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978-1-107-09515-1 - The Cambridge Companion To William Carlos Williams

Edited by Christopher MacGowan

Excerpt

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I

CHRISTOPHER MACGOWAN

Introduction: the lives of William Carlos Williams

William Carlos Williams might have led the life of a small-town doctor – one whose career spanned some important advances in medicine and whose practice was impacted by two world wars, a deadly influenza epidemic, and a depression so severe that many of his patients could not afford to pay him – ending with a few years of retirement from medicine after successfully handing over his practice. Williams did lead this life. But at the same time he published more than forty books, and was part of a New York avant-garde that included such figures as Marcel Duchamp, Alfred Stieglitz, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore. He knew Hilda Doolittle before she became H. D., and had a lifelong, if sometimes turbulent, correspondence with Ezra Pound. His work was well known to the expatriates who frequented Sylvia Beach's bookshop in Paris in the 1920s well before his own visit there in 1924. He was friends with painters Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, Charles Sheeler, and Ben Shahn, and purchased Demuth and Hartley's work when their buyers were few. He knew and corresponded with novelists Ford Madox Ford and Nathanael West, with critic Kenneth Burke, and poet Louis Zukofsky. He won the first National Book Award and a posthumous Pulitzer Prize; was a member of the Academy of Arts and Letters; was a mainstay for years, along with Pound, of James Laughlin's *New Directions*; and in his last decade was the subject of pilgrimages to his suburban New Jersey house by such figures as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gregory Corso. He corresponded with Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley, and Robert Lowell, was required reading at Charles Olson's Black Mountain College, and remains today an acknowledged influence upon many contemporary poets.

Williams was fortunate in some of his early contacts during his student years at the University of Pennsylvania, the years when he met Pound, H. D., and Demuth. He was also spared the intellectual isolation of so many American poets of the previous generation thanks to the reductions in the cost of paper and printing that made possible such little magazines as *Poetry*

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and *The Little Review* in Chicago, *The Egoist* in London, and the magazines that Williams himself would help edit, *Others* and *Contact*. Thanks to such little magazines the latest examples of modern writing and debate on two continents could be delivered to any subscriber's mailbox. The physical location of Rutherford, New Jersey, where Williams lived his whole life, also contributed to the fusion of his two careers. Rutherford is a half-hour train or bus ride from New York City. As in Williams's day, the city's skyscrapers are still visible on the horizon across the New Jersey meadowland swamps, despite the encroachment of a century's development. The resources of the city, its galleries, performances, and avant-garde salons were available to him any afternoon or evening when there were no office hours. Important too was the sophisticated, multicultural background of Williams's family. His brother Edgar went on to become a notable architect and urban planner, a recipient of the prestigious Prix de Rome. His Puerto Rican mother had studied painting in Paris, and his English father's sales position involved extended trips to Latin America. Spanish and French, as well as English, were spoken in the home and Williams published translations in both languages.

Williams determined early on a career that would unite his medical and writing interests. There were a few periods in the years that followed when he would regret the time and energy that medicine took away from his writing: the interruptions, the middle of the night phone calls, and even the medical bureaucracy that he had to work within. But much more often he recognized that his role as a doctor gave him the access to lives that would otherwise remain unknown and unrecorded. Readers familiar only with the anthology pieces on "things," a red wheelbarrow or a dish of plums, may be surprised at the dramas of ordinary lives that fill Williams's poems, stories, and novels.

Williams's earliest writing ambitions were conventionally literary and centered on theater. Writing plays would remain an interest, from his involvement with the University of Pennsylvania's Mask and Wig Club and plays put on locally in Rutherford, to later plays – one of which, *Many Loves*, ran successfully off Broadway when produced by Julian Beck and Judith Melina's Living Theater in 1959. But with his efforts to get a play produced in New York coming to naught, poetry increasingly gained Williams's attention. He liked to remember that Whitman was a first influence, but an early, unpublished epic, "Philip and Oradie," owes more to his admiration for Keats. Williams paid for his first book of verse, *Poems*, to be published in 1909, and arranged for its distribution through a local stationary store. The poems display a familiar late Romantic style that piles up inversions, and features such mainstays of magazine verse at the turn of the century as fruitful bees, a southern land of plenty, and twittering "nestlings." Poetry

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must be “poesy,” while a shady tree by a river is “a leafy bay.” Pound, now starting to make important literary connections in London, sent Williams a frank response upon receiving a copy, telling his friend that he needed to modernize himself – and sending the first of what would be more than forty years of reading lists. These lists were initially crucial for Williams, but eventually he found them wrong-headed and patronizing. Such a list from Pound would appear as one of Paterson’s found objects four decades later.

Over the next few years, as Williams established his medical practice, married, and started a family, he did modernize his poetry. Pound helped again by steering his poems toward publication in London, and putting him in touch with the Grantwood, New Jersey, colony of artists, who included Man Ray, and most importantly Alfred Kreymborg – whose contacts introduced Williams to the avant-garde literary and visual arts world in New York and Chicago. Soon Williams was involved in *Others*, and published regularly in *Poetry* and other little magazines.

At first Williams’s move in a modernist direction largely echoed Pound’s own development. *The Tempers* (1913), published in London with Pound’s help, mirrors Pound’s pre-imagist work, although a poem like “Hic Jacet,” despite its Poundian title, shows something of Williams’s future direction – in being the result of his careful observation and his medical work in the local community. However, when in 1912–1913 Pound and H. D. began to explore the possibilities of imagism, Williams saw the potential for his own work. His sympathies were with those writers and critics calling for an American art that was more than just an offshoot of European tradition, but that at the same time met international standards of achievement. Imagism threw out many of the conventions of this tradition, particularly, for Williams, the English poetic tradition. Imagism seemed modern and efficient in its economy, just as America was modern and efficient. It was contemporary in its focus on the immediate moment, and its pictorial focus urged the reader to look carefully at his or her surroundings. These features became key characteristics of Williams’s work in his subsequent writing, developed and adapted through the decades that followed, and tied to the key concept of “contact” – the title of the magazine he would edit with Robert McAlmon in 1920 and later in another version with Nathanael West in 1932. From this position Williams could set his work against the international modernism of Pound, H. D., and – newly arrived in London – T. S. Eliot. Thus when Pound abandoned imagism after a couple of years to return to the broader historical and social concerns of *The Cantos*, Williams’s poetry remained largely pictorial, local, and concerned with immediate experience. His 1920 “Prologue” to *Kora in Hell* became a declaration of independence

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and an important statement of his poetics. In this essay he takes on not only Pound, but H. D., Eliot, and even Carl Sandburg and Wallace Stevens.

In 1917 the two titles that Williams debated for his volume *Al Que Quiere!* indicated the two directions in which he felt pulled. The eventual title, which Williams translated as “to him who wants it,” acknowledges the small audience inevitable for avant-garde writing, while his alternative, “The Pleasures of Democracy,” invites a much wider reading public. Williams wanted both titles, but his publisher objected. This tension, illustrated best through the contrast of content and form, proved fruitful to Williams for the rest of his career. But that wider reading public was slow in coming, and to increase Williams’s sense of isolation the center of gravity for modernist experiment shifted east when first Duchamp and the other European modernists seeing out the world war in New York returned to France; they were soon joined by Gertrude Stein’s “lost generation” of expatriates who flocked to Paris. Pound urged Williams to join them rather than be buried in a provincial New Jersey suburb; meanwhile the success of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* defined the modernist poem as international, allusive, and unremittingly complex. Much of Williams’s work in the 1920s had to be published in Europe with small expatriate outfits. In the 1930s his new collections appeared from craft presses in even smaller print runs. The wider readership eventually started to come with the appearance of James Laughlin, founder of New Directions, who took up publishing Pound and Williams in the later 1930s, and saw Pound win the Bollingen Prize in 1949 and Williams win his National Book Award the following year.

Williams experimented with ways to expand the possibilities of imagist strategies beyond the short poems for which the movement is best known. These included the prose/poetry sequence *Spring and All* in 1923, the diary format of “The Descent of Winter” in 1927 – both containing useful statements on Williams’s poetics – and the ten-poem sequence “Della Primavera Trasportata al Morale” in 1930. These works retain the immediacy of the moment without forfeiting the complexities of a longer form. He was also interested, as early as the 1920s, in writing a long poem, although a number of false starts preceded his coming up with the collage-like format of *Paterson* in the early 1940s. The poem is based on both the history and the contemporary condition of the small industrial city to the north of Rutherford and just west of New York City, whose nineteenth-century wealth was based on the water power from its famous Falls – the second deepest, after Niagara, east of the Mississippi. As the poem records, Alexander Hamilton had seen the potential of exploiting the falls a century earlier. Williams’s concept evolved as he published the first four volumes individually from 1946 to 1951, and then a fifth, not part of the original plan

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at all, appeared in 1958. *Paterson* was the poem that finally won Williams readers and critical attention. Once the beautifully printed limited run of each book sold out, New Directions published cheap reprint editions that gathered together the individual volumes as they appeared.

Both Pound and Williams tested the loyalty of publisher Laughlin in different ways: Pound with his anti-Semitic comments and the arguably treasonous wartime radio broadcasts that led to his arrest, while Williams let himself be tempted away to commercial publisher Random House in the first half of the 1950s by one of Laughlin's own former employees. This defection was the result of Williams's festering sense that his readership and income would be greater with a wider distribution of his books, a concern particularly important once he retired from his medical practice. New Directions published two volumes gathering forty years of his poems, but Williams wasn't finished yet. Despite increasing health problems he still had ten years and three new collections to come.

In the 1950s Williams began to be discovered by a new generation of poets. Among those acknowledging his influence were Allen Ginsberg – three of whose letters appear in *Paterson* – Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, Robert Lowell, Amiri Baraka, Frank O'Hara, and Kenneth Koch. These poets, with their own diverse interests, saw Williams's work as offering possibilities outside of the dominant, carefully crafted mode endorsed by the New Critics. Williams managed for a short time in the middle of the decade to give readings and talks around the country, but by the late 1950s he became increasingly housebound, and recurring strokes made composition, typing, and reading difficult. The Pulitzer Prize for his last volume, *Pictures from Brueghel*, which also collected the two volumes from the Random House years, was awarded posthumously.

Critical commentary on Williams was helped by New Directions making available much of Williams's more radical prose and poetry of the 1920s in the volume *Imaginations* (1970). Previously the full texts of *Spring and All* and "The Descent of Winter" had only been available for the most part in rare book rooms. Emily Mitchell Wallace's meticulous *Bibliography* (1968) allowed scholars to track down Williams's numerous contributions to the little magazines, while Paul Mariani's detailed biography, *A New World Naked* (1981), provided a well-researched and detailed account of the poet's life. The *William Carlos Williams Newsletter* (now the *William Carlos Williams Review*), founded by Theodora Graham in 1975, provided an opportunity for specialized discussion of the poet, and early issues documented the poet's unpublished papers and correspondence in major research libraries nationwide. (The most extensive collections are in the Poetry Collection at SUNY Buffalo and Yale's Beinecke Library.) The work of the

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Williams Review was supplemented importantly by the various conferences and publications of the National Poetry Foundation at the University of Maine, Orono.

This *Cambridge Companion* covers the major directions of scholarship on Williams over the more than fifty years since his death, and points toward the continuing areas of discussion in contemporary critical debate. Eric White begins the essays by looking at the importance of the little magazine world to Williams, and argues for Williams's expansive sense of the "local" in his use of the term. Glen MacLeod describes Williams's relationships with the writers, artists, and communities most central to his work in the first twenty years of his career. The importance of the avant-garde visual arts to Williams, and their role in his concept of a poem's design, is explored by Peter Halter. Lisa Steinman takes a fresh look at *Spring and All*, a text that has received significant attention from scholars in recent years. Milton Cohen takes Williams's career into the 1930s, looking at the way that Williams's political positions sometimes put him at odds with magazines and editors with whom he might be expected to be in sympathy. Alec Marsh explores Williams's prose writing, including his experimental writing of the 1920s and the *White Mule* trilogy that he began in the late 1930s, while the themes and compositional history of *Paterson* and the varied critical responses it has produced are the subject of Erin Templeton's essay. This broadly chronological survey of Williams's career ends with Cristina Giorcelli's discussion of the 1950s poetry.

The essays that then follow are devoted to some of the central issues in recent Williams scholarship. Ian Copestake's essay puts Williams's position in the context of earlier American writing, and examines Williams's treatment of history in *In the American Grain*. Kerry Driscoll explores the sometimes controversial topic of Williams and women, arguing that there were some important changes in his thinking about gender following his correspondence with Harriet Gratwick. Williams's multicultural background as it appears in his work, and his sometimes conflicted sense of ethnic identity, is the subject of Julio Marzán's discussion. Hugh Crawford looks at the role of Williams's medical career in his poetry and prose, with particular attention to the short stories posthumously collected as *The Doctor Stories*. Finally John Lowney discusses Williams's legacy, his influence on the younger generation of the 1950s and on into the twenty-first century.

Inevitably, given space limitations, some aspects of Williams's career and some additional approaches to his work can only be suggested in the Further Reading section of this volume. Williams's role as a correspondent is one such area. John Thirlwall's 1957 *Selected Letters*, although weighted more toward the latter part of Williams's career, is a useful starting point, but

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individual volumes of correspondence with such figures as Ezra Pound, James Laughlin, Louis Zukofsky, Kenneth Burke, Marcia Nardi, and Denise Levertov have become available, and no doubt future collections will appear. Williams's role as a dramatist would be worthy of an essay, as would further discussion of his editorial work on the little magazines he was associated with, especially *Others* and the two incarnations of *Contact*. Some recent commentators are finding Williams's work important in the areas of environmental and disability studies. In addition, in recent years there have been a number of books aimed at introducing Williams's life and work to younger readers. This latter development is an appropriate extension of Williams's work as a pediatrician – another instance of the coming together of two lives that Williams, in most moods, never saw as separate.

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ERIC B. WHITE

William Carlos Williams and the local

Across the arc of his long career, William Carlos Williams remained stimulated by the localities he worked and lived in. Rutherford and the surrounding environs of New Jersey and New York provided the focal point through which the doctor-poet appraised the seismic cultural shifts taking place during the first half of the twentieth century, in America and beyond. Nevertheless, he also insisted that localities cannot be viewed in isolation: knowing what was distinctive about his own location depended heavily upon his ability to refer to other places, peoples, and times. For example, in his late 1920s work *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, he argued that for all artists “the local” consists of the “material before [them]” (EK 23). The crucial point for Williams was that a poetics of the local did not imply a constriction, but rather, a necessary focalization of effort. As such, the local should not be “confuse[d]” with “the narrow sense of parochialism,” because “the local in a full sense is the freeing agency to all thought, in that it is everywhere accessible to all” (EK 23).

From his earliest self-published poems through to *Paterson*, Williams consistently viewed the local as a dynamic crucible of modern experience. In this sense, Williams’s investment in local culture was essential to his literary modernism, not a paradoxical quirk of it. Equally, his locally sourced modernist poetics were necessarily formed in dialogue with avant-gardes based overseas, since it was only by accessing those heated exchanges that he could fully comprehend the onset of modernity in his own backyard. As art and ideas circulated between continents during the peak years of literary modernism, Williams argued that the unique and untranslatable site-specificities of artists’ localities were best expressed by creative interpretations. His cultural localism and literary modernism emerged from this matrix of “translocal” interactions, and in seminal works such as *Al Que Quiere!*, *Spring and All*, “The Descent of Winter,” and sections of *Paterson*, he argued that only through such processes could a “national” literature truly begin. Williams’s localist project ultimately proposes a method of making art that

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involves, as he insisted in *Paterson*, “an/ interpenetration, both ways” of the locality and its wider contexts – a process which is constantly evolving and subject to endless revision (*P* 4).

Pragmatism and the local

In 1920 the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey famously declared that “the locality is the only universal” point of reference for artists – an axiom that Williams was fond of quoting.¹ Although rarely given credit for it, Williams was among the key pragmatist thinkers to theorize and test the relational possibilities of the local.² Rather than a cohesive philosophical system, pragmatism is generally agreed to be a practice-based epistemology with an empirical emphasis.³ Pragmatists have an intellectual investment in testing philosophical ideas through their relevance to everyday experience. Because of this, local spheres of activity are particularly important to formulating and testing their hypotheses. This is because localities tend to be concentrated forms of broader categories of geographical place, that is, the physical contours of the real world that Michel de Certeau argues “impl[y] an indication of stability” in a given site, and which pragmatists consider to be theatres of lived experience.⁴ However, Dewey, like Williams, usually thought of geographical “place” in relation to cultural “space,” where human activity invests a site with meaning over time. As de Certeau explains, “*space is a practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers.”⁵ Yet for pragmatists, neither of these terms was specific enough. For this reason Dewey and Williams turned to the more circumscribed vocabulary of “the local,” which combines the stability and recognizability of place with the contingencies of space within a discrete, bounded area over specific durations of time.⁶ By extension, localism, though often dismissed as a form of inward-looking parochialism, or a narrower expression of uncritical nationalism based on a reification of tradition and the immutability of local culture, was in Dewey’s and Williams’s estimation quite the opposite. For Dewey, localities and their inhabitants were “constantly emergent or in flux,” modifying each other “continuously in transactive processes.”⁷ Accordingly, the version of cultural localism that Dewey proposed in his 1920 article “Americanism and Localism” for *The Dial*, which Williams embraced in his own little magazine *Contact*, refuted such static affirmations of identity. Instead, their versions of localism emphasized how the unique environments of specific sites continually interacted with contingent external forces to modify populations and places they inhabited over time, and how artists might tap into those experiential processes.

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More recently, the “spatial” and “transnational” turns in American literary studies have drawn attention to the ways in which circulations of populations, ideas, and interests across the globe shape cultural and national identities (and, in turn, the ways in which such movements problematize the restrictive paradigms of nationalism and the nation state as bases for such identities).⁸ The local and its variants have gradually emerged as effective sites for contesting traditional notions of space–time dialectics and the identitarian geopolitics of nationhood across several fields of study. In this respect, Williams anticipated trends in some fields of contemporary scholarship which, in the words of the cultural historian James Clifford, have come to view “human location as constituted by displacement as much as by stasis.”⁹ It is fitting, then, that Williams’s poem “To Elsie” served as a catalyst for Clifford’s own book *The Predicament of Culture*, which offered an early version of what Clifford later termed the “translocal”: a form of “cosmopolitanism” that “requires a perpetual veering between local attachments and general possibilities.”¹⁰ Adapting this term for literary studies, Jahan Ramazani has formulated “a *translocal poetics* as an alternative to understandings of the relation of poetry to place as either rooted or rootless, local or universal,” which “highlights the dialogic intersections . . . of specific discourses, genres, techniques, and forms of diverse origins.”¹¹ Although Williams is often aligned with a culturally nationalist project – even a rigidly “nativist” one, which rejects identities perceived as alien¹² – his Deweyan cultural localism insisted that static, centrally or regionally imposed identities were anathema to the transactional, provisional experiences that formed for him the basis of his locally sourced art.

Nevertheless, the stubbornly fixed features of localities were deeply important to Williams. For him, the *translocal* remained forever in creative tension with what might be called the *cislocal*. As numerous studies of transatlantic literature remind us, the prefix “trans” means “across,” “beyond,” or “on the opposite side,” while its antonym “cis” means “on this side of.”¹³ So in addition to the widely used term *translocal*, we can use “*cislocal*” to refer to an experience of the local that, more often than not, remains rooted and identifiable with a particular geographical place for a sustained duration of time. Williams struggled to reconcile these two aspects of locality in most of his major works, but they remained inseparable for him. It was a tension that he both acknowledged and revelled in.

“To make a start,/ out of particulars”: the early poetry

Williams’s early poems establish local sites and characters in the suburb of Rutherford, New Jersey, as the focal points around which the rhythms of