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Introduction

What's in a name? It was a matter of some importance to Wystan Hugh Auden, Edward Estlin Cummings, Thomas Stearns Eliot, Robert Lee Frost, Marianne Craig Moore, Ezra Loomis Pound and William Carlos Williams. Only one of these specified that a full name appear on title pages. With that single exception, they wished to distinguish themselves from such turn-of-the-century lightweights as Pauline Florence Brower, John Vance Cheney, Theodore Eugene Oertel and Anna Spencer Twitchell. Wallace Stevens had no middle name and probably never entertained thoughts of nominal streamlining. Hilda Doolittle, also lacking a middle name, went one better by letting Ezra Pound reduce her signature to initials. "H.D." saw the advantage in taking a new name that did not specify a gender. But the choice also signaled a commitment to a new kind of poetry.

By 1915 it was understood that the reduction of one's name to something less than the full panoply of the birth certificate meant that you were casting your lot with the revolutionary poets. Williams in fact seems to have anticipated the practice in his first publications. Christopher J. MacGowan notes that Williams contributed four line drawings to his 1906 medical school yearbook under the signature "W. C. Williams" (1984: 3). Three years later, the cover of his privately published *Poems* advertised the author once again as "W. C. Williams." By 1912, however, the name he offered to the readers of the *Poetry Review* in London was "William Carlos Williams."[1] Williams gave full measure to his name although the trend among his peers was toward condensation. Why?

For Rod Townley, the answer lies in Williams's need to affirm a particular element in his nature:

> His Spanish heritage seemed to represent to him that streak of wildness, of Dionysian abandon, which his poetry so much needed, and which Williams so much feared. . . . Between the two bland Williams's of his

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> name there lurks a Carlos, a "dark Spanish beauty," as the 1906 Medical School yearbook, *The 'Scope*, called Williams. (Townley, 1975: 65)

If Townley has it right, then Williams chose to identify himself as both Anglo-Saxon and Spanish, and thereby announce that element of "wildness" to the world. His stipulation of his full name, however, created a context that tames – or restrains – that wildness. Had Williams wished merely to call attention to the clash between the two elements of his identity, it would have been sufficient to present himself to the world as "Carlos Williams." The use of his full name allows him to use the outmoded form as a vehicle for publishing his "dark" side.

Williams's tinkering with his name was a characteristic practice. To put it simply, he showed a disinclination to be categorized. The "distaste for lingering" he detected as the motivating force behind the work of Marianne Moore applies to himself as well. His manifest distaste for conventional categories – whether found in culture, social relations, family life or art – caused Williams to sidle away from them. The particular form his avoidance often took was that which we find in his choice of name. That form is a compromise that – while indebted to two contrary approaches – moves him outside their range. In the case of his name, he recognized that the stodginess of a full name was one customary trap but that the rebelliousness of overemphasizing his alien, Spanish heritage could be interpreted as an equally conventional gesture.

Such observations may seem absurdly simple. Yet the reasons for this compromise were not at all simple, and the working out of similar ones in his poetry was extraordinarily complex. My purpose in this study is to examine the hitherto neglected and unnoticed convolutions that developed as Williams departed from convention. The result is, I think, a reading which ties together aspects of his art that hitherto have been separated as intrinsically and unavoidably disparate.

It has long been common among critics of Williams's work to note the paradoxical and contradictory nature of the man. By and large, however, though critics feel obliged to note his characteristic doubleness and fragmentation, their observation of them has been cursory. They regard it, to be sure, as an essential element of his character, but somewhat less important in interpreting his art. For critics who have a particular slant on Williams, especially those who have studied his indebtedness to the visual arts and to contemporary industrial and technological developments, it helps explain why he turned to these arts and sciences rather than continuing in a strictly literary tradition.

Part of the argument of this book is that Williams criticism has not gone far enough in recognizing the uses Williams saw for contradiction. Chapter 1 presents Williams as someone who habitually thought in terms

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of conflicting impulses. My contention is that he began to acquire his own voice as a poet when he recognized that he could be a vehicle for contending voices. Williams consciously understood how valuable the quandaries in which he found himself could be. As Ann Fisher-Wirth suggests:

> Tension, frustration, and a sense of loss (which he calls "damnation") were the necessary conditions of his creativity. At a fairly early age, he learned this fact about himself, and therefore deliberately did not make decisions that would give him a false sense of possession or force him into one camp or another, though the pressures on him and within him to do so were great. (1989: 24)[2]

I argue not only that Williams understood that these were "necessary conditions of his creativity," but that they are the defining features of his early poetry.

My reading of Williams departs from previous examinations of the early poetry in the emphasis it places on the poems as expressions of Williams's personal struggles with himself, his parents, his domestic role and his social position. This prompted one reader of the manuscript to ask, "Can we justify reading all of WCW's poems so literally?" Of course we need not read every one of his poems literally, but there is an advantage to interpreting many of the early ones in this way. Such a reading at least has the merit of connecting the poems with Williams's particular circumstances, of grounding them in his local facts, a procedure that Williams himself repeatedly indicated was his aim. The poem "Great Mullen" is a case in point. Though John Thirlwall noted – on Williams's authority – that the poem was about a "fight with Floss,"[3] subsequent commentators have either passed it by or thrown up their hands in despair. " 'Great Mullen,' for instance, starts beautifully," says Rod Townley, "but later it becomes so querulously obscure that the reader feels quite left out" (1975: 131). In fact, attention to the poem as a record of a quarrel between Williams and his wife is the necessary first step toward properly estimating the poem. Only after we have learned that the argument concerns Williams's extramarital proclivities can we appreciate the metaphorical dance of spousal contention, as I show in Chapter 2.

A "literal" reading also helps to indicate the close parallel between Williams's attitude toward, say, his marriage and traditional metaphors. Or to put it another way, a "literal" reading permits us to see how similar was Williams's attitude toward such seemingly disparate institutions. Thus, the reader should not look on the first three chapters and the last three as divorced (the former covering content and theme, the latter covering style). Instead, it may be more helpful to think of the last three

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chapters as displaying stylistic postures adopted by Williams that are much the same as the thematic postures evident in the first three.

It is my intent to demonstrate how Williams's early poems manifest themselves as arenas for the expression of tension. At the same time, it is also a study of the mechanics of these tensions. For Williams does not simply pit one opposite against another in his poems, but usually manages to suggest ways in which seemingly contrary forms are able to reach a partial – though never a complete – accommodation.

At this point some examples might be in order. For our test cases we will take two of his best-known short poems, "The Great Figure" and "The Red Wheelbarrow."

"The Great Figure" recalls the fleeting glimpse Williams has of the number 5 on a fire truck as it speeds through Manhattan. Unlike F. Scott Fitzgerald, who through the medium of Nick Carraway offers the reader multiple reasons for terming Gatsby "great," Williams supplies no clues as to why this gold figure on a red background merits that adjective. The poem notes that the number passes "unheeded" by the crowd; there is even a faint suggestion that this number has lost its rightful hold on our attention just as (in Williams's favorite classical myth) Kore has been lost to the underworld: both number and goddess are obscured in the "dark city." In the most advanced city in the world, simple numbers go by unheeded, even though number itself is at the basis of modern civilization. The tension in the poem, then, is between the neglected exemplar of the truth that without number not only civilization but the structure of the universe would collapse, and the hurrying modern minds around it that forget the essential numbers that make their lives possible. The figure is "great," therefore, because of its absolute necessity. It is "great" in that it humbly and quietly performs a service much more essential than that of extinguishing fires.[4]

If the contrast in "The Great Figure" is between the hurrying, modern, urban scene and ancient, pervasive and indispensable number, what are we to make of "The Red Wheelbarrow"? We are back in the neighborhood of Rutherford, or perhaps any rural location. Chickens and wheelbarrows are found in proximity in many parts of the world, though they would not be found in the middle of Greenwich Village. But numbers and the red wheelbarrow do have one thing in common: both are elementary in the sense that civilization depends on them. The wheelbarrow is one of the simplest machines, combining in its form the wheel and the inclined plane, two of the five simple machines known to Archimedes. Just as civilization depends on number, civilization depends on simple machines – both in themselves and in their increasingly complex combinations. "So much depends upon" the wheelbarrow in its service not only through the centuries, but as a form whose components

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are indispensable to the functioning of a highly industrialized civilization. We can identify two contrasts in the poem. One is between the latest advances in machine technology and the continuing but overlooked importance of elementary machines.[5] The other is between the universal and age-old scene depicted in the poem and the radically new free verse form in which it exists.[6] I shall have more to say about this second contrast in Chapter 6.

The comparison of these two poems allows us to see that in one important way they are similar. Both call our attention to "elementary" objects in the landscape, whether it be urban or rural, but do so in the context of a new kind of poetry. In short, both poems manage the reconciliation of things as old as civilization itself with the newest form of poetry. Similarly, Williams balances the "dark" Spanish side of his heritage with a concession to the seemingly antiquated practice of presenting yourself to the reading public with a tripartite name. Williams avoids a commitment either to the new or the old by blending them.

An understanding of Williams's art of compromise leads us to a more subtle appreciation of the whole range of his work, including his critical prose. It has long been customary for critics to point out how tangled his thoughts became when he attempted to theorize. Even Williams's admirers seem to regret that he was not magisterial, profound and comprehensive in his critical essays. Behind the distress we feel when faced with much of Williams's critical prose lurks the example of T. S. Eliot. Now *there* was a critic. Yet we are wrong in assuming that Williams was trying to write like Eliot and failed, or that he even wanted to emulate Eliot's example.

Carl Rapp points to a useful way of thinking about Williams's critical prose when he notes that "though he generally shied away from using terms like 'God,' he was still impelled to acknowledge the ultimate source of his creative power in language unmistakably associated with religious mysticism" (1984: 24). Most writers on Williams duly note that his mother was an amateur medium, and most indicate that Williams was embarrassed by the unpredictable fits of spiritual enlargement that were visited upon her. No one has seen a connection between the contorted and mystical language Williams adopts in the crucial moments of his prose and the language of spiritualism. This failure to see the connection between his mother and his odd explanations about the gist of poetry is perhaps due to the tendency of some critics to view his parents as representing values Williams was eager to repudiate.[7] Yet other critics have seen that Williams never completely rejected the values of his mother and father. The most likely answer is that critics have reacted to Williams's diction the way he reacted to his mother's unpredictable possessions; it has been too embarrassing to entertain the thought that a

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respectable Modernist poet could have found the language of spiritualism useful: better to call it "mysticism," a term with a more respectable pedigree. "Spiritualism" to literary critics tends to evoke the nineties, Yeats and the Order of the Golden Dawn, an era on the verge of the Modern but not quite there. But Williams's spiritualism is American, democratic and (to use Hugh Kenner's term) homemade. In adopting it, Williams selects a language that is faithful to the local rather than starting from the universal, that is associated with women rather than men and that serves as a contrasting language to the scholarship in English that was predominant in the universities during the first third of the century.[8] Williams's critical prose does not represent a failure of terminology or a distressing tendency toward muddy thinking; rather it attempts to reinvigorate criticism with a language commonly regarded as antipathetic to cultivated discourse.[9]

If Williams's art is the art of evasions and compromise, the study of his art must be an examination of the strategies and negotiations that direct evasion and compromise. To some extent that has been the main direction taken by Williams criticism since Bram Djikstra's *Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams: The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech* (1969/1978). In showing how fruitful it could be to read Williams in light of the visual arts, Djikstra inspired two other books that proceeded to elaborate this approach: William Marling's *William Carlos Williams and the Painters, 1909–1923* (1982) and Christopher J. MacGowan's *William Carlos Williams's Early Poetry: The Visual Arts Background* (1984). All three works admirably demonstrate the extent to which Williams seized on developments in the visual arts to vivify his poetry. The next turn in Williams criticism was to stress technological influence. Cecelia Tichi's *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* (1987) and Lisa M. Steinman's *Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets* (1987) both regarded the effect of science and technology on Williams. The limitation of such approaches is that they inevitably tend to portray one aspect of a multifaceted artist. The Williams we get from such studies tends to be lopsided. What view of Williams as a whole poet then are we aiming for?

In noting that Williams dedicated *The Tempers* to his mother's brother, Carlos Hoheb, Rod Townley adds that Uncle Carlos "represented . . . the whole man Williams wanted to become, in whom Heaven and Hell, Apollo and Dionysus, scientist and poet, German and Spaniard are finally reconciled" (1975: 66). This depiction of Williams as a conglomeration of widely differing elements echoes a view held by Marsden Hartley, who in a 1923 letter to Alfred Stieglitz, remarked, "I never saw so many defined human beings in one being."[10] There are indeed contending elements in Williams's personality, yet to argue that Williams wanted to

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create an identity that would hold them in balance may be to suggest that the art of compromise we have mentioned is the art of subtracting some portion of each element so that all may comfortably rub together. It is as if we were to say that each element should be partly crippled so that all may be equal. But did Williams envision this sort of balance as constituting a harmonious personality? The negotiation that informed both his relations with other people and the relation between elements in his poetry might be better described as one of dynamic change. His conception of his own identity supposes a rapid alteration of selves such as are possible in cases of multiple personality. Or to use another of his observations about the work of Marianne Moore, what is valuable in personality or in art "can be held firm only by moving rapidly."[11] Indeed, Williams's interest in collaborating with other people – most extensively with Louis Zukofsky – in the composition of literary works suggests that he was not bound to the concept of the sovereign self as author.

Carl Rapp has shown how Williams, in his search for a "new measure," consistently and consciously pushed the possibility of discovering that measure into the indefinite future.[12] Nevertheless, Williams needed a modicum of measure while he pursued the search for that "final" measure he knew he should not find. Though he often needed to be in transition, he could not do without the containment and structure provided by restrictive measures (metric, familial, literary). Equal emphasis has to be given to the flight resulting from the impulse toward a still undiscovered mode and the fixed security inherent in "measure."

It is therefore partly, but not wholly, just to characterize Williams's work as a "balance of antagonisms" or "antagonistic cooperation."[13] This suggests that Williams's art is fundamentally neoclassical. The model I propose for Williams is one in which there are sometimes dominant and subordinate elements – scenarios in which the elements, though equal, alternate to our attention within the field of the poem. What makes Williams a greater poet than such contemporaries as John Gould Fletcher, Alfred Kreymborg, Maxwell Bodenheim – whose free verse superficially resembles Williams's – is that the tensions of opposing elements are greater in his poems, and his manipulation of them is constantly inventive. To demonstrate what I mean by "constantly inventive," consider a final example – the poem that Williams identified as his first:[14]

A black, black cloud
flew over the sun
driven by fierce flying
rain.

If this active little poem came with a moral tag attached, it might have been a poem by Stephen Crane. But Williams is content with simply

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depicting the frenzy of the storm. Critics have noted that the poem anticipates Williams's mature style, with its dearth of punctuation, freedom from the pentameter and lack of capitalization at the beginning of each line. Yet these deviations from poetic convention are set on a familiar grid – familiar, that is, to generations of schoolchildren who have learned to diagram sentences. The poem's first line contains the subject with its attendant modifiers – the repeated adjective "black." Line 2 begins with the predicate (the verb "flew") and continues with a prepositional phrase modifying that predicate (i.e., an adverbial phrase). Line 3 offers first a participle ("driven") modifying "cloud," then another prepositional phrase for whose conclusion we must wait until the last line. In short, we have here a poem whose allegiance to syntactic neatness is at odds with a tendency toward dissolution.[15] This tension is reflected in the objects named in the poem: the eternal, immutable sun and the transient, dynamic storm.

The poem also exhibits a tension in the tendency of the adjectives and participles to draw our attention away from the core of subject and predicate ("cloud / flew") despite the core's refusal to be anything less than a coherent sentence. Williams also relies on poetic form to fracture the prose sentence. Note that if these words were written out as a sentence, the subject and predicate would be in proximate relationship. But the line break separates them. Similarly, the removal of "rain" to a line by itself fractures the prepositional phrase of which it is a part. The tension in the poem between stasis in syntactical structure and the torsions caused by line breaks parallels the tension of images within the poem: sun versus storm.

This sentence's determination to stay a sentence despite ramifying additions is the secret drama of the poem. The clue to the secret is in the ordering of grammar and syntax. Line 1 offers the complete and single subject with its attendant modifiers. Line 2 offers the predicate but with the added complication of a prepositional phrase. The form of the poem grows more complex – or wild – as the poem continues, but not so wild that it cannot be tamed before the period – "rain" on a line by itself? Enough is enough, and the period puts a stop to the threat that the sentence/poem will escape conventional formal limitations. Evasion of regularity proceeds to the verge of chaos but is stopped short.

Williams's commentary on this early effort is worth noting: "The joy I felt, the mysterious, soul-satisfying joy that swept over me at that moment was only mitigated by the critical comment which immediately followed it: How could the clouds be driven by the rain? Stupid" (A, 47). The reaction – a tension in the afterthought between "soul-satisfying joy" and "critical comment" – after composition echoes the tensions within the poem itself. One point Williams does not make, but we must,

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is that the poem does not mention wind. If it did, the poem would be logically correct but would rob the poet of joy. For his joy lies in smashing (or perhaps the better word would be "evading") logic and thus escaping the conventional phrase "driven by the wind." The evasion of the ordinary and the substitution of something deviant was a form of rebellion Williams was to practice repeatedly in his art.

He was, however, rebellious only to the point at which people would begin to call him a rebel. Breaking up convention to that extent would simply land him in another conventional bag – that of being labeled a radical. Williams learned in his early years that the truly free spaces for him were the crevices between conventional discourses. There, as we shall see, is where his poems grew.

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Dr. Williams and Mr. Hyde

Williams's lyrics are frequently preoccupied with confinement. In the 1909 *Poems,* for example, "On a Proposed Trip South" expresses the poet's dissatisfaction with the season (winter) and his joy at the prospect of a trip to a warmer climate: "truth to tell I tremble with delight / At thought of such unheralded reprieve" (CP1, 22). Of course, the lyric poem has traditionally been useful for poets lamenting their particular circumstances and longing for a wider, happier venue, yet the variety and range of Williams's dissatisfactions are somewhat unusual. In the last of the 1909 *Poems,* "Hymn to Perfection," he even invokes a new god to liberate him from imprisonment:

> For thee, O Perfection, great ruler,
> Chief God of all monarchs, I shatter
> The stillness of heaven; awaken,
> Like waves on an ocean which scatter
> A widening tempest, the uproar.
>
> And cry who will, "Pile the bare mountains,
> All rock, in gigantic confusion!
> Aye, let every desperate bellow
> Of sea, earth and sky in collusion
> From tripling trumpet be blasted
> Upon the huge pillar! Profusion
> Of space so engirds thee, as ever,
> Thou wouldst hold undisrupted seclusion."
>
> But not I! One with man, yet immortal;
> For me hast thou built no constriction.
> This heart doth outvie the weak eagle.
> Not sight so o'errides all restriction.
> Then hail! thou great God, from my woodlands
> I sing, and Thou calm'st my affliction!