

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality.

1954

Of Mere Being

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze distance,

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

1955, 1957

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

(1883–1963)

The physician as man of letters, whether Rabelais or Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, has characteristically shown a special knowledge of humanity, a diagnostic reserve toward its frailty or strength, and enough humor to preserve his sanity. These characteristics all appeared strongly in the work of Dr. William Carlos Williams. He displayed a probing and clinical realism, as one taught by science to seek beauty and truth in the vulgar or the common as much as in the uncommon. Wallace Stevens once called his friend's materials "anti-poetic": Dr. Williams writes of "the plums that were in the icebox"; of "a red wheelbarrow * * * beside the white chickens"; of weeds on the sour land "by the contagious hospital." Like Stevens he is a poet of ideas, but he did not share Stevens's interest in metaphysics. Instead he

sought his signs of permanence in the local and concrete.

Williams's early interest in painting and the influence of two of his friends, the artists Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth, is reflected in his sharp and graphic figures and in his feeling for form, texture, and color. Just as his material experiences and their metaphors were rooted in the common American soil, so also the language of Williams's poems—vocabulary, "measures," and rhythm, were inherent in the natural and common American speech. "The American idiom," he wrote, "is the language we use in the United States, * * * the language which governed Walt Whitman in his choice of words. * * * Measure in verse is inescapable. * * * To the fixed foot of the ancient line, including the Elizabethan, we must have a reply: it is the variable foot

which we are beginning to discover after Whitman's advent." By "the variable foot," Williams meant a "measure" or foot not regulated by the number of syllables or by their distinction as "long" or "short." English formal poetry had been committed to syllable counting since the fourteenth century. The Old English meter had been accentual, not syllabic; popular balladry had remained accentual and so had the common English and American speech, but only Whitman had taken the hint for poetry before Williams.

William Carlos Williams was born in Rutherford, New Jersey, on September 17, 1883. After attending preparatory schools in New York and in Switzerland, he began his medical training at the University of Pennsylvania. There he gave serious attention to his poems and found another poet and friend in Pound, a student in the graduate school. After his graduation in 1906, followed by two years' internship in New York City, Williams went to Leipzig for work in pediatrics. He renewed his friendship with Pound, then in London and a leader among the young experimental poets of imagism and other *avant-garde* writing. Although Pound included work by Williams in the first imagist anthology, the young physician was an individualist always.

Williams soon returned to his birthplace, Rutherford, where in 1910 he began his engrossing medical practice and, in spite of its exactions, produced more than twenty-five volumes of fiction and poetry. In many of his poems, and in the prose essays that often appeared in the same volumes, he kept up a running fire of commentary on his age, its foibles, and its art. He won his *alma mater's* laurels for medical practice while deriving from that practice the knowledge of people and of a community history and life that inspired the best of his poems, his stories and sketches of life along the Passaic, and his epic *Paterson*, in five books, 1946–1958 (fragments of a sixth book were posthumously published in 1963). *Paterson*, perhaps Williams's

major accomplishment, shows the hand of the gifted writer, a knowledge of life at once humane and disciplined, disillusioned, witty, and yet compassionate. The work incorporates the history, the characters, and the myths of Paterson from its Indian origins to its industrial present. The lively *Autobiography* (1951) shows the surprising range of his association with the *avant-garde* of American letters, especially during the critical period from 1910 to 1930. Williams received the Dial Award for Services to American Literature in 1926, the Guarantors Prize awarded by *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* in 1931, the Loines Award in 1948, and the National Book Award for *Paterson* in 1949. *Journey to Love* (1955)—see "The Ivy Crown" (below)—and *Paterson V* (1958) show an actual advance, after several years of declining health, in power and formal invention, including the "three-stress line." His acceptance of life, too often before muted, now speaks almost joyfully, as in the opening of *Paterson V*, "In old age/the mind/casts off / rebelliously / an eagle / from its crag." He died on March 4, 1963.

The Collected Poems, Vol. 1, 1909–1939, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, 1987, and Vol. II, 1939–1962, ed. Christopher MacGowan, 1988, supersedes earlier collections, but does not include *Paterson*. Earlier are *Collected Poems, 1921–1931*, 1934; *Complete Collected Poems, 1906–1938*, 1938; *Selected Poems*, 1949; *Collected Later Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 1950; *Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams*, 1951; *Paterson*, 4 vols., 1946–1951, collected in one volume, 1951; *The Desert Music and Other Poems*, 1954; and *Journey to Love*, 1955. *Paterson, Book V* appeared in 1958 and *Pictures from Brueghel* in 1962. *Paterson* (Books I–V, with fragments of VI), was published in 1963. *The Farmers' Daughters: The Collected Stories* was published in 1961. Earlier short-story collections include *The Knife of the Times*, 1932; *Life Along the Passaic River*, 1938; *Make Light of It*, 1950. His novels are *A Voyage to Paganry*, 1928; *White Mule*, 1937; *In the Money*, 1940; and *The Build-Up*, 1952. Collections of his essays are *The Great American Novel*, 1923; *In the American Grain*, 1925, reissued 1940; and *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams*, 1954. *Many Loves*, a play, was produced in 1958. *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, 1957, was edited by J. C. Thirlwall, and *William Carlos Williams and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* was edited by Hugh Wittmeyer, 1989. *Imaginations: Collected Early Prose*, 1970, was edited by Webster Schott.

Something to Say: William Carlos Williams on Younger Poets, 1985, was edited by James E. B. Breslin.

The *Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* appeared in 1951. Williams dictated his recollections of many of his books in bibliographical order in *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, edited by Edith Heal, 1958. Emily M. Wallace compiled *A Bibliography of William Carlos Williams*, 1968.

The first complete biography is Paul Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked*, 1981. Other biographical and critical studies include Vivienne Koch, *William Carlos Williams*, 1950; Linda W. Wagner, *The Poems of William Carlos Williams*, 1964, and *The Prose of William Carlos Williams*, 1970; James Guimond, *The Art of William Carlos Williams*, 1968; Sherman Paul, *The Music of Survival: A Biography of a Poem by William Carlos Williams*, 1968; Thomas R. Whitaker, *William Carlos Williams*, 1968 (rev. ed. 1989); Bram Dijkstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 1969; James E. Breslin, *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist*, 1970; Joel

Conarroe, *William Carlos Williams' Paterson*, 1970; Benjamin Sankey, *A Companion to William Carlos Williams's Paterson*, 1971; Mike Weaver, *William Carlos Williams: The American Background*, 1971; Robert Coles, *William Carlos Williams: The Knack of Survival in America*, 1975; Louis Simpson, *Three on the Tower: The Lives and Works of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams*, 1975; Reed Whittemore, *William Carlos Williams: Poet from New Jersey*, 1975; Rod Townley, *The Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 1976; Margaret Glynnne Lloyd, *William Carlos Williams's Paterson: A Critical Reappraisal*, 1980; Christopher MacGowan, *William Carlos Williams's Early Poetry: The Visual Arts Background*, 1984; Stephen Cushman, *William Carlos Williams and the Meaning of Measure*, 1985; Bernard Duffey, *A Poetry of Presence: The Writing of William Carlos Williams*, 1986; Kerry Driscoll, *William Carlos Williams and the Maternal Muse*, 1987; David Frail, *The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams*, 1987; and Terence Digory, *William Carlos Williams and the Ethics of Painting*, 1991.

The Young Housewife¹

At ten A.M. the young housewife
moves about in negligee behind
the wooden walls of her husband's house.
I pass solitary in my car.

Then again she comes to the curb
to call the ice-man, fish-man, and stands
shy, uncorseted, tucking in
stray ends of hair, and I compare her
to a fallen leaf.

The noiseless wheels of my car
rush with a crackling sound over
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling.

1916, 1938

Tract

I will teach you my townspeople
how to perform a funeral—
for you have it over a troop
of artists—

unless one should scour the world—
you have the ground sense necessary.

1. Williams's poems, except for the selections from *Paterson*, are printed here in the texts given in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams* (1987-

1988). The order is of earliest printing, in some instances in periodicals.

Then briefly as to yourselves:
 Walk behind—as they do in France,
 seventh class, or if you ride
 Hell take curtains! Go with some show
 of inconvenience; sit openly—
 to the weather as to grief.
 Or do you think you can shut grief in?
 What—from us? We who have perhaps
 nothing to lose? Share with us
 share with us—it will be money
 in your pockets.

Go now
 I think you are ready.

1916, 1917

To Mark Anthony in Heaven

This quiet morning light
 reflected, how many times
 from grass and trees and clouds
 enters my north room
 touching the walls with
 grass and clouds and trees:
 Anthony,
 trees and grass and clouds.
 Why did you follow
 that beloved body
 with your ships at Actium?²
 I hope it was because
 you knew her inch by inch
 from slanting feet upward
 to the roots of her hair
 and down again and that
 you saw her
 above the battle's fury—
 clouds and trees and grass—
 For then you are
 listening in heaven.

1920, 1934

Portrait of a Lady

Your thighs are appletrees
 whose blossoms touch the sky.
 Which sky? The sky
 where Watteau³ hung a lady's
 slipper. Your knees
 are a southern breeze—or

2. This refers to the story that Cleopatra betrayed her lover Anthony by withdrawing her navy from the crucial battle of Actium (31 B.C.); that in Alexandria she drove Anthony to suicide by pretending to be dead; and that her suicide resulted from these

events.

3. Jean Antoine Watteau (1684–1721), French painter celebrated for romantic, idealized outdoor scenes. See Pragonard, below.

I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.

The Bull

It is in captivity—
ringed, haltered, chained
to a drag
the bull is godlike

Unlike the cows
he lives alone, nozzles
the sweet grass gingerly
to pass the time away

He kneels, lies down
and stretching out
a foreleg licks himself
about the hoof

then stays
with half-closed eyes,
Olympian commentary on
the bright passage of days.

—The round sun
smooths his lacquer
through
the glossy pinetrees

his substance hard
as ivory or glass—
through which the wind
yet plays—

Milkless

he nods
the hair between his horns
and eyes matted
with hyacinthine curls

Spring and All

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue

1921

5

10

15

20

25

1922, 1934

mottled clouds driven from the
northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the
waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

5

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees:

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines—

10

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches—

15

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind—

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

20

One by one objects are defined—
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of
entrance—Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted; they
grip down and begin to awaken

25

1923

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

a red-wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

5

1923

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
 you were probably
 saving
 for breakfast

Forgive me
 they were delicious
 so sweet
 and so cold

1934

The Yachts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows.
 Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside.
 It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair

until the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind;
 the whole sea become an entanglement of watery bodies
 lost to the world bearing what they cannot hold. Broken,