by writing a poem built to refute it—otherwise  
 he wins!! But that leads to mere controversy. For us rehash of rehash of hash of re-  
 hash is *not* the business.

A whole semester of studies is implicit here. Perhaps a whole course of post-  
 graduate studies—with theses—extending into a life's work!! But before I extol  
 too much and advocate the experimental method, let me emphasize that, like  
 God's creation, the objective is not experimentation but *man*. In our case, poems!  
 There were enough experiments it seems, from what natural history shows, in that  
 first instance but that was not the culmination. The poem is what we are after.

And again let me emphasize that this is something that has been going on, unrec-  
 ognized for years—here *and* in England. What we are at is to try to discover and iso-  
 late and *use* the underlying element or principle motivating this change which is trying  
 to speak outright. Do you not see now why I have been inveighing against the sonnet  
 all these years? And why it has been so violently defended? Because it is a form which  
 does not admit of the slightest structural change in its composition.