

William Carlos Williams in the 1930s

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I, Robert L.G. Tucker, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

The subject of this thesis is William Carlos Williams and the circle of writers around him in the 1930s. During this decade Williams was a key figure in the formation of an alternative left-wing American canon, and active in a group that included Nathanael West, Louis Zukofsky and Kenneth Burke. This thesis explores the political and aesthetic grounds on which that canon was constructed. The assumption that Williams was already a successful writer after *Spring and All* (1923) has often led to a disproportionate emphasis on his poetry and the ‘modernist’ aspects of his aesthetics. This thesis makes the case for the significance of Williams’ 1930s prose writings in the growth of the Proletarian Literature movement, and challenges the assumption that ‘Marxist’ literature of the 1930s was at odds with ‘modernist’ literature of the 1920s. I investigate the key concepts of Williams’ own aesthetic philosophy, ‘Objectivism,’ ‘Pragmatism,’ ‘Contact,’ and ‘Localism,’ and show how these concepts became politicized during the 1930s. By exploring the relationship between art and politics, and the ways in which Williams was radicalized by the Great Depression, this thesis attempts to expand critical notions of ‘radicalism’ to include a broader New Deal alliance between traditional democratic liberalism and Marxist economic determinism. Focusing on concepts of ‘Nativism’ and ‘Americanism,’ this thesis also charts America’s burgeoning cultural nationalism during the 1930s, and demonstrates how America’s founding values were challenged by political, economic and social upheaval in the wake of the Depression. By locating Williams’ desire for radical economic change within the context of the Jeffersonian movement, I demonstrate how a historical assessment of America’s past led Williams and the writers mentioned above to question America’s attitudes towards individualism, the redistribution of wealth, the forces of corruption and plutocracy, and the effectiveness of democracy to bring about social justice.

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List of Abbreviations

People

EP	Ezra Pound
GA	George Antheil
KB	Kenneth Burke
LZ	Louis Zukofsky
NW	Nathanael West
RJ	Richard Johns
WCW	William Carlos Williams

Works

<i>A</i>	<i>Autobiography of William Carlos Williams</i>
<i>ARI</i>	<i>A Recognizable Image</i>
<i>CPI</i>	<i>William Carlos Williams: Collected Poems, Volume I</i>
<i>EK</i>	<i>The Embodiment of Knowledge</i>
<i>FD</i>	<i>The Farmer's Daughters</i>
<i>ITAG</i>	<i>In the American Grain</i>
<i>IWWP</i>	<i>I Wanted to Write a Poem</i>
<i>HP</i>	<i>The Humane Particulars: The Collected Letters of William Carlos Williams and Kenneth Burke</i>
<i>ML</i>	<i>Many Loves</i>
<i>SE</i>	<i>Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams</i>

<i>SL</i>	<i>Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams</i>
<i>STS</i>	<i>Something to Say: William Carlos Williams on Younger Poets</i>
<i>WCW/LZ</i>	<i>The Correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky</i>
<i>EP/LZ</i>	<i>Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky</i>
<i>WM</i>	<i>White Mule</i>

Introduction

The subject of this thesis is the politics and poetics of William Carlos Williams and the literary circles that he engaged with from 1929 to 1939. These circles can be divided into a number of separate categories. First, there are specific writers who influenced and were influenced by Williams, in particular Louis Zukofsky, Ezra Pound, Nathanael West and Kenneth Burke. Secondly, there are the publishing ventures that Williams supported and often helped to fund, such as the Objectivist Press, the Alcestis Press, and towards the end of the 1930s, *New Directions*. Thirdly, there are the little magazines that Williams edited and whose editorial policies he often shaped, such as *Blues*, *Pagany*, *Contact*, *Blast*, not to mention the many little magazines that Williams contributed to, such as *New Masses*, *Anvil* and *Partisan Review* to name but a few. Finally, there are the literary movements that Williams was involved in: in this study I shall focus on two in particular – ‘Objectivism’ and the ‘Proletarian Literature’ movement.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First and foremost this thesis is a work about Williams himself. I wish to show, through a study of the writers, magazines and movements that he engaged with during the 1930s, that we must revise our conception of Williams as the modernist poet typified by *Spring and All*, an apolitical poet of formal experimentation, to something quite different, a writer of great influence in America, in prose as much as poetry, in ‘proletarian literature’ as much as ‘modernism’. Following on from Hillis Miller’s seminal *Poets of Reality* (1965), and Breslin’s classic study, *Williams Carlos Williams: An American Artist*

(1970), both of which see *Spring and All* as the ‘height of his creative achievement’,¹ Williams was incorporated as a poet and a ‘modernist’ into the academic canon during the 1960s and 70s. This thesis will demonstrate that within Williams’ own lifetime it was in fact his prose works, *The Knife of the Times* (1932), *White Mule* (1937), and *Life Along the Passaic River* (1938) that attracted the most attention from readers and critics. *Spring and All* was largely unread during Williams’ lifetime and was only retrospectively awarded such prominence in the Williams canon. I do not wish to focus exclusively on his prose works, however, I do wish to show that a case must be made for the lasting importance of his prose writings of the 1930s and for their significance, political and aesthetic, in shaping proletarian literature. Michael Gold wrote in 1933:

When somebody writes the future history of the pioneer beginnings of proletarian literature in America, I am sure W.C. Williams will be somewhere large in the table of contents... Williams has never written about a strike or a labor union. What he has done, however, is to reflect as in a faithful mirror the raw powerful force of the unorganized American worker, and the horrors of the slum life he leads.²

Gold’s prediction turned out to be entirely inaccurate; a quick look at the contents section of any of the classic studies of radical literature of the 1930s, such as Walter Rideout’s *The Radical Novel* (1956), David Madden’s *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties* (1968), Eric Homberger’s, *American Writers and Radical Politics* (1986), James Francis Murphy’s *The Proletarian Moment* (1991), Daniel Aaron’s *Writers on the Left* (1992), Barbara Foley’s *Radical Representations* (1993), Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Linko’s *Radical Revision: Rereading 1930s Culture* (1996),

¹ James Breslin, *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.87.

² Michael Gold, *The Daily Worker*, 12th October, 1933, quoted in James Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy Over Leftism in Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p.134. In fact Gold was wrong to imply that Williams was wholly unconcerned with strikes or unions. Though they were not a consistent part of his poetry, he did explore these themes in *White Mule* (1937) and in stories such as ‘The Paid Nurse,’ *Anvil* 1:1 (1939).

will show that Williams is not only left out of the contents page, he is hardly in the index either. Such studies focus almost entirely on Gold himself and the *New Masses* circle; Granville Hicks; Jack Conroy; the *Partisan Review* circle around Dwight Macdonald; feminist writers such as Meridel Le Seuer and Tillie Olsen, and the writers of the Harlem Renaissance – in short, writers whose leftist credentials can be clearly established through affiliations with John Reed clubs, the American Writer's Congress or the 1935 anthology edited by Granville Hicks, *Proletarian Literature in the United States*.³ If these studies mention Williams at all, then it is in his capacity as a 'modernist.'

This brings me to my second purpose in writing this thesis. Not only do I wish to demonstrate that Williams was influential in the formation of the so-called 'proletarian' movement, but, following on from Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front* (1996), I also wish to show that American modernism (and I do not include Pound and Eliot in this category) was not at odds with radical or leftist literature to begin with. Rather, proletarian literature was more commonly an extension of modernist iconoclasm.⁴ The proletarian movement was originally formulated as an avant-garde, developing out of the modernist avant-garde of the 1920s, and the little magazines in particular moved seamlessly from the former to the latter, often with

³ The following works suggest the 'radical' writers usually pressed into service for critics of the 1930s: Michael E. Staub, *Voices of Persuasion: Politics of Representation in 1930s America* (Cambridge University Press, 1994) – focusing on John Dos Passos, John Neihardt, Zora Neale Hurston, Tillie Olson; Rita Barnard, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) – focusing on Nathanael West and Kenneth Fearing; Robert Shulman, *The Power of Political Art: The 1930s Literary Left Reconsidered* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000) – focusing on Meridel Le Sueur, Josephine Herbst, Richard Wright, Muriel Rukeyser and Langston Hughes; *The Novel and the American Left: Critical Essays on Depression-Era Fiction*, ed., Janet Galligani Casey (University of Iowa Press, 2004) – Josephine Herbst, Mike Gold, Kenneth Fearing and others; John Lowney, *History, Memory, and the Literary Left: Modern American Poetry, 1935-1968* (University of Iowa Press, 2006) – focusing on Muriel Rukeyser, Elizabeth Bishop, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Thomas McGrath, George Oppen.

⁴ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), p.121. That there was a distinct form of 'American modernism,' related to but separate from the conservative modernism of Eliot and Pound, is an argument that I shall justify over the course of this thesis.

same writers contributing. Williams himself encapsulates this continuity, and the peculiarly American brand of modernism that he had been advocating since the 1910s was already very much in alignment with the aims, methods, forms and styles of what became the Proletarian Literature movement. In studies of radical or proletarian literature, a space must therefore be made for Williams, and for writers like him, who approached the left not from a theoretical Marxist position, or even from a hopeful desire for a new socialist revolution equivalent to the Russian Revolution, but rather from the sense of an American awakening derived from Whitman, from Emerson, and from the long tradition of American Populism. I shall argue that of all the writers of the 1930s Williams most clearly encapsulates the New Deal alliance between the 'liberal' ideas of traditional American democracy, continued and revised by writers such as Dewey, and the radical 'socialism' of writers such as Gold. In this respect Williams' works form a legitimate, and often under-studied, part of the Popular Front. The works of Williams point to a wider association between Marxism and Pragmatism during the 1930s, a belief in American Exceptionalism, in radical change without political revolution, and above all to an expression of 'native' radicalism carried over from the Populist tradition.

My methodology in examining this subject matter is derived largely from Hugh Kenner's seminal work, *The Pound Era*. Indeed one might see this thesis as a reply of sorts to Kenner, describing the literary history of the 1930s in terms of a 'Williams Era' rather than a 'Pound Era'. In *The Pound Era*, Kenner's approach suggests that literary history should be understood as the history of alliances and affiliations, of publishing ventures, payments and favours, rather than grand themes and meta-narratives. To this end, I have spent considerable time examining the original source

materials, notebooks, correspondence, and now forgotten magazines in which Williams was writing. This thesis assumes that the most profitable way to formulate the literary history of the 1930s is to excavate those lines of influence and allegiance, friendship and enmity, as well as the methods of discussion and dissemination and the various forums of debate. Rather than simply looking at the formal necessities of a genre, this thesis also attempts to look at a particular genre, movement, or historical moment as a *social formation*. This is not to say that such a methodology is appropriate for all literary criticism, only that it has a particular importance for this thesis, since, as I shall demonstrate, it reflects the ‘contextualist’ philosophy that Williams brought into his works of the 1930s, putting social context at the heart of interpretation.

At the same time I have not been so naïve as to assume that the objective detachment implied by a ‘historical’ assessment of a given period is without its own flaws. The subject of this thesis is how Williams built a canon (though as I shall demonstrate, the phrase ‘anti-canon’ might be more appropriate) of American writers in opposition to Eliot’s classical canon. The historicist critic must first recognize that such ‘historical’ assessments are already a result of previous canon-making histories. I have attempted wherever possible to uncover the precise nature of these canon-making processes, and I have tried to be conscious of my own similar processes, which in a study such as this are frequently geared towards an over-privileging of the ‘untold story’ or the ‘forgotten history’ at the risk of marginalizing the obvious.

My methodology has also been influenced considerably by Michael Denning’s seminal literary history of the 1930s, *The Cultural Front* (1998). Like Kenner, Denning pursues two separate lines of argument simultaneously, a material history of

literary and political interactions (the various factions and alliances of the left) and a history of ideas, of aesthetic and political philosophy. The latter seeks to uncover both the various interpretive frameworks through which contemporaries theorized their own works, and of course the shifting terms and frameworks through which subsequent generations interpreted them. Denning does not always attempt to demonstrate that the material history and the ideological history are in alignment. Rather, he appears most concerned with the places of discordance, in which the facts of literary history do not support the aesthetic philosophy and vice versa. For it is in these instances of disputation and dissent that the discerning critic is able to uncover the precise motivations, meanings and consequences of a given historical moment.

At times I have been frustrated by the seeming contradictions in Williams' own creative and critical writings. However, the excavation of such contradictions is essential to the work of the historicist critic. Although there are certain narratives that are deeply embedded in our understanding of the 1930s – from Europe to America, from isolationism to involvement, from Marx to consumerism, from coherence to plurality – these narratives are constantly undermined by the chaotic realities of the period. In addition, Williams himself was a notoriously whimsical thinker, and was not at all concerned with building a coherent aesthetic philosophy, as Pound and Eliot were. Bob Johnson sees in Williams 'the central postmodern insight into subjectivity—the individual, poet or otherwise, is a matrix of subject positions that defies ideological coherence.'⁵ One need not, however, make it a question of 'postmodernism'; one could just as easily draw on Emerson's assertion that

⁵ Bob Johnson, "'A Whole Synthesis of His Time': Political Ideology and Cultural Politics in the Writings of William Carlos Williams, 1929-1939," *American Quarterly*, 54.2 (2002), p.184.

‘consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.’⁶ For Williams, good art must be discovered naturally and spontaneously in real life by the open-minded, inclusive, democratic artist.

This inconsistency is not just aesthetic but political as well. After so much discussion of Proletarian Literature and the left, one might be surprised to discover that fascism (and especially the aesthetics of fascism) play an important role in my understanding of Williams in the 1930s. So much of what Williams was writing during the 1930s was formulated as a reply to Pound, and thus Pound’s critical theories constitute the fundamental base from which Williams was reacting. In addition, it is important to understand that for contemporaries there was no binary opposition between communism and fascism, left and right. For Pound, fascism was originally a socialist (or perhaps one might be better served using the term ‘social’) movement equivalent to communism, Social Credit or the Gesellite movement. Paul Morrison notes in *The Poetics of Fascism* (1996) that fascism was originally derived from communism and could not have existed without it.⁷ Almost every historian of the 1930s backs this argument.⁸ The same can also be said of Social Credit, which Williams supported in principle. I have therefore used the term ‘radicalism’ to denote the convergence of the many different economic and political alternatives to capitalist democracy that emerged during the 1930s. If the reader of this thesis is at times confused by the seemingly shifting and unpredictable nature of the political

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), p.265.

⁷ Paul Morrison, *The Poetics of Fascism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Paul de Man* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), p.6.

⁸ See for instance, Dennis Mack Smith’s 1981 biography, *Mussolini* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), p.22. That fascism was a product of communism, or rather the fear of communism, is perhaps more true of German fascism than Italian.

aesthetics of 'fascism,' 'communism' 'Stalinism' or 'Anti-Stalinism' it is because those ideologies were shifting and unpredictable during the 1930s.

This thesis charts Williams' long slow break with Pound, on political grounds, and his influence on the American scene that Pound had abandoned. Williams' direct circle of influence during the 1930s includes many American writers of the left whose work I have not had space to explore, such as Kenneth Rexroth, Norman Macleod, Archibald MacLeish, Josephine Herbst, Muriel Rukeyser, Horace Gregory, Kay Boyle and Parker Tyler, not to mention artists such as Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler. The sheer volume of correspondence between Williams and other notable writers throughout his lifetime was staggering, and the 1930s was no exception. From the 1940s onwards Williams' circle would extend even wider to include Ginsberg and the Beat poets and the Black Mountain School. To define the precise scope of Williams' influence from 1929 onwards would be too great a task for a single work. For half a century Williams was, if not America's best poet, then certainly its most constant one. Williams was without a doubt the most vocal of Whitman's successors, though changing and re-inventing himself regularly. Unfortunately, whilst his fellow writers recognized him, this recognition did not extend to the public or to the publishing houses until the late 1940s. Even as late as 1936 Williams had yet to be picked up by a mainstream publisher, whilst Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Nathanael West and many others had already found their publishers. It was only through his alliance with New Directions Press in the late 1930s that Williams was finally able to get his work out there, and without this fortuitous backing from a wealthy independent publisher, Williams would perhaps never have received the critical reception that he did. At the end of the 1930s, the

Society of the Friends of William Carlos Williams was founded ‘to assure Mr. Williams and the public of the great esteem in which he is held by his brothers of the pen, an esteem which is withheld from him in any reasonable measure by both the public, the Trade and the very press itself.’⁹ Through the society, writers such as Ford Maddox Ford, Archibald Macleish, Katherine Anne Porter, Alfred Steiglitz, Kenneth Burke, E.E. Cummings, Marianne Moore, Waldo Frank, Sherwood Anderson, Marsden Hartley, Paul Rosenfeld, Henry Miller, Gorham Munson and many others, all paid tribute to Williams’ decisive, though as yet unrecognized, contribution to American letters.¹⁰

In choosing which writers to focus on, certain sacrifices have, of course, had to be made. A more detailed discussion of Williams in relation to Marianne Moore or Wallace Stevens, perhaps even Robert Frost, all of whom Williams knew during this period, might have been expected. These three poets are typically branded with the same ‘modernist’ label that has come to define Williams. However, I have chosen to focus on those writers, magazines and movements, with whom Williams had a more personal and artistic connection. This thesis therefore describes his inner circle, and is driven by historical facts rather than ideological or aesthetic similarities. For this reason I have not chosen to include a complete chapter considering Williams alongside Kenneth Burke or John Dewey. Though these two thinkers provide an intellectual and philosophical background which is essential to this thesis, Williams was not directly engaged with their writings in the way that he was with, for instance, Louis Zukofsky, Ezra Pound or Nathanael West. This thesis attempts to trace not only Williams’ influence on the 1930s but also the influence that his direct circle of

⁹ Yale, WCW Papers, Box 11, Folder 365.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

acquaintance had on Williams, and how their direct interaction influenced American literature in years to come.

i.i. A Native Literature

In some ways Williams is uniquely representative of 1930s values. No other American writer better understood the terms on which so many American writers came flooding back from Europe to their native country during the 1930s, the movement defined by Malcolm Cowley in his autobiographical literary history, *The Exile's Return* (1934). It is in the concept of the 'native' itself that Williams truly reflects 1930s values.

This 'native' program was certainly nothing new. At the same time as Williams began writing about the importance of a native American cultural tradition in the early 1920s, the 'Young Americans' of the *Seven Dials* group, in particular Van Wyck Brooks and Waldo Frank, were expounding similar ideas. Though there is little evidence that Williams was influenced by Van Wyck Brooks, there are striking similarities in their works, and both can be traced back to Emerson's bold declaration that 'our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close.'¹¹

Though these ideas had been fermenting since the turn of the century, in the 1930s an enormous revival of all things 'native' took place, a second American Renaissance, which in many ways came to fruition retrospectively in works such as Dos Passos' history of early America, *The Ground We Stand On* (1949); Alfred

¹¹ Emerson, "American Scholar," *Essays and Lectures*, p.53.

Kazin's classic literary history of the 1930s, *On Native Grounds* (1942); Richard Wright's protest novel, *Native Son* (1940); Paul Strand's Popular Front production about corporate violence against unions, *Native Land* (1942); and Louis Adamic's magazine analysing American culture, *Common Ground* (1940).¹² The idea of 'earth', 'ground', 'place', 'local' 'native' and other variations on this concept form a constant refrain throughout the culture of the 1930s.

As these works testify, the word 'native' was also infused with a kind of irony, a lament for the Lincoln Republic even as it was invoked. Of America's 'native' 1930s writers, Woody Guthrie had perhaps the greatest celebrity, and his lyrics, frequently focusing on ideas of 'native,' 'land' and 'earth,' normally carry both this sense of joyous Whitmanian patriotism and the more ironic lament for its demise. The most popular of these is perhaps his classic, 'This Land is Your Land', which celebrates American freedom in the figure of the 'roaming and rambling' migrant, whilst also pointing to the death of that freedom in capitalist property relations.

As I was walkin', I saw a sign there
 And that sign said, no tresspassin'
 But on the other side, it didn't say nothin!
 Now that side was made for you and me!¹³

Steinbeck's migrant tale, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), similarly invokes a kind of 'American sublime' in the concept of the 'native' wanderer, whilst at the same time lamenting its passing. *The Grapes of Wrath* points to the beginning of an age of bureaucracy, ideology and plutocratic government, in which man's mystical connection to the land is severed, and man becomes a literal and figurative exile,

¹² Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p.168.

¹³ Woody Guthrie, "This Land is Your Land," written in 1940, recorded in 1944. See Will Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), p.xx.

doomed to wander the earth like the thousands of sharecroppers who had been dispossessed by the Depression.

For Williams the emphasis on a native grounding¹⁴ was exactly what he had been striving for. Indeed, it is more accurate to say that the culture of the 1930s was slowly moving into alignment with ideas that Williams himself had been advocating since as early as his 1917 ‘Prologue to Kora in Hell’ – an essay which represents both Williams’ first major work of criticism and his first attempt to articulate his opposition to the classicist revival of Eliot and Pound, his ‘reply to the Greek and Latin with the bare hands.’¹⁵

In searching for a rival American aesthetic Williams turned decisively towards Whitman and to ideas of poetic ‘radicalism’ during the 1920s. Breslin’s seminal study, *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist* (1970) persuasively describes Williams’ poetic development as a journey from the Romantic formalism of his early Keatsian imitations, with their elevated and courtly appeals to ‘Poesy’ and ‘Truth’, towards the earthiness and immediacy of his poetry of American experience.¹⁶ This narrative of influence, from Keats to Whitman, is backed up by Williams’ own autobiography and the terms in which he describes his personal development during his early manhood. Williams’ puritanical upbringing, his training as an ‘English gentleman,’ the prim moral certitudes of his Sunday school, gradually began to

¹⁴ See Stephen Fredman, *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially his discussion of *ITAG*, p.13-5.

¹⁵ Williams, *Paterson* ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1995), p.2.

¹⁶ Breslin’s work on Williams has been considerably revised by later critics. However, it remains an excellent starting point for a review of Williams criticism since it articulates very clearly what we might think of as the ‘standard’ view of Williams, the ‘Whitmanian’ Williams – democratic, empiricist, and concerned chiefly with radically revising the language and forms of the genteel tradition and replacing them with a more rough and ready vernacular. Breslin was perhaps the first to place the very idea of radicalism or iconoclasm at the heart of Williams’ work.

dissipate when he left home to attend medical school at the University of Pennsylvania from 1902 to 1906. In 1906, when he began an internship at the French Hospital in Hell's Kitchen, New York, Williams was unexpectedly exposed to a side of society he had not yet witnessed, a world of unwanted pregnancies, pimps, poverty, starvation, domestic abuse, disease and all the social pathologies that working in a rough hospital dredges up.¹⁷ After finishing his internship in 1909, he chose not to pursue a profitable career as a city specialist, a path which most likely would have strangled his poetic career early on, but instead to serve as a general practitioner and obstetrician for the poorest immigrant neighbourhoods in and around Rutherford, a path which would bring less profit, but more contact with 'the people' and more chances to turn those experiences into literature. Over the next ten years, Williams would be both a doctor and a writer, with each of these two simultaneous careers influencing the other. His medical practice would immerse him in the 'gulfs and grottos' of the poor (A, 288), transforming his world view as well as his poetry and initiating a slow process of liberation from the genteel tradition, from idealism, from Puritanism, from the abstract. As Milton Cohen writes, 'he came by his radical sympathies naturally, not from a book.'¹⁸ Like Whitman he would come to embrace the low-down, the marginal and even the grotesque as a healthy and natural expression of humanity.¹⁹ Breslin argues that the point at which Williams began to

¹⁷ At the same time, during his medical education and afterwards Williams was decisively influenced by the new wave of modernist art coming from Paris, Cubism and Dada, and the works of Picasso, Braque, Klee, Duchamp, Demuth and others. David Frail indicates that the Armoury show of 1913 marked a turning point in Williams' aesthetics. See David Frail, *The early politics and poetics of William Carlos Williams* (UMI Research Press, 1987), p.56. A similar turning point happened during the 1920s as Williams encountered the American movement of Precisionism, which opened up the possibilities of bringing the documentary aesthetic into his art. See also Dickran Tashjian, *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) especially pp.83-4.

¹⁸ Milton Cohen, *Beleaguered Poets and Leftist Critics: Stevens, Cummings, Frost, and Williams* (Alabama; University of Alabama Press, 2010), p.148.

¹⁹ Carl Rapp rejects this view, arguing (very successfully) that 'The Wanderer' is based on Keats' 'Hyperion' and that Williams never ceased in his search for what he calls in *Paterson*, the 'Beautiful

rapidly move from a Keatsian to a Whitmanian aesthetic can be traced to the writing of 'Con Brio' in 1913, after which he began to explore a greater openness and emotional spontaneity, portraying earthy themes of the proletariat, the pastoral and of course the sexual. However, following on from Hillis Miller's classic essay in *Poets of Reality*, it is commonly supposed Williams' first long poem, 'The Wanderer,' from his more sure-footed volume, *Al Que Quiere!* (1917), symbolically enacts the moment at which he gives up on any transcendental or remote conception of art, and resolves to become a 'mirror to this modernity' (*CPI*, 28).

The comparison to Whitman may be troubling, especially since, as Leibowitz points out, Williams was keen to 'get out from under the shadow of Godfather Walt.'²⁰ In chapter five, I shall discuss how Williams attempted to move beyond the idea of 'free verse' altogether, and I hope to demonstrate throughout this thesis that Williams' conception of American democracy was never as optimistic as Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*. However, the fact remains that Whitman was a seminal influence on Williams in articulating a rival American aesthetic.²¹ In a 1955 essay, Williams reflects on Whitman's contribution to poetry:

Thing', a transcendent ideal of art. Carl Rapp, *William Carlos Williams and Romantic Idealism* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1984), pp.14-18. However, whilst Rapp's revisions are useful, they are not enough to challenge the fact that Williams began to pursue more democratic and earthy themes during the early 1920s.

²⁰ Herbert Leibowitz, *"Something Urgent I Have to Say to You": The Life and Works of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), p.ix.

²¹ See, in particular, Stephen Tapscott, *American Beauty: William Carlos Williams and the Modernist Whitman* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984). Tapscott argues that Williams needed Whitman in order to define himself in opposition to the Transcendentalist tradition, a tradition which ultimately ends up defining him in return. In comparing the politics of Williams and Whitman, he finds that the one overall principle of both is continually to reinvent themselves so as not to become part of an institution or tradition. In his analysis of the successive drafts of *Paterson*, he also makes the case that Williams' attitudes towards democracy were conflicted and mistrustful. This goes against the assumption made by almost every Williams critic that Whitmanian democracy is at the heart of his work. I will explore the evidence for Williams' views on American democracy fully in chapter four.

It was a challenge to the entire concept of the poetic idea, and from a new viewpoint, a rebel viewpoint, an American viewpoint. In a word and at the beginning it enunciated a shocking truth, that the common ground is of itself a poetic source.²²

The idea of a 'common ground' is highly significant for Williams since it points to the Whitmanian origins of his democratic philosophy of 'localism' (though as I shall discuss in chapter three, the word was also taken from Dewey). In the same essay, Williams argues that during the 1920s, Eliot had practically single-handedly crippled the Whitmanian tradition by driving poets 'plainly away from all that was native to America, Whitman among the rest, and toward the study of the past and England.' Referring to the publication of *The Waste Land*, he added, 'I had not known how much the spirit of Whitman animated us until it was withdrawn from us.' In Williams' estimation, Eliot had allowed students once again to 'follow theologians' in writing footnotes to history rather than openly pursuing 'the freedom of a new measure.'²³ Williams saw the kind of poetry that Pound and Eliot were writing as the aggregate of mankind's abstractions, the accumulation of the 'tyrannies of the past' (*SE*, 218), the philosophies and cultures of ancient civilisations that prevented poetry from engaging with the language and problems of the day. Indeed, one might refer to this as a Pragmatist critique of poetry, since it reflects almost exactly the Pragmatist critique that Dewey had levelled at contemporary philosophers, namely their unwillingness to engage with the real world problems of their time.²⁴ By confusing poetry with theology, Williams believed Eliot was teaching young writers to think, as he says in 'To Elsie' (1923),

²² Williams, 'An Essay on Leaves of Grass,' in *Leaves of Grass One Hundred Years After* ed. Milton Hindus (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1955), p.22.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp.24-5.

²⁴ John Dewey, 'The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy' (1917), republished in *The Pragmatism Reader: From Peirce through the Present* ed. Robert B. Talisse, Scott F. Aikin (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011). See also Elisa New, *The Line's Eye: Poetic Experience, American Sight* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) for further discussion of Williams and pragmatism, especially pp.148-9, 205-6.

as if the earth under our feet
 were
 an excrement of some sky

and we degraded prisoners
 destined
 to hunger until we eat filth (*CPI*, 218)

The words ‘earth’, ‘ground’, ‘place’, ‘local,’ ‘native,’ which were so common during the 1930s, recur throughout Williams’ creative and critical writings, usually in opposition to the those forms of ‘academic’ thinking which he was attempting to discredit as the latest manifestations of Puritan transcendentalism, namely, science, philosophy and theology.²⁵ In short, for Williams, the democratic artist, embracing lowly and earthy themes, must fulfil himself in relation to his ‘locus’, the ground from which he comes, and the ordinary things/words/people that he finds there.

Williams also saw this ‘native’ program as being inherently radical, as he said of Whitman, ‘a rebel viewpoint, an American viewpoint’. Through Whitman, Williams came to identify the ‘rebellious’ with the ‘physical’, embracing the fertile world of the everyday. Initially, this was largely conceived as a linguistic program, in which the task of the native poet was to break out of all received categories, and to separate words from their ‘associational or sentimental value’.²⁶ In fact, this idea of destroying the received categories that are inherent in our usage of language so that words can once again refer directly to the thing-in-itself is so central to Williams’ poetics that every Williams critic must confront it in some capacity.²⁷ The bulk of

²⁵ See chapter one for further discussion of Williams’ opposition to these concepts.

²⁶ Williams, ‘Prologue to *Kora in Hell*’ (*SE*, P.11).

²⁷ This phrase ‘associational or sentimental value’ is one of the most quoted in the entire Williams canon. Critical debate about whether this is a Romantic or empiricist or modernist etc. trait has been fierce. Personally, I see Williams’ desire to change the associational value of words as a part of the same strand of Pragmatist thought as Kenneth Burke’s *Permanence and Change* (New York: New

Williams' 1920s work is concerned with undermining the vocabulary of the genteel tradition, and returning poetry to a rough but nevertheless beautiful American vernacular. For Williams, beauty should not be something that is remote, but should carry the hard edges and clarity of definition of Cubism or Precisionism. During the 1930s this originally poetic program became tied to a political program, a wider rejection of the authoritative discourses of church, state, and academy. Williams saw his task as rediscovering the 'poetry' of everyday language, so that words can once again be 'natural facts,' as Emerson phrased it, rather than the fakery of a 'higher' culture.²⁸

This Whitmanian aesthetic did not make much headway during the 1920s, a time when alienation, cynicism and complexity were more usually favoured. Eliot wrote of Whitman that he was 'a great representative of America, but emphatically of an America which no longer exists'.²⁹ In the 1930s however, America experienced a sudden revival of Whitman's nativist aesthetic. In his book *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, William Stott argues that 'no other time so praised

Republic, Inc., 1935), pp.14-6. See also my discussion of 'Literature as an Equipment for Living' on pp.59-60. Other critics who discuss this concept include Joseph Riddel, *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William Carlos Williams* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), p.49; Carroll Franklin Terrell, *William Carlos Williams: Man and Poet* (Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1983), p.444; Bram Djikstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Steiglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton University Press, 1969), p.128; Peter Halter, *The Revolution in the Visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.78; Ronald E. Martin, *American Literature and the Destruction of Knowledge: Innovative Writing in the Age of Epistemology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), pp.283-6; Harold Bloom, *William Carlos Williams* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), p.80; Burton Hatlen, *William Carlos Williams and the Language of Poetry* (Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 2002), p.141; Jerome Mazzaro, *William Carlos Williams: The Later Poems* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1973), p.8; Roy Miki, *The Prepoetics of William Carlos Williams: Kora in Hell* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press), p.127; Thomas R. Whitaker, *William Carlos Williams* (Connecticut: Twayne Publishers, 1989), p.34; Harihar Rath, *The Poetry of Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2003), p.230-1.

²⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Language," *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Volume II* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1881), p.149.

²⁹ Quoted in *A Companion to Walt Whitman* ed. Donald Kummings (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p.445.

the Whitmanian 'I'—able to see, incorporate, and give voice to all human experience.³⁰ As a result, during the 1930s Williams' continual appeals for a Whitmanian revival began to be heard by other writers on the little magazines circuit. In chapter one I shall demonstrate that Williams exerted an important influence on several of these little magazines, often writing their manifestos personally. Some critics, such as Donald Davie have derided Williams almost as a simpleton, 'a dumb ox,' 'incapable of consecutive thought' in comparison to the great sophistication of the other modernists.³¹ Certainly Williams' poetry was intimately concerned with simplicity, but during the 1930s other artists and critics began to perceive that this might be more than simply 'anti-intellectualism',³² as Yvor Winters and later Donald Davie claimed, that in fact Williams was deliberately taking up a Whitmanian stance on what 'poetic' language should fundamentally signify.

During the 1930s, Williams became something of a figurehead for the new wave of more socialist American poets pursuing this Whitmanian revival, such as

³⁰ William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (University of Chicago Press, 1973), p.36.

³¹ Donald Davie, 'A Demurral' (1987) republished in *Two Ways out of Whitman* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), p.65.

³² The charge that Winters, Davie and others levelled at Williams was that he was 'anti-intellectual', and that he displayed his ignorance in an embarrassing manner as though it were something to be celebrated. Davie remarks with contempt that when Williams was prompted to explain why he ordered his line breaks as he did, he simply replied 'I don't know.' For Davie, Williams could only ever be a poet who was 'ignorant of enjambment,' with no conscious understanding of what he was doing, a writer plagued by 'muddleheadedness'. If Williams is to be attacked on the grounds of muddleheadedness, then we must extend the charge to all writers of the surrealist tradition. However it is not my intention to get involved in a debate about surrealism and whether a poet must be conscious of his own poetry-making processes. I merely wish to point out that this view, the Davie view of Williams, is nearly always expounded by those critics who think of Williams in the context of a great poetic tradition; a tradition to which Williams only ever showed 'impudence' and never appreciation. Davie seems to be completely unaware that Williams even wrote prose, his only introduction to Williams' prose being the 'inchoate prose' that is included in *Spring and All*. It is therefore worth making a distinction from the outset between Williams' 'prose-poetry' (such as the avant-garde prose writings that populate *Spring and All*) and the more conventional 'prose' of his short stories and his later novels. Davie is justified in referring to the former as 'inchoate'. (For this reason, one should not read *Spring and All* as a combination of alternating prose and poetry, but rather as a single stream of prose-poetry). The more conventional prose of his short stories and novels, however, is surprisingly traditional in a realist sort of way, and often astonishingly insightful. It is my intention to show another side of Williams that Davie ignores. *Ibid.* pp.64-5.

George Oppen, Louis Zukofsky, Horace Gregory,³³ Archibald MacLeish, Muriel Rukeyser and Norman MacLeod. As such Williams himself represents a key link between the liberal ideology of the democratic legacy of the Lincoln Republic and the socialism of the 1930s. One of the key subjects of this thesis is therefore how America's liberal past was re-imagined by the new wave of American writers – to what extent it was challenged and to what extent it was sentimentalised. There is a tension that occurs both in Williams' own works and in the literature of the 1930s at large, between a reliance on an established idea of 'native' American culture and an attempt to fundamentally re-imagine America's past.

Peter Conn, in his recent literary history of the 1930s, argues that 'the turbulent circumstances of the Depression stimulated an especially vigorous engagement with history,'³⁴ in which writers and journalists looked for the causes of the national crisis in the 'historical subsoil that lay beneath the country's urban streets and rural farms.' Conn's book sets out the argument that the Depression precipitated a battle over American history that was, in essence, a battle for American identity, 'a debate over the meaning of America'.³⁵ Critics such as Warren Susman see the 1930s as a period of revision with regard to American identity. Susman argues that the 1930s prompted a 'self-conscious search for a culture' that could 'make their own world comprehensible again.' This impulse, according to Susman, gave rise to a 'new era of nationalism'³⁶ This new era of nationalism and the search for a new American culture are undoubtedly reflected in the Williams canon (though Williams' interest in

³³ Gregory in particular was heavily influenced by Williams and wrote to him on 1st May, 1931, saying that Williams' writing had encouraged him to leave behind 'traditional forms' for 'a language that will reproduce the experience of living.' Yale, WCW Papers, Box 7, Folder 247.

³⁴ Peter Conn, *The American 1930s: A Literary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.5.

³⁵ Conn p.5, p.35. He notes the increased gathering and administration of historical records during this period, including the National Archives, the Dictionary of American Biography, the Historical Records Survey, the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Index of American Design.

³⁶ See Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Patheon, 1973), p.157.

such matters clearly predates the Depression). Though one might assume that this nationalism was a conservative trait, in reality it was a cross-party phenomenon, as evidenced by the slogan of the Communist Party USA during the 1930s, ‘Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism.’³⁷ David Eldridge even shows that cultural nationalism became the unofficial policy of the Roosevelt administration.³⁸ Even the Federal Writers’ and the Federal Theatre Projects of the WPA, which were plagued by congressional accusations of being a hotbed for ‘Red Propaganda,’³⁹ were implicated in this cultural nationalism through projects such as States Guides, which catalogued and documented the ‘American way of life’ in 48 states. That nationalist agenda became formalized when the remnants of the WPA were incorporated into the wartime propaganda effort in 1940.⁴⁰

Williams was deeply concerned with finding an ‘American’ solution to the economic crisis during the 1930s. When *Partisan Review and Anvil*, held a symposium on the theme ‘What is Americanism? Marxism and the American Tradition’ in April 1936, Williams replied that “the American tradition is completely opposed to Marxism” and that

Marxism is a static philosophy of a hundred years ago which has not kept up – as the democratic spirit has – through the stresses of an actual trial... My opinion is that our revolutionary literature is merely tolerated by most Americans, that it is definitely in conflict with our deep-seated ideals. (*SL*, 157-8)

The article was published under the heading “Sanctions Against Williams” in the next issue, and *Partisan Review* received a deluge of letters denouncing Williams’ position. The subsequent correspondence confirms that a battle was taking

³⁷ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p.13.

³⁸ David Nicholas Eldridge, *American Culture in the 1930s* (Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp.24, 165-71.

³⁹ See Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), especially pp.4-15.

⁴⁰ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, p.348.

place over what ‘Americanism’ meant, and whether it was compatible with the 1930s drive towards the reconstruction of the state from a social perspective. As I shall discuss in chapter four, his support for Major Douglas’ radical economic revisions in Social Credit, was based largely on the assumption that Social Credit could counter America’s economic autocracy without fundamentally affecting America’s traditional values: liberty, individualism and opportunity.

This emphasis on American individualism during the 1930s by writers such as Williams was also a product of the threat to free speech witnessed in dictator states. The implied threat to freedom was a decisive factor in preventing those on the left from gaining a solid foothold during the early 1930s. In accordance with Stalin’s “Third Period” policies, the Communist Parties in countries such as America were increasingly forced to toe the party line rather than trying to integrate with existing grassroots socialist movements in their respective countries. As a result, the CPUSA could no longer align itself with America’s past, but now had to reject that past in favour of an ‘internationalism’ that in reality stemmed from Russia.⁴¹ The result was that membership of the CPUSA dropped sharply during the first years of the Depression, and indeed, it recovered only after it began to pursue the Popular Front alliance with social democratic elements. For Conn, the CPUSA failed because it insisted, in accordance with Third Period policies, on being Russian rather than adapting to American traditions. For Conn, it was nostalgia rather than revolution which won the battle for American identity, with the ‘Red Decade’ appearing as a mere anomaly on America’s unswerving march towards a capitalist future.⁴² This must be the inevitable conclusion of those studies that define ‘radicalism’ exclusively

⁴¹ See Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p.20. See also Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

⁴² Peter Conn, *The American 1930s*, pp.4-6.

in terms of those elements which were calling for outright revolution, such as the CPUSA. In this thesis, however, I wish to focus on the tradition of writers which attempted to marry a home-grown 'socialism' with the American Populist tradition and to show the first stirrings of the Popular Front in modernist writers such as Williams.

One of the most important founding texts in this tradition of home-grown socialism is Van Wyck Brooks' *America's Coming of Age* (1915). Brooks articulates his huge frustration towards what he calls the 'imperial' tradition, referring to the marriage of extreme individualism in the nation's philosophical life with capitalist conquest in its economic life. In particular, he condemns Emerson's role in creating an America individualist tradition that was 'incapable of an effective social ideal'.⁴³ Emerson received a great deal of criticism during the 1930s from Marxist critics such as V.F. Calverton and Granville Hicks, who argued that his 'frontier mentality' had created a rapacious and self-serving philosophy in which society could 'take care of itself, or go hang.'⁴⁴

⁴³ Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming of Age*, first printed in 1915 (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1995), p.44. Waldo Frank made similar observations in *Our America* (New York: Boni and Liverwright, 1919).

⁴⁴ V.F. Calverton's *The Liberation of American Literature* (New York: Scribners, 1932), p.249. See also Granville Hicks, *The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), p.8-9. This interpretation of Emerson may be legitimate within the specific context of certain essays, most particularly 'Self-Reliance.' However, various revisionist critics have attempted to show that Emerson also laid the groundwork for a more social and contextual understanding of society in essays such as 'Circles'. This more recent view of Emerson has been championed by critics such as George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (New York: Sage Publications, 1995) and Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism: The Carus Lectures, 1988* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Kateb argues that Emerson's 'democratic individualism' must be distinguished from the Romantic individualism of Nietzsche or Byron, and that Emersonian individualism, in contrast to the solipsism of the romantics, is exemplified in 'town meetings', which encourage the idea of individual dissent within a social environment. Similarly, Stanley Cavell argues that the significant aspect of Emersonian individualism lies in the 'disdain for official culture' which ultimately is intended to reinforce our commitment to a social understanding of the world (Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p.50). Kateb and Cavell both arrive at the conclusion that Emersonian individualism, which has been characterized for over a century as an apolitical selfishness, actually necessitates political activism, an assertion which is backed up by Emerson's own involvement in abolitionism.

The rejection of ‘Emersonian’ individualism was fully articulated on the political stage most clearly in Roosevelt’s speeches, and the defining narrative of the 1930s was this movement towards the ‘social.’ Roosevelt’s anti-monopoly, anti-trust speeches (his ‘Commonwealth Club’ speech in particular) bemoaned the ‘free play and unlimited reward’ given to powerful individuals and the corrupting effect it had on society. Such a philosophy, giving free reign to the individual, Roosevelt argued, had been acceptable for a frontier age, but now that America’s great age of expansion was over, the power of these ‘titan like’ individuals must be curbed for the benefit of society.⁴⁵ Williams makes a similar point in ‘Revolutions Revalued’ (1936): ‘At first and for a long time unrestricted individualism was a social asset of the first order, it was pro-social. If it has gone too far it is because now it has become anti-social’ (*ARI*, 101).⁴⁶

Thus we might forgive critics for assuming that the 1930s was decidedly not an ‘Emersonian’ decade. And yet Williams’ political philosophy of the 1930s did not depart significantly from Emerson’s vision of democratic America. Williams was to a large extent an Emersonian. He believed in the idea of the great individual, specifically in the power of the visionary poet to re-imagine the intellectual and cultural frameworks in which we live (just as Madame Curie or Einstein did).⁴⁷ He believed in a Romantic anti-capitalism, derived from Jefferson, and that the path to

See also Peter S. Field, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Intellectual* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), p.4; *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan Levine, Daniel S. Malachuk (Kentucky: University Press Kentucky, 2011), p.26.

⁴⁵ FDR, “Commonwealth Club Speech,” 23rd September, 1932, in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Volume I: The Genesis of the New Deal*, ed. Samuel I. Rosenman (New York: Random House, 1938), pp.747-8.

⁴⁶ Williams kept various newspaper clippings of cases of corruption and nepotism in business and politics. For instance, the case of ‘Frank “I am the Law” Hague,’ and his ‘stooge,’ Judge Thomas F. Meaney, who corrupted the New Jersey State Banking Department. See Yale, WCW Papers, Box 7, Folder 249. Various other clippings of this nature were kept by Williams, focusing on economic injustice, suggesting that it was an ongoing concern of his from the 1930s onwards.

⁴⁷ For Williams’ writings about Einstein see his 1948 essay ‘The Poem as a Field of Action’ (*SE*, 280). For a discussion of Madame Curie see *Paterson*, book IV, especially p.184.

liberty lay in individual freedom and a minimalist state. And yet Williams was also, in some ways, a socialist. In economics he was devoted to the American Social Credit Movement, which I shall discuss in chapter four, and he believed in the radical redistribution of the nation's wealth. What we find in Williams is a synthesis of traditional Emersonian liberalism, American Populism and the socialism of the 1930s.

In this respect, Williams typifies the majority movement of the Popular Front. In its anti-institutionalism, its pursuit of the 'authentic', its rejection of the plutocratic world of finance, its desire for a native understanding, its privileging of the marginal and powerless ('the idiot, the Indian, the child and unschooled farmer's boy'),⁴⁸ it is clear that the new 'social' movement of the Popular Front did not deviate as far from Emerson as the majority of critics would have us believe. In fact, Emerson's fervent belief that 'the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time' could describe the literature of the 1930s as much as the 1830s.⁴⁹

In his 1918 essay, 'A Useable Past,' Brooks wrote that the past had 'no objective value; it yields only what we are able to look for in it.'⁵⁰ Brooks wanted to fundamentally recreate America's past from a more social perspective. Williams' almost obsessive writing about the Founding Fathers and the revolutionary period during the 1930s, which I discuss in detail in chapter four, is evidence enough that he

⁴⁸ Emerson, "History," *Essays and Lectures*, p.256

⁴⁹ Emerson 'The American Scholar,' *Essays and Lectures*, p.69. See also FDR's "Forgotten Man," speech, Albany, N.Y. 7th April, 1932, in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, p.624.

⁵⁰ Van Wyck Brooks, 'On Creating a Useable Past,' *Dial*, 64 (11th April, 1918), p.338. For further discussion of Williams and Brooks see Bryce Conrad, *Refiguring America: A Study of William Carlos Williams' In the American Grain* (Urbana: University Illinois Press, 1990), p.20.

was searching for a 'Usable Past' of his own, one that could guide him artistically and politically through the radical changes of the Depression era.

Williams had been actively concerned with creatively re-imagining America's past in order to undermine what he saw as the hegemonic Puritan (and capitalist) understanding of America's beginnings since the publication of *In the American Grain* in 1925.⁵¹ At the heart of this re-imagining is the idea of history or historical method itself. In *American Grain* Valery Larbaud accuses Williams of wanting to 'uproot history,' but Williams insists that he seeks 'the support of history' but wishes 'to understand it aright, to make it SHOW itself' (*ITAG*, 116). Indeed, in some sense Williams' entire oeuvre is an attempt to reclaim the 'meaning of America' from what he perceived to be its corruption by the European. Williams' attachment to the idea of a native, pre-European (pre-lapsarian) history and his attempt to rediscover American 'nativism' in a modern setting is of central importance in understanding Williams' politics and aesthetics.

Whilst the *American Grain* is now one of Williams' most celebrated works, it was virtually unknown during the 1920s. Early critics such as the *Saturday Review of Literature* described the book as 'not history, not even good sense.' Only a few writers of the time recognised its value. Bill Bird wrote to Williams in November 1925: 'in my view you have actually, in this book, fixed the point of departure for the American novel of the future... it may have the effect of sending a good many of our "ex-patriots" scurrying back to their native shores.'⁵² It was not until Laughlin resurrected the book in 1939 that it gained any kind of public acceptance at all. In some sense, it is therefore possible to make a case for *American Grain* as being suited for a post-1930s readership. The reason for this is partly Williams' emphasis

⁵¹ Henceforth Abbreviated to *American Grain*.

⁵² Bill Bird to WCW, 28th Nov, 1925. Yale, WCW Papers, Box 2, Folder 60.

on native history. In *American Grain* this ‘native’ emphasis frequently takes on the form of romanticising Native American culture: ‘almost nothing remains of the great American New World,’ Williams writes, ‘but a memory of the Indian’ (*ITAG*, 157).

During the 1930s the movement for Native American self-determination grew in strength in the wake of Roosevelt’s Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which returned considerable land and rights to Indians. Support for Native Americans had in fact been growing gradually since the Dawes Act of 1887, which had made it explicit government policy to integrate Native Americans into the political system by privatising their land.⁵³ As a result an interest in the concept of a ‘native history,’ separate from the hegemonic European version, had been growing, and during the 1930s the academic establishment began to revisit historical and cultural interpretations of Native Americans in similar terms to those Williams had developed in *American Grain*.⁵⁴

American Grain was more than simply a nationalist bid for cultural status; it was also a battle to destabilize the authority of the Puritan version of history on political grounds, that is, the history of the British in America.⁵⁵ Like Van Wyck Brooks, Williams also felt that America’s past had to be rescued from the debilitating

⁵³ The Indian Reorganization Act was spearheaded by a man named John Collier, who led a crusade for a “New Deal for Indians.” Joel Pfister describes Collier’s attitudes towards Native Americans as an “anti-imperial Romanticism.” Not only did he want to restore Native American rights, he also wanted to bring the Native American way of life and social structures into Protestant America, believing that where white democracy was merely ‘political,’ Native American democracy was also “economic, social and cultural.’ In other words, he saw Native American democracy as being far deeper and more meaningful. In this he has much in common with Williams. Joel Pfister, *Individuality Incorporated: Indians and the Multicultural Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p.192-6. See also Kathleen Sue Fine-Dare, *Grave Injustice: The American Indian Repatriation Movement and NAGPRA* (Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), pp.64-5.

⁵⁴ John Beck also discusses the importance of the growing recognition of a Native American in Williams’ writings. See John Beck, *Writing the Radical Center: William Carlos Williams, John Dewey and American Cultural Politics* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), p.80.

⁵⁵ This may well be connected to Williams’ Spanish Catholic background. Williams certainly makes a case for the superior aims and methods of the Catholics who came to the New World, as opposed to the Protestants who merely wanted to strip it of its resources. See *ITAG*, p.108. See also Julio Marzán, *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994), p.198.

gloss that Puritanism had super-imposed onto it. In *America's Coming of Age*, Brooks argues that Puritanism had created a duality in American thought between the 'high brow' and the 'low brow,' between theory and practice. America's intellectual life was characterized by a transcendental loftiness, which he saw as the legacy of European culture, in whose 'clammy' and 'pallid' grip any lively or life-giving elements in American thought were immediately stifled.⁵⁶ The university he perceived as the most impenetrable stronghold of this Puritan transcendentalism. America's practical life, on the other hand, he saw as being characterized by an abhorrent environment of competitive individualism, where 'society is fair prey for what [the individual] can get out of it'. Again he perceives this competitive individualism as another opposing effect of Puritanism. Brooks wished to create a new, more social America, in which individuals were concerned with self-fulfilment, and where America's intellectual and practical life could be in agreement. He also pre-empts Williams considerably in considering that the issue was a linguistic one as much as anything else; namely that 'slang has quite as much in store for so-called culture as culture has for slang.'⁵⁷ If Williams 'fixed the point of departure for the American novel of the future' in *American Grain* as Bill Bird claimed, then it was in this drive towards undermining the separation between the 'high brow' and the 'low brow'. That this supposition was based on the rather suspicious concept of the 'authentic' language of the people is a problem that Williams struggled with throughout the 1930s.

Like *America's Coming of Age*, *American Grain* also pursues a Romantic critique of capitalism from a Jeffersonian perspective.⁵⁸ Like all Jeffersonian visions

⁵⁶ Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming of Age*, pp.3-6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p.16.

⁵⁸ See chapter four for further discussion of Williams' relationship to Jeffersonian thought, especially pp.203-7

of society, his is one which substitutes the 'formal' or 'contractual' understanding of society, built around the idea of property, legal ties and contracts, for a 'natural' or 'organicist' understanding, built around the mystical connection between man and nature. The Romantic nature of this critique becomes clear if we look at the De Soto chapter. The De Soto chapter is divided, most confusingly, into two separate voices. The first is the 'historical' voice; a third person account of De Soto's travels told in the voice of the historian, one might even say, an academic or European voice. The other is the voice of the new world, told in the first person, immediate and poetic. What is clear is that Williams imagines the voice of America as the voice of the land, a guardian deity, and that this is a female voice. De Soto's lust for the fabled city of gold eventually becomes a more mystical quest for America itself. As the voice of the land warns him: 'you shall receive of me, nothing' except, of course, the beauty of the New World itself, 'pregnant with sudden meanings' (*ITAG*, 45-6). There is therefore a kind of romance that happens between the virgin spirit of the land, which Williams describes as a 'flower' waiting to be 'ravished' (*ITAG*, 7) and the male European conqueror. There is an intimate connection between the primitive violence of the new world, its atavism, and the sexual. As the voice of the New World says, 'Every arrow has upon its barbs a kiss from my lips' (*ITAG*, 49). The female spirit of the new world seduces the strong man with violence and hardship, eventually claiming him in sexual union just as he, appositely, overcomes and conquers her. Eventually De Soto loses his western name and is reborn as Black Jasmine, wearing native furs rather than European apparel (*ITAG*, 46-53). As D.H. Lawrence wrote, 'History in this book would be a sensuous record of the Americanization of the white men in America, as contrasted with ordinary history, which is a complacent record of the civilization and Europizing (if you can allow the word) of the American

continent.’⁵⁹ The metaphor that Williams uses to convey the relationship between man and land is therefore marriage, a mystical union, giving natural bounty.⁶⁰ As Lawrence implies, such a union recognizes the primacy of the ‘sensual’ (the natural) over the European convention of the contract, ‘property’, or legal union.

This sort of mystical connection between man and land offers the basis for Jeffersonian agrarianism, and was frequently the mainstay of anti-capitalist movements during the 1920s and 30s. Alec Marsh puts forward a compelling argument that Williams and Pound were both strongly influenced by the Jeffersonian Populist Movement during the first two decades of the century.⁶¹ Whilst agrarianism was seen as a ‘natural’ life giving force, sustaining the balance and continuity of the natural world, capitalism was frequently portrayed as against nature, and compared to rape and other acts of sexual deviancy.⁶²

The Anglo-Puritan subversion of the natural, its repression of the sexual, and its denial of human pleasure, is contrasted throughout *American Grain* with the ‘organicism’ of the Native American.⁶³ The debate over ‘organicism’ acquired a new political urgency during the 1930s, as the furore over America’s Dust Bowl refugees raged.⁶⁴ For contemporaries, the New Deal was typically associated with

⁵⁹ D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p.35. Quoted in Bryce Conrad, *Refiguring America*, p.2.

⁶⁰ This touches on the enormous subject of the role of the female as a fertilizing ‘Other’ in Williams’ work. Conrad also argues that whilst Pound and Eliot were typically governed by the ‘father to father’ form of influence, Williams introduces a subversive and feminized ‘Other’ that exists outside of cultural traditions. This subversive female force, he notes, is often represented by the earth, indicating a more sensual and primal way of looking at the world. See Conrad, *Refiguring America*, p.106. Breslin also discusses the image of the ‘supplying female’ as the source of creative inspiration (Breslin, *An American Artist*, pp.46, 51).

⁶¹ Alec Marsh, *Money and Modernity: Pound, Williams, and the Spirit of Jefferson* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998).

⁶² See Ezra Pound, ‘Canto XLV,’ *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1996), p.230.

⁶³ See also Williams’ short story ‘Above the river,’ published originally in *The Nation* 19th December, 1938. The Native American is portrayed in this short story as the archetype for American machismo, in contrast to the feminization of those inheriting European civilization (*FD*, 251-4).

⁶⁴ James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.10. See also Brad D. Lookingbill, *Dust Bowl, USA:*

‘technocracy’ and the attempt to bring about what Roosevelt described as a ‘social revolution’ through programs such as the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), the huge New Deal dam-building projects, the modernization of housing, and various other engineering and technological advances.⁶⁵ Residential electricity became the outward symbol of these social advances.⁶⁶ But there was also strong ‘organicist’ counterpoint to this movement, encapsulated in books such as *Grapes of Wrath*. New Deal film-maker, Pare Lorentz, portrayed the Great Depression as a ‘natural disaster’ in his documentary films *The Plough That Broke The Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938). Lorentz suggests that the Depression was an evolutionary imperative, a result of nature correcting the aberrant phenomena (such as the dust bowls) that arose from mankind’s violation of the balance of nature.⁶⁷ Films such as this were merely a small part of the emergence of a wider ecological discourse during the Depression.⁶⁸ As Donald Worster writes, ‘Not since the coming of the Industrial Revolution to America in the early nineteenth-century had there been so keen a debate between the claims of nature and culture.’⁶⁹ These two claims, of the technological and the organic, are entwined throughout Williams’ oeuvre. Certainly, Williams appears to bring more industrial and urban elements into his works of the 1930s, in poems such as ‘The Attic which is Desire’ (1930), or ‘Between Walls’ (1938), as well *White Mule* (1937) and his urban stories, such as ‘The Paid Nurse’

Depression America and the Ecological Imagination, 1929-1941 (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2001).

⁶⁵ Ronald C. Tobey, *Technology as Freedom: The New Deal and the Electrical Modernization of the American Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p.98, see also pp.95-6.

⁶⁶ FDR described electricity as a “servant of the people” and argued that it must be controlled at a Federal level to prevent the people from being extorted by utility firms. “Campaign Address on Public Utilities,” Portland, Oregon, 21st September, 1932, in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, pp.727-742.

⁶⁷ Pare Lorentz, *FDR's Moviemaker: Memoirs & Scripts* (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1992), p.71.

⁶⁸ Neil M. Maher, *Nature's New Deal : The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.11-2.

⁶⁹ Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.237.

(1939). Nevertheless, ideologically and politically, it must be said he derives more from his long-standing belief in Jeffersonian organicism.

The enslavement of the Caribs for profit, it is implied in *American Grain*, is a Puritan theme that will continue, not only in the form of the African slave trade but even more fundamentally, as a legacy of finance capitalism and the western understanding of property itself.⁷⁰ The Native American culture by contrast offers Williams a vision of a libertarian society, which, like all Jeffersonian versions of society, appeals beyond the idea of man-made laws to the idea of a natural law. The implication is of course that in Native American society the individual and the community naturally coexist together, without constraints, according to natural laws. Incidentally, this was the exact same myth that fascism offered its followers. By turning the process of government into a spiritual movement, an almost religious phenomenon, fascism glossed over civil, political and financial tensions by creating the illusion of one big commune, the will of the whole.⁷¹ Though Williams did not buy into fascism, the myth of Naive American organicism offers a similarly totalizing effect and implies that the political and economic injustices that come with European style government are simply not present in a 'natural' society - a myth that glosses over the harsh realities of frontier life.

David Frail explores this romantic critique of industrialism fully in his book *The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams* (1987). In many ways, this thesis is a continuation of Frail's project, beginning in 1929 where Frail's work ends. The terms in which Frail describes Williams have now become a cliché of modernism: confronted with Fordism and new forms of mass cultural production, the disenfranchised artist is forced to escape into the citadel of liberal 'autonomy' in

⁷⁰ Williams, *ITAG*, p.41.

⁷¹ Paul Morrison, *The Poetics of Fascism*, p.8.

order to offer a radical critique of modernity.⁷² Though this may have been true of early Williams, it is not the most significant aspect of his later politics. The Romantic critique of capitalism, backed by a latent agrarianism, is in fact far more relevant to Pound. Indeed, Williams increasingly emulated the industrial art and documentary aesthetic of painters such as Sheeler as the 1930s progressed. Nevertheless it is important to note that as a result of his early politics, an organicist critique of industrialism forms a kind of intellectual sub-structure to Williams' political aesthetics.

Following on from this, the most striking aspect of Williams' battle against 'Puritanism' is his objection to Federal encroachment, which he traces directly back to Puritan values. The connection is not easy to spot except in the context of Prohibition society:

The Puritans have damned us with their abstinence, removal from the world, denial... From lack of touch, lack of belief. Steadily the individual loses caste, then the local government loses its authority; the head is more and more removed. Finally the center is reached—totally dehumanized, like a Protestant heaven. Everything is Federalized and all laws become prohibitive in essence' (*ITAG*, 128).

One of the most significant texts for this thesis is his unpublished 'Democratic Party Poem' (c.1927, see Appendix 1) the only poem that fully lays out Williams' vision for the Democratic Party (of which he was a life-long supporter):

The old strength of Europe is its traditional localism fixed by a variety of languages...

States' rights precede all other political virtues

*The Renaissance was the flowering of rival cities*⁷³

⁷² David Frail, *The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams*, p.52.

⁷³ Buffalo, WCW Papers, A76.

The 'Democratic Party Poem' is a somewhat confusing work, since it puts forward a lengthy case for states' rights, and celebrates the decentring principle of republicanism. During the 1930s the Democratic Party was fundamentally concerned with centralising and bureaucratising all aspects of government. In fact, centralisation might even be considered the most fundamental aspect of the New Deal, its *raison d'être*. From welfare, housing, social security and fiscal policy to the artists of the WPA, the New Deal systematically brought the United States under the control of Federal mandates.⁷⁴ Williams' vision of the Democratic Party, on the other hand, was fundamentally based on the concept of 'localism' and the devolution of power to smaller local communities. Here Williams' political beliefs were out of step with the rest of the country. He was a Democrat who believed in radical 'socialist' ideas about the redistribution of wealth, whilst at the same time supporting states' rights. The emphasis on states' rights might lead one to questions why he didn't simply vote Republican. How is it possible that Williams was a supporter of Al Smith during the 1920s and Social Credit during the 1930s? Again, for Williams, this comes back to the legacy of Puritanism. Williams naturally blamed the legacy of Puritanism for prohibition politics, and consequently construed a narrative in which Democrats and not Republicans must become the champions of individual liberty and states' rights. Just as the first settlers issued a blanket ban on wearing ribbons and various other needless acts of prohibition, Williams argues, so Republicans embrace Federal mandates wherever it suits their goals, attempting to define and

⁷⁴ It is on the issue of centralization that Williams departs significantly from Dewey. As Sidney Milkis writes, 'From Dewey, New Dealers learned how to circumvent American hostility to administrative centralization and persuade Americans that expansive national power was consistent with revered traditions.' Sidney M. Milkis, 'Franklin D. Roosevelt, The Economic Constitutional Order, and the New Politics of Presidential Leadership' in *The New Deal and the Triumph of Liberalism* eds., Sidney M. Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), p.38. See also *The Making of the New Deal: The Insiders Speak*, ed. Katie Louchheim (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p.104.

control acceptable moral standards, whilst hypocritically covering their Puritanism with the discourse of liberalism and states' rights. Thus, for Williams, the Volstead Act was proof that Republican calls for states' rights are hollow and always in service to their own Puritan agenda. True devolvement of government could only come from the left. Thus Williams wanted to make the left the bastion of localism, and legitimately saw communism itself as a threat to this devolution of power.

In this manner, we can see that for Williams the battle for a free and liberal America during the 1930s was merely a continuation of a historic battle between the organicist tradition, represented by figures such as Boone, De Soto and Père Rasles, and the forces of industrialisation, which are nowhere more apparent than in the early Federalists. Williams directs his hatred of industrial America predominantly at Hamilton, who founded the First Bank of America. He holds Hamilton directly responsible for the manner in which the early Federalists copied English legal and financial systems in the period immediately after the revolution, turning the First Bank of America into a replica of the Bank of England (an institution which Williams and Pound both held in disdain). It is in this historic struggle that we can begin to make sense of Williams' support for the American Social Credit Movement. The issue that is at the heart of the Social Credit is the issue of the banking system allowing private individuals to control the nation's primary resource, its financial credit, and using that public credit for individual profit. For Williams (and of course Pound) Hamilton was the living embodiment of this exploitation.

Hamilton, of course, founded the city of Paterson (described by Williams as 'the vilest swillhole in Christendom')⁷⁵ and he notes with disdain that Hamilton wanted to make it the capital of the newly-founded country because the Paterson

⁷⁵ ITAG, p.195.

Falls provided the opportunity for a manufacturing centre based around water turbines. Hamilton personally set up the Useful Society for Manufacturing, and sold the rights to use the waterpower to manufacturers in the hope of artificially stimulating American industry. As Williams notes, this decision had repercussions for the Passaic Valley that continued for centuries. The public land was privately owned under the initial charter, and, despite never having paid for it, companies were able to make huge profits out of it, polluting the river with impunity and plundering the resources of the Passaic valley. Hamilton's desire to make Paterson the capital city of America reflected his desire to put corporatism at the heart of America, to make the corporation, as opposed to the natural unit of the family, the new organising principle of society. Williams writes:

Hamilton, sewed up his privileges unto kingdomcome, through his holding company, in the State legislature. *His* company. *His* United States: Hamiltonia – the land of the company. (*ITAG*, 195)

Williams therefore sees Hamilton as selling the national resources of the Passaic Valley to his backers and political supporters, so that they could literally 'rape' the virgin land of the new world and replace the natural relationship of man and earth with an alliance of political and commercial corporations that would continue to exploit and enslave the residents of Passaic Valley right up until the Paterson silk strikes of 1913, which first prompted Williams to write about Paterson. This issue of course became one of the driving forces behind his epic poem *Paterson*, when he began writing it at the end of the 1930s, but it had been an ongoing concern of his since he began writing *American Grain*.

In later chapters I wish to demonstrate that Williams was forced to revise his Jeffersonian understanding of a 'natural' agrarian society as a result of his contact

with Marxism during the 1930s. Nevertheless, it did not leave him entirely, and neither did it leave the literature or culture of the New Deal. The Romantic critique of capitalism that Williams brings into his works also falls into alignment with mainstream New Deal criticisms.

The films of Frank Capra, for instance, which are frequently seen as the exemplary of mainstream New Deal Populism, often hinge on a tension between ‘natural’ laws and systemic corruption, and of course, between cynicism and faith towards America’s past. Capra’s characters are nearly always average, ordinary people who are suddenly thrust into positions of power, in which they are then pitted against the entire machinery of modernity. In *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town* (1936), for instance, a young boy-scout leader, a patriot who can quote Lincoln and Jefferson by heart, a man of nature, is suddenly made into a Senator and sent to Washington where he must contend against a corrupt political system. A hidden monopoly of newspapers, paid-off politicians, and corrupt businesses (the spectre of which Roosevelt invoked to win the 1932 election)⁷⁶ attempts to destroy him. In the end, he comes to recognize that his faith in American ideals was naïve, a product of his ignorance about the realities of bare-knuckle politics. Nevertheless, his rugged frontier hardiness, his refusal to be corrupted by the forces of modernity, and his ‘fool’s faith’ in the American ideals of liberty, freedom and equality ultimately win the day. This idea of faith-from-cynicism and the triumph of ‘natural man’ in the face of a corrupt political juggernaut is a constant theme of New Deal literature and continuously informs the films and books of the period. The Depression was simultaneously a period in which traditional American ideals were challenged, and at

⁷⁶ See also John Dewey’s article, ‘Imperative need: A New Radical Party’ first published in *Common Sense*, 2 (September 1933), pp.6-7. Dewey talks about an open ‘oligarchy of wealth’ who ‘control banks, credit, the land, and big organized means of production... means of transportation, and, with exceptions, the public press.’ The fear that democracy was simply a system of buying votes, capable only of reinforcing vested interests, reached an all time high in the first years of the Depression.

the same time an occasion for a renewed sentimentality and idealism in all things ‘native’. It is this tension that I shall explore in Williams’ works of the 1930s.

i.ii. Marxism and Pragmatism

Before continuing this discussion of Williams and radicalism one might first ask why this debate is necessary, and why critics have not traditionally thought about Williams in the context of a radical tradition. As I mentioned earlier, Williams has been left out of nearly every critical study of radical literature of the 1930s. Initially the reason for this may have been more to do with the critical tradition of the 1930s itself, rather than Williams’ own creative and critical output. Robert Warshow claimed in his *Commentary* (1947) that:

For most Americans [the atmosphere of the 1930s] was expressed most clearly in the personality of President Roosevelt and the social-intellectual-political climate of the New Deal. For the intellectual, however, the Communist movement was the fact of central importance; the New Deal remained an external phenomenon, part of that ‘larger’ world of American public life from which he had long separated himself - he might ‘support’ the New Deal . . . but he never identified himself with it.⁷⁷

By turning American communism into a radical intellectual movement, and nothing more, critics of the 1940s and 1950s were able to perpetuate a sense of America’s hegemonic culture falling victim to ideological conspiracies from the left, which, though perhaps well-intentioned, were dangerously out of touch with the ‘real’ world. In other words, communism might sound good in theory, it would never work out in praxis – a position that has continued to define the popular assessment of communism since *Animal Farm* (1945).

⁷⁷ Robert Warshow, ‘The Legacy of the 30s’, *The Immediate Experience* (1962; Anchor ed., 1964), pp. 3-5. Quoted in Eric Mottram, ‘Living Mythically: The Thirties,’ *Journal of American Studies*, 6:3 (Dec., 1972), p.269.

Where proletarian writers were acknowledged, such as Henry Roth, Jack Conroy or James T. Farrell, it was usually as a result of them being successful writers from proletarian backgrounds, as opposed to writers (of any background) writing successfully about proletarian issues.⁷⁸ Such ‘proletarian’ writers were rarely accepted into the academic canon prior to the 1980s. The response to the radical literature of the 1930s in Walter B. Rideout’s 1956 assessment of the Red Decade in *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954* was that communism had instigated an ‘intellectual terrorism’ and that the future of the radical novel lay with the ‘independent radical.’⁷⁹ For Rideout, *The New Masses* was a ‘feeble magazine’ and the ‘recurring squabble during the Thirties over the aesthetics of radical fiction’ was inconsequential since ‘the radical novel of these or any other years could scarcely be expected to rise to an aesthetic level worth talking about.’⁸⁰

It was scarcely likely that Williams would be associated with the radical/proletarian tradition during the 1950s. One of the major ongoing debates for contemporaries was the question of whether literature could be considered a tool for political change, or whether literature answers to a higher (though not necessarily ‘transcendent’) truth, next to which the political struggles of a single generation would seem like the mere froth of history. To Marxists such as Farrell, the continual emphasis on ‘aesthetics’ over political content was simply a result of the bourgeois legacy of transcendentalism. In this respect Williams is an interesting case.⁸¹ Though

⁷⁸ Edwin Seaver, for instance, defined ‘proletarian literature’ as literature written by proletarians, thus denying writers such as Williams a place in the proletarian movement. See James Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), pp.170-1.

⁷⁹ Walter B. Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1956), pp.290, 291.

⁸⁰ In fact, this latter quote is a paraphrasing of Rideout, whose own criticisms were more muted. See Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p.25. Rideout did believe, however, that literature served a higher function, to inquire into the human condition, and that communism undermined the independence of this inquiry. See Rideout, *The Radical Novel*, p.254.

⁸¹ See James Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment*, pp.170-1.

Williams was similarly concerned with undermining bourgeois idealism, in the early 1930s he continually distanced himself from Marxist critics by distinguishing between those writers who focused on ‘style’ and those who focused on ‘propaganda,’ urging young writers to place artistic considerations before political ones. ‘What we must have in literature today,’ he wrote to Zukofsky in July 1936, ‘is not propaganda for the proletariat – but a proletarian *style*.’⁸² Thus on the surface it would seem that Williams was taking a fairly strong stance in the debate over the aesthetics of radical literature that was occupying the leftist intelligentsia.⁸³ The assumption here is that the aesthetic world (which, for Williams, is the world of direct sensory experience) exists prior to and supersedes the often theoretical and abstract world of politics. In this respect, Williams’ poetry, which focuses to an extraordinary degree on the physical, material world, has always been sufficiently ‘non-political,’ sufficiently ambiguous, to satisfy critics of various political backgrounds. He has been called ‘communist,’⁸⁴ a ‘liberal,’⁸⁵ and almost everything else in between. In fact, Williams himself did not seem to regard these as mutually exclusive terms. In this respect he is similar to the character of X in ‘The Dawn of Another Day’ (1934) who declares ‘I’m a Democrat and I’m a Communist.’ He goes on to give a lengthy speech about *Das Kapital*:

⁸² WCW to LZ, 22nd July 1936 (WCW/LZ, 235). All correspondence between Williams and Zukofsky is taken from this volume unless otherwise stated.

⁸³ James Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment*, p.171.

⁸⁴ Denning for instance describes Williams as a communist and writes that ‘Williams’s iconoclastic communism was more typical of figures in the proletarian movement than historians have realized.’ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p.213. Johnson describes Williams as a ‘Democrat and a Communist’ and argues that the two were not incompatible during the 1930s. See Bob Johnson, ‘“A Whole Synthesis of His Time” : Political Ideology and Cultural Politics in the Writings of William Carlos Williams, 1929-1939,’ *American Quarterly*, 54.2 (2002), p.179.

⁸⁵ It must be said that the majority of critics have tended to portray Williams as a liberal rather than a communist. Robert Lowell describes Williams as ‘liberal, anti-orthodox, and the descendent of Emerson and Whitman’ See Robert Lowell, *Collected Prose*, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1987) John Beck’s *Writing the Radical Center* is entirely devoted to this idea (see p.9). The same is true of Frail’s *The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams*.

I read that lousy book till I damned near knew it by heart. And the old bugger is right. To hell with the Capitalists that enslave the resources of the nation. You know yourself 5% of the people of the United States own 95% of the money. And 95% of the people own only 5% of the money. Now that's not right. We got to have a revolution and take it away from them. (*FD*, 148-9)

Passages such as this, which are scattered throughout his works of the 1930s, seem to indicate that Williams was a communist sympathiser. Part of the uncertainty over how Williams should be categorized politically is undoubtedly his own deliberate resistance to political 'categorization.' In 1939, for instance, he signed up to Sidney Hook's Committee for Cultural Freedom, an organisation intended to oppose all forms of totalitarianism, both communist and fascist. Williams resigned from the CCF a short while later because he 'found out it was a covert attack on Communism,' and because he believed that the CCF contained fascist elements (this, of course, would have been completely contrary to the founding principles of the Committee and was most likely a lie spread by hard-line communists in order to prevent the CCF from gaining too much influence).⁸⁶ The *New Leader* published his resignation from the CCF and publicly embarrassed him, saying that Williams wasn't even a socialist and that he had 'no right to pass judgement on revolutionary poetry' in the first place, since he 'didn't understand it.'⁸⁷ Soon after, two new overtly communist groups emerged with the aim of attacking the CCF: the Committee of 400 and the LCFS (League for Cultural Freedom and Socialism). Williams, evidently not learning his lesson, signed up to both. His signature on the Committee of 400 manifesto made it look as though he was supporting Stalin just a week before Russia signed the Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler, further embarrassing him.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Williams to McAlmon, Quoted in Milton A. Cohen, *Beleaguered Poets and Leftist Critics*, p.178.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Reed Whittemore, *William Carlos Williams: Poet from Jersey* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), p.257.

⁸⁸ Milton Cohen examines Williams' role in these various organisations and committees in greater depth. Though I have given a brief summary here, I do not wish to devote too much time to discussing Williams' role in the various factions and organisations of the left, since I do not believe that they are

Though Williams may have been politically naive, he was certainly not the only one to be confused and misled by the infighting, the lies, the competition between radical organisations, and the general climate of the fear that totalitarianism had inspired. The same was true, for instance, of Laughlin, who signed up for the Honest Money Foundation's 'Directory of Monetary Reform Leaders,' a seemingly noble enterprise, only to discover that it had been caught 'distributing antisemitic literature and the crude fascist ravings of Christians.'⁸⁹

The glut of adulation for Williams' poetry that took place during the 1950s and the early 1960s and which secured his admission into the academic canon was based on the assumption that Williams was non-political, that he represented the voice of open-minded American democracy, in contrast to the aberrant and dangerous extremism of the 1930s, and in particular, Pound.⁹⁰ In opposition to Pound, Williams would forever be the acceptable face of modernism. If Williams started, as an early critic, Monroe Spears says, 'the second American revolution in poetry,' to his

particularly relevant to Williams. Williams' main criteria for signing or not signing a manifesto seems to have been whether his friends had already signed up; for instance, he only signed the LCFS manifesto because Laughlin had already done so. As such an examination of the CCF or the LCFS will not be particularly insightful in terms of figuring out Williams' own political position. Milton Cohen, *Beleaguered Poets and Leftist Critics*, p.178-80.

⁸⁹ GM to JL, 13th June, 1939. Wesleyan University, Gorham Munson Papers, Box 12.

⁹⁰ Linda Wagner has helpfully collected a list of many of these articles. Wagner writes 'Williams continued his poetic experimentation, in the hope of finding a means to re-create his contemporary locale in his poem. Most critics today think that Williams achieved his goal most successfully in his last four books – *The Desert Music*, *Journey to Love*, *Paterson V*, and *Pictures from Brueghel*.' As it happens Williams' final four books were also amongst the most Romantic in his oeuvre. Linda Welshimer Wagner, 'A Decade of Discovery, 1953-1963: Checklist of Criticism, William Carlos Williams' Poetry' in *Twentieth Century Literature*, 10:4 (Jan., 1965), p.166. The assumption that Williams was fundamentally opposed to Marxism continued at least as far as Whittemore's 1975 biography. Whittemore is an example of those critics who see 'modernism' and 'radicalism' as two separate entities, and he places Williams firmly in the 'modernist' camp with a satisfaction that is born out his belief that Marxism was essentially a foolish enterprise and that Williams was wise to avoid it. See *William Carlos Williams: Poet from Jersey* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), p.178.

generation it would be a revolution associated firmly with Washington and not Marx.⁹¹

The 1950s assessment of the Red Decade was drastically overturned, however, during the subsequent decade with what Mottram describes as ‘the fashionable mythicization of the 1930s which took place during the 1960s.’⁹² In the 1960s there was a backlash from Marxist critics seeking to uncover an indigenous Marxist tradition in America. Daniel Aaron’s *Writers on the Left* (1961)⁹³ is perhaps the most obvious example of this Marxist revival, presenting a thorough history of American communism from 1912 to the early 1940s, focusing on the history of card carrying members of the CPUSA. However, more often than not, Marxist critics of the 1960s still felt compelled to begin any study of 1930s literature with a lengthy rejection of Stalinism. The 1968 collection of essays edited by David Madden, *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, which included important essays from Leslie Fielder and Marcus Klein, is a case in point. The general thrust of this volume is that 1930s proletarian fiction was hampered by its over-dependence on Marxist theory. Madden sees the literature of the period as tending towards good old-fashioned realist narratives which are suddenly interrupted by inexplicable and unwarranted interludes of Marxist editorializing. As with Walter Rideout, there is the assumption that Marxism is, as Madden says, ‘an external, abstract ideology’ which has been transplanted clumsily onto American culture and politics.⁹⁴ Foley notes that critics such as Madden tend towards binary oppositions such as ‘creative judgement vs.

⁹¹ In fact the first book length criticism of Williams is Vivienne Koch’s sympathetic 1950 study, *William Carlos Williams* (Norfolk, VA: New Directions, 1950). Critics of the 1950s often saw Williams as a mystic, a Romantic visionary, and Williams’ early Keatsian imitations generally found more favor than his works of the 1930s.

⁹² Mottram, ‘Living Mythically: The Thirties,’ p.287.

⁹³ Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961).

⁹⁴ David Madden ed., *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), pp.173. See also Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p.27.

party line.’ Such binary oppositions unconsciously lead us to the conclusion that any literature of ‘creative judgement’ or ‘an aesthetic level worth talking about’ would be fundamentally non-political.⁹⁵

This tension between the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘political’ was also intricately connected to the legacy of the New Critics. As Foley notes, the privileging of certain qualities such as ‘opacity, paradox and ambiguity’ within literature is in fact ‘an ideological manoeuvre rationalizing a conservative and exclusionary concept of literary value’⁹⁶ in which the poet must search for transcendent (or ‘ambiguous’) truths rather than those partisan, political truths which take one side of a debate and reject the other. Because Williams continually undermined ‘propaganda’ in literature he was nearly always considered as a poet comparable to the other modernists. Within his own lifetime, appreciations of Williams’ own works were nearly always bound to this post-Eliotic critical discourse, and his contribution to literature was nearly always seen as one of ‘form’, rather than ‘content.’

On the whole then, the ‘fashionable mythicization’ of the 1930s during the 1960s did very little in terms of encouraging critics to see Williams as part of a radical tradition. It also did very little in terms of breaking down the divide between the ‘high’ culture of modernism and the ‘sub’ culture of the radical left. Critics of the 1980s sought to undo much of the damage caused by this distinction. Cary Nelson, in his 1989 work, *Repression and Recovery*, argued that the cold war essentially suppressed the proper canonization of many 1930s writers by keeping them confined within a narrow conception of ‘Proletarian Literature.’ Nelson writes: ‘English professors should be pressed to explain why, for example, the poetry sung by striking coal miners in the 1920s is so much less important than the appearance of *The Waste*

⁹⁵ Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations*, p.29.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p.3.

Land in The Dial in 1922.⁹⁷ This is in essence the argument that Williams had been putting forward since the beginning of the 1930s. In fact, Williams (during the mid 1930s) and Nelson (during the late 1980s) both champion the poetry of H.H. Lewis as an exemplar of the kind of non-canonical worker's poetry that presents a challenge to the citadel of high modernism.

Born on a farm in Missouri, and working as a farmhand for most of his life, Lewis was another poet, like Williams, who had no formal training and was frequently derided by the intellectuals of the left. Lewis (and Williams to an extent as well) had a lifelong hatred of both Philip Rhav and *Partisan Review* crowd as well as the *New Masses* clique, who Lewis referred to as the Kaffee Klatsch Klan.⁹⁸ It was really their united distrust of Marxist intellectuals that brought Williams and Lewis together. Williams saw Lewis as part of the long tradition of revolutionary literature in America, a tradition distant from Marx and from European intellectualism. In his 1935 review of Lewis' works he writes:

There is a lock, stock and barrel identity between Lewis of today, fighting to free himself from a class enslavement which torments his body with lice and cow dung, and the prosecuted colonist of early American tradition. It doesn't matter that Lewis comes out passionately and openly for Russia. When he speaks of Russia, it is precisely then that he is most American, most solidly in the tradition.⁹⁹

Indeed, this may be a case of Williams projecting his own poetic ambitions onto Lewis.¹⁰⁰ But even so it is telling. Williams, despite his rejection of 'propaganda

⁹⁷ Cary Nelson, *Repression And Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p.68.

⁹⁸ H.H. Lewis to WCW (undated letter). Yale, WCW Papers, Box 12, Folder 393.

⁹⁹ Williams, 'H.H. Lewis: An American Twentieth Century Second Quarter Poet' (1936), Yale, WCW Papers, Box 62, Folder 1323.

¹⁰⁰ Unlike Williams, Lewis did not see himself as incorporating radicalism into the American Revolutionary tradition. In 'Thinking of Russia' he writes,
I'm always thinking of Russia,
I can't keep her out of my head,
I don't give a damn for Uncle Sham,
I'm a left-wing radical red.

for the proletariat' frequently sought to align himself with communist goals and proletarian writers by incorporating communist revolutionary ideals into the American tradition. Despite his continual rejection of Marxist intellectualism, it would be very short-sighted to say that Williams was not radical or that he was not a 'proletarian' writer. In his review of Lewis, Williams quotes from his poem 'Russia.'

Russia, Russia, Russia!
That unified one sovereign throng,
That hundred and sixty million strong,—
Russia! America's loud EXAMPLE-SONG.¹⁰¹

It seems hard, on reading Lewis' poems, to believe that his marginalization is a result of political suppression, as Nelson implies, rather than simply being a result of a lack of intellectual content.¹⁰² Nevertheless, it is Williams' desire to form a non-canonical literary tradition, or rather, his desire to ensure that the American national tradition itself would be defined by its very revolutionary nature, which shall be of interest to me in this thesis.

Recently, interest in the non-canonical writers of the 1930s seems to have abated. With Peter Conn's literary history of the 1930s, the critical discourse has come full circle back to where it was in the 1950s. Conn writes,

However, it is important to make clear that just because Lewis saw himself as undermining American cultural values and opposing traditional ideas of an 'American' identity doesn't mean that Williams was wrong. In fact Williams is almost certainly right about Lewis being more in the American tradition than any of the poets of the *Partisan Review* circle.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., Yale, Folder 1323. Amusingly Williams quotes this as an example of Lewis' 'lyric achievement' and argues that it is filled with 'triumph, realization. A poet's vision of real future.'

¹⁰² Following on from my earlier analysis of the 'aesthetic' and 'political,' Nelson argues that Lewis' poetry has suffered rather because it is entirely unambiguous in its meaning. According to Nelson, ambiguity is the primary feature of canonical literature since ambiguity and internal language conflict always point towards a 'transcendental' meaning. Nelson also sees this as the legacy of New Criticism, which created a critical environment in which transcendental, timeless truth was precisely what made a writer canonical.

Eager to honor radical commitment and to re-orient literary value judgements, recent scholarship on the 1930s has transformed a host of once-obscure novelists, critics, and poets into allegedly substantial figures.¹⁰³

Amongst these ‘allegedly substantial figures’ Conn includes just about every radical writer on whom the edifice of 1930s criticism has been built, including Gold himself, V.F. Calverton, Philips and Rhav and the entire 1935 anthology. Conn’s survey of the 1930s focuses on works such as *Gone With The Wind*, which had large print runs and sold en masse.

Unlike Conn I do not wish to minimize the importance of the left in America during the 1930s or to reassert the dominance of the mass market. Whilst Conn is attempting to undermine our sense of the 1930s as a radical decade and to bring narratives of the 1930s back into alignment with the mainstream culture of the day, I am more interested in reassessing the idea of American ‘radicalism’ in relation to writers such as Williams who were interested in revolutionary new forms of government and revolutionary modes of thinking, but politically, were not prepared to stray from American democracy and were cynical towards communism itself as another piece of rigid ideology in a world defined by the ideological.

In this sense it is Michael Denning’s 1998 work, *The Cultural Front*, which resembles my own approach.¹⁰⁴ This encyclopaedic work bridges the gap between the liberal tradition and the radical left by arguing for a ‘Cultural Front’ rather than the more obvious Popular Front. This ‘Cultural Front’ would be based around ‘revolutionary symbolism’ rather than a literal affiliation with the CPUSA, the CIO or any other specific political structure. The idea of a revolutionary symbolism is

¹⁰³ Peter Conn, *The American 1930s: A Literary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp.29-10.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996). Barbara Foley’s, *Radical Representation* also attempts to minimise any conception of a ‘master narrative’ of the left wing or the control of the *Politburo*.

taken from Burke. Burke's behaviourist approach to socialism had more in common with modern day advertising than it did with Marx, seeking to condition the masses into an acceptance of leftist ideology through repetitive symbols.¹⁰⁵ Burke argued that the symbolism of the left should revolve around 'the people,' rather than 'the worker,' in order to allow even intellectual workers a 'symbolic enrollment' in socialism.¹⁰⁶ Following on from this, Denning argues that traditional accounts have put too much emphasis on building a 'core-periphery model', with the party in the middle and the 'fellow travellers' on the outside. 'In cultural studies, this has often led to a fetishization of Party membership and an overemphasis on the narrative of affiliation and disaffiliation.'¹⁰⁷ His 'Cultural Front' appeases both critics like Conn who wish to focus on the popular experience of the Depression, and critics such as Nelson, who fear the ideological ramifications of this approach. Denning's idea of a 'symbolic avant-garde' also enables him to unite the avant-gardism of the modernist establishment with the avant-gardism of the worker's revolution into a single historical and social formation – the 'Cultural Front.'

The basis for this argument lies in Lewis Corey's groundbreaking 1932 manifesto, *Culture and the Crisis: An Open Letter to the Writers, Artists, Teachers, Physicians, Engineers, Scientists and Other Professional Workers of America*.¹⁰⁸ Corey's manifesto was an attempt to convince the intellectuals, artists, and professional workers that they were already a part of the 'working' classes, since they had no controlling stake in the nation's economic structure. Corey sought to

¹⁰⁵ Kenneth Burke's *Permanence and Change* is a key text here, outlining the ways in which he believed language was fundamentally a social construction and thus subject to Pavlovian conditioning. See also 'Revolutionary Symbolism in America' reprinted in *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke*. ed. Herbert W. Simons and Trevor Melia. (Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp.266-273.

¹⁰⁶ Kenneth Burke, 'Revolutionary Symbolism in America.' See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p.56

¹⁰⁷ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p.xviii.

¹⁰⁸ League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, *Culture and the Crisis: An Open Letter to the Writers, Artists, Teachers, Physicians, Engineers, Scientists and Other Professional Workers of America* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1932).

undermine one of the pillars of socialist thought – the division between mental and manual labor, which had traditionally led to friction between the material base and the intellectual superstructure, between the producing classes and the intellectual classes who feed off them. Under socialism, professionals would be liberated from their capacity as intellectual policemen of the capitalist order, and would be free to pursue their craft in any manner that pleased them.¹⁰⁹ Denning sees the ‘Culture and the Crisis Manifesto’ as the beginning of a divergence between ‘American Marxism’ and ‘European Marxism.’ He describes European Marxism as being focused on direct political action (a natural result of the overwhelming class conflict that emerged out of the legacy of Feudal Europe) and the image of the worker. American Marxism, as embodied by the works of Burke, Rorty and Sidney Hook, was more focused on cultural theory and symbolic alignments rather than direct action.

Denning’s idea of a symbolic avant-garde, though valid, is not entirely compatible with my understanding of Williams. In order to articulate the problems that this ‘symbolic avant-garde’ gives rise to, it will first be necessary for me to do a quick survey of how critics have traditionally interpreted Williams. The central debate that drove early Williams scholarship, following on from Hillis Miller’s seminal 1965 work *Poets of Reality* and his 1985 revision of that position in *The Linguistic Moment*, is the question of dualism; ideas and things, mind and matter, word and world. Miller’s portrayal of Williams was influential because it cast Williams’ poetry as the solution to the modernist dilemma, namely that Williams had refused to entertain a notion of reality that was distant or ‘other,’ or that ‘mind’ and ‘matter’ are ontologically separate in the first place. The estrangement and alienation of Eliot’s unreal city is not present in Williams’ work, and neither is the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p.96, 101-2.

transcendental or mythological understanding of reality that one finds in *The Cantos*. Instead one finds in Williams' poetry, Miller argued, a 'region of copresence, in which anywhere is everywhere.'¹¹⁰ Miller therefore sees 'objectivism' (which he uses as a blanket term for Williams' poetics) as a new stage of artistic development comparable to Classicism or Romanticism, involving the conjoining of subject and object into a single ontological plane. In this single plane, there is no separation between man and God, the real and the ideal, or any other such dualism, but instead the concrete particular represents the whole by virtue of its very particularity.

In response to Miller, Breslin interpreted Williams solely in the context of the empirical tradition, arguing that the strong focus on the sensual, the physical, and the experiential was testament to the supremacy of the material world: 'no ideas but in things.' Breslin also argued that Williams' poetics were fundamentally radical: 'For Williams,' Breslin writes, 'the distinctive feature of [ordinary consciousness] is its tendency toward a rigid conservatism, a fear of new experience and a need to operate safely within established categories.' In contrast to the stasis and fixation that is characteristic of 'ordinary consciousness,' the 'poetic consciousness' of poems such as 'The Red Wheelbarrow' force us to radically reconsider our mental habits, to make things 'new'.¹¹¹ Carl Rapp's *William Carlos Williams and Romantic Idealism* offers perhaps the most coherent rejection of Breslin's assessment of Williams.¹¹² Drawing on comparisons to Keats, Coleridge, Hegel and Emerson, Rapp argued that the subject of a poem such as 'The Red Wheelbarrow' isn't the material world (the concrete particulars of the scene, such as the barrow itself), but rather the perceiving mind, which accords an almost visionary significance to these particulars in a

¹¹⁰ Joseph Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (Harvard University Press, 1965), p.288.

¹¹¹ Breslin, *An American Artist*, p.43.

¹¹² Though a very similar rejection comes from Donald Markos, *Ideas in Things : The Poems of William Carlos Williams* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993), p.192.

sublime moment of recognition. He quotes Williams' own remarks about writing the poem, 'The sight impressed me somehow as about the most important, the most integral that it had ever been my pleasure to gaze upon. And the meter though no more than a fragment succeeds in portraying this pleasure flawlessly, even it succeeds in denoting a certain unquenchable exaltation.'¹¹³ The true subject of Williams' poetry is therefore the perceiving mind. Rapp sees Williams' poetry as a romantic quest for 'origins', for an unmediated, direct vision of reality, that immerses the poet in the phenomenal world whilst conversely 'bringing the whole phenomenal world into subjection' in order to 'present himself as the true locus of value and meaning'.¹¹⁴ Rapp describes this 'quest' in terms of Emerson's 'original relation to the universe,' the 'formless truth' that precedes all learning and all categories of understanding.¹¹⁵

In spite of Miller's initial attempts to move beyond the debate about dualism in art, almost every Williams critic from the 1960s to the 1990s has made some contribution to this debate, and this single issue, of ideas and things, has framed our understanding of Williams. The result was that critics almost completely ignored social and historical context in reading his poetry, and continued to see Williams in the context of the classical philosophic tradition, and issues that were certainly more relevant to a poet like Eliot than a poet like Williams. Indeed, it was not until David Frail's *The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams* (1987) that anyone really considered Williams' poetry in relation to the Paterson Silk Strikes, the labour movement, the industrialization of New Jersey, and the other social issues that infuse his work.

¹¹³ See Carl Rapp, *William Carlos Williams and Romantic Idealism* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1984), p.89. Originally from *Fifty Poets: An American Auto Anthology*, ed. William Rose Benet (New York: Duffield and Green, 1993), p.60.

¹¹⁴ Rapp, *Williams and Romantic Idealism*, p.98.

¹¹⁵ Emerson, 'Nature,' *Essays and Lectures*, p.7. See Rapp, *Williams and Romantic Idealism*, pp.36-7.

Though a few isolated studies did appear during the 1960s,¹¹⁶ the early 1970s was really the period in which Williams was canonized with a cluster of studies from 1969 to 1971 that as a whole lay out the terms (Objectivism, Contact, localism) on which critical appreciations of Williams are based.¹¹⁷ From 1974 that canonization took place largely as a result of Williams criticism becoming bound up with deconstructionist approaches. Joseph Riddel's *The Inverted Bell* (1974) is perhaps the best example of this. Relying heavily on Derrida, Riddel argues that Williams' poetry is not about 'subject' or 'object' but about language itself. Riddel's argument, only at times convincing, stems from the principle that 'no ideas but in things' is 'a saying about a saying, and is not at all concerned with the priority of thing over idea.'¹¹⁸ Riddel describes Williams' poetry in terms of a battle against logocentrism. A comparison to Pound illustrates this point well enough. Pound saw the 'Word', to borrow Barthes' phrase, 'like a monolith or a pillar which plunges into a totality of meanings.'¹¹⁹ The Chinese characters of Pound's ideogrammic method stand as precisely such 'monoliths,' assuming an unproblematic origin from which 'natural'

¹¹⁶ Most notably John Brinnin, *Williams Carlos Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963) and Linda Wagner, *The Poems of William Carlos Williams: A Critical Study* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1964).

¹¹⁷ In 1969 Bram Dijkstra published his still influential book, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Steiglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton University Press, 1969), which focuses on Williams' early years and his connection with Steiglitz (often to Steiglitz's advantage, c.f., p.87). In 1970 came Linda Wagner's second study of Williams, *The Prose of William Carlos Williams* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1970) as well as James Breslin's book, *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) and the first dedicated critique of *Paterson* – Joel Conarroe's *William Carlos Williams' Paterson: Language and Landscape*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), which offers a thematic approach to *Paterson*. A year later came Benjamin Sankey's *A Companion to William Carlos Williams' Paterson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), which alone did more than any other study to forward the impression that *Paterson* was Williams' magnum opus. In 1971, Mike Weaver's *William Carlos Williams: The American Background* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1971) brought a close to this cluster of publications. This period around 1970 might be considered as something of a golden age for Williams criticism, when most of the ideas that one associates with Williams were still being explored and most of these books are still widely read and quoted by critics. See also Paul Mariani, 'Towards the Canonization of William Carlos Williams,' *The Massachusetts Review*, 13:4 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 661-675 in which he argues academia has neglected Williams and must make a forceful effort to give him his due.

¹¹⁸ Joseph Riddel, *The Inverted Bell* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), p.8.

¹¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (Illinois: Fontana Press, 1983), p.58.

knowledge derives.¹²⁰ Williams on the other hand, began to develop a completely different theory of literature during the 1930s, one that describes the poem in terms of a ‘field of action.’¹²¹ This field of action assumes the free interplay of interdependent elements within an open network of word-relations. Riddel’s point was simply that meaning in Williams’ work is based not around a ‘quest for origins’ but rather around a center-less relational-network.

Such deconstructionist approaches form an important background for this thesis. Though my own methodology is not derived from deconstructionist approaches, critics such as Riddel were essential in redeeming Williams from his association with Pound, and opening up his works to a more pragmatist understanding. It is in this idea of a ‘field of action,’ and the contextualist understanding of language that my own reading of Williams lies, and in this respect I see Williams as having more in common with John Dewey and Kenneth Burke than with Derrida, Heidegger or European Marxists.

Burke’s attempts to bring together a Marxist agenda with a pragmatist philosophy are of particular importance to Williams. In ‘Literature as an Equipment for Living,’ Burke outlines a pragmatist understanding of language, namely that language should not be conceived of in terms of ‘meanings’ that communicate certain ‘ideas’ (Williams’ own critical writings are likewise overwhelmingly devoted to

¹²⁰ Pound writes, for instance, that the character for ‘east’ is composed of a sun coming up over a tree, or that the character for ‘ripple’ is derived from the characters for water and boat. In this way Pound envisioned a poetics which would once again return language to being based on nature, much like Emerson’s ‘natural facts.’ See Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), p.60, p.83.

¹²¹ Though Williams did not come to explicitly formulate this theory in those words until his 1948 essay, ‘The Poem as a Field of Action,’ nevertheless I wish to show in subsequent chapters that this contextualist understanding of language had its roots in his writings of the 1930s.

undermining this particular fallacy),¹²² but rather it should be understood in terms of ‘strategies’ unique to each situation that are intended to accomplish particular objectives.¹²³ Thus a large part of any communication will be the unconscious hints that it communicates, implicit commands, statements and assumptions that do not operate directly but by association. Burke compared his own understanding of language to the advertising industry. In exactly the same way that advertising seeks to associate its brand with other things that the consumer desires, all communication relies on an unconscious framework of associations, which in turn takes part in other concentric contexts and frameworks.¹²⁴ Burke argued that for certain situations we develop typical strategies, which he also referred to as the ‘frames of acceptance’¹²⁵ or ‘orientations’¹²⁶ by which we habitually interpret things. Ultimately these rhetorical strategies form the ‘ideology’ (though obviously Burke is considerably revising this term) by which we experience the world.

Williams and Burke both explored these ideas during the early years of the 1930s. However, there is also a key difference between what Burke and his Marxist contemporaries were attempting and what Williams was attempting. Burke was primarily interested in exploiting these rhetorical strategies for the sake of his own Marxist agenda. In ‘Revolutionary Symbolism in America’ he asks the writer deliberately to engage in propaganda, ‘not as an over-simplified, literal, explicit writing of lawyer’s briefs, but as a process of broadly and generally associating his

¹²² In *The Embodiment of Knowledge* (1928), Williams distinguishes between the writing of journalists, scientists and philosophers, in which language ‘is made secondary to the burden of ideas’ and writing-as-art, ‘where language is itself primary and ideas subservient to language’ (*EK*, p.141). During the 1930s, Williams reformulated this argument in terms of a battle between ‘art’ and ‘propaganda.’ See Williams’ unpublished article, ‘The Editorship of Blast’ (1933), Buffalo WCW Papers, C54.

¹²³ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, originally published in 1941 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p.297.

¹²⁴ Kenneth Burke, ‘Revolutionary Symbolism in America’ reprinted in *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke*. ed. Herbert W. Simons and Trevor Melia. (Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p271.

¹²⁵ Kenneth Burke *Attitudes Towards History*, (California: University of California Press, 1984), p.20.

¹²⁶ Burke, *Permanence and Change*, p.20.

political alignment with cultural awareness in general.’¹²⁷ Again in *Attitudes towards History* (1937), Burke urges writers to uncover ‘the symbols of authority’ and to subvert them, by creating a ‘revolutionary symbolism’, which would undermine the hegemonic symbols of the capitalist order.¹²⁸ Williams, on the other hand, wanted to writers to move beyond ‘propaganda’ and symbolic versions of language altogether. Like Burke he wanted writers to uncover the symbolic or ‘associational’ grounds of language, but not with an eye towards constructing another symbol system, rather to destroy all symbol systems and mythologies altogether, and to create a ‘clean’ language.¹²⁹

In thinking of Williams as a contextualist and an iconoclast who was interested in demythologising language/culture, it is perhaps surprising that more critics have not insisted on the importance of John Dewey in the formation of Williams’ poetics. Dewey, like Williams, was also attempting to move beyond the concerns of European philosophy. Dewey believed that philosophical problems were never resolved, but rather that the terms in which the questions were framed simply became irrelevant and were superseded.¹³⁰ In Dewey’s case, he did not attempt to resolve the issue of dualism, but argued that it simply no longer carried any relevance, and that it was chaining philosophy to the distant problems of the classical era. Whilst philosophers were discussing remote subjects such as reality and consciousness, the world was clamouring for a philosophy that would resolve real world problems, such

¹²⁷ Burke, ‘Revolutionary Symbolism in America’, *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke*, p.273.

¹²⁸ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Towards History*, p.21.

¹²⁹ The words ‘clean’ and ‘clarity’ recur throughout Williams creative and critical writings: ‘Clean, clean he had taken each word and made it new for himself so that at last it was new, free from the world for himself’ (*I*, 167). T. Hugh Crawford discusses this concept at length in relation to Williams’ medical practice and his scientific training. T Hugh Crawford, *Modernism, Medicine, & William Carlos Williams* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), p.108.

¹³⁰ John Dewey, ‘The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy’ (1917) in *The Pragmatism Reader*, pp.109-10.

as poverty, inequality, education, war, and political extremism.¹³¹ Just as Dewey sought to undermine the Spectator Theory of Knowledge, that philosophers could study reality objectively from on high,¹³² so Williams sought to undermine the Spectator Theory of Poetry, that poets could understand themselves and the world from the lofty heights of Poesy. A poet must be an agent in the world, Williams believed, and his poems are of the world and are mediated by its happenings.

In chapter three, I will attempt to demonstrate how Williams' ideas about mind and matter were, if not resolved, then at least superseded by his notion of Contact. Though I do not wish to make a case, as Hillis Miller did, that Williams had 'solved' the problem of dualism in poetry, I do wish to suggest that he moved beyond it. Attempts to explain Williams' poetry as a poetry of 'things' (as Breslin argued) or as a 'drama of consciousness' (as Rapp argued) are missing the point. The entire purpose of the aesthetic philosophy of 'contact' is that it would be a practical meeting point of ideas and things that assumes the interdependence of both. This also goes back to the arguments that originated in *America's Coming of Age*, that America must move beyond its division of mind and matter, theory and praxis, since such division must inevitably lead to the dualism of 'high brow' and 'low brow,'.

Williams' notion of contact, which is specifically derived from Dewey's essay on 'Americanism and Localism,'¹³³ also takes part of the same contextualism that informs Dewey's work, that is, in binding specific questions to the social context in which they are posed. In this manner, this thesis must go onto examine the more

¹³¹ For Dewey on dualism, see John Dewey, 'Experience and Thinking,' in *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), p.165. See also Terry Hoy, *The Political Philosophy of John Dewey: Towards a Constructive Renewal* (Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1998), p.25.

¹³² John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (1929), reprinted in *The Later Works, 1925–1953: Volume 4* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p.19.

¹³³ John Dewey, 'Americanism and Localism,' *The Dial*, Volume 68 (1920), pp.684-88. Republished in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 12* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), pp.12-16.

important questions provoked by Williams' work, and which are also mirrored in Burke and Dewey's writings; namely the writer's access to a political or cultural unconscious which mediates our knowledge, and how such a cultural unconscious is formed and disseminated. In this respect, it is John Beck's excellent study, *Writing the Radical Centre* (2001), which reinterprets Williams in the context of Dewey and the Pragmatist tradition, that offers a vision of Williams that is closest to my own. At the centre of the pragmatist tradition, Beck argues, is the theory of inquiry, which urges an exposition of the norms by which an idea is tested, and of those cultural assumptions that are also necessarily political assumptions.¹³⁴

Beck combines Williams' art and politics into a single discussion of 'form.' In particular, he looks at the relationship between the individual poetic elements in Williams' work, the 'concrete particulars,' and the overall form or structure in which those particulars are situated, and he compares this to the relationship between the individual and society. Beck comes to the conclusion that both Williams' art and politics are founded on a liberal aesthetic centred on the freedom and autonomy of the particular element within the system; the freedom of the particular to re-define the whole, the freedom of the artist to re-imagine society. The individual artist or artwork must be 'free to announce itself,' with this autonomy being 'an aspect of its *being* rather than a privilege enjoyed by politically sanctioned rights.'¹³⁵

For Dewey, the autonomy of the liberal artwork also provided an important political function. In his writings of the 1930s Dewey argued that the repressed masses 'refuse to look facts in the face and prefer to feed on illusions, produced and

¹³⁴ Dewey 'The Existential Matrix of Inquiry' from the *Theory of Inquiry* (1938) republished in *The Later Works Volume 12* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984). See especially pp.51-53. John Beck, *Writing the Radical Center: William Carlos Williams, John Dewey, and American Cultural Politics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York P, 2001), p.14.

¹³⁵ John Beck, *Writing the Radical Center*, p.2.

circulated by those in power.’¹³⁶ Or as Williams phrased it: ‘The world has gone in for stupidity of a large scale... we crave to be hypnotized and raped.’¹³⁷ Thus blinded by mass media and the brainwashing power of a pervasive political discourse, mass man, Dewey argues, is incapable of thinking or speaking for himself or standing up to those in power. Only the intellectual/artist is capable of speaking truth to the masses by standing outside of the structures of power. Beck attempts to attach this same argument to Williams. He argues that for both Williams and Dewey, democracy is defined by the dissent of the individual rather than conformity to society, and he sees both Williams and Dewey in the problematic position of trying to teach those who have fallen into the false democracy of mass culture how to be an individual once more by granting them access to the ideas and materials which will liberate them.¹³⁸

Though it is true that Williams’ writings contain a deep and abiding fear of institutions and institutionalisation, Williams also embraces the New Deal Populism of the 1930s. Cary Nelson even sees Williams as welcoming mass culture in poems such as ‘At the Ball Game’ and ‘The Attic Which is Desire,’ and self-consciously breaking down the distinction between poetry and advertising.¹³⁹ Certainly, Williams did believe in the importance of the great intellectual, scientist or artist to re-imagine society (a privilege which he never once afforded to a great businessman or a great politician), but his own attempts to achieve that became increasingly focused on the rather mysterious concept of measure from the end of the 1930s onwards. Dewey and Williams both posit language as the fundamental tool for such a ‘measure’. Through language, our perception of the phenomenal world takes place in a socially-defined

¹³⁶ Dewey ‘Imperative need: A New Radical Party,’ *Common Sense*, 2 (September 1933), p.6.

¹³⁷ Williams, ‘Jefferson and/or Mussolini,’ *New Democracy* 4 (October, 1935), pp.61-62.

¹³⁸ John Beck, *Writing the Radical Center*, pp.7-8.

¹³⁹ Nelson, *Repression and Recovery*, p.263.

way.¹⁴⁰ These ideas shall become especially important for my discussion of Objectivism in chapter five.

So far I have provided an intellectual and philosophical background to this thesis, focusing on the core concepts that drive it, ‘Nativism,’ ‘Marxism,’ and ‘Pragmatism’. In subsequent chapters I shall focus less on over-arching arguments and more on specific historical movements. In chapter one this is the Little Magazines circuit, especially *Blues* and *Pogany*, which for me point to the beginnings of an alliance between American modernism and the left. In chapter two, I discuss Williams’ own magazine, *Contact*, and his relationship to his co-editor Nathanael West, whose discussion of mass media in *Miss Lonelyhearts* was influential on Williams. In chapter three, I examine Williams short stories of the 1930s with particular reference to his medical practice, to ask not only why Williams suddenly switched forms at the beginning of the 1930s, but why he also suddenly put his medical practice at the center of his writing. In chapter four, I will do a close analysis of Williams’ libretto *The First President* and consider the manner in which the Founding Fathers were received during the 1930s in general. In chapter five, I focus on the three-way relationship between Williams, Zukofsky and Pound, and try to make sense of Objectivism as a literary movement. Throughout this thesis I have attempted to ask the question for writers of the 1930s that Williams puts forward at the beginning of ‘Against the Weather’ (1939):

What should the artist be today? What must he be? What can he do? To what purpose? What does he effect? How does he function? What enters into it? The economic, the sociological: how is he affected? (*SE*, 196)

¹⁴⁰ See for instance, John Dewey, ‘Renascent Liberalism’ in *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935), reprinted in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 11, 1925 – 1953* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), pp.51, 70.

1. Williams and the Little Magazines of the 1930s

The little magazines never more than barely kept going, their five and ten contributions from some semi-submerged group of five or six young men and women – who mostly want to publish their own rebellious work – serving, though the hopes are big, to get no more than a few issues out before they collapse. It is only in the aggregate that they maintained a steady trickle of excellence, mixed with the bad, that served to keep writing loose, ready to accept the early sensitive acquisition of art. But at that it was a precious business... The little magazine is something I have always fostered, for without it, I myself would have been early silenced. To me it is one magazine not several... I have wanted to see established some central or sectional agency which would recognize, and where possible, support little magazines. I was wrong. It must be a person who does it, a person, a fallible person, subject to devotions and accidents. (A, 265-6)

The period between 1929 and 1933 was a special period for Williams both in terms of his artistic output and his personal life. It was during this period that Williams struggled with writer's block and almost gave up on writing poetry altogether; he consistently failed to get his work published in the mainstream press and produced a series of increasingly hysterical manifestos; then suddenly revising his artistic aims, he proceeded to write some of the most outstanding work of his career, the socially engaged prose of *The Knife of the Times* (1932) and the beginning of his novel, *White Mule* (1937), works which have more in common with the Proletarian Literature of Jack Conroy, Robert Cantwell or James T. Farrell than with the other modernist poets. It was also a time in which Williams thought and wrote obsessively about the relationship between science, philosophy and literature, and he began to make his medical practice the centre of his writing. Whilst I shall be focussing on Williams, I also hope to

demonstrate, by an analysis of the little magazines of the period, and in particular the three with which Williams was most closely associated, *Blues*, *Pogany* and *Blast* (I shall leave Williams' own magazine, *Contact*, to the next chapter) that Williams' own artistic changes were part of a broader change that came about in America as a result of a number of factors; these include political and social unrest, a dissatisfaction with the social function or role that artists found themselves occupying, the need for modernist art to reinvent itself in the face of the social demands of the Depression, and the suppression of 'radical' art by a prudish and intolerant prohibition society.

No doubt some of these factors derive from the workings of the publishing industry itself, and in particular, the situation that many artists found themselves in the early 1930s of being unable to fund their literary endeavours. The modernist publishing scene was in a state of upheaval. Many of the established little magazines of the 1920s were breaking up and the market was once again opening up to lots of smaller, more radical ventures. *The Dial* and *The Little Review* were both in decline, with *The Dial* finally capitulating in July 1929 and *The Little Review* following shortly after in September. By 1929 McAlmon's publishing venture, Contact Editions, which had been important in shaping the course of modernism during the 1920s, had folded. In addition, Eugene Jolas' experimental magazine *transition* which made its name by publishing sections of Joyce's 'Work in Progress' (*Finnegans Wake*) was also in trouble and was forced to suspend publication in 1931.

Discounting magazines such as *The New Yorker*, or the *New Republic* which only occasionally included literature, by 1930 only *Poetry* edited by Harriet Monroe, *Hound & Horn* edited by R.P. Blackmur, and *The New Masses* edited by Gold and Freeman remained of the Little Magazines of the late 1920s.¹ Though Williams published in all of these magazines,² he was never really a part of any of them. He objected to *Hound & Horn*, whose editorship was taken over by Yvor Winters in 1932, for its rather stuffy artistic (and political) editorial policies. *Hound & Horn* was originally ‘based on the London *Criterion*’³ and, in Williams’ own words, ‘took the hint from Eliot in determining the tone of its material.’⁴ As a Harvard publication, it was too close to the academy and to the sort of neo-classicism which was associated with Eliot’s right-wing politics for Williams’ liking.

Something similar could be said of his relationship with *Poetry*. Throughout the early 1930s Pound had been urging Williams to use his ‘influence’ with Monroe to get poets such as Norman Macleod printed instead of the more traditional poetry favoured by Monroe. Williams however did not see himself as having any influence with *Poetry*. Although he was a contributor and his relationship with Monroe and Zabel was cordial,

¹ H.L. Mencken’s *The American Mercury* could also potentially be added to this list. It seems strange that Williams was not more closely involved with Mencken since they were both invested in the same linguistic project: redefining the language spoken in America as more than simply ‘English’. When he read Mencken’s book on American diction he admired it fiercely. Williams occasionally published in *The American Mercury*, but for whatever reason this did not happen frequently.

² For instance, he published ‘Rain’, *Hound & Horn*, 3:1 (October – December 1931), see CPI, 343-5; ‘In the ‘Sconset Bus,’ *Hound & Horn*, 5:4 (July-September 1932), pp.540-1, see CPI, 362-4. See also his ‘Letter to the Editor’ *The New Masses*, 6:7 (December 1930), p.22, as well as his review of H.H. Lewis ‘An American Poet’ in *New Masses*, 25:9 (Nov 1937), pp.17-18. Williams continued to publish in *Poetry* more or less throughout his lifetime and his 1930s contributions include ‘The Unfrocked priest’ (CPI, 351) and ‘Poem (As the cat),’ *Poetry*, July 1930 (CPI, 352) as well as Williams’ contribution to the Objectivist issue of Feb 1931 and a group of poems which were published in *Poetry* under the heading ‘That’s the American Style’ in October 1933, which included ‘The Flowers Alone’ (CPI, 365), ‘The Locust Tree in Flower’ (CPI, 366), ‘Tree and sky’ (CPI, 385), ‘A Foot-Note’ (CPI, 370) and a few others.

³ Yvor Winters, ‘Preface,’ *Hound and Horn*. 3:4 (1934): p.563.

⁴ Quoted in Gerardus Antonius Maria Janssens, *The American Literary Review: A Critical History, 1920-1950* (New York, Mouton, 1968), p.91.

he privately criticised the ‘conservatism’ of some of the English contributors such as F.R. Leavis.⁵

Williams’ relationship with the modernist establishment therefore tended to be defined by formality and cordiality, even if he privately resented its conservative tendencies. His dealings with the left, however, were much more tempestuous. His relationship with the *New Masses* got off to a rocky start in 1926, when the magazine accepted one of his very first short stories, ‘A Five Dollar Guy,’ about an employer who had propositioned an employee for five dollars. Though this story might not be considered ‘radical’ by the standards of card carrying members of the CPUSA, it had been Williams’ first attempt to write about class conflict and to side with the proletariat. The story was published without Williams having a chance to read the galleys or make corrections and the name of the employer and company were included, leading to a libel case and an out of court settlement of \$5,000; a huge sum for Williams at the time. That it left a bad taste, and a lasting resentment towards Joseph Freeman, Mike Gold and the *New Masses* circle is undoubted.⁶

Nevertheless, Williams appeared to take the side of the *New Masses* again in 1930, when Pound wrote a letter to the *New Masses*, defending Mussolini’s ‘co-operative state’ from the ‘bawling’ of the proletariat.⁷ Naturally Gold attacked the letter. Williams felt some kinship with Gold over this rejection of fascism, or more likely, over

⁵ *Poetry Archives* (Regenstein Library, University of Chicago) Box 42, Folder 15, WCW, see especially WCW’s letter to Harriet Monroe 4th February 1930, and WCW’s undated letter to Harriet Monroe (probably sometime in late May 1934) about Leavis’ review of Pound’s *Active Anthology*.

⁶ For a more in-depth version of this story see Mariani, *William Carlos Williams*, p.254-5.

⁷ Gold, ‘Notes of the Month,’ *New Masses* (October, 1930), p.1. See also Douglas Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898 – 1990* (University of Illinois Press, 1998), p.182.

the rejection of Pound himself. He wrote to Gold, 'I'm for you [*The New Masses*], I'll help as I can.' At the same time he qualified this support with a rejection of party dogmatism.

The only thing is what the hell? I feel in a false position. How can I be a Communist being what I am? Poetry is the thing that has the hardest hold on me in my daily experiences. But I cannot, without an impossible wrench of my understanding, turn it into a force directed toward one end, Vote the Communist Ticket... I can however see the monumental blockwit of social injustice surrounding me on every side.⁸

Williams therefore supported Gold in his opposition to fascism but at the same time he felt that it was a 'false position' to subject his art to an ulterior political motive. For Williams, poetry was a direct engagement with reality itself, whereas left-wing politics was more frequently about vague ideological alignment and abstract rhetoric. Undoubtedly, he was naive to think that the official organ of the CPUSA would let such a remark go. Mike Gold published the letter under the mocking title 'Poor Doc, Nobody Wants His Life Or His Verses,' ending, perhaps, what could have been an improved relationship. Later, in 1937 Williams wrote to H.H. Lewis saying that he 'felt very little toward that crowd having had my own difficulties with them many years earlier.'⁹

Yet oddly enough, Williams' only explicit written objection to the *New Masses*, which comes in letter to Fred Miller in 1935, is along the same lines as his objection to *Hound and Horn*. 'Those New Masses transcendentalists make me weary' he writes. 'So God has spoken to them, has He, and told them how to classify licherachure.'¹⁰ For Williams the party dogmatism of the CPUSA was another kind of 'transcendentalism'

⁸ Quoted in Gary Lenhart, *The Stamp of Class: Reflections on Poetry & Social Class* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), p.39.

⁹ WCW to H.H. Lewis, 28th April, 1937. Yale, WCW Papers, Box 12, Folder 394.

¹⁰ WCW to FM, 11th June 1935, Delaware. Quoted in Mariani, *William Carlos Williams*, p.812.

or faithfulness to a ‘higher’ cause. Whether it be the higher cause of Poesy or the higher cause of communism, Williams rejected all attempts to create an exclusive canon.

Williams may not have considered himself to be the same as either the modernists of the *Hound & Horn* or the political activists of *The New Masses*, but it seems that both of these groups considered him to be a part of their team, even if only peripherally. Williams’ rejection of both *Hound and Horn* and the *New Masses* is indicative of the very difficult position in between modernism and proletarianism that he found himself straddling throughout the 1930s.

However, at the beginning of the 1930s, a surge of what Denning describes as ‘mushroom mags’ (little magazines with a short lifespan) sprang up, many of which shared Williams’ own attitudes towards politics and literature. Indeed, from 1926 when he published ‘The Five Dollar Guy’ through to 1939 when he published ‘The Paid Nurse’ in *The New Anvil*, Williams either contributed to or edited just about every single left-wing publication of the 1930s. A list of significant publications that Williams contributed to would certainly include *Anvil* (1933-5), Jack Conroy’s ground-breaking magazine of proletarian fiction; *Partisan Review* (1934-2003), Philip Rahv’s epoch-defining, anti-Stalinist publication; *Dynamo* (1934-5) edited by Sol Funaroff (previously the poetry editor of the *New Masses*);¹¹ *The Symposium* (1931-2), edited by the Trotskyist, James Burnham, who was strongly influenced by Sidney Hooks’ attempts to graft Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy onto Marxism; *Contempo* (1931-4), the modernist, literary magazine from North Carolina which positioned itself as an

¹¹ See *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Volume II: North America 1894-1960*, eds. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: OUP, 2012), p.829. Henceforth abbreviated to *Oxford History of Modernist Magazines*.

‘Asylum for Aggrieved Authors’; *Blast: A Magazine of Proletarian Short Stories* (1933-4), edited by Fred Miller, where Williams published some of his most significant stories of the 1930s; *Morada* (1929-30), which was funded by Federation of the Organization of Soviet Writers (FOSP) but was edited by Norman Macleod and published mainly American modernists; *New Democracy* (1933-6), Gorham Munson’s magazine dedicated to Americanising the Social Credit Movement and offering economic alternatives to capitalism; and *Furioso* (1939-1953) edited by Williams’ first biographer Reed Whitemore.

Though Denning asserts that these magazines can be loosely divided into two categories the ‘radical modernist’ magazines and the ‘proletarian magazines,’ I hope to show through an assessment of Williams’ influence on the little magazines circuit that this division is more than a little reductive. Certainly many of these magazines were ‘modernist’ in the limited sense that they were associated with the ‘Revolution of the Word,’ and an avant-garde literary agenda. As a result of Jolas’ manifesto, the ‘Revolution of the Word’ is commonly understood as an explicitly ‘anti-political’ form of modernism, which subsequently disappeared during the 1930s.¹² It seems to me, however, that the ‘Revolution of the Word’ did not so much disappear, as become incorporated into a new politically radical agenda. Indeed, the markets for ‘aesthetic’ magazines and ‘political’ magazines were colliding during the early 1930s, and Williams can in some ways be seen as a figurehead for this new synthesis. Rozendal writes ‘More than a distraction from the revolution of the word with the word of revolution, the lively discussions [in the Little Magazines of the 1930s] where Williams

¹²See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p.212.

was one critical vector can be seen reviving an increasingly moribund modernist project.¹³

1.1 *Blues*: Literary Radicalism in 1929

When, in late 1928, the very young surrealist poet and proto-Beat writer from Mississippi, Charles Henri Ford, contacted Williams asking him to be a contributing editor of the little magazine he was organising, *Blues : The Magazine of New Rhythms*, Williams was delighted. Although Williams was already an established writer on the little magazines circuit, he had yet to have any of his volumes issued commercially, and he was once again struggling to find places to publish his work. ‘There is hope!’ he wrote to Zukofsky in October, 1928, ‘A brand new, gritty clean magazine is about to see the light of day in Mississippi. I am to be a contributing editor. An outlet at last.’¹⁴

Blues was never intended to fill the gap left by those bastions of liberal modernism *The Dial* and *The Little Review*. It was too closely associated with Greenwich Village radicalism to attract such a broad audience. *Blues* was specifically intended to be a ‘magazine with the courage to publish apparent imbecilities and indubitable grotesqueries,’ aimed to shock and challenge the literary establishment, or as Ford put it, to excite ‘the hostility of the intellectually and artistically conservative.’¹⁵

¹³ Michael Rozendal, ‘Forms of Need: William Carlos Williams in the Radical Thirties Little Journals,’ *William Carlos Williams Review*, 27:2 (Fall 2007), p.137.

¹⁴ WCW to LZ, undated letter. Ahearn dates the letter to December 1928. See *The Correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky* ed. Barry Ahearn (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), p.24.

¹⁵ *Oxford History of Modernist Magazines, Volume II*, p.361.

Ford himself, as an open bisexual, would soon develop a reputation for radicalism in Greenwich Village circles after another bisexual poet, Parker Tyler, invited him to come and live in New York in 1930. Tyler soon began co-editing the magazine with Ford, and in the first few years of the 1930s they began writing *The Young and Evil*, a book that would be banned in America.¹⁶ In reality, the majority of the work accepted into *Blues* was not as radical as the rhetoric of its founders, and typical contributions (Joseph Vogel's prose piece, 'Milk Pitcher,' being an excellent example) combined formal experimentation with traditional storytelling.

Even so, Williams was in many ways of a different generation from the young Charles Henri Ford. Though he had a reputation as a bohemian poet in his own time, the exploits of the protagonists in *The Young and Evil* would have been utterly alien to him.¹⁷ Whether Williams was aware of Ford's gender-politics when they first began to correspond is uncertain,¹⁸ but *Blues* did provide a platform for Williams to publish his manifestos during its two year life span.

¹⁶ The characters, based on Ford and Tyler, frequent the arty hangouts of the Greenwich Village scene, read poetry, have sex, and drink in speakeasies (prohibition would not end until 1933). All this is told in a childish style, reminiscent of nursery rhymes. *The Young and Evil* was banned in America and Great Britain for 50 years, though an underground trade in the book flourished in Greenwich Village circles. See Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Ann Arbor: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.255.

¹⁷ We do not find an aversion to homosexuality in Williams' writings; rather we find the complete repression of the entire subject. The only exception to this is in *The Knife of the Times* which contains two stories that appear to accept homosexuality, as Robert Gish says, 'without inhibitions,' namely the title story and 'The Sailor's Son.' See Robert Gish, *William Carlos Williams: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), pp.64-5. Whether the timing of these two stories in the early 1930s is as a result of his contact with Ford is unclear. Leibowitz in contrast describes Williams as 'often uneasy in the company of homosexuals.' Herbert Leibowitz, *Something Urgent I Have to Say to You: The Life and Works of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), p.294, 307.

¹⁸ He was certainly aware of it by early 1931 when he attended a gay party at Ford's house with Richard Johns. According to Halpert, Williams and Ford were the only two guests not to dance with the host and they deliberately never mentioned that night ever again. See *A Return to Paganry: The History Correspondence, and Selections from a Little Magazine. 1929 - 1932*, ed. Stephen Halpert and Richard Johns (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p.215.

The period 1929 to 1930 was undoubtedly one of the most important periods for Williams in terms of developing his poetic project and writing manifestos. Never was there a period in which he was more prone to renouncing contemporary American poetry, attacking science and philosophy, and declaiming upon the many defects of American writers. The first manifesto that he wrote for Ford, printed in the second issue of *Blues*, March 1929, 'For a New Magazine' demonstrates his expectation that *Blues* might come to represent the kind of poetic project that Williams was himself invested in.

Anything that fractures the stereotyped is definitely taboo, now as always. In the common mind America is just recovering from post-war hysterias of a few of the more bizarre writers of that unsettled time, returning to the normal paths of good literary practice. In short to dullness, to stupidity, to regimentation, to business. *Blues* comes as near to stating the implied revolt from this as one could get to entitle a pushing new venture.¹⁹

He goes on to say, 'the young writers today must not be allowed to lose what those of 1914 and thereabouts won.'²⁰ In fact, Williams was often prone to a mythologizing of the pre-First World War era. He saw 'the men of 1914' (Wyndham Lewis coined the phrase)²¹ as bold adventurers into uncharted literary landscapes, experimenting with the 'taboo' just as Ford and Tyler were doing now. As a result of war, artistic experimentation collided head on with conflict and fragmentation leading to the 'post-war hysterias' of Surrealism, Dadaism and so on. Critics of the 1930s often note that after such an apocalyptic event as the First World War and the subsequent decade of almost feverish artistic activity, the 1930s by contrast was a time of sobering

¹⁹ Williams, 'For a New Magazine,' *Blues : The Magazine of New Rhythms*, 1:2 (1929), reprinted, New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1967, p.30.

²⁰ Ibid. P.29.

²¹ Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting & Bombardiering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p.249.

up and coming back to reality. This retrospective contains a view of the 1930s that has been almost universally taken up by critics. The idea is that as a result of the Depression writers began to leave behind the frivolous formal experimentation of the 1920s and apply themselves seriously to content (for which we can read the ‘political’) rather than form (for which we can read the ‘apolitical’). Milton A. Cohen is by no means the only critic to state as much as if it were common knowledge:

Writers who in the 1920s thought of themselves as a race apart, dedicated (in Malcolm Cowley’s words) to the ‘religion of art,’ indifferent to political issues, alienated from their social milieu, now, in this economic crisis... rejected 1920s despair, nihilism and elitism. They demanded a new, upbeat proletarian literature in a more simplified style that addressed the real-world problems of the working class, not the bourgeois dilemmas of *Babbitts* or the artist’s psyche.²²

For critics like Cohen, formal experimentation is associated not only with an apolitical stance towards writing, but even worse, with the conservatism of that ‘elitist’ and ‘nihilist’ philosophy we associate with high modernism and publications such as *The Egoist*. For Cohen then, American literature after the crash of 1929 heralded the advent of America’s artistic independence, and thus the new ‘American’ art was defined by its politicism. Williams’ *Blues* manifesto exposes the all too easy chronology of this narrative. The first issue of *Blues* was published some seven months prior to the crash. Already before the Depression then, Williams saw that ‘experimentation’ was on the way out and artists were ‘returning to the normal paths of good literary practice’ – not for economic reasons, but simply because the life span of that movement had run its course. Williams’ manifesto, and indeed *Blues* itself, also shows a remarkable resistance to the association of formal experimentation with the apolitical. Williams’ plea to young

²² Milton A. Cohen, ‘Stumbling into Crossfire: William Carlos Williams, *Partisan Review*, and the Left in the 1930s’ in *Journal of Modern Literature* 32:2 (Winter 2009), p.143.

writers to stop the regression into older more conventional forms is couched in an implicitly political language, and he presents the victories of the ‘men of 1914’ (‘At least inversions of the sentence seem finished’)²³ as implicitly political ones.

Furthermore, the material published in *Blues* also seems to challenge the idea that 1920s ‘nihilism’ and ‘elitism’ suddenly gave way to an optimistic ‘upbeat proletarian literature.’ The majority of submissions to *Blues* continue to deal with the themes of the 1920s. Ford’s poem, ‘Elegy,’ in the second issue offers an excellent example of the kind of post-Eliotic poetry that *Blues* accepted. It focuses on the ‘unreal city’ of modernity, a poetry of sophistication, flaneurism, and alienation.

when the layers of smoke have faded into a staleness brick walls are
maudlin and four o’clock is once more in travail
a car overturns with a scream of brakes and a scream of fear and i catch
my breath which is sour with bootleg
o cankerous complexity of a city morning and four a m
men pull into a coldness and sparrows like dead leaves are agitated by
a sullen wind
clothes stuffed with flesh and blood begin to move along the sidewalks
whistles at six a m sob a threnody for broken bones.²⁴

Aside from the specific reference to American bootleg this could be a scene from *The Waste Land*. In fact, the smoke is rather reminiscent of Prufrock, and the ‘clothes stuffed with flesh’ also somewhat reminiscent of ‘The Hollow Men’ which had been published some four years previously. Denning argues that modernist alienation of the 1920s was the product of mass culture (the *other* kind of Fordism) and the estrangement of the individual from the changes that were altering the face of society as a result of the

²³ Williams, ‘For a New Magazine,’ p.31.

²⁴ *Ibid.* pp.38-9.

early twentieth-century's second industrial revolution.²⁵ If that is indeed the case, then *Blues* demonstrates how such 'modernist alienation' easily translated into political alienation during the 1930s. Here the morning's working population are 'clothes stuffed with flesh and blood,' defined by their suits and by the world of appearances, and the alienation of the radical artist from the ruling structures is encapsulated in that word 'bootleg.' Horace Gregory's poem 'McAlpin Garfinkle, Poet' in the fourth issue of *Blues* provides another excellent example of how modernist avant-garde techniques were easily adapted into the political radicalism of the 1930s.

It is better for me to believe nothing
 than to be nothing
 better for me
 not to fight, to let cops and truck drivers crash
 through my brains, trample my entrails,
 o, let me cry my rage against millions,
 carry me to the President,
 up the steps of the White House
 with my remains for evidence,
 deodorized by the Department of justice
 and the Secretary of State,
 thenceforth expunged from
 the Congressional Record.²⁶

One would hardly describe this as a new 'upbeat' proletarian style which rejected nihilism. Indeed, though this poem is written tongue-in-cheek, mocking the poet's melodrama, it shows that modernist existential angst was easily translated into 1930s political angst, as shown in the fear of being 'expunged from / the Congressional Record.' Increasingly, however, Williams was less and less sympathetic towards such poetry. In the 9th issue of *Blues* he writes,

²⁵ See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p.27.

²⁶ Horace Gregory, "McAlpin Garfinkle, Poet," *Blues*, 1:4 (1929), p.89.

We've had enough of the cant that the artist is a born weakling, that his works are effects of a neurosis, sublimations, escapes from the brutal contact with life that he, poor chap, horribly fears.²⁷

In the same article, Williams refers to C.G. Jung's 'Psychology and Poetry' which was published in the June 1930 issue of the revived *transition*. Jung rejects Freud's interpretation of the poet as one who is driven by his own inner neurosis, and instead sees the artist in a 'visionary' role, as one who 'rises far above the personal and speaks out of the heart and mind and for the heart and mind of humanity.'²⁸ As Williams says, 'It is he, the poet, whose function it is, when the race has gone astray, to lead it – to destruction perhaps, but in any case, to lead it.'²⁹ In all of the four manifestos that Williams wrote for *Blues*, he attempted to define what this 'leadership' would involve; he saw it as something more than mere political leadership at any rate. What Williams appeared to be looking for was a cultural and linguistic paradigm shift.

Certainly Williams saw the restructuring of language at the heart of this paradigm-shift. In his first *Blues* manifesto Williams compares poetry to a machine, such as a motor car. Like machinery, poetry has a 'function,' he writes, which is 'to say something as accurately and clearly as possible.'³⁰ Here Williams essentially puts forward a Pragmatist understanding of the poem, not as a series of layered 'meanings' or 'ideas', but as a 'function' which produces an effect. Like the parts of a motor car the words used in poetry are also subject to age and change and need to be updated, just as technology is updated, with every generation. He goes on to argue that 'poetry

²⁷ Williams, 'Caviar and Bread Again,' *Blues* 2:9 (1930), p.46.

²⁸ C.G. Jung, 'Psychology and Poetry,' *transition*, 19-20 (June, 1930), p.28.

²⁹ Williams, 'Caviar and Bread Again,' p.46.

³⁰ Williams, 'For a New Magazine,' p.31.

especially is just at the brink of its modern development when it will with absolute certainty supplant a great part of the effectiveness now absorbed by science and to a less apparent extent by philosophy.³¹ His 'absolute certainty' of course masks his very real fear that the poet would never again have the authority that he formerly commanded in the age prior to the technological revolution. Williams himself had grown up in the era of the horse and cart. He had even made his first doctor's rounds on a horse named Astrid before buying the Ford car that would become the 'hero' of *The Great American Novel* (A, 127). Ironically, by 1930 Charles 'Henry' Ford would become so fed up of being asked whether he was related to the motor car magnate that he would change his middle name to the more bohemian 'Henri.' Evidently something had changed, as 'Henri' Ford's middle name testifies. 'Henri' belongs to an older world, the European world.

Williams, however, never wanted his art to be associated with Europe. As a result, he cashes in, so to speak, on the emergent scientific discourse, thinking of words as parts of a motor car, figuring the poet as a kind of word-mechanic, whilst at the same time he denies the legitimacy of all systematic and mechanical estimations of knowledge. The poem is a machine, which is to say, the rules that govern it are material, not spiritual, and yet it is also organic in some ways, constantly growing and evolving. We should be careful to note that the associations that the modern reader has with machinery, of machines as repressive tools, and the 'machinery of state' are not there. For Williams the machine is a radical enterprise and he wishes to associate poetry with radical advances in technology. He is therefore left in the problematic position of trying to claim the authority of science on the one hand whilst attempting to supplant it on the

³¹ Ibid, p.31.

other. More than this there is a tension here between the idea of poetry as a rule-governed enterprise, a formal mechanism which exists within a specific framework, and on the other hand his attempts to surpass all rules and break out into new forms, to 'fracture' the stereotyped. 'Poetry I refuse to see as the sum of all the rules that have been made to hedge it,'³² Williams writes. He was therefore influenced by two contradictory positions: firstly he was attempting to move beyond the idea of 'free verse' and to re-establish the idea of poetry as a structural and mechanical enterprise, and secondly he was attempting to undermine all systematic or systematising ways of looking at the world.

In his initial manifesto, Williams insists that a new magazine must be 'open to experiment' and that it 'can't bother to print stuff salable [sic] in the usual market.'³³ Certainly this creates a tension between the 'elitist' writer and the mass market, but it was not Williams' hope, as might be said of Pound, to educate the masses from the lofty heights of poetic sensibility. What does it mean then, politically and aesthetically, for Williams to incite the youth not to give up on experimentation and to utterly reject saleability as a measurement of the success of a literary work? If critics are apt to equate 'experimentation' with the frivolous 20s, then the manifestos that Williams published in *Blues* consistently demonstrate his attempts to connect formal experimentation with the political and economic understanding of literature that was emerging in the 1930s. In other words, that which is culturally radical, that which is 'taboo,' is necessarily subversive, necessarily political. Conversely this 'returning to the normal paths of good

³² Williams, 'A Note on the Art of Poetry,' *Blues*, 1:4 (1929), p.79.

³³ Williams, 'For a New Magazine,' p.31.

literary practice' is equated with 'dullness', 'regimentation,' and ultimately 'business' which stands in here both as a symbol of capitalism and also as a symbol of the status-quo, or 'business as usual.' Williams appears to cherish and celebrate the underground, and subversive elements of poetry. In this way, he links radical formal experimentation with the left and ultimately with the rejection of capitalism.

Though their politics were different, Pound too was interested in associating radical, literary experimentation with the rejection of capitalism, and was writing from a very similar perspective to Williams at the beginning of the 1930s. In 1929, he published the essay 'How to Read' in the *New York Herald Tribune*, in which he recalls approaching an agent with the proposition to replace Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, the standard anthology of classic verse (from which Williams had learned to worship Keats in his youth)³⁴ with a new anthology 'in which each poem was chosen not merely because it was a nice poem or a poem Aunt Hepsy liked, but because it contained an invention, a definite contribution to the art of verbal expression.' The answer came back, 'But don't you know... the whole fortune of X & Co. is founded on Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*?'³⁵ For Pound, as for Williams, 'business' and the vested interests of the market were holding poetry back from its rightful place as a radical art. For Pound, as for Williams, it was obvious that until the economic substructure of literature was changed, the 'dullness' and 'regimentation' of the publishing industry would forever hold the arts in the dark ages. Like Williams, the only alternative Pound finds to the

³⁴ Mariani, *William Carlos Williams*, p.11.

³⁵ Ezra Pound, 'How to Read', *New York Herald Tribune Books*, published serially on the 13th, 20th, and 27th January, 1929.

mass market lies in treating the poem as a formal mechanism that contains some definite ‘invention.’³⁶

During the early 1930s there was a considerable amount of anger directed by modernists at the publishing industry. In 1934, Fred Miller, editor of *Blast* wrote to Williams, ‘If publishing wasn’t a *racket* you’d be getting a fair price for every line you write, instead of having to give your stuff away usually. Ask me. Ask the dozens and dozens of writers who look on you as the head of the craft.’³⁷ During the 1930s this anger became aligned more generally with the anger that the proletariat felt towards the ‘establishment’. Williams and Pound in their separate ways were beginning to see what it would cost to overthrow the canon. Williams, in particular, is constantly aware that the rejection of hackneyed linguistic structures entails a rejection of the political or market structures that sanction them. Consequently, he puts his hopes for the rejuvenation of literature in magazines like *Blues* as the only viable way out of this impasse.

This anger towards the publishing establishment was further exacerbated by the censorship of radical writers. In the same issue of *Blues*, right next to Williams’ first manifesto, Pound publishes a call to arms to politicize this new magazine. The piece, aptly titled ‘Program 1929,’ calls for ‘Article 211 of the penal code to be amended by the 12 words: THIS STATUTE DOES NOT APPLY TO WORKS OF LITERARY AND

³⁶ Ibid. See also Williams, ‘For a New Magazine,’ p.31. Despite their attempts to engage with the mass market, both Williams and Pound ultimately came to rely on the patronage of James Laughlin, the son of a wealthy steel merchant. After his initial success publishing *White Mule* in 1937, Laughlin went on to become the pillar of modernist publishing in America.

³⁷ Fred Miller to WCW, July 24, 1934, from unpublished material copyright 2007 by Paul H. Williams and the Estate of William Eric Williams. Quoted from Michael Rozendal, ‘Forms of Need: William Carlos Williams in the Radical Thirties Little Journals,’ *William Carlos Williams Review*, 27:2 (Fall 2007), p.139.

SCIENTIFIC MERIT.³⁸ Article 211 of the penal code was a favourite punch bag of Pound's, being the article that prohibits the publishing of erotic or salacious material, or as Pound says in his letter to Senator Bronson of November 1930, the article that confuses 'smutty postcards, condoms and Catullus.'³⁹ One can see why Ford might have felt that such a manifesto spoke directly to his readers.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, one cannot help but feel that Ford may have been misled if he felt that Pound was calling for the same liberation of the arts that *Blues* itself professed to support. Pound's message is not that the mass market should be opened to a greater freedom of speech, simply that the government should not interfere with those elite writers whose 'works of literary and scientific merit' transcend the mundane affairs of law. Williams would take Pound's attempts to politicize poetry seriously during the 1930s (though ironically it was precisely because of this politicisation that their friendship eventually became untenable).

In the next issue, Williams published his equally remarkable essay, 'A Note on the Art of Poetry'⁴¹ one which regrettably has not been reprinted, since it presents one of his clearest attempts to articulate his opposition to the classicism of Eliot. In it Williams argues that 'To write is dangerous,' and that the poet must resist society's attempts to contain him. Though he is 'torn at by ridicule' and 'beset by measurers' who

³⁸ *Blues*, 2 (1929), p.29.

³⁹ EP to Senator Bronson Cutting, 8th November, 1930. See *Ezra Pound and Senator Bronson Cutting: A Political Correspondence 1930 – 1935* ed. E. P. Walkiewicz and Hugh Witemeyer (Albuquerque NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), p.38. Senator Cutting had also been working towards a revision of the copyright bill, which Pound saw as a serious danger to the arts. See also Ezra Pound's 'Article 211,' *Exile* 4 (Autumn 1928), pp.20-22.

⁴⁰ In fact, despite Ford's radical claims, there is very little salacious material in *Blues*. Perhaps it is because of Article 211 itself, but in any case it seems that radical formal experimentation was the only outlet for literary rebellion in 1929.

⁴¹ Williams, 'A Note on the Art of Poetry,' *Blues*, 1:4 (1929).

seek to restrain his verse in systems and academies, the artist perseveres, fighting out his battle on the obscure front. And on top of this, 'He is abducted by women, if they can do it. They "love" him.'⁴² Certainly this points to a sexual undercurrent to Williams' radical literary politics, one that is in many ways concordant with the abandonment and freedom of the Greenwich Village scene.

We might also suppose from this bizarre manifesto that Williams was once again feeling constrained by marriage after Floss and the children had returned from Europe in July of the previous year. Denning notes that the rhetoric of manhood and the sexual politics of virility were frequently invoked by the left throughout the 1930s. The 'cult of the virile male' body, in opposition to the feminization of the genteel tradition and, indeed, the feminization of mass culture, was a mainstay of the Popular Front.⁴³ Through the details of Williams' various affairs, we can be sure that he felt, at times, that his marriage, his job, his family had held him back from fully realizing the bohemian lifestyle of which he had always dreamt.⁴⁴ Poetry, Williams argues, occurs spontaneously when man is pushed to the edge. It is the opposite of 'the woodchuck sluggishness of a middle Ohio.'⁴⁵ It exists not in middle America, where Williams himself was stranded, but at the margins. 'Ridicule. Retirement. The English. Morality. None of these things mean anything to writing.'⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid. p.79.

⁴³ Denning, *Cultural Front*, p.137.

⁴⁴ Leibowitz sees Williams' numerous affairs as a factor of great significance in his writing. Drawing on poems such as 'Arrival,' 'Romance Moderne,' 'The Ideal Quarrel,' 'Queen-Anne's Lace, and 'Great Mullen,' he interprets Williams poetry in terms of a tension between the release of his libidinal forces (his bohemian desire to be a part of the wild art scene on the other side of the Hudson), and the forces of repression, which usually took the form of duty to Floss and his sons. Leibowitz, *Something Urgent I Have to Say to You*, see especially pp.161-172.

⁴⁵ Williams, 'A Note on the Art of Poetry,' p.78.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p.79.

The idea of bold innovation being derided and cast out by a conservative establishment pervades his manifestos of the period, and he links this feeling with his conception of a 'male excellence in poetry,' a phrase he uses twice during the manifesto. He posits the specifically masculine and radical art of American verse in contrast to the feminine, academic art of Eliot, who is leading poetry away from the bold frontier and back into mediocrity. 1929 was also the year in which Williams began to denounce Eliot and his poetic program most forcefully. 'I heard from McAlmon that T.S. Eliot has turned definitely to Anglo-Catholicism of late' he writes to Zukofsky in January 1929.⁴⁷ In his 'Note on the Art of Poetry' Williams effectively divides American letters into those who support radicalism and those who do 'the academic thing.'

It is truly pathetic to see and to feel how completely the living opposition to the classic viewpoint is lacking in even a vocabulary to give it voice... Next to the rascality of our legislative and judicial bodies the university, the true home of learning, is the worst scandal of our day.⁴⁸

Williams argues that where the academic writer attempts to 'seize' poetry in words, the radical artist attempts the opposite, to free words from their commonality.⁴⁹ Williams is therefore in something of a paradox. He must legitimise radicalism as an artistic and philosophical standpoint by giving it its own vocabulary (and he expresses his dismay that 'the living opposition to the classic viewpoint is lacking in even a vocabulary to give it voice'), but at the same time he refuses to 'seize' poetry in words.

⁴⁷ WCW to LZ, 25th January, 1929, p.27.

⁴⁸ Williams, 'A Note on the Art of Poetry,' p.77.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p.78.

In order to understand what this ‘living opposition to the classic viewpoint’ entails it is necessary to place Williams’ writing within the context of his profession as a physician. Indeed, throughout his ‘Note on the Art of Poetry’, he continues to attack ‘science and philosophy,’ bundling the two together as representative of the ‘academic’ way of thinking, in opposition to ‘poetic’ knowledge. The entire manifesto is an attempt to put this ‘poetic’ knowledge on the same footing, with the same authority, as science. It may seem strange that Williams, who was the only modernist poet to have anything in the way of scientific training,⁵⁰ should also be the only one to devote a considerable amount of time and thought into attacking it. For Williams knowledge is not to be found in theory, but instead it is born in *praxis*, and takes its bearing from that ‘contact’ with the world.

Critics such as T. Hugh Crawford have shown how this trait is a direct result of his medical training. This is after all a natural position for any physician-poet to take. Williams’ famous dictum, ‘No ideas but in things’ (CPI, 263), is in many ways a manifesto for the scientific tradition of sceptical thought that situates knowledge in sensation. It is in our experience of the world, Williams argues, that the ‘idea’ resides. This is hardly surprising if one considers that the sceptical tradition goes right back to Epicureanism which, as Bremen notes, was born out of the medical writings of the Hippocratic school.⁵¹ The physician is indeed the most empirical of beings, being trained in the art of what Williams refers to in his 1929 poem, ‘Della Primavera Transportata al Morale,’ as the *tactus eruditus* (CPI, 335) – an old medical term for ‘the

⁵⁰ Stein studied psychology under William James and later enrolled at medical school before dropping out. It would be unreasonable to describe this as ‘scientific training’ however.

⁵¹ Bremen, *The Diagnostics of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.20-1.

education of the touch.’ In this respect, medicine, like poetry, requires the poet to ‘freshen [the] eye’ (I, 270) and reawaken the senses. In the *ABC of Reading*, Pound had remarked:

The proper METHOD for studying poetry and good letters is the method of contemporary biologists, that is, careful first-hand examination of the matter, and continual COMPARISON of one ‘slide’ or specimen with another.⁵²

Indeed, this is exactly a definition of the French clinical method that Foucault puts forward in *The Birth of the Clinic*.⁵³ The trained gaze of the physician-poet apprehends the truth of that reality in its *localization*. In his autobiography Williams refers to a pathologist named Krumwiede who seems to represent the clinical future of science. His job as a pathologist entailed examining blood samples and classifying the disease according to an established table of diseases.⁵⁴ Williams was certainly not opposed to medical advances,⁵⁵ however, the practice of pathology represents a taxonomic version of knowledge, a confinement by *a priori* conceptual categories, with which Williams could not agree. Rather than taking a body of theory straight from the university or any institution and applying it to a particular case, Williams always tried to suggest that diagnosis should proceed from the evidence of the patient. The doctor (like the poet) must learn to read and understand the body, so that nature itself becomes his textbook. This is the essence of Williams’ 1923 ‘Rome’ journal (1924): ‘It is impossible to write a poem save as hair grows,’ he writes.⁵⁶

⁵² Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1987), p.17.

⁵³ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. A. M. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2003), p.5.

⁵⁴ Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1951), p.88. Henceforth abbreviated to (A).

⁵⁵ For instance he writes in ‘A Night in June’ that ‘one gets not to deliver women at home nowadays. The hospital is the place for it. The equipment is far better’ (*FD*, 137).

⁵⁶ Williams, ‘Rome,’ *William Carlos Williams Review*, 26:2 (Fall, 2006).

Many of Williams' poems are 'scientific,' in this limited sense, concerned only with studying and contextualising a single isolated object. His 1930 poem 'The Attic Which is Desire,' published in the eighth number of *Blues* (Spring 1930), offers an interesting example:

Here from the
street by

* * *

S

* * *

O

* * *

D

* * *

A

* * *

ringed with
running lights

the darkened
pane

exactly
down the center
is
transfixed (*CPI*, 325-6)

Like much of Williams' poetry, this poem is concerned with the forgotten objects of modernity, which other people overlook, in this case a street sign. Rather than explaining or describing, he literally attempts to transcribe or 'transfix' the object as a visual structure directly onto the page. Careful scientific scrutiny of the subject leads to an almost photographic poetic form, giving the poem an urban documentary feel – the poetic equivalent of Sheeler's *City Interior* (1936), *Classic Landscape* (1931), or *River Rouge Plant* (1933). Like so many other Williams poems, it emphasises the materiality

of the poetic object within its context, as opposed to exploring its essence or ‘meaning.’ Undoubtedly it is his study of diagnostics that informs his conviction that ‘clarity’⁵⁷ of vision (rather than ‘truth’ in any other abstract manifestation) could in and of itself be the new aim of American poetics.⁵⁸

Yet if his diagnostic training gave Williams a poetic method of sorts, the reverse is also true; his aesthetic philosophy influenced, one might even say underwrote, his attitudes towards science. Williams’ reading of A.N. Whitehead’s *Science and the Modern World* in 1927 (a book which we know from his correspondence was influential on Williams) may have determined this approach.⁵⁹ From Whitehead, Williams learned to take a fundamentally Pragmatist approach to the philosophy of science; namely, that science also is a product of culture. Whitehead’s essential thesis is that the great scientific discoveries of any period do not emerge in a vacuum, but are a direct product of the cultural climate in which they are born. Science is not a separate, almost sacred sphere of objective knowledge; rather the economic, cultural and political substructure pre-determines our ‘science’. Science must not therefore be considered as a positivistic enterprise but rather as a part of a broader social nexus.

⁵⁷ Williams, ‘Rome,’ p.24.

⁵⁸ T. Hugh Crawford explores the idea of a ‘clinical method’ both in poetry and in medicine, and he draws a connection between Williams’ notion of ‘clarity’ and Foucault’s notion of the ‘pure Gaze.’ Crawford argues that both assume that through the mastery of the perceiving eye, the object can be contained within a phenomenal structure which is also a language structure. Or as Foucault puts it; ‘Over all these endeavours on the part of clinical thought to define its methods and scientific norms hovers the great myth of a pure Gaze that would be pure Language: a speaking eye.’ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, pp.140-1. See T. Hugh Crawford, *Modernism, Medicine and William Carlos Williams*, p.32. Whilst I’m sure that the concept of ‘clarity’ is important to Williams, I would hesitate to associate it with the word ‘clinical’ in this Foucauldian sense, since this runs contrary to my own understanding of Williams’ fundamentally pragmatic attitudes toward language.

⁵⁹ Williams read *Science and the Modern World* in 1927 (*SL*, 79).

In this regard Williams extended his Romantic belief in the visionary role of the artist to certain scientists as well. Williams' scientific heroes (Copernicus, Madame Curie, and Einstein) were thinkers who had in some way stepped outside of the institutions and beliefs that would contain them in order to remodel our understanding of the universe. In his 1948 essay, 'The Poem as a Field of Action,' Williams writes:

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.⁶⁰

For Williams, Einstein's revisions in science were part of a broader movement towards 'relativism' in all fields (history, social studies, linguistics, and so on), which he believed would ultimately influence and inform all aspects of human activity. Williams believed that the truly great scientist, like the poet, must transcend boundaries. Thus it was not in his capacity as a scientist that Williams praised Einstein but in his capacity as a revolutionary. Williams' rejection of the university as the site of knowledge contains a version of this myth, and shows the fundamentally aesthetic basis on which Williams attacked science. As he writes in his *Blues* manifesto:

Science and Philosophy we must see and insist on over and over again are completely spent as of any further use to the mind and to the difficult realization of man living whole in his world.

The whole world is stigmatized, maimed by its scientific and philosophic practices. The imagination, Man, rarely a poet, holds the sole outlet.⁶¹

Williams makes a case for the importance of the imagination in understanding the world as a 'whole'. In short, not only does he imagine the artist as the guardian of

⁶⁰ Williams, 'The Poem as a Field of Action' (*SE*, 283).

⁶¹ Williams, 'A Note on the Art of Poetry,' p.78.

humanity's bigger picture, but he also believes that the experiential form of knowledge to which the poet has access is of a fundamentally different quality and insight to science, which he perceives as merely the 'multiplication' of facts. These ideas were certainly nothing new. As early as 1923 he had written:

The inundation of the intelligence by masses of complicated fact is not knowledge... It is the imagination on which reality rides – It is the imagination – It is a cleavage through everything by a force that does not exist in the mass and therefore can never be discovered by its anatomization.

It is for this reason I have always placed art first and esteemed it over science (*I*, 139)

Even as far back as 1923 then, Williams was contrasting the 'wholeness' of the imagination of the poet, with the anatomization of science. The new clinical methods that were emerging from 1900 to 1930 represent precisely this 'anatomization' of knowledge, with doctors separating out into specialist practices. Yet we can also see that there is an implied tension between the 'masses' (either of 'people' or 'facts') and the individual observer, the poet/physician, who singularly holds the meaning of the masses. Just as the individual poet stands outside of the masses, so the imagination is that 'force' which exists outside of the codifications and categories that we unconsciously inherit from society. For Williams, it is the imagination which allows the poet/scientist to intercept reality as a totality; it is imagination, rather than any superior scientific training, that ultimately allowed Copernicus, Madame Curie and Einstein to redefine their fields, to 'make it new.' What Williams intends is a revolution in the minds of the people (to be induced by the revolutionary art of the early twentieth-century), which would liberate knowledge from its dependence on institutions (most notably the institution of academia) and America from its own ideological repression in

one and the same movement.⁶² The vital role of the poet is thus radicalism itself. In being radical, the poet is able to extend his vision beyond received culture.

But there is also an implicitly political statement here, one that is tied to this concept of ‘wholeness’ and ‘totality.’ During the 1920s, Pound was also denouncing the practice of specialization in universities, or what he called ‘German Philology with sacrifice of individual intelligence to the Moloch of “Scholarship”’⁶³ and ‘the idea that the man is the slave of the state, the “unit,” the piece of the machine.’⁶⁴ By the time he published *Provincialism the Enemy*, Pound had construed German ‘socialism’ into an entire mode of thinking or method of scholarship (covering everything from philology to politics) which he called ‘kultur,’ and which was for him the antithesis to free-thinking individualism, disempowering the individual by preventing him from seeing the totality of his field.

The concept of totality is a particularly difficult one, and it requires careful excavation. In the first years of the 1930s, the philosophy of ‘totalitarianism’ had not yet come to possess the negative associations with that it did in the late 1930s and early 1940s.⁶⁵ As Williams said a year later in his commentary for his own magazine *Contact*:

⁶² See also Williams’ editorial in *Blues*, 1:2 (1929), p.31. ‘Poetry especially is just at the brink of its modern development when it will with absolute certainty supplant a great part of the effectiveness now absorbed by science.’

⁶³ Ezra Pound, ‘Economic Democracy’ originally published in *The Little Review*, April 1920. Quoted here from *Selected Prose 1909-1965* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p.210.

⁶⁴ Pound, *Selected Prose*, p.192.

⁶⁵ Our own critical conceptions of ‘totality’ in many ways are derived from György Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Lukács’ aim was to challenge the bourgeois assumption that the individual is a freely thinking and acting agent who exists prior to society. He argued that if, as Marx says, man’s consciousness is determined by his material and social conditions, then it is only by looking at the totality that we can look at the individual, and see that ‘the core of existence stands revealed as a social process.’ György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), p.19. Lukács’ major achievement was to put the concept of totality (rather than merely economics) back at the heart of dialectical materialism, so that Marxism itself should be defined as ‘an aspiration towards totality.’ Ibid.

I cannot swallow the half alive poetry which knows nothing of totality. It is one of the reasons to welcome communism. Never may it be said, has there ever been great poetry that was not born out of a communist intelligence.⁶⁶

Here the idea of ‘totality’ and ‘communism’ is tied to a socially inclusive way of thinking. The concept of ‘totality’ changed a good deal during the 1930s. In the space of only a few years, the word went from being a positive affirmation of one’s commitment to incorporating the marginal and powerless, to a frightening threat to freedom of expression, forcing the individual into the mould of the state.⁶⁷ Williams embraced totality within the narrow definition of ‘inclusivity’. Indeed, the word ‘miscellany’ might be more appropriate. Elsewhere Williams spoke out strongly against the ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ and the Marxist conception of totality which he saw as negating America’s deep-seated belief in individualism and diversity of opinion.⁶⁸ One might say that Williams’ understanding of ‘totality’ is derived from the contextualist social project that he inherited from A.N. Whitehead, rather than the theoretical discussions of Lukács, Bloch or Gramsci.

Nevertheless, there are some significant examples of ‘totalitarian’ thinking that one might not expect from Williams included amongst his writings of the early 1930s. In the 7th issue of *Blues* Williams published an extraordinary, and frankly incoherent

p.198. Adorno, in contrast, felt that a micro-analysis of the fragments of the social whole was all that a critic could accomplish. See Theodore Adorno, *Notes to Literature: Volume I*, trans Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), especially pp.14-6, 42. In this he is actually much closer to Williams, who typically portrays the whole in terms of particulars, and not the other way round. See also Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p.202.

⁶⁶ Williams ‘Comment,’ *Contact*, 1:3 (October, 1932), p.131.

⁶⁷ See Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, p.153. Jay discusses the ‘sinister connotations’ that began to be associated with the word ‘totalitarian’ during the 1930s as a result of its connection to Stalinism.

⁶⁸ Williams, ‘Social Credit as Anti-Communism,’ *New Democracy*, 1:10 (15th January, 1934), p.2.

advertisement (see Appendix 2).⁶⁹ To avoid confusion, we should assert that Williams is not introducing a collection of his own writings here (no such collection was published at this time), he is referring to *Blues* itself. In it he refers to the rejection of the ‘*SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*.’ The advert builds on the idea that he lays down in his second *Blues* manifesto, albeit with an increasingly hysterical tone, that poetry is ‘a direct engagement with the character of destruction.’⁷⁰ He imagines literature as an atomic bomb, cutting through the ‘morass’ of ‘detail’.⁷¹ Later on he would make some very similar though slightly alarming remarks about the atomic bomb: ‘one great thing about “the bomb” is the awakened sense it gives us that catastrophic alterations are also possible in the human *mind*, in art... We are too cowed by fear to realize it fully’ (*SE*, 287). The bomb is the true flowering of modernism and its attendant philosophy; it teaches society that it can ‘make it new.’

In the 7th issue of *Blues*, along with his advert Williams also published ‘Simplex Sigillum Veri: A Catalogue,’ roughly translated as, ‘simplicity is the seal of truth.’ The poem lists the items of modernity:

an American papermatch packet
closed, gilt with a panel insert,
the bank, a narrow building
black, in a blue sky [...]

two telephone directories
The Advertising Biographical
Calendar of Medicine, Wednesday 18
Thursday 19, Friday 20, papers

of various shades sticking out

⁶⁹ Williams, ‘Introduction to a collection of modern writings,’ *Blues* 1:7 (1929), p.1.

⁷⁰ *Blues*, 4 (1929), p.79.

⁷¹ Williams, ‘Introduction to a collection of modern writings,’ p.1.

from under others, throwing
the printing out of line: portrait
of all that which we have lost (CPI, 321-2)

This poem is in many ways a culmination of everything Williams had been talking about in his manifestos. The idea of ‘simplicity’ as the mark of truth leads him to a purely empirical sort of poetry, one which looks at objects as though they were slides under a microscope, and limits its meaning to the most pure form of that contact. Yet in many ways Williams’ poem also gestures towards the emptiness of that philosophy. For if a poem is nothing but ‘a mechanism that has a function which is to say something as accurately and clearly as possible,’ then in ‘Simplex Sigillum Veri’ Williams finds that absolute cleanliness of description, that purely clinical poetry, and yet shows it to be hollow – merely a list, which treats the world as though it were a collection of scientific data. The poem is also likely intended as a bitter reply to Whitman. Whitman used the form of the list to create a feeling of inclusiveness, expansiveness, and wholeness, as well as showing the diversity of the inner world of the poet and the promise of diversity in democracy. Williams’ list is largely without emotion, ending in a kind of lament, ‘portrait / of all that which we have lost.’ Moreover, the historicity of the poem is undercut by the image of the calendar, ‘Wednesday 18 / Thursday 19, Friday 20’. The calendar points on the one hand to the specificity of each isolated day, but on the other hand it points also towards the endless reproducibility of days, each one just like the last. Ultimately, the poem becomes swamped by the morass of ‘detail,’ which Williams claimed that it was the poet’s job to cut through, and the reversion to the quatrain perhaps marks his sense of confinement within this type of poem.

In the same issue, Parker Tyler published a letter expressing his own dissatisfaction with American art and his sense that radical literature was being swamped by the mass market:

in America our culture is confused with such things as advertising and bookselling clubs... Greenwich Village has ceased to be more than a romantic memory. There has been an influx of bank clerks, gangsters and sharp real-estate dealers.⁷²

‘Simplex Sigillum Veri’ deliberately reads like an advertising catalogue and it gestures towards the need for the poem to sell itself in a world trapped by the tawdry. In the end Williams does not find any meaning in the purely empirical, and the poem becomes a ‘portrait / of all that we have lost.’ Few critics would make a case for the lasting importance of poems such as ‘Simplex Sigillum Veri.’

Indeed, one might see the period surrounding this seventh issue of *Blues* as a turning point for Williams. The next time he would publish in *Blues*, he would begin to shy away from this idea of experimentation for its own sake and, indeed, to shy away from *Blues* itself. Perhaps it was the appointment of Eugene Jolas to the editorial board and the feeling that too much experimentation in the style of *transition* was being printed that caused Williams to change his mind. In any case, Williams himself became less and less interested in the sort of ‘radical’ literature that *Blues* was offering, and began to call for a poetry of greater ‘substance’. ‘Experiment we must have,’ Williams writes in the 9th issue,

⁷² *Blues*, 1:7 (1929), p.41.

but it seems to me that a number of the younger writers has [sic] forgotten that writing doesn't mean just inventing new ways to say 'So's your Old Man.' I swear I myself can't make out for the life of me what many of them are talking about, and I have a will to understand them that they will not find in many another.⁷³

Williams had also come under fire from Rexroth for his previous *Blues* manifestos. Rexroth recognised that American modernism needed an alternative champion to the conservative Yvor Winters, who was at that time winning over more recruits to the 'other side' (the cause of classicism), with his influential piece appearing in the 3rd *American Caravan*, entitled 'The Reintegration of the Human Spirit in the Poetry, Chiefly French and American of Modern Times.' Yet for Rexroth, Jolas and the *transition* crowd had shown that they were incapable of the task, and Williams' manifestos, though along the right lines, were not 'likely to become proverbial for their Aristotelian lucidity.'⁷⁴ The article by Winters in question puts forward a vaguely neo-humanist argument that man is capable of attaining a 'moral godhead' and that literature is 'the greatest spiritual service that can be performed' for humanity by providing it with the material needed for this task.⁷⁵ Winters writes,

The increasing popularity of several species of second hand nihilism in our own day is probably responsible in a large degree for the decreasing functioning of the will among all of the educated classes; an obvious symptom of which is the depressing but steady increase of sexual perversion, not only in our 'art centers,' but in nearly all of our universities... Art is the most intense moment of consciousness... It is the final proof that he [the artist] as self-directed integer, is morally superior to the facts of life.⁷⁶

⁷³ Williams, 'Caviar and Bread Again,' *Blues* 2:9 (1930), p.47.

⁷⁴ *Blues*, 7 (1929), p.43.

⁷⁵ 'The Extension and Reintegration of the Human Spirit Through the Poetry Mainly French and American Since Poe and Baudelaire' in *The Uncollected Essays and Reviews of Yvor Winters* ed. Francis Murphy (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1973), pp.226-7. Originally printed in *The New American Caravan*, III (1929), pp. 361-402.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

The basic hope that the artist can change society remains the same, yet the purpose of this role could not be more different. Whilst Winters intended to use the arts to stamp out ‘sexual perversion’ and reinforce the ‘will’ of the ‘educated classes,’ Williams hoped that the arts could be a tool of sexual and class liberation, that would liberate body, mind and morals from the repressiveness of institutionalised inequality and America’s puritanical sense of morality.

Yet Rexroth’s criticism of Williams’ *Blues* manifestos is also centred on the issue of nationalism. *Blues* was always intended to be an international publication, idealising the cosmopolitan, expatriate lifestyle in Paris.⁷⁷ Rexroth was wary that American writers seemed to be dividing into two camps with European classicism on one side and the sort of American nationalism that Williams himself was championing on the other. Rexroth himself hoped to forge a reply to Winters and his supporters that did not rely on nationalism. Rexroth writes:

Since the war (which should have banished such ideas forever) nationalism has run rampant in u.s. criticism. Josephson and Williams, men for whom otherwise i have the greatest respect, are i suppose the most guilty... when today someone tells me that my Duty Is To Express What Is Native To America, i am just a little afraid that tomorrow I shall be told to Go Back To Russia Where I Came From.⁷⁸

Rexroth certainly has a valid point, but Williams was not a nationalist in any bigoted sense of the word. Rather, he was a ‘localist.’ Nationalism for Williams was bound up with the inherent promise of American democracy and his great faith that America had the potential to become the very embodiment of a free and equal society. Williams, far from being offended by Rexroth’s letter, wrote to Ford, ‘Rexroth is one of

⁷⁷ See for instance the ‘Expatriate issue,’ *Blues* 1:6 (1929).

⁷⁸ *Blues*, 7 (1929), p.43.

my favourites... he is quite right in jumping me for lack of lucidity and my statements which do not help... I'd like someday to complete what I have to say, to articulate up the bones of my plea' (*SL*,110-111). Unfortunately, it seems that Williams himself was still struggling to articulate a lucid and forceful reply to Eliot, Winters and the rest. He had still not found the new language of American poetry that he sought. Indeed, it would not be until he began writing *Paterson* that Williams would fully articulate his 'reply to Latin and Greek with the bare hands,' his 'living opposition to the classical viewpoint' (*P*, 2). Nevertheless the issue of nationalism was one which would remain between Williams and many of his American peers. Ford himself would soon discontinue *Blues* and head to Paris in search of vice and adventure, whilst Williams would remain as ever, in Rutherford, trying to forge an American art.

From the Fall 1929 issue of *Blues* onwards, the magazine was forced to become a quarterly magazine, as opposed to monthly, due to a lack of funding. On the 12th November 1929, Williams wrote to Ford:

under the economic pressure we all suffer, a quarterly is inescapable, forced on us, therefore better face to the facts, and so better all around.

Blues is after all you. You must bear it yourself and make it go, no help to that, though help you must have.

There are four or five new quarterlies and what not. Some good, some (probably) bad. Each will be at its best a person, as I see it. (*SL*, 110)

1.2. Pagany: A Change of Form

One of the new quarterlies to which Williams was referring was undoubtedly *Pagany: A Native Quarterly*. In April, 1929, just four months prior to the Wall Street

crash, a young would-be writer, Richard Johns had written to Williams declaring his intention to begin a quarterly in January 1930, and requesting permission to use the name *Pagany* (taken from Williams' *Voyage to Pagany*). Johns also asked Williams to become an associate editor and write a manifesto for the first issue, much as Ford had done one year previously. Williams, wary after his disillusionment with *Blues*, responded somewhat hesitantly that he doubted Johns had the time or money to make it last more than a few years. He added:

I have a vivid perception of something that might be done in the U.S. with literature as material. I should be instantly raised into heaven could I be sure that I would have a quarterly at my disposal that I could make the fulcrum by using which I would, in the course of the next ten years, pry things so loose here that we could breathe again in an enlightened air and not in this sink of stupidity and ignorance where we live now 'saved' by science and philosophy.⁷⁹

Indeed, in many ways, this ideal of the little magazine that Williams depicts *was* the project to which Williams had devoted his life, first with the *Others* group, then with the first run of *Contact*. If it was Williams' great hope that the arts could revitalise society then the little magazine was the tool that he imagined would accomplish this end. However, he had also grown cynical with regard to little magazines and the scope in which they had to operate. And thus he requested that Johns leave his name off the masthead.

In fact, it turned out that Johns had both the time and the money. He had dropped out of Classical High School, Lynn, Massachusetts some four years previously and had educated himself instead on copies of *transition*, *Contact*, and *The Little Review* instead.

⁷⁹ WCW to RJ, 1st July, 1929, *Pagany* Archives, Regenstein Library Chicago, University of Delaware, Collection Number, Collection number 110, Box 10, Folders 248-252. Henceforth, all correspondence between Williams and Johns is from this location unless otherwise specified.

Johns' father was a moderately wealthy Boston attorney, and he was supportive of his son's literary endeavours to the tune of \$1,000.⁸⁰ Unlike *Blues*, *Pagany* would pay contributors, but unlike *Blues* it would also compromise with the mass market. 'That you could pry things loose here, introduce an enlightened air here I sincerely doubt,' Johns replied to Williams. Instead it would combine his 'personal preference in literature' with 'stuff the people will buy.'⁸¹ Williams was surprisingly open to the idea and we can only presume that he had grown tired of *Blues*, tired with existing in the margins, and tired of failing to get his work published in any meaningful public forum.

Soon Ford and the *Blues* crowd would express their disappointment that Williams had jumped ship and was supporting a new magazine.⁸² His letter to Johns of 12th July, 1929, seems to confirm that Williams was indeed jumping ship, in more ways than one. He wrote to Johns that he agreed that *Blues* was 'just a loose end', the remnants of 1920s modernism dying out, and that he approved of the bold American subtitle that Johns had chosen: 'A Native Quarterly.'⁸³ Williams had originally used the term *Pagany* as a pseudonym for Europe (in *Voyage to Pagany*), but now it would refer to a celebration of primal, native America.

The birth of *Pagany* also shows the first signs of a rupture between Williams and Pound. Williams wrote to Zukofsky in September 1929, asking him to keep the new magazine a secret from Pound. 'I'd not let Pound know of this just yet,' he writes, 'as he might inbalance [sic] the effort. Later he should come in – if he will. He won't of

⁸⁰ See Stephen Halpert, *A Return to Pagany*, pp.3-36.

⁸¹ RJ to WCW, 7th July, 1929.

⁸² See Mariani, *William Carlos Williams*, p.313.

⁸³ WCW to RJ, 12th July, 1929.

course, unless he can father-mother-bugger it – the new Trinity.⁸⁴ Williams evidently wanted to keep *Pagany* free of the influence of the expatriate crowd, and part of this was Williams' own declaration of independence from his literary mentor. In many ways *Pagany* was the first of a wave of literary magazines during the early 1930s that made Americanism a virtue in its own right. It was not averse to 'modernism' but attempted to ground itself in the terse vernacular of the 'native.' Williams, however, most likely saw it as a continuation of the original *Contact* (1920-1) which he had started with McAlmon, whose original manifesto had been:

For native work in verse, fiction, criticism or whatever is written we mean to maintain a place, insisting upon that which we have not found insisted upon before, the essential contact between words and the locality which breeds them, in this case America.⁸⁵

Aside from Williams, the other key player in the founding of *Pagany* and the single greatest influence on the magazine's future direction would be Sherry Mangan, who soon came to co-edit the publication with Johns and Williams.⁸⁶ Mangan was heavily influenced by Williams' rejection of Eliot and his supporters. In the second issue, he published an influential piece that came to be seen as the cornerstone of *Pagany's* critical ethos. His essay 'On the Somewhat Premature Apotheosis of T.S. Eliot' argues that Eliot's new school of 'Precisionism' (referring to the New Critics, and not to be confused with Sheeler and the Precisionists) was 'corrupting the youth' by

⁸⁴ WCW to LZ, 15th September 1929, p.35.

⁸⁵ Williams 'Comment on Contact,' *Contact*, 1 (1920), p.10, reprinted, *ARI*, p.65.

⁸⁶ Mangan was a near neighbour of Johns' in Lynn and they came to know each other when Mangan published Johns' poem 'Mazie Marston' in the final issue of Mangan's failing publication *Larus*. Johns took over the balance of *Larus*, and carried out Mangan's contract to supply those who had already paid for annual subscriptions with copies of *Pagany* instead. In return, Mangan helped put together the first issue of *Pagany*, and thus began their close literary friendship. See Stephen Halpert, *A Return to Pagany*, p.10.

privileging the ‘critical faculty’ over the ‘creative’ one.⁸⁷ Mangan’s distinction between the ‘critical’ poets and the ‘creative’ poets here is remarkably similar to Williams’ own distinction between the ‘academic’ poets and the ‘radical’ poets and follows similar battle lines. According to Mangan, Eliot was guilty of ‘snobisme’ and of turning ‘the need to be right’ into a ‘psychopathic mania’ amongst students of literature. In opposition to Eliot’s emphasis on the critical, Mangan posits the idea of ‘abundance.’⁸⁸ ‘Abundance’ is similar to Williams idea of the poet’s desire for death in ‘A Note on the Art of Poetry,’ an overflowing of creative energy, and a desire for literary radicalism. Mangan, whether consciously or not, follows Williams’ example of aligning this radical quality with the new American poets in opposition to the stale formulaic English tradition.

it seems like some colossal and incredible joke to see young Americans solemnly reading *The Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology* and gravely disputing about the apostolic succession over their glasses of bootleg gin.⁸⁹

‘Let Mr. Eliot ask himself why he wrote *The Waste Land* instead of a thesis on sociology,’ Mangan writes. ‘The kernel of the matter is the very fact that abundance is logically inexplicable.’⁹⁰ Mangan argues that Eliot’s need for professionalism and impersonality necessitates ‘some agreeable form of exterior authority,’ with the result that Eliot was turning the youth into conservatives.⁹¹ Williams wrote to Johns, ‘I like the Sherry Mangan. I thought it an important contribution to the general mess over

⁸⁷ Sherry Mangan, ‘A Note: on the Somewhat Premature Apotheosis of Thomas Stearns Eliot,’ *Pagany*, 1:2 (April-June, 1930), pp. 26.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p.32-3.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p.29.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p.34.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* p.28.

humanism.⁹² On the 24th October 1929, Williams wrote to Johns after reading over the first batch of submissions, ‘I am beginning to grow enthusiastic about this venture of yours. I had no idea there was so much really new writing going on about me.’

The first issue of *Pagany* was launched with two manifestos, one from Johns and one from Williams on the first page (see Appendix 3). In fact, Johns’ piece would be better described as an anti-manifesto in its strenuous avoidance of any attempt ‘to make a point, to formulate a policy.’ Johns was adamant that *Pagany* would have no agenda other than its focus on good quality writing, with the language itself, rather than the content, driving its editorial policy: ‘Wary of definite alliance with any formulated standard, PAGANY (as an enclosure) includes individual expression of native thought and emotion.’

At the same time, other little magazines were one by one beginning to politicize themselves, often moving dramatically to the left. The case of *Front* magazine, edited by Norman Macleod, presents an excellent example. The magazine had looked like it was about to collapse but was rescued by a new Russian backer, the Federation of the Organization of Soviet Writers (FOSP). The new backer, Macleod wrote to Johns, came with a price: ‘Instead of the “complex countenance of a generation” it will be entirely left... Do you think that you could scrape up some work that could be called proletarian or left or revolutionary?... we are going to try to have every article, poem or story above proletarian reproach.’⁹³ Such a policy of attempting to ‘scrape up’ some revolutionary

⁹² WCW to RJ, 1st May, 1930.

⁹³ Stephen Haplert, *A Return to Pagany*, p.133.

work seems almost ridiculous, but the fact remains that writers had to go where there was interest, not to mention funding, and in 1930 that meant the left.

Johns, with Williams' encouragement, was strenuously avoiding this mass politicisation. Williams wrote to Johns that *Pagany* must not 'take on burdens of righteousness or policy. It does what it should: presents an extant practice of the art of writing.'⁹⁴ Williams kept up a constant stream of encouragement to Johns throughout 1930, continually reassuring him that *Pagany's* 'inclusive policy without a banner of isms to sail under is the right one.'⁹⁵ He wrote to Johns in June 1930,

People like Parker Tyler and the Blues people generally seem to have a legitimate kick when they see you presenting an unorganized front. They would want you to be extreme-left or nothing. Tyler wrote to me a hot letter last week asking me if I was the one responsible for the acceptance of so much bad stuff by Pagany. I replied.... that Pagany is and must be a miscellany, a true, even a realistic picture of the rather shabby spectacle America still makes from the writers [sic] viewpoint...

It's a time just now – as you know – of Symposiums, of Hound & Horn meticulousness and of a searching generally for an intelligent viewpoint in those things which concern us. The successes in this quest have been slight. Pagany seems not to be taking any stand at all. Well, it's better than some of the stands that have been taken.⁹⁶

On the surface, *Pagany* seems to be self-consciously apolitical, however, this would be entirely inaccurate. On the contrary, Johns and Williams were taking a deeply politicised stance towards the reaffirmation of freedom of expression. As John Beck writes, 'with the impossible choice between fascism and communism, progressives understandably made much of their middle ground... of cooperation over conflict, and of communication over censorship.'⁹⁷ Rather than 'apolitical' it should therefore be seen as 'anti-ideological.' The very concept of ideology, that is, a concerted attempt to

⁹⁴ WCW to RJ, 6th January 1930.

⁹⁵ WCW to RJ, 25th June, 1930.

⁹⁶ WCW to RJ, 1st May 1930.

⁹⁷ Beck, *Writing the Radical Center*, p.4.

systematise one's thought within a given discipline or credos, ran counter to Williams' desire to open up literature to the experiential, to change one's point of view entirely depending on context. There is certainly a latent association between the 'political' and the 'formulaic' but this belies a deeper truth. In its insistence on the 'dangerous' freedom of the individual, its social inclusiveness and its rejection of 'regimen' and 'formula,' *Pagany's* diverse approach was steeped in Populist rhetoric. Such an editorial policy chimed well with Williams' dual commitments: his unwavering faith in individualism and his (somewhat contradictory) need to be part of a group of writers, a movement that transcended his own particular project.

Williams' own manifesto on the first page of *Pagany* continues Johns' attack on formula but brings it round once again to undermine the mechanical attitude of the scientific mindset (Appendix 3). The quote from Scott Buchanan is most revealing. Though Buchanan's book, *Poetry and Mathematics* (1929), is now largely forgotten, it should be seen as an important influence on Williams, reinforcing what he had read in A.N. Whitehead's work. It is through Buchanan's book and Williams' rather cryptic manifesto that we can see what exactly he means by these first tentative steps towards expressing a new aesthetic that would supplant the hegemony of science.

In *Poetry and Mathematics*, Buchanan describes a crisis that he believed to be occurring in mathematics in the years around 1929. To quote the sentence that Williams himself quotes, 'The ghosts so confidently laid by Francis Bacon are again walking in the laboratory as well as beside the man in the street.'⁹⁸ The positivistic attitudes that had dominated mathematics, its 'single minded devotion to mechanics' and the

⁹⁸ Scott Buchanan, *Poetry and Mathematics* (New York: The John Day Company, 1929), p.16.

‘dogmatic determinism of physics,’ he argued, were crumbling. The assumption that mathematics is an absolute, exact and positivistic discipline was no longer certain.

Buchanan writes:

The numbers seem to be elastic. Forces, masses, and weights won’t stay put. The elements begin to move about on the Mendeleeff chart. The old method of calculating errors of measurement seems to signify more than human and material imperfection.⁹⁹

Buchanan argues that mathematics was undergoing a resurgence of ‘Pythagoreanism’, that is, the resurgence of an ‘organic’ understanding of mathematics. Pythagoras had of course invented the twin sciences of triangulation and harmony, leading him to the belief that the world formed a beautiful harmony of numbers, that mathematics was literally inscribed in nature, and obeyed natural laws. For the contemporary thinker, it is not hard to accept the possibility that the fundamental physical nature of universe, which is now encapsulated in the mysterious area of quantum mechanics, might be essentially unpredictable and chaotic. Yet in 1929, at the height of logical positivism, such a theory was undoubtedly very bold. For the new method of approaching mathematics Buchanan looks not to mechanics but to poetry, seeing ‘an impressionistic movement in science catching up with similar movements in art.’¹⁰⁰ This neo-organicism was embraced by Williams, who as a physician instinctively felt that knowledge must proceed from nature, and that nature is imperfect. As his 1928 poem from *The Descent of Winter*:

There are no perfect waves—
Your writings are a sea
full of misspellings and

⁹⁹ Buchanan, *Poetry and Mathematics*, p.178.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p.176.

faulty sentences. (*CPI*, 515)

These new ‘biological’ or ‘organic’ approaches to mathematics lead Buchanan to two separate conclusions. Firstly, he believed that all human understanding is necessarily aesthetic. The mathematician is not just a ‘prover of propositions,’ concerned only with ‘rigid structures,’¹⁰¹ rather he follows his formulas and proofs with the same leaps in understanding, the same feelings of joy or wonder with which one might read poetry or listen to Bach’s fugues. In essence, his argument renders all human knowledge as a subset of art. This is exactly what Williams had been driving at when he wrote that ‘Art is the pure effect of the force upon which science depends for its reality – Poetry’ (*I*, 139). Secondly, Buchanan sees mathematics as a language, and his thesis opens the way to seeing all human understanding as partaking of language. Buchanan argues that any proposition, such as the sentence ‘man is an animal,’ contains ‘an analogy in some form or other,’ and an analogy is in essence an equation. Furthermore Buchanan’s understanding of language is entirely contextualist. He writes, ‘even the meanings of single words come from the structures in which they occur in discourse. The words are merely the points of reference in the context, each dependent on its companions for its own character.’¹⁰² Rather than thinking of mathematics as a series of absolute solutions, he sees it as a series of functions, or structures, much like the rules of a language.¹⁰³ Naturally this contextualism was well received by Williams, who copied

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* p.7.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p.80, 156-7.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* p.162.

the essence of Buchanan's argument into his *Pagany* manifesto, though he changes the word 'context' to one with which he was more familiar, 'place.'¹⁰⁴

Whatever the validity of Buchanan's arguments, he provided Williams with the academic justification he needed to validate his intuitive sense that language is the highest calling of the intellect. Consequently he made this the essence of his *Pagany* manifesto:

To what shall the mind turn for that with which to rehabilitate our thought and our lives? To the word, a meaning hardly distinguishable from that of place, in whose great, virtuous and at present little realized potency we hereby manifest our belief.¹⁰⁵

This is Williams' own 'Revolution of the Word' manifesto, but one which makes 'word' and 'place' part of the same thing. In the first issue of *Pagany*, along with his manifesto, Williams also published one of his most famous essays, 'The Work of Gertrude Stein.' In many ways this essay is a retrospective on 1920s modernism, detailing the importance of Stein's 'formal insistence on words in their literal, structural quality of being words' as an influence on his own work.¹⁰⁶ He argues that Stein had in turn been influenced by Laurence Sterne's 'grammatical play.'¹⁰⁷ What Stein and Sterne both have in common is their treatment of language as an almost mathematical phenomenon, disregarding sense and meaning in favour of new structures and networks of word-relations. He notes that Stein takes the traditional sentence structures which we all unconsciously recognize, and inserts into them an entirely new and unpredictable

¹⁰⁴ Appendix 3.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ A, 265. Williams is referring specifically to the Objectivists here, but his comments carry into modernism as a whole.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, 'The Work of Gertrude Stein,' *Pagany* 1:1 (Winter, 1930), p.41.

content. ‘It is simply the skeleton, the “formal” parts of writing, those that make form, that she has to do with, apart from the “burden” which they carry.’¹⁰⁸ For Williams, Stein is able to evade the ‘dead weight of logical burdens’ and those ‘fetishes of unspeakable abhorrence,’ science and philosophy, by reinventing the language and the word-structures that inhabit our consciousness. Williams describes Stein’s poetry as a new ‘objective’ approach to language. Similarly, in his autobiography, he describes himself as being strongly influenced by Stein’s ‘objective use of words’ (A, 241). In his *Pogany* article, he writes:

To be democratic, local (in the sense of being attached with integrity to actual experience) Stein, or any other artist, must for subtlety ascend to a plane of almost abstract design to keep alive. To writing, then, as an art in itself... Stein’s pages have become like the United States viewed from an airplane – the same senseless repetitions, the endless multiplications of toneless words, with these she had to work.¹⁰⁹

Williams therefore did not see this kind of abstract, formalist approach to literature as being in any way incompatible with his emphasis on the ‘democratic’ and the ‘local.’ Nor can there be any doubt that Williams saw the modernist revolution in language as an explicitly American form, that is, one linked to new structures in American society, and the emergence of a new American consciousness.

It is a revolution of some proportions that is contemplated, the exact nature of which may be no more than sketched here but whose basis is humanity in a relationship with literature hitherto little contemplated.¹¹⁰

This makes explicit what I have so far been pointing to: Williams saw the revolution in poetry as one of the most significant phenomena of the modern world,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p.42.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.58.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p.43.

comparable to Einstein's revisions in science. Taking his *Pogany* manifesto and his essay on Stein together, we are not exactly left with a lucid and easy to grasp poetic project. And it is understandable that the politically active manifestos of the period should make much greater headway with younger writers looking to be part of something.

Having laid out these complex ideas, Williams would then put his frenzy of manifestos to bed in order to focus on prose. His own 'Revolution of the Word' project that he had been exploring in his critical writings would not be forgotten, but it would be submerged amongst his more mainstream prose writing.

1.3. *White Mule*: an unconventional middle-ground

Williams had been planning a prose project since as early as 1928. Indeed, one of the main reasons why it took so long for Williams to start *Paterson* was that from 1928 to 1930 he considered writing it as a novel. The notes for this unfinished prose novel, despite being scattered and unfinished, are nevertheless worth examining, since they point to a completely different and unexpected side of Williams.

The initial fragmented notes of the plot outline show two different strands to the projected story. The first strand is centred on the figure of Dolores Marie Pischak, who Williams also wrote about in *The Descent of Winter*.¹¹¹ Her story (focusing on ideas of 'religion and crime') is tragic; her first lover is found dead in a river, she is raped and gets pregnant, subsequently refusing to have an abortion. It is unclear how much of this

¹¹¹This name is a variation of the name of a girl that tried to seduce Williams. See Mariani, *William Carlos Williams*, p.265-6.

derives from real people that Williams met, but certainly there are some very clear similarities with the short stories that Williams wrote in the early 1930s. Her baby, for instance, in a sketch that is reminiscent of ‘Jean Beicke,’ is taken to the hospital and abandoned: ‘They put it there to die - but it didn’t.’ The notes hint toward an attempted suicide followed by the family reuniting at the end.

The other main strand of the plot focuses on a male figure (most probably the father). He is offered money by ‘Big Frank’ and the mob but refuses to take it and consequently gets involved in a shoot-out. Another clear similarity to the short stories of *The Knife of the Times* is in the use of the ‘house call’ as a plot device for observing and recording ordinary lives. But instead of the figure of the doctor making house calls, which we find in his short stories, Williams planned to cast the hero as Detective Gus.¹¹² Williams also hints at plans to add a political layer to the plot through the Mayoral elections.

If the plot elements are a cliché of *The Black Mask Boys* and other 1920s gangster comics, then the same is also true of the style. Words like ‘jack’ (money), ‘boob’ (simpleton), and ‘Giney’ (wimp), pervade the imitation New York gangster dialect. There can be no doubt that Williams wanted to write something populist, a prose masterpiece of low-down America, with the city of Paterson at its center,¹¹³ but from his notes it is clear he never finalized the plot. In the end, he rejected the crime novel as a vessel for his *Paterson* project, and abandoned the story.

¹¹²Gus also has a secret, that he has an illegitimate child which he is raising in the back of a speakeasy. Was Williams making a confession? At the William Carlos Williams Society Conference 2012 evidence was put forward that Williams had an illegitimate child.

¹¹³ Yale, Series 2. Writings, Box54, Folder 1227. The various notes are dated from July 1928 through to December 1929. Williams also mentions the novel in a letter to Pound of 25th June, 1928 (SL, 101).

During the summer of 1930, however, Johns began encouraging Williams to turn his attentions once more to the novel form, and offered to pay to serialized his fiction in *Pagany*. Williams therefore began to work on a new project. He had decided that he wanted to write a work of art in which the hero was a baby. Rather than using the clichéd plot elements of crime fiction he would base his novel on the true story of his wife Floss and her family, from birth to adulthood (*IWWP*, 61). The resulting work, *White Mule*, became the exemplar of the kind of realist prose that *Pagany* was disposed towards publishing, a compromise between low down and high brow America.

The catalyst for beginning the project was most likely the death of Floss' father on 27th March 1930. Floss' father, Paul Hermann, had shot himself whilst hunting, leaving the family deeply in grief. Although the protagonist of the trilogy overall is Floss herself, in many ways the real protagonist of this first novel was actually Paul Hermann, or 'Joe Stetcher.' *White Mule* can in many ways be seen as a tribute to his father-in-law and his ideals. Joe Stetcher, like Williams himself, is a working professional, caught between the left and right. His hatred for the profiteering capitalist bosses is matched only by his hatred of the similarly profiteering unions and the saboteurs who needlessly threaten the business and livelihoods that depend on it. Like Williams, Stetcher has to navigate his own middle path through this minefield. Stetcher is very much a representative of the old America. He carries an almost religious fervour for the value of hard work, skill and craftsmanship, and an equally potent dislike for the corrupting influence of money.¹¹⁴ In his 1937 review of *White Mule*, Philip Rahv describes Stetcher as a 'pure artisan, a man who has not yet been alienated from the product of his

¹¹⁴ Williams, *White Mule*, first published in 1937 (Bristol: MacGibbon and Kee, 1965), pp.20-2.

labor.’¹¹⁵ Rahv correctly sees ‘a correspondence’ between Stetcher and Williams, particularly in his ‘philosophy of workmanship,’ his dislike of political ‘automatism,’ and in his search for a satisfactory resolution between the competing claims of labor and capital.¹¹⁶

The first chapter, published in the third issue of *Pagany*, July 1930, begins, as do so many of his short stories of the period, with a birth. Apart from his connection with paediatrics there is another reason why it was natural for Williams to make a baby the hero of the novel. There is a theme running throughout much of Williams’ work that can be traced back directly to Emerson’s writings on the wisdom of children, of trusting to your ‘natural’ or childish self, and refusing to conform to the pressures of adult society.¹¹⁷ In one sense, the new consciousness of America had always been associated with the consciousness of children. This also is the theme of *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, written for his two sons, in which Williams deplores the American school system for turning children into automatons. The novel therefore begins by celebrating the wild freedom of its new born hero:

She entered, as Venus from the sea, dripping... If Venus did not cry aloud after release from the pressures of that sea-womb, feeling the new and lighter flood springing in her chest, flinging out her arms – this one did.’¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Philip Rahv, ‘Torrents of Spring,’ *Nation* (26 June 1937), p. 733; reprinted in *William Carlos Williams: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Charles Doyle (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p.144.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.145.

¹¹⁷ In ‘Self-Reliance’ Emerson writes that great men have always ‘confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age... Infancy conforms to nobody: all conform to it, so that one babe commonly makes four or five out of the adults who prattle and play to it.’ See *Essays and Lectures*, p.260.

¹¹⁸ *Pagany* 1:3 (July-September, 1930), p.4.

George Monteiro argues convincingly that this opening is an attack on the pristine and dignified Botticellian Venus, and at the same time a criticism of American Puritanism.¹¹⁹ Instead of emerging full grown with flowing golden hair, Williams' Venus is covered with a lard-like slime, urinating, and defecating. On top of this he refuses to desexualize the baby, 'Open your legs now till I rub some of this oil in there' the midwife says.

You'll open them glad enough one of these days – if you're not sorry for it... In the folds of the groin, the crotch where the genitals all budding and angry red seemed presages of some future growth – she rubbed the warm oil.¹²⁰

The reaction to this first chapter gives some measure of the artistic climate into which it was launched. *The New York World* described it as a 'most disgusting tale. Williams is a physician and in literature a man of taste, but you won't believe either when you read this story of a new born baby and its behavior.'¹²¹ A fellow doctor writing to Williams after reading the first chapter appears to treat it as a kind of manual, as 'excellent education for prospective young mothers,' designed to help them get over any 'illusions concerning the beauty of childbirth.'¹²² Erskine Caldwell, a *Blues* writer who had recently gained a reputation for good writing on the little magazines circuit wrote to Johns:

Williams gives me an inelegant puke with his White Mule but he's got something (God knows I don't know what it is) that nobody else ever had. He's as creative as a bull jumping a fence but I don't like the windward smell.¹²³

¹¹⁹ George Monteiro, 'The Existence of an American Venus: William Carlos Williams versus Henry Adams,' *Journal of Modern Literature*, 20:2 (Winter, 1996), pp. 248-253.

¹²⁰ Williams, 'White Mule,' *Pagany*, 1:3 p.5.

¹²¹ *The New York World*, 12th June, 1930.

¹²² Letter from Walter L. Liefield to WCW, 25th May, 1931. WCW forwarded the letter to RJ and it now resides in the *Pagany* archives at Delaware with the rest of the WCW/RJ correspondence.

¹²³ Erskine Caldwell to RJ, 12th July 1930. See *Return to Pagany*, p.150.

Despite the general trend towards realism, even writers on the left such as Caldwell found this confrontation with the realities of birth overwhelming. Williams had always felt that rather than attempting to get to grips with the realities of proletarian life, the left had indoctrinated itself too thoroughly in stereotypes and standard plot devices: the selfish capitalist boss, the hero's Damascene conversion to the left, the poor mother-figure who still finds the heart to be generous in the hero's moment of need. In one sense then, *White Mule* is a reply to the left, a raw expression of untamed reality.

In his classic study, *The radical novel in the United States, 1900-1954*, Walter B. Rideout outlines four main types or plots for the radical novel during the 1930s: conversion novels (in which the protagonist is converted to Marxism), strike novels, novels of middle-class decay, and 'bottom dog' novels (named after Dahlberg's eponymous work of fiction) about the down-and-out. *White Mule* is deeply concerned with middle class life, but not as a picture of decay, rather as a picture of middle class aspiration and striving. It might also be considered a strike novel, but unlike typical strike novels it doesn't venerate the strike breakers. Indeed, during the course of the novel Stetcher actually betrays the AFL and uses scabs to break a strike. He treats the bosses and the unions with identical disdain, seeing them both as money making enterprises, and refusing to be held ransom by either. In this respect, *White Mule* might also be considered a 'conversion novel,' but rather than a conversion to Marxism, it would be a conversion from Marxism into something else entirely – what Williams calls an 'open shop' policy.

Like the majority of his stories, Williams based the general outline of the novel, on a true story – that of his father-in-law, Pa Herman. Breslin notes that in *The Great American Novel* and *Voyage to Pagan* Williams had shunned ‘plots’ for their ability to ‘smooth over the jagged edges of raw experience.’¹²⁴ In *White Mule*, Williams moved closer to mainstream fiction than he had at any time in his career, but he attempted to do so in a way that would preserve those ‘jagged edges.’ The archives at Buffalo detail the extensive research Williams did into his father-in-law's history. His father-in-law Paul Herman had previously been the manager of a print-shop, whose primary business was a government contract for printing money orders. The print-shop was always awarded the contract, and there was a hint of corruption, stemming from the fact that the superintendant of the money order system had a son who worked for the same company. In 1903, Herman left the company in order to start his own print-shop, and he put in his own bid for the money orders, with the backing of New York financiers and the support of a New York union. The superintendant of the money order system awarded Herman’s former employer the contract as usual, and ignored Herman’s bid, despite being legally obligated to award it to the lowest bidder. Herman took the matter to court. His former employer struck back arguing that Herman himself had prepared their bid whilst in their employ and thus had ‘knowledge of its terms.’ The matter went all the way up to the White House, with Theodore Roosevelt even becoming embroiled in the affair. Eventually Herman won the legal action and the entire business became something of a scandal.¹²⁵ One newspaper article collected by Williams describes the case as symptomatic of government corruption and nepotism:

¹²⁴ Breslin, *An American Artist*, p.127.

¹²⁵ Buffalo, WCW Papers, B51.

The case of James T. Metcalf, the superintendent of the money order system, who was summarily dismissed yesterday by Postmaster-General Payne for endeavouring to divert a contract for manufacturing money order blanks from the lowest to a high bidder, with a resulting loss to the Government of \$45,000 a year, is considered to be but a flash in the pan.¹²⁶

One can see why Williams decided the story was worth re-telling during the 1930s, particularly in its exploration of corruption and nepotism. In essence, Herman's move in starting his own print-shop was to cut out the capitalist boss. Williams carries this anti-capitalist feeling into *White Mule*, suggesting that there is 'something fundamentally wrong with the capitalistic system itself' (*WM*, 245), a feeling that is embodied in the figure of Wynnewood and his son, Lester. Stetcher arranges the bid for the money contract in such a way as to give Wynnewood an honest 10% profit-margin. Wynnewood, however, rewrites the bid to inflate the figures, and then goes to 'the club' where he puts in a word (or a bribe) with the right people: 'any bid under Wynnewood Crossman co. goes in the waste basket' (*WM*, 54). Stetcher evidently despises the way that the real business, the actual profit, is kept within 'the club,' and passed down from father to son. There appears to be an unbridgeable gap between the Joe Stetchers, who have worked their way up with effort and talent, and the Wynnewoods who are born into the right social circles. Stetcher is therefore a kind of revolutionary, and after stealing Wynnewood's business he himself becomes a new kind of working-boss, sharing the profits more evenly with his employees. Stetcher describes this as an 'open shop' policy,¹²⁷ whereby the distribution of company profits would be publically

¹²⁶ 'New Yorker Indicted for Postal Frauds,' *The New York Times*, 6th October, 1903. See Buffalo, WCW Papers, B51.

¹²⁷ Stetcher describes his policy towards his new workers as being to pay them 'as much as the business can stand' and to 'stick to them as long as they stick to me,' but to quickly fire those who fail to deliver what he wants. (*WM*, 244).

available information, giving the workers complete transparency as to how company profits were being spent and to make their voice in the running of the company heard.

The novel explores typical 1930s themes: nepotism, corruption, big business, union sabotage, profiteering etc. But the true story of Pa Herman allows Williams to explore these themes in a way that was less politically one-sided, and less morally high-minded than his contemporaries. As such *White Mule* offers an interesting alternative to books such as Mary Heaton Vorse's *Strike!* (1930), Fielding Burke's *Call Home the Heart* (1932) or Robert Cantwell's *Land of Plenty* (1934).

Despite writing to Johns in June 1930 that he already had the next two chapters drafted,¹²⁸ Williams was utterly unable to progress any further with it. The fact was that he was suffering from depression and writer's block. He wrote to Zukofsky in May 1930 that he had never been 'so hellishly distraught' in his life and that even he did not fully understand why.¹²⁹ Mariani attributes this writer's block to an unfortunate incident which befell Williams' mother when she slipped on ice and cracked her hip, with the result that she would never walk again, as well as the death of Floss' father.¹³⁰ Certainly these were significant factors. Yet there are a number of other convincing factors too. There can be no doubt that Williams was feeling the strain of living a double life. His 1929 poem 'Birds and Flowers' which subsequently became part of his 1930 work 'Della Primavera Transportata Morale' expresses his feelings very nicely:

I plan one thing – that I could press

¹²⁸ WCW to RJ, 5th June, 1930.

¹²⁹ WCW to LZ, 9th May 1930, p.64.

¹³⁰ Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981), p.304.

buttons to do the curing of and caring for
 the sick that I do laboriously now by hand
 for cash, to have the time
 when I am fresh, in the morning, when
 my mind is clear and burning – to write (CPI, 324-5)

Indeed in 1930, Williams began cutting back on his practice ‘under the guise of becoming a “specialist.”’ (SL, 108). Nevertheless, whilst we commonly assume that Williams was already an established writer by this point in his career, it is clear to those who read his correspondence of this period, that Williams was starting to doubt if he would ever secure a place for himself in literary history. It is this general feeling of powerlessness, political and economic, that the poem captures, and his alienation from a society that did not care for poetry. As a result, Williams was feeling uncertain as to which direction his writing career was moving in, if indeed it was going anywhere at all. The result of this was that he was beginning to doubt the relevance of poetry as a form. In May 1930, he received word that Nancy Cunard’s The Hours Press had rejected his ‘Novelette’ as well as ‘Primavera.’¹³¹ The fact was that poetry (and here I count the ‘Novelette’ as being much closer to poetry than prose) was quietly and gradually slipping away from him.

It was *Pagany* itself and the influence of Richard Johns, however, that ultimately enabled Williams to break through this impasse and to give him the new lease of life that he needed to write the most successful prose work of his career. Even as early as January 1930 Williams had written to Johns that it was ‘a pleasure to find so many short

¹³¹ WCW to LZ, 27th May, 1930, p.65.

stories in *Pagany*' and that it was the prose works that 'held the interest and carry the other less attractive though perhaps more weighty writings.'¹³²The other 'more weighty writings,' refer of course to poetry, which now Williams finds less appealing. Perhaps because of the demands of his practice, Williams just did not have the time to dedicate to the obscure writings of modernist writers. Although *Pagany* did publish a lot of poetry in this vein, Williams is correct that it is the short stories that characterize the magazine, a fact that became evident when Johns found himself caught in a controversy over the closing down of *transition* in the summer of 1930.

Johns had unwittingly accepted a retrospective on the life of *transition* entitled 'Experiment and Expression' from one of its former editors, Pierre Loving, believing it to be an honest appraisal of that magazine's life span (though *transition* would soon re-emerge and continue publication until 1938). In reality, Loving had fallen out with Eugene Jolas over his policies,¹³³ and thus *Pagany* was unwittingly drawn into their literary feud. Loving's piece attacks *transition*'s association with surrealism and Jolas' reliance on 'two recurrent watchwords,' Mythos and Dream.¹³⁴ The champion of *transition* (whether he chose to be or not) was of course Joyce, and Jolas based his editorial program and his theories on the 'Revolution of the Word' on the language revolutions in *Finnegan's Wake* which he was serializing. Where Jolas, taking his cue from Joyce, always asserts the importance of the primitive, the unconscious and the mythical as the basis of the imagination, Loving, taking his cue from the more mainstream writings of *Pagany*, is attempting to reassert the importance of the

¹³² WCW to RJ, 8th January, 1929.

¹³³ *A Return to Pagany*, p.155.

¹³⁴ Pierre Loving, 'Experiment and Expression,' *Pagany* 1:4 (Oct-Dec 1930), pp.98-9.

conscious and the constructed. In many ways this battle between *Pagany* and *transition* was a battle between the Apollonian and Dionysian elements of American letters.

Jolas was outraged with Loving's article and attempted to organise a boycott of *Pagany*, getting his supporters, Kay Boyle amongst them, to write angry letters to Johns. The controversy also became bound up with the different editorial policies that *transition* and *Pagany* adopted. Jolas published obscure writings but continually justified them with manifestos and explanations, whereas Johns published mostly lucid short stories and made a virtue out of his hands-off editorial policy. Williams naturally supported Johns' editorial policy. But these questions touch upon the change that was occurring in Williams' own output at that time. In January 1929, with the automatic writings of the 'Novelette,' Williams' project, though perhaps not 'surrealist,' was certainly not at odds with the kind of project that *transition* was attempting. As a result of his depression, his failed attempts to write a novel, and most of all his involvement with *Pagany*, he had finally found the courage to begin his literary career anew in a different form, the short story. And it is Williams' short stories that shall be the subject of the next chapter.

In conclusion, we can see that Williams' rejection of those magazines on which he had relied for getting his work published in 1929 (chiefly *Blues* and *transition*), and his subsequent alignment with Richard Johns and *Pagany* entails a literal and figurative migration that operates along a series of different axes: from poetry to prose, Europe to America, private market to mass market, theory to practice, experiment to expression. Whilst these are certainly not intended to be absolute categories, they certainly point to

an overall trend that was occurring in Williams' writing – changes which had their origin both generally in the political and economic upheaval of the time and the breaking up of the modernist publishing scene, and specifically in terms of Williams' own personal and professional life, with the death of Floss' father, his own disillusionment with Pound, and his impatience with partisan politics and the left.

2. The Politics of Medicine in the 1930s

Starting with ‘Doc Rivers,’ Williams wrote over 30 short stories during the first half of the 1930s, publishing two collections, *The Knife of the Times* (1932) and *Life Along the Passaic River* (1934). Indeed, it was his new found infatuation with writing short stories that finally put an end to Williams’ writer’s block in October 1930 and gave him the confidence to go on writing *White Mule*. He wrote to Johns as soon as it happened:

What the underlying cause of my choice of form has been I do not know. I’m even curious about it to a degree that is funny. I’ve had a crazy bug on. It’s been short stories, quite short ones....

At first I was slaving away on that damned Old Doc Rivers thing which nearly killed me. I can’t work that way. It never got to be a unit, just wandered around trying to cover a big piece of ground. (Scribner’s turned it down thank God) The [sic] I did another short story very carefully. Then I did one, a funny one about a red headed woman, that tickled me pink. And then I got perfect diarrhoea. I wrote so fast I couldn’t [sic] see straight. Now the drunk is over and I’m back on White Mule.¹

A significant number of these stories focus on Williams’ own experiences as a medical practitioner. For the first time (other than in a few poems), Williams would put his medical practice at the centre of his writing career. Nor is this sudden interest in his medical practice a coincidence. There can be no doubt that as a medical practitioner, and one doing house calls at that, Williams got to see the widespread effects of the Depression more than any other artist of the times. Nor is it a coincidence that he published a significant grouping of these stories in Fred Miller’s magazine of

¹ WCW to RJ, 10th October, 1930. *Pagany* Archives, Regenstein Library Chicago, University of Delaware, Collection Number, Collection number 110, Box 10, Folders 248-252.

proletarian fiction, *Blast* (not to be confused with Wyndham Lewis' magazine of the same name), whose editorship Williams assumed in 1933.

These stories, 'Jean Beicke,' 'The Use of Force,' 'A Night in June,' 'The Girl with a Pimple Face'² give us an important insight into the relationship between literature and medicine in Williams' works, and how the two separate disciplines mutually influence each other. In many ways, Williams was amongst the first 'modernist' physicians, just as he was amongst the first modernist writers, and both of these enterprises shared certain defining features: an emphasis on objectivity, 'impersonality,' a shared desire to completely reinvent method and form, a movement towards professionalism, and a tendency towards rejecting the 'intuitive' and focusing on dislocations and interruptions in our inherited knowledge. The modernisation of medicine brought about a number of changes: from general practice to specialist practice, from local/bedside treatment to centralized hospital treatment, from care (the social aspect of medicine) to cure (the clinical aspect of medicine).³

² Many more of Williams' stories however fit into this category of 'case history,' most notably 'Mind and Body,' 'A Face of Stone,' 'Ancient Gentility,' 'The Insane,' and 'Comedy Entombed: 1930.'

³ Since its publication in 1982, Paul Starr's *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* has generally been considered the definitive guide to the emergence of modern medicine and clinical practice in Europe and the United States from 1760 to 1980. My discussion of Williams' attitudes towards medicine is heavily influenced by Starr's excavation of the commoditisation of healthcare, the evolution of the medical industry from a private, often family-owned enterprise into a centralised, multi-billion dollar industry. For a discussion of the emergence of the modern hospital, see Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), p.167. The University of Pennsylvania, where WCW studied, was actually the first clinical medical school to be opened in the colonies in 1765. Ibid, p.41.

2.1 Positivism and Pragmatism in Medicine

Williams often seems as resistant to ‘modernism’ in medicine as he was resistant to modernism in literature. The many stories Williams told of his medical training – wrestling with a fat, naked, Greek patient (A, 76), using ether to separate a fight between five pregnant women who had all gotten pregnant by the same man (A, 94-5), confiscating knives from under a patient’s pillow (A, 78), being offered a million dollars to marry an old widow who wanted a young doctor for a husband (A, 71-2) – all lead to the impression of his training being anything but clinical. Williams is often at pains to emphasise the humanity of being a doctor.

If the emergence of aseptic practices and laboratory methods was increasingly reducing this sort of ‘contact’ between doctor and patient, then it was something that Williams lamented. In *American Grain*, Williams associates clinical advances in medicine with Puritanism. He argues that Puritans are afraid of ‘the animate touch’ and consequently ‘shun’ the world and ‘rush off to the laboratory’ (ITAG, 177-8).⁴ Williams carries this conception of a ‘Puritan’ epistemology, which privileges rule-governed categorisation over the chaos of raw experience, into his medical practice as well. After completing his internship, Williams went to work at the Nursery and Child’s Hospital in one of the roughest parts of New York where he had two of his most formative experiences in medicine. The first occurred when a child accidentally died in a convalescent home where it was not supposed to be. The hospital feared that the use of the convalescent home would be denied to them if discovered, and Williams was

⁴ For a better example of this argument, see Williams, *Autobiography*, p.182.

required to carry the child's corpse in a suitcase on the metro as part of a cover up (A, 96). The second happened when, as Resident Surgeon, Williams refused to sign and authorise the papers detailing the number of patients treated during a particular period, on suspicion that the figures were being rigged in order to secure more funding from private sources. As a result of this second incident, a job offer at a New York specialists fell through and the other doctors at the Nursery and Child's Hospital turned on him. 'We doctors can't go against the business of an institution like this,' his colleague warned him. 'Our business is to cure patients, not to worry over where the money comes from' (A, 103). Williams, however, seemed to feel that being a doctor was not simply about 'curing' patients. Indeed, the very word 'cure' entailed for Williams a positivistic notion of the aims of science that he could never agree with. But what this episode also demonstrates is the growing realization that the entire health industry needed to be doing a great deal more in terms of 'worrying where the money comes from.'

During the Depression the medical and literary establishments were both voicing similar concerns. 'What should the artist be today?' Williams asks, 'What enters into it? The economic, the sociological: how is he affected?' (SE, 196). The realization that art could never be some separate, sacred sphere of truth but was implicated in every possible sense in the political, the economic and the social, was a realization that doctors were also coming to. To my mind, Williams' experiences in the Nursery and Child's Hospital, of corpses and corruption, constituted a critical moment in his career where he finally made the decision not to pursue a profitable career as a specialist in New York city, a path which most likely would have strangled his career as a writer

early on, but to return to Rutherford and become a general practitioner. In effect, the choice was between a profitable clinical career and a life that would allow direct ‘contact’ with people, and the opportunity to turn that contact into poetry.

Indeed, this choice between specialist practice and general practice entails a number of overlapping concerns. In order to understand the full implications of this I’d like briefly to consider the politics of the health industry in America leading up to the 1930s. From 1900 to 1920, health policy in America, which had always been a subordinate issue in the general question of welfare, had been gradually separating from other social policy. This was concordant with a movement from seeing healthcare as a social phenomenon, like unemployment, to seeing it as a branch of pure science.⁵ During the first half of the twentieth-century the terms and factions that define American health policy became increasingly entrenched, with an ongoing battle between the supporters of compulsory health insurance (backed by labour groups and philanthropic foundations),⁶ and the American Medical Association (AMA) and its allies in the pharmaceutical and insurance industries, who naturally perceived that a socialised medical system controlled by the Federal government would be a threat to their autonomy (i.e. subjecting the pure aims of science to political agendas) and, of course, their profit margins.⁷ In 1924, William Allen Pusey, the president of the AMA,

⁵Daniel Fox, *Health Policies, Health Politics: The British and American Experience 1911-1965* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1986), p.4.

⁶ See for instance the 1932 report of the Committee on the Costs of Medical Care funded by several philanthropic foundations. I.S. Falk, ‘Medical Care in the USA, 1932-1972: Problems, Proposals and Programs from the Committee on the Costs of Medical Care to the Committee for National Health Insurance,’ *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly. Health and Society*, 51:1 (Winter, 1937), pp.1-32.

⁷ My purpose is only to sketch the broadest outline of the arguments and prejudices that define American health policy. The demonization of the AMA began with books such as James Rorty’s 1939 polemic,

complained about a plot by left wing elitists to do away with good old fashioned country doctors and force the entire medical industry into a centralized and hierarchical system based around the hospital instead of the individual.⁸ The drive towards health care reform reached a new peak during the Depression when equivalent reforms were being enacted in every aspect of welfare. The AMA, however, staved off changes to the health care system by generating public suspicion that the reforms were ‘Soviet-inspired’ and detrimental to traditional American liberties.⁹ In the end, Roosevelt was forced to drop the health reform sections of the Social Security Act of 1935 for fear that the AMA might sink the entire bill.¹⁰ As Fox writes, ‘There was no New Deal for health.’¹¹

What was involved here was not simply two different political perspectives at work, but two competing images of the doctor – the rural G.P. and the city specialist. Each of these (in broad terms) represents a different philosophy of science. The centralised urban laboratory approaches healthcare from a positivist perspective; it assumes that disease can be isolated and identified according to a classificatory system, and then eradicated – all in an absolute, positivistic sense. The general practitioner, on the other hand, approaches healthcare from a pragmatist perspective; he traditionally visited people in their homes where he could observe the relevance of other factors,

American Medicine Mobilizes (New York: Norton, 1939) and was echoed by a series of presidents, including Truman and Kennedy who publicly refuted the AMA after the defeat of his Medical Care Bill in 1962. Sympathetic accounts are now more prevalent, such as Jaap Kooijman’s, *And the Pursuit of National Health: The Incremental Strategy Toward National Health Insurance in the United States of America* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 1999). See especially pp.7-11.

⁸ Daniel Fox, *Health Policies, Health Politics*, p.43. See also pp.10-20.

⁹ Paul Starr, *The Logic of Health Care Reform* (Knoxville, TN: Grand Rounds Press, 1992), p.13.

¹⁰ Kooijman, *And the Pursuit of National Health*, p.8.

¹¹ Fox, *Health Policies*, p.79. See also Lowell Eliezer Bellin, ‘The Intellectual Decline of the Health Care Left,’ in *Medical Care*, 9:19 (September, 1980), pp.960-8.

such as poor nutrition, whether the patient can afford adequate heating, whether the patient is living alone or receiving care from relatives and so on. The general practitioner would therefore consider disease not as an ontologically unique occurrence, but as part of a broader social nexus. What this means is that ideologically, the general practitioner is bound to a contextualist rather than a clinical understanding of diagnosis; care rather than cure.¹²

Such a dichotomy is after all very similar to the debate between the supporters of the New Critics, who sought to isolate poetry from its milieu and consider it in relation to a greater meta-order, and the supporters of Williams, who argued that poetry occurs spontaneously in every day experience and is the result of that particular moment of history crystallizing.

Williams' 1934 short story, 'Jean Beicke,' highlights the importance of care rather than cure in medicine and hints towards the political implications that this realization provokes. It discusses the surge in unwanted babies during the Depression. Jean Beicke is one such unwanted baby, suffering from malnutrition and all the diseases that come with poverty. The story describes how mothers suffering from Depression wouldn't even come to visit their children for fear that they would be forced to take them back home where they couldn't afford to feed them. Frequently the children were out of care for no more than a week before they were readmitted, their parents often being 'habitual

¹² I have simplified this argument into two opposing camps in order to make it easier to understand. In reality Williams was neither a 'general practitioner' nor a 'city specialist' and the distinction should be considered as an artificial tool for understanding a complex and shifting moment of medical history rather than as a historical fact. For a broader discussion of the historical facts underpinning these loose categories see Fox's, *Health Politics, Health Policies*.

drunkards' or guilty of 'deliberate neglect in most cases.' Doctors would often profit from these poverty stricken parents by arranging to take away unwanted babies for a fee (*FD*, 159-60).

Rozendal writes of Jean Beicke, 'The story invites us to look at Jean's hobbled, intransigent, fiercely individual body as a representation of the body politic, an incarnate form of the social condition.'¹³ This completely misses the point of all that Williams was attempting. We absolutely cannot look at Jean Beicke as an 'allegory' – to do so would be to abstract this child from the reality of its suffering. Williams' understanding of poetic method as a concrete moment of history crystallising refuses such abstractions, both in politics and in art. The gaze of the general practitioner demands that one consider each case, not in relation to an abstract meta-order, a classificatory table of diseases, but as a specific reality caused by specific social circumstances. Williams is ultimately left with a feeling of anger, and a sense of futility and despair towards the life that would have awaited Jean Beicke, even if she had survived: 'maybe it will get well and grow up into a cheap prostitute or something' (*FD*, 160). When his colleague remarks that perhaps a correct diagnosis could have saved the child, he remarks, 'For what?... Vote the straight Communist ticket.' This ambiguous ending has a few possible explanations. Firstly, it suggests that what killed this child wasn't really an infection in the mastoid glands but rather politics itself, and that without political reform, attempting to save the abandoned children of the Depression was almost futile. On the other hand, the ending also seems to indicate that the narrator's lethargy extends to the political arena as well. He seems to dismiss the

¹³ Michael Rozendal, 'Forms of Need: William Carlos Williams in the Radical Thirties,' *William Carlos Williams Review*, 27:2 (Fall 2007), p.147.

Communist Party at the same time as he invokes it. When it comes to proposing a solution, the ending is starkly empty. The story does not romanticise poverty; it is almost brutally realistic and cynical. This anger and cynicism is a feeling that is contained in almost every story in *The Knife of the Times*. As Williams reflected later:

I felt furious at the country for its lack of progressive ideas. I felt as if I were a radical without being a radical. The plight of the poor in a rich country, I wrote it down as I saw it. The times—that was the knife that was killing them. (*IWWP*, 49)

Certainly Fred Miller, an overt Marxist, felt the story was radical enough to be the lead story in his ‘magazine of proletarian fiction.’ Despite Miller’s overtly leftist position, he was more than happy to publish what one might call ‘the Williams criteria’ in a statement of editorial policy. In his editorial statement Williams demanded that ‘Blast be understood to be and remain a magazine devoted to writing (first and last) though in the service of the proletariat.’¹⁴ Williams argues that magazines such as *Red Front* are inherently flawed, since they attempt ‘to talk down to an audience,’ thus perpetuating a subject-object divide between the intellectuals (content owners) and the proletariat (content consumers). Williams argues that writers can only ‘face their responsibilities towards the world revolution’ through ‘good writing.’ ‘There is no communistic writing,’ Williams argues, ‘there is only writing’ which must remain in ‘contact’ with the ‘materials’ of the age. The radical artist, Williams argues, must be ‘a practical man’ who works only with materials which ‘he knows from the first.’ It is this ‘integrity to the materials’ that Williams reiterates over and over, and in a ‘communistic’ age he defines these materials as explicitly ‘social materials’ (*ARI*, 75-

¹⁴ Williams, ‘Art and Politics: The Editorship of Blast’ reprinted in *A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists* ed. Bram Dijkstra (New York: New Directions, 1978), p.75.

81). Williams' understanding of 'good writing' therefore exists outside of ideology, though not outside of communism itself, in as much as communism is one of the materials of the age. Certainly this appears to be a somewhat tautological position, and one which most contemporary critics would question, yet it served a purpose for Williams by positing an open ended 'revolution' which encompassed radicals of all kinds without the need to define the specific content of that revolution too closely. More importantly it enabled writers such as Williams, who had always felt excluded from the 'radical' creed, to equally take part in this grand organisation of the materials of the age.

Despite these continued calls for the primacy of good writing, the fact remains that Williams himself *was* affected by the politicized re-evaluation of modernism that magazines such as *Blast* indicated. The short stories that Williams published in *Blast* focus on concrete moments of proletarian experience, rather than the extended political editorialising (either through dialogue or through stream-of-consciousness) in which writers such as Steinbeck indulge. In stories such as 'An Old Time Raid' (about a drunken unemployed man named Dago), 'The Buffalos' (about a passionate supporter of women's suffrage), 'Life Along the Passaic River' (about the poverty and degradation of life amongst the families that work in the factories along the Passaic) and 'The Dawn of Another Day' (about two men, one rich and one poor, drinking bootleg liquor together) Williams does not attempt to uncover the interior landscape of his characters except where it can be expressed through the material facts of the scene. And yet despite his predilection for the concrete, the stories are charged with what Williams himself describes as 'class consciousness' (*FD*, 156), that is to say, his stories are not ideologically neutral, but present a political 'framing'.

It is interesting to examine this concept of ‘framing’ in relation to Barbara Foley’s four criteria for proletarian literature: firstly the Criterion of Authorship (is the writer proletarian), secondly Audience (is it read by proletarians), thirdly Perspective (is the story told from the perspective of a proletarian, is our hero proletarian) and fourthly Subject Matter (does it deal with proletarian ‘themes’). In Williams’ short stories we can see that he frequently rejects these four criteria in favour of a fifth criterion, what I call the Criterion of Framing. This idea of framing is not simply a question of focusing on proletarian subjects, or looking at things from a proletarian angle. The character of Dago, in ‘An Old Time Raid,’ for instance, is not portrayed as a victim of the Depression, rather he is figured as an eccentric, a person with his own problems, but also with his own charm. Williams does indeed write about proletarian subjects (such as Jean Beicke) but he refuses to make the ‘subject matter’ itself political, since to do so would be to focus on the ideological content of the writing and thus sacrifice his ‘integrity to the materials.’ Instead, Williams explores the different contexts which we can use to examine Jean Beicke – her medical context, her family context, and of course, her political context. In stories such as ‘Four Bottles of Beer,’ this self-consciousness with regard to how our vision of ‘proletarian’ life is framed takes the form of an interplay between two different perspectives, the perspective of the patient, their hopes, dreams and problems, and the ‘objective’ perspective of his own medical training. In this respect, the Criterion of Framing refers to the expectation that an ‘objective’ organisation of the materials of the age would in and of itself be political.

This idea of ‘framing,’ or contextualism, is an important concept for understanding his medical practice as well. If there is one thing that ‘Jean Beicke’ makes clear, it is that medicine during the Depression era was more a social service than a clinical science. Any truly accurate medicine would have to go about ‘curing’ the Depression as well as its diseases, and a true ‘science’ of medicine would have to be carried into welfare, housing, policing and every single aspect of our lives; it would have to look at the *totality*.

This is not to say that Williams did not appreciate the importance of clinical methodology.¹⁵ Williams himself practiced both as a general practitioner in Rutherford and also had his own specialist sideline in obstetrics for which he would frequently commute to New York hospitals. He was not a rural practitioner, nor was he an urban one. Whilst he recognised the importance of emerging clinical methods, he nevertheless regarded the positivism of the clinical method with a degree of contempt:

Any worth-his-salt physician knows that no one is ‘cured’... Surgery always seemed to me particularly unsatisfying. What is there to cut off or out that will ‘cure’ us?... The cured man, I want to say, is no different from any other. (A, 286-7)

The epistemology of the ‘cure’ carries with it that absolute opposition of normal/abnormal; it presumes that there is a normal functioning human body and that any deviation from this condition is pathological. ‘I defend the normality of every distortion to which the flesh is susceptible, every disease, every amputation’ Williams remarked in his 1930 short story, ‘Danse Pseudomacabre’ (FD, 208). His

¹⁵ His poem ‘Le Medicine Malgré Lui’ deals with this specific issue. Williams feels that he should be more clinical, he should spend more time reading journal articles and staying up to date with techniques, and yet even so, like Molière’s quack doctor he is only a ‘doctor in spite of himself’ (CPI, p.122).

Whitmanesque desire to embrace deformities and pathologies undoubtedly parallels his aesthetic penchant for the forgotten fragments of modernity which we find in poems such as ‘Between Walls’ (*CPI*, 453).

In a sense, what Williams offers in his short stories and in his discussions of medicine is a new ‘language of the clinic’ – one based on his own pragmatism and allowing for the non-conformity and individualism that he cherished. In his autobiography he describes the pleasure he gains from listening to his patients relating their problems to him:

The physician enjoys a wonderful opportunity actually to witness the words being born... We begin to see that the underlying meaning of all they want to tell us and have always failed to communicate is the poem... And it is the actual words, as we hear them spoken under all circumstances, which contain it. (*A*, 361-2)

And again, he describes the pleasure he gains from visiting ordinary people in their homes, seeing their private spaces and hearing their intimate problems:

my ‘medicine’ was what gained me entrance to these secret gardens of the self... I was permitted by my medical badge to follow the poor, defeated body into those gulfs and grottos. And the astonishing thing is that at such times and in such places – fouls as they may be with the stinking ischio-rectal abscesses of our comings and goings – just there, the thing, in all its greatest beauty may for a moment be freed to fly for a moment guiltily about the room. (*A*, 288-9)

For Williams, the ‘poem’ is to be found in the intimate life of the individual. He implies that doctors and poets share a common agenda; they are the ones who do not look away from life’s sordid details but instead confront the ‘ischio-rectal abscesses of our comings and goings’ head on. By probing and studying they are able to recognize the beauty and legitimacy of those parts of humanity that society chooses to gloss over.

There is therefore an underlying naturalist theme to Williams' understanding of the relationship between science and art, in other words, his belief that a doctor must literally get his hands dirty in the diseases and problems of ordinary people mirrors his belief that the poet must get his hands dirty with everyday words. Everything that Williams admires about medicine and indeed poetry stems from this 'contact' that he has with the particular patient before him, the 'actual words, as we hear them spoken under all circumstances.' For Williams, this was frequently the language of the Polish immigrants whom he treated, rather than the language of high culture and its associated institutions.

The other short stories of the period also confirm this obsession with the 'actual words.' 'Four Bottles of Beer,' published in the second issue of *Pagany*, April-June, 1930 is in many ways representative of the short stories that he was writing at the time. It describes a real life encounter with a poor family whilst doing his doctor's rounds (as did the majority of the stories that Williams wrote of this period). Nearly all the stories are based on autobiographical incidents, snippets of conversations, moments of real-life enshrined, so to speak, in a vignette. In addition, 'Four Bottles of Beer' attempts to capture in exact detail the language that is used *in practice* by American people, tied explicitly to that particular moment of utterance, complete with mistakes, mispronunciations, awkward silences, repetitions and so forth:

What did she say? Tadke, what's that?
That's his name. What you call Theodore. (38-9)

In 'Four Bottles of Beer' we observe that the conversation that he encountered was frequently not in English. The language of 'Four Bottles of Beer' is a melting pot of

different tongues. Its diversity reflects an America that could no longer be bound by the hegemony of the establishment discourse. There is an underlying political message in 'Four Bottles of Beer,' which is brought out in the title of the story. At the end of the story, the grandmother, who speaks no English at all, presses four bottles of beer as a gift on our protagonist. Alcohol is a symbol that Williams often used in his work, as the title 'White Mule' (referring to bootleg liquor) testifies. Moonshine was a sign of ordinary people and ordinary pleasures and at the same time a rather grander symbol of the American individual refusing to bow down before the state and its commandments.

One also notes that Williams wrote obsessively about immigrants in America during this period, perhaps as a result of his own family history. *White Mule* too is the story of an immigrant family, based on his father-in-law's struggle to raise a family in the new world. For Williams, the American story was somehow connected with this immigrant experience, the experience of starting anew in a strange country, of forging a new identity, and a new American language which reflects that diversity.

As was shown in the pages of *Pagany*, there was a tension between the professionalization of literature by the New Critics, and the deliberate de-professionalization of literature by Williams and his followers in the early 1930s. This tension also finds its parallel in medicine as well. Clinical practice and general practice were not simply opposed in their methods, they were also bound to two different conceptions of language. On the one hand, there was the emergence of the language of clinical practice, whose classificatory aims are tied to a positivistic version of language in which words and things equate to each other on a one-to-one basis. Each bacteria or

virus can, and must have its own substantive category. There is only one ‘Influenza A H1N1’ (swine flu), and if it were to mutate it would be given a different tag for identification. On the other hand, there was the language of general practice, which had its own time-honoured literary form – namely, the ‘case history’ (or ‘case report’). Indeed, a great many of Williams’ short stories (and even many of his poems) would be more accurately described as ‘case histories.’ The entire thrust of Williams’ engagement with medicine is away from seeing the patient as an incidental factor in the treatment of a disease and towards building a narrative for his patients with them at the centre. The narration of the patient’s story engages diagnosis in the process of historicising and contextualising, and similarly it ties medicine to a Pragmatist rather than a clinical understanding of diagnosis.¹⁶ The contact between doctor and patient can therefore be seen as a metaphor for the contact between subject and object, signifier and signified. Entailed within this ideal of ‘contact,’ is kind of reverence for the everyday – everyday language, and everyday people. Unlike the city specialists in their hospitals (the ivory tower of the medical profession), Williams was working directly with the poorest people, visiting them in their homes and frequently not being paid for the care he was providing.¹⁷ Thus Williams privileges ‘general practice’ over specialist practice from both a social and epistemological perspective.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the ‘case report’ as both a professional practice and a narrative technique see Jane Caldwell, *Literature and medicine in nineteenth-century Britain: From Mary Shelly to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.118-143.

¹⁷ See *IWWP*, p.50.

2.2. The Institution of Medicine

Underwriting this idea of medical ‘contact,’ however, is the broader political question of the competing agendas of regional (or small town) practitioners and urban practitioners, and their equivalent spaces, home and hospital. Indeed, Williams was of the last generation of Rutherford physicians to practice traditional home visits.¹⁸ Mark Storey notes, in the Foucauldian tradition, that medical discourse is nearly always generated at ‘institutional sites’ (the hospital, the laboratory, the library) and that these sites are nearly always urban. The rural practitioner therefore resists the authority of the clinical institution and its concomitant language by ‘decentring it.’¹⁹ Literary representations of medicine have nearly always privileged the aims and agendas of general practice, over the hospital-centred approach.²⁰ Literary critics discussing the influence of medicine on literature have typically taken a Foucauldian stance on these issues, opposing institutionalisation and the dominance of the hospital and celebrating ‘decentring’ and ‘fragmentation’ in both its aesthetic and political forms. In this respect, critics such as Crawford are eager to congratulate Williams on the anti-institutional aspects of his work.²¹

¹⁸ As a piece of anecdotal evidence, I learned from Williams’ granddaughter, Daphne Williams Fox, that by the time WCW’s son, William Eric Williams, inherited his father’s obstetrics practice, home visits were no longer practiced.

¹⁹ Mark Storey, ‘A Geography of Medical Knowledge: Country Doctors in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Sarah Orne Jewett,’ *Journal of American Studies*, 44:4 (2010), p.694.

²⁰ A classic example of this is *Arrowsmith*. The image of the ‘good doctor’ in literature, from Madame Bovary through to stock Hollywood characters has nearly always been the country or small town doctor.

²¹ T. Hugh Crawford, *Modernism, Medicine, & William Carlos Williams*, pp.18, 54, 61, 117.

I, on the other hand, wish to suggest that this issue may not be quite as black and white as critics such as Crawford suggest. The fear of institutionalisation was a powerful reactionary force in American health politics that ultimately hampered the course of health care reform. Rural practitioners were more likely to oppose healthcare reform, since free market policies offered rural doctors greater autonomy. To an extent Williams' individualist approach to medicine, though motivated by a laudable sense of social responsibility, was aligned with a more questionable politics.

Williams' famous character, Doc Rivers, half genius and half charlatan, demonstrates this rural resistance to medical authority and its implications. Rivers seems to point back to the commercial origins of America's medical establishment, the 'snake oil' salesmen and travelling pharmacists, selling whatever 'medicine' they have wherever they can. 'It is a little inherent in medicine itself,' the narrator of 'Doc Rivers' remarks, 'mystery, necromancy, cures – charms of all sorts, and he knew and practiced this black art' (*FD*, 101). Williams portrays Rivers as a loveable rogue, glossing over his highly dangerous alcohol and substance abuse whilst lauding his apparently uncanny knack for diagnosing patients at first glance. What fascinates Williams about Rivers, I believe, is his complete lack of clinical methodology and his tendency towards self-mythologizing: 'when the Doc came into the room he took one look at me. This boy's got typhoid fever, he said. Just like that – that's how he did it' (*FD*, 94). It is this ellipsis out of the scientific and into the uncanny on which the narrator continually dwells. The two aspects of Rivers' character, the trained physician and the divine healer correspond roughly to the science and art of medicine. The black magic of medicine does not lie in any body of technical knowledge, rather it lies in the rhetoric of medicine, the way it

projects its own image. Rivers himself therefore represents a condemnation of positivistic science, since he seems to demonstrate that the true power of medicine comes from the *performance* of knowledge and not its containment within an ordered system. Medicine, as Crawford describes it, is a ‘theatre of proof’²² just like poetry. The medicine that Rivers practices, like placebos, points to a world that cannot be measured by science. The death of Rivers signals the shift from the individualism of the doctor-cum-outlaw to the collectivism of the hospital and its attendant descent into dogma.

If ‘decentring’ and ‘fragmentation’ have become part of the rhetoric of pluralism in cultural criticism, then the story of Doc Rivers seems to indicate that such an idea can be dangerous when transferred into scientific discourse, and especially into medical practice. Since Rivers’ patients, like Williams himself, buy into the Rivers persona, only regulation and centralisation (and not the free market) can effectively prevent doctors from doing the things that Rivers did, like performing surgery whilst drunk.

For Williams, the ‘philosophy of general practice’ as I have termed the broad coalition between pragmatism in medicine and literature, is implicated in every sense in social responsibility, if not outright class conflict. ‘The Paid Nurse’ (1939)²³ is another story that deals with these themes. It tells of a factory worker who is involved in an industrial accident which leaves his skin blistered and swollen. Like many factories, the owners employ their own in-house nurse, who, instead of giving him the care he needs, orders him back out onto the factory floor to do heavy work. The employee goes to an outside doctor (Williams himself), who intercedes by writing a letter to the state senator.

²² T. Hugh Crawford, *Modernism, Medicine & William Carlos Williams*, p.46.

²³ Originally published in *The New Anvil*, 1:1 (March, 1939).

The doctor is successful in securing some sick leave for the employee and the right to return to work afterwards, but fails to get him any compensation for the scars he will sustain. Williams cites many examples in which medical practice is made to serve an agenda other than the patient's agenda.²⁴ But here it is implied that the institution of medicine is not separate from other power structures, rather they are different facets of a single entity. As the victim remarks, 'If I make any trouble they'll blackball me all over the country' (*FD*, 270). Thus the worker becomes trapped in a Foucauldian nightmare of exploitation and repression where all factories are transferable aspects of the one great 'Factory' from which he can never escape.

The case of John Coffey offers a similar example. Coffey was a Marxist thief who hoped to challenge property law in court, and in effect to put the legal system on trial. However, the courts would not accept the challenge and Coffey became the eponymous 'Early Martyr' of Williams' 1935 collection of poems:

Rather than permit him
to testify in court
Giving reasons
why he stole from
Exclusive stores
then sent post-cards
To the police
to come and arrest him
— if they could —
They railroaded him
to an asylum for
The criminally insane
without trial (*CPI*, 377)

²⁴ Elsewhere he discusses doctors who charge patients for operations such as the removal of the appendix when the operation is not required, simply to make money (*A*, 296).

Coffey was not, according to Williams, ‘insane,’ in any real sense. He knew exactly what he was doing and why. In the end, two doctors, described by Williams as ‘frankly puzzled,’²⁵ pronounced him insane thus allowing him to be transferred out of the justice system and into the medical system before being reintegrated with society. It is not only the betrayal of the medical profession that Williams cannot forgive, it is that Coffey’s own aims were ultimately scientific: ‘What Coffey was after was definition, a light in the dark, a diagnosis.’²⁶ In this respect he is a kind of ‘modernist’ criminal, and he was attempting, with the curiosity of a scientist, to explore and define the notion of property. Again Williams implies that the institution of medicine is not separate from other institutions but is ultimately an extension of hegemonic power structures. The final line of the poem, ‘They “cured” him all / right’ (*CPI*, 377) became the final line of Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*, another story in which the medical profession is co-opted into reinforcing the state’s agenda.

Williams did often align himself with socialist causes, giving free treatment to the poor, organizing medical supplies to fight fascism in Spain during the Spanish Civil War and so on, but his fear of institutionalism led him to reject Communist Party politics. Likewise he was equally sceptical of the AMA and never joined its ranks.²⁷ The fear of institutionalism was a powerful force in American health politics. Amongst the majority of doctors, this fear of ‘institutionalism’ was inseparable from the fear of socialism and ultimately it was doctors themselves who were instrumental in preventing

²⁵ See Bob Johnson, ‘A Whole Synthesis of His Time,’ p.187.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See Paul Mariani, *William Carlos Williams*, p.651, 403.

the course of health care reform.²⁸ Williams therefore represents an unusual case. Despite his fear of institutionalism, and his aesthetic and ideological support for traditional American values, he was in a minority of doctors in his overall support for socialism. Although he continued to believe firmly in American democracy, during the Depression he also came to support the American Social Credit Movement and their plan to ‘socialise’ (redistribute) purchasing power by radically redefining the basis of credit in society. In 1936, Williams wrote an article in support of the American Social Credit Movement entitled, ‘A Social Diagnosis for Surgery: A Poet-Physician on the Money-Cancer.’ In it he argues that the world is suffering from a ‘disease,’ namely a credit monopoly of corporations and financiers that is designed to uphold the status quo and prevent lasting political change. Despite this, he argues, the disease itself is ‘*not* inherent in Capitalism, any more than malignant disease is inherent in the normal, personally possessed, human body.’²⁹ Society’s problems, he argues, must be addressed in their localization, rather than by attempting any kind of totalitarian communist revolution. Simply put, the answer would be to redistribute America’s wealth more evenly within the existing political structures. Williams suggests that just as Madame Curie looked beyond the known table of elements to discover another element – radium – which was put to use in curing cancer, so society must look beyond its known elements and find a radical way to burn away the cancerous plutocracy sucking the life

²⁸ Paul Starr discusses the resistance to institutionalism in U.S. health policy at great length, for example, when the New York City Health Department began making a vaccine against diphtheria in the late 1890s (a thing no single doctor could have accomplished by himself), the outraged medical profession denounced it as ‘municipal socialism’ interfering with private business, and consequently put a stop to it. There is a long history to such encounters in America. See *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, p.186.

²⁹ Williams, ‘A Social Diagnosis for Surgery: A Poet-physician on the Money-Cancer,’ *New Democracy*, 6 (April, 1936), pp.35-36. See also Johnson, ‘A Whole Synthesis of His Time’ p.195.

out of society. Later this would become one of the dominant themes of his epic poem, *Paterson*: 'Release the gamma rays that cure the cancer / the cancer, usury. Let credit / out' (*P*, 182). As Williams aligns himself with the socialist cause, we can see a strange reversion to the clinical language which he spent a long time denouncing; he argues that the healthy state can be represented by the idea of the 'normal, personally possessed human body' and that capitalist exploitation is a 'cancer' which, through surgery, can be cut out and 'cured.' I have already demonstrated the lengths to which Williams went to denounce the idea of the 'cure' and its positivist associations. Yet as he aligns himself with socialist causes he slips into positivist discourse.

This is reflective of a more general alignment between socialism, positivism and healthcare during the 1930s. In 1939, for instance, Williams' friend Kenneth Fearing, the Marxist poet of the Depression era and editor of *Partisan Review*, published a novel called, *The Hospital*. The novel does not have a single protagonist, but is divided up into 47 mini chapters, each told from the first person perspective of someone related to the hospital. Through their fragmented accounts a sort of story-of-the-collective emerges. What unites and binds the story together is the hospital itself, which presides over the book as a positive symbol of unity. For Fearing the hospital is the symbol of the Marxist state, and he implies that a truly socialist society would be the society-as-hospital. For Fearing, the individual doctor or patient is merely the historically transient manifestation of a system that endures, a system that both cares for and controls its members.

One might think about this in terms of the Apollo/Dionysus distinction in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.³⁰ Apollo is the god of prophecy and also of physicians. The sense that the universe is composed of a spontaneous order and that there might be design or fate in its machinations is an idea that is strongly linked to our sense of health and of healing. The physician's task is therefore the restoration of the

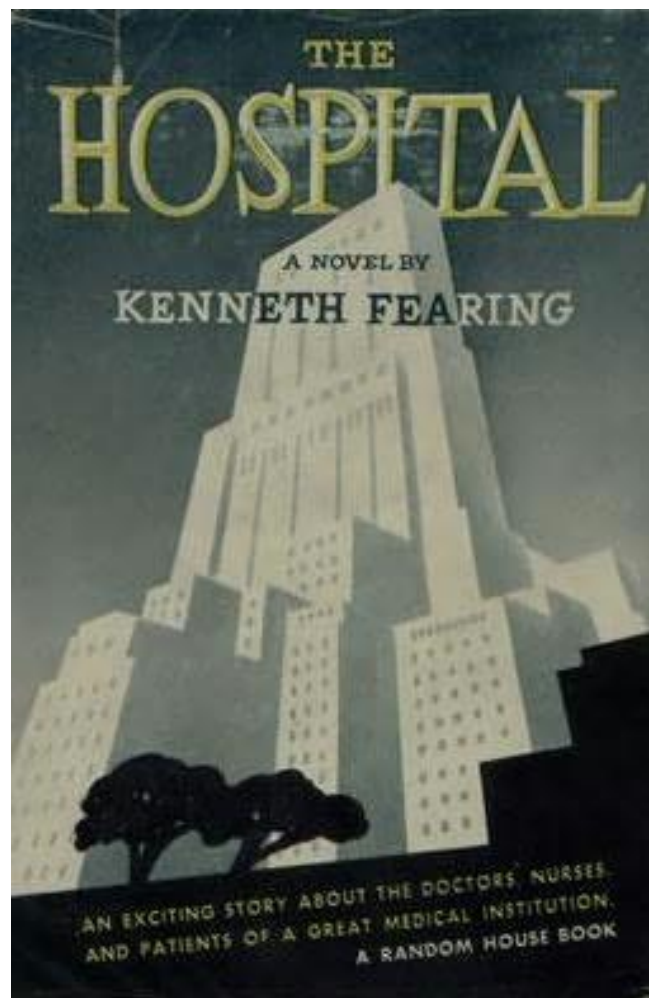


Figure 1. The front cover of Kenneth Fearing, *The Hospital* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1939).

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p.11.

body to that universal ‘Order’ which is also society’s order.³¹ Dionysus, on the other hand, represents the forces of chaos and is connected through the Orpheus myth with the dismemberment of the corpus.³² The front cover of Fearing’s novel (Figure 1) is something of a study in itself, and leaves us in no doubt as to the Apollonian nature of hospital in 1939.

The single building of the hospital with its rigidly straight lines contains and dominates the landscape. The hospital itself is transparently a hierarchy, culminating in a single tower projecting itself into the sky, and presiding over the rest of the building like the key which governs and gives order to the others. The hospital in Fearing’s picture, is clearly more than just a building, it is an entire scientific method, an epistemology, a culture, and a network of power relationships. It clearly states that knowledge should proceed from the top and then disseminate outwards from there. Such a view of knowledge was the opposite of everything that Williams stood for. In this regard, Williams, with his individualism and his anti-institutionalism, was not a typical socialist. Just as the American Social Credit Movement wanted to revolutionize finance capitalism within a centrist, democratic framework, so Williams wanted to socialise medicine in a manner that preserved America’s fundamental values.

Evidence of Williams’ specific stance on health policy is not abundant. However, during the wartime period Williams kept a folder of statements from influential medical practitioners and politicians on the need for medical reform, all of which are in support

³¹ Anne Hudson Jones, ‘Literature and Medicine’ in *The Body and the Text*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Wendell Aycock (Texas: Texas Tech Press, 1990), p.11.

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Clifton Fadiman (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1995), p.3.

of the Democratic drive towards compulsory health insurance.³³ From the scope and depth of this folder it is clear that Williams supported the creation of a nationalised health program in the late 1940s and strongly endorsed what the AMA would have termed ‘socialised medicine.’ Amongst this collection is a statement from Senator Claude Pepper in favour of the Wagner-Murray-Dingell Bill first introduced in 1943, arguing that the solution to American health policy is ‘the time-tested American way – insurance.’³⁴ These statements frequently appeal to American identity or the ‘American way’ in their justification for change. Like Williams, they marry a leftist agenda with American values. One can confidently speculate that Williams, as a lifelong Democrat, supported the Wagner bill and indeed, it is reasonable to assume that he held similar views at least as far back as the 1930s. And yet we must also recognise that this presents something of a conundrum. In his politics Williams supported the centralisation, institutionalisation and nationalisation of healthcare, whilst in his writing he devoted a considerable amount of time to writing stories that romanticized the idea of general practice and venerated the country doctor’s resistance to institutionalisation. Williams was therefore conflicted in his political support of a system to which he was ideologically sceptical.

Williams' attitudes towards medicine, were therefore far from clean cut, and they straddled the same uncomfortable middle-ground between radicalism and liberalism, between revolutionary new forms of thinking and the traditional values of the ‘American way.’ However, Williams’ struggle against the dominant positivist

³³ See Yale, WCW Papers, Box 41, Folders 1041-2.

³⁴ Claude Pepper, ‘Health for the People.’ Ibid.

philosophy of the early 1930s and his own private and often lonely battle against the literary and scientific establishment in many ways represents a forward thinking attitude that truly sets him apart as one of the key founding figures of the American counter-culture of the twentieth-century.

3. *Contact*: Williams and Nathanael West

For Williams scholars, the word ‘contact’ is perhaps the most important in the Williams canon. Originally the name of a little magazine edited by Williams and McAlmon from 1920-1923, ‘contact’ eventually became synonymous with Williams’ aesthetic and cultural theories. The magazine expanded to become Contact Editions in 1923, through which McAlmon published many of the avant-garde writers in Paris during the 1920s, including Hemingway’s first book, *Three Stories & Ten Poems* (1923), Stein’s *The Making of Americans* (1925) and *Spring and All*.¹

The term ‘contact’ has subsequently been used by Williams critics in a number of different capacities. Tapscott sees it as being related to Objectivism and the almost geometric placement of words in a visual and semantic structure.² Bremen sees it as directly relating to Williams’ empirical method and the primacy of ‘experience and perception’ in Williams’ thought.³ Duffey describes it as a ‘transformational encounter with a scene,’ though he is unclear on precisely what this means.⁴ Through the manifestos that Williams and McAlmon put forward in the original run of *Contact*, however, the single most important meaning of the word ‘contact’ derives

¹ For an account of the original *Contact* see *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines, Volume II* eds., Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.249-58. See also Jay Martin, *Nathanael West: Art of His Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), pp.123-4. I rely heavily on Martin’s thorough biography during this chapter.

² Tapscott, *William Carlos Williams and the Modernist Whitman*, p.146.

³ Bremen, *William Carlos Williams and the Diagnostics of Culture*, p.21.

⁴ Bernard Duffey, *A Poetry of Presence: The Writing of William Carlos Williams* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p.17.

from its connection to localism: ‘We, Contact, aim to emphasize the local phase to the game of writing,’ Williams wrote in 1922.⁵

‘Localism’ is another equally significant word for Williams, connected to the Pragmatist aesthetic derived from Dewey’s philosophy. The word was originally taken from Dewey’s essay, ‘Americanism and Localism’, in which he argued that ‘the locality is the only universal.’⁶ The first issue of *Contact* in 1920, therefore set out a simple aim, in the words of Williams, to explore ‘the essential contact between words and the locality that breeds them.’⁷ This comes back to a contextualist way of looking at language, not as a series of meanings, but as a series of relations. Dewey’s essay discusses the concept of ‘localism’ in opposition to the rise of what he calls ‘Americanization,’ viewing the latter as a kind of homogenization. Dewey argues that through emerging channels of mass communication, American immigrants were being indoctrinated into the mass values of the ‘American way.’ His concept of localism involves undermining the influence of the ‘Associated Press’ and other big media outlets that support this homogenization. Literature must ‘discover the localities of America as they are,’ Dewey suggests, rather than forcing a concept of what America’s national identity should be through the commoditization of ‘Americanism’ in Hollywood and the national papers. Dewey sees America not as a single nation, but rather as ‘a collection of houses, of streets, of neighbourhoods, villages, farms, towns,’ and he celebrates the role these sub-communities play in creating a diverse America.⁸

⁵ Williams, ‘Comment,’ *Contact* 2 (Jan, 1922), p.11.

⁶ John Dewey, ‘Americanism and Localism’ in *Dial* 68 (1920), pp.684-88 republished in Dewey, *The Middle Works, 1899-1924, Volume 12* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), p.15.

⁷ Williams, ‘Further Announcement,’ *Contact* 1:1 (Dec, 1920), p.10.

⁸ Dewey, ‘Americanism and Localism,’ in *The Middle Works, Volume 12*, pp.12, 16.

It is worth beginning by saying, therefore, that the concept of ‘localism’, which the contemporary critic might be tempted to associate with the term ‘parochialism,’ is in fact quite the opposite. Localism was a pluralistic concept. Likewise Dewey’s concerns are undoubtedly reflected in Williams’ deep aversion to the assimilation and Anglicization of immigrants, and his emphasis on a new ‘American language’ (in contrast to the ‘King’s English’). Eric White notes that for most American writers the concept of ‘localism’ didn’t suddenly spring up out of America, but was in fact a product of transatlantic exchanges. American writers (Williams first among them) felt a need to assert their cultural importance, and frequently expressed these nationalistic tendencies under the name of ‘localism.’⁹ Such is undoubtedly the case for Williams, who consciously cultivated the ‘localist’ label as a kind of anti-branding for America.

But for Williams, localism was about more than just ‘homemade modernism’ (Kenner uses the term), and certainly more than just a pluralistic agenda. Williams took the term localism and made it his own; so much so that he built it into what one might tentatively call an aesthetic method. It is this aesthetic method, with both its successes and its failures that I shall seek to examine in the pages of *Contact*. Whilst the convergence of ‘localism’ and ‘modernism’ has already been thoroughly explored by Eric White and Hugh Kenner, my chief concern is how those ideas became entangled with Depression literature during the 1930s. As such this chapter will focus exclusively on the three issues of *Contact* that were published in 1932, almost 10 years after the original run had finished. I also wish to look closely at Williams’ relationship with Nathanael West, who co-edited the second run of *Contact*, and how

⁹ See Eric White, *Transatlantic Avant-Gardes: Little Magazines and Localist Modernism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p.9.

West's own version of 'Americanism' may have complicated Williams' philosophy of contact.

3.1. The American Jungle

It is perhaps worth mentioning that the idea for doing another run of *Contact* did not come from Williams himself, but from David Moss and Martin Kamin, the original publishers, who now fancied themselves owning a left-wing publication. Previously they had been connected through Moss' wife, Frances Steloff, to the Gotham Book Mart, whose business model they tried to replicate.¹⁰ Moss and Kamin set up their own bookstore in 1930 and decided to use the *Contact* brand as a launch pad, taking over the name Contact Editions from McAlmon.

It was through Moss and Kamin that Williams and Nathanael West first met. In the fall of 1930, West mentioned to Kamin that he had finished a manuscript, at this stage still called *The Journal of Balso Snell*. Kamin sent the manuscript on to Williams (without West's knowledge) to ask for his opinion. As a result of Williams' enthusiastic reader's report, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* became the first, and as it turns out, only novel that Moss and Kamin would publish under the name of Contact Editions. Though it is little known, Williams was therefore West's first and most important critic and, as for so many other American writers, a springboard for his

¹⁰ In the 1930s The Gotham Book Mart came to occupy the same cultural territory as Mabel Dodge's literary/political salon had in the 1920s. Steloff's business model was to stockpile rare books and sell them very slowly over a long period of time, often via mail order, at a highly inflated price. See Kathleen Morgan, 'Frances Steloff and the Gotham Book Mart,' *Journal of Modern Literature*, 4:4, Special (Apr., 1975), pp. 737-748. Morgan does not seem to find any disparity between this business model and the radical Marxist pretensions of the book store and the writers who frequented it, including its 'Writer's Relief Fund' for poor artists.

career; thus began a close literary friendship that would last until West's tragic death in a motor accident in 1940.¹¹

It may seem surprising that Williams recommended *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. It is full of the sort of formal literary conceit that had become Williams' *bête noire*, 'classicism.' For similar reasons, *Balso Snell* is almost universally regarded as West's least successful work by critics everywhere, with one critic even describing it as 'schoolboyish'.¹² I would argue, however, that *Balso Snell* represents not only West's most innovative work but also one of the most original and challenging contributions to American literature at the time of its publication.

It is a novel that is more or less impossible to describe. Beginning with his entry through the rectum ('O Anus Mirabilis!')¹³ of the Trojan Horse, our poet-hero, Balso Snell, undergoes a kind of satirical Dantescan/Joycean journey through the canonical texts and aesthetic theories of western literature. The novel is episodic and unconnected, with so many narrators and layers of text upon text that like West's own insane characters, the reader begins to lose any sense of a clearly defined speaking voice, leading to a nightmare of infinite concentric contexts with no clearly defined centre. The novel is also deeply grotesque, violent and scatological in a way that breaks through any and all attempts to make the action of the novel meaningful.

¹¹ Jay Martin, *Nathanael West*, p.123-4.

¹² Stanley Edgar Hyman, 'Nathanael West,' University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962) reprinted in *Nathanael West*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p.18. Critics have generally neglected to point out that *Balso Snell* is profoundly funny and perhaps one of the few surrealist texts that also manages to be utterly gripping. The only exception to this trend is Jonathan Veitch's, *American Superrealism : Nathanael West and the Politics of Representation in the 1930s* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p.25. Veitch's book remains the most interesting and insightful study on West to date, and I shall be drawing on his discussion of West's involvement with *Contact* throughout this chapter.

¹³ *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1957) intro by Alan Ross, p.3.

Scatology is self-evidently a ‘material’ phenomenon, drawing our attention to the physical, the carnal and the concrete. West, however, uses scatology in a particular way to unleash materialism as a critique of literary culture. For example, one of the narrators talks of a theatre production in which the play suddenly stops half way through and the entire cast shout Chekhov’s words at the audience: ‘It would be more profitable for the farmer to raise rats from the granary than for the bourgeois to nourish the artist, who must always be preoccupied with undermining institutions.’ The audience are then covered in ‘tons of loose excrement’ dropped from the ceiling of the theatre. Afterwards the patrons can ‘gather in the customary charming groups and discuss the play.’¹⁴ The physical, the sensual and the grotesque occupy a similar (though perhaps less violent) function in Williams’ own work. The inclusion of grotesque elements and the resistance to the literary establishment is perhaps one of the main reasons why Williams failed to find favour with critics up until the 1960s. Joseph Bennett wrote in 1952:

The Romanticism which is the mainspring of Williams’ compulsions [towards self-pity and maudlin egotism] manifests itself in the most obvious ways – zest for the Gothically gruesome; fascination with the natural functions of defecation, and, to an incredible degree, of urination; the loud anti-intelligence harangues.¹⁵

Bennett is certainly right to associate what he calls Williams’ ‘puerile’ and ‘dreary’ ‘anti-intellectual attitude’ with this penchant for the grotesque and scatological, yet he bizarrely characterizes this as a Romantic trait.¹⁶ Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, Williams’ ‘scatology’ (assuming that we acknowledge this term as referring to his general acceptance of the grotesque, the low-down, the deformed, and the imperfect) is one of the defining features of his

¹⁴ NW, *Complete Works*, p.31.

¹⁵ Bennett, Joseph ‘The Lyre and the Sledgehammer,’ *The Hudson Review*, 5:2 (Summer, 1952), p.299.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.300.

brand of modernism, and comes from his overwhelming obsession with materiality and his attempt to break through the Puritan idealism that shelters us from the Other. Like Williams, West took an aggressive stance towards the institutions that purport to provide an interpretive framework for literature, and felt a personal need to rescue art from its idealized setting as the eternal bourgeois standard from which we can measure the decline of culture into the mass market.

Williams must surely have recognized that he had found a similar writer to himself in West. If nothing else, they were two out of a surprisingly small number of American writers at the beginning of the thirties, who had experimented with interpolating surrealism into the American realist style, and in many ways, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is a continuation of the surrealist project that Williams had set out to accomplish in his 1929 *Novelette*.

In this regard it will be worth noting the disparity between ‘surrealism’ as Williams and West employed it. Williams’ *Novelette*, hastily jotted down on prescription pads during the flu epidemic of 1929 and published by Zukofsky’s To Press in 1932, had been a more or less standard surrealist ‘automatic writing’ project (Williams uses the term himself).¹⁷ The reader has a strong sense of a single unified consciousness writing the *Novelette*. At its most basic level, surrealist automatic writing is intended to reveal the hidden elements of the writer’s subconscious; the desires, fears, pathologies etc. which constitute the individual. Surrealism, as it occurs in the writings of Breton and Soupault (whose *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* Williams was translating during the first years of the 1930s) often implies a latent mysticism. It assumes that the universal secrets of human nature can be examined by

¹⁷ ‘This was automatic writing. I sat and faced the paper and wrote’ (*IWWP*, 49). See also Dickran Tashjian, *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene, 1920-1940* (University of California Press, 1978), pp.131-2.

looking deep inside the individual unconscious. Williams was certainly an individualist, but he never had that much time for introspection, and consequently in the *Novelette* Williams attempts to combine his automatic writing with a typically pragmatic and down-to-earth American approach. Rather than exploring any unconscious inner truth, the *Novelette* should be seen as an attempt to explore the limits of solipsism and to measure and define the distance between himself and the world; or as he writes in the *Novelette*, 'all things enter into the singleness of the moment and the moment partakes of the diversity of all things' (I, 282). The result is a work that is based firmly around the concept of the autonomous individual, and which creates a strong tension between the accidental and arbitrary nature of automatic writing and the ordered Apollonian mind.¹⁸

The Dream Life of Balso Snell is vastly different. Where *A Novelette* starts with the American individual and attempts to delineate the relation of that individual to his context, West takes for his subject mass culture and the production of seemingly 'individual' consciousnesses by the media, advertising, movies and so forth. In West's work, surrealism is employed as a method of tapping into humanity's collective dreams to reveal the truth of what is found there, not the sacred truth of the individual, but the collective debris of American capitalism, a system that must continually attempt to sell ideas and identities.

The characters in *Balso Snell*, all of whom are 'artists,' are therefore more like con-artists. They do not have anything meaningful to say, they are simply in the business of selling whatever they can get away with. In this respect, West was exploring the artist's concern with consumer culture from much the same perspective as many Dada. One thinks here of Duchamp's 'readymades,' where he would walk

¹⁸ Apollonian in the sense defined by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* trans. Clifton Fadiman (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1995), p.3.

into a hardware store and buy the first thing that he saw as his 'art work' for that day. West's artists, bereft of talent, must sell their own posturing instead.¹⁹ The irony is that as religion, truth, beauty and all other means of measuring the worth of an art object are stripped away, the amount of money they can get for their posturing becomes the final measure of their worth as artists, and ultimately legitimates their 'art'.

For Williams, his surrealist phase was short-lived, beginning with his trip to Europe in 1928 and lasting only for a few years afterwards. 'Paris had influenced me,' Williams wrote looking back on his *Novelette*. 'An American reader would have been lost entirely' (*IWWP*, 48-9). Consequently, Williams gave up on surrealist prose (as discussed in the previous chapter) and would never truly find a way to incorporate surrealist elements into his writing. West, on the other hand, took the integration of surrealism into American realism as his project from the very beginning, and arguably this is the very foundation of his next novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

It was not until after Williams had read *Balso Snell*, in 1931, when Williams was approached by Moss and Kamin once more about instigating another run of *Contact*. As an explicitly American magazine, the original *Contact* had been something of a failed venture. McAlmon moved to Paris in 1921 and the magazine began to publish mostly avant-garde writing from the expatriate crowd in Europe. In the 1930s however, during the time of growing American nationalism, the moment for an all-American magazine was propitious, and Williams and West planned to

¹⁹ See, for instance, NW, *Complete Works*, pp.31-2.

exclude anything that had the smack of the old ‘Frenchified symbolist stuff,’ as West called it.²⁰

Perhaps because of his success with *Pagany*, Williams was surprisingly open to the idea of editing a new magazine, if one takes into account his previous reservations about the future of Little Magazines. McAlmon, now bitter towards the entire modernist publishing scene,²¹ was no longer interested in *Contact*, and Williams was therefore forced to look for a new associate editor. Under Moss and Kamin's advice Williams chose West. Though *Balso Snell*, could hardly be described as ‘in the American grain’ both Williams and West were agreed that *Contact* had to ‘cut a trail through the American jungle without the use of a European compass,’ as it says on the masthead.²² In October 1931, West wrote to Williams that the ‘boundaries of our task’ had to be the limits of the American nation itself and nothing less.²³ Williams and West were therefore well suited for launching a publication together. Both had been strongly influenced by European art, but neither would be content with implementing a revolution in writing on anything other than American terms. What those American terms were would be much harder to define.

As the two began drawing up plans for the new magazine, the issue of politics was kept at bay. Unlike Williams, West was a committed Marxist, and his oeuvre is constantly informed by certain Marxist preoccupations.²⁴ Jonathan Veitch argues that West did not explicitly use fiction as a tool to spread those beliefs, or rather, that his

²⁰ NW to WCW, Jay Martin Collection, Huntington Library Box 1, Folder 27.

²¹ The entry for Robert McAlmon in the *American National Biography*, states that ‘he published nothing after 1929 except for his memoirs, a story, several poems against fascism, and a short appreciation of Williams.’ This is not entirely true, he contributed a number of stories to *Pagany* and *Contact* and Williams tried to push as much work his way as he could. Unfortunately when he failed to find a publisher for his novel, McAlmon gave up on becoming writer. His influence on Williams’ editorial choices was still considerable though, even during the 1930s, as the correspondence at Yale testifies.

²² *Contact: An American Quarterly Review*, 1:1 (Feb 1932), p.1.

²³ Martin, *Nathanael West*, p.144.

²⁴ See Martin, *Nathanael West*, p.349 for an account of his involvement in the newly formed Screenwriter’s Guild and other Marxist organisations.

fiction is ‘deeply politicized without being overtly political’²⁵ – a comment that could well describe Williams. Certainly West does not narrow the scope of his project down to the propagandistic aims of writers such as H.H. Lewis, but West’s fiction does, nevertheless, unconsciously encourage the reader to approach literature from a Marxist position. Williams was certainly a Marxist sympathizer, but as with *Pagany*, he felt that there was no reason to subject a magazine to a particular political agenda, and he consequently drafted the opening manifesto along similar lines to the one he had drafted a year earlier for *Pagany*:

You might say: People are in distress the world over, writing will not relieve them (or make them worse off). Why not take the money there is for a magazine like this and give it away – as food – to the bums, for instance, living in packing cases over near the east river these winter nights?

But what makes you think money has any value? there’s food enough rotting now in the world, even within sight of the place where these men are hanging out, to feed them every day in the year. Money has nothing to do with it. Bad writing has though: it’s the same sort of stupidity.

This points to a fundamental connection, as Williams sees it, between art and politics, a political system being also a phenomenological and language system; ‘bad writing’ leads to ‘bad politics’. His assertion that money has no inherent value also foreshadows his later preoccupation with social credit as an alternative to market economy. Interestingly, there is also some considerable economic basis to what he is saying here. Overproduction was one of the main problems causing economic depression, particularly in agriculture, with huge food surpluses driving down the price that farmers were getting for their crops. As a result there were enormous grain reserves ‘rotting’ across the country whilst a huge number of now unemployed

²⁵ Veitch, *American Superrealism*, p.22. West often displays an alarmingly sadistic quality towards the masses, frequently asking the reader to laugh at and degrade our conception of mass man. His parody of the rags-to-riches fables of Horatio Alger in *A Cool Million* is almost entirely based on this premise. See, for instance, NW, *Complete Works*, pp.183-4. Whether this could be considered a satirical tool in aid of Marxism, however, is less certain. It is more probable that West was as conflicted in his attitudes towards mass culture as Williams was.

farmhands were starving in breadlines.²⁶ What kind of system or ideology could justify a situation that is so maddeningly counter-intuitive? Williams' answer is 'bad writing.' The critic familiar with Williams' thinking will recognize this kind of argument. Williams sees politics as ultimately serving the system itself rather than the people that the system is intended to represent. For Williams, the withholding of grain reserves from people who are starving requires a special kind of abstraction that converts people into mere statistics, and economics thus serves to abstract real lives and turn things into ideas. It is a question of separating form and content. To politicians, the 'people' have become simply an empty signifier, devoid of 'contact' with the reality.

This is precisely the criticism of poetry that Williams had been putting forward since his assertion in *Spring and all* that poetry must empty words of all their hackneyed associations and fill them up with new meanings (*I*, 100-2). In the unpublished draft of his first *Contact* manifesto, Williams writes: 'It is not the "sincere" meaning of the words that so much counts, nor their quality of being "good" but it is the constellations that between them reveal a new relationship of meanings and qualities.' Williams imagines the task of the American writer as being to create these new 'constellations' of meaning.²⁷

Williams' 'The Cod-Head' from the second issue of *Contact* could be taken as an example of this linguistic renewal. The poem is a narrowing down of the gaze

²⁶ See Lee J. Alston, 'Farm Foreclosures in the United States During the Interwar Period,' *The Journal of Economic History*, 43:4 (Dec, 1983), p.891, in which the Secretary of Agriculture, Henry A. Wallace, is quoted as saying, 'our surpluses of food crops seem to have had as disastrous effect upon national well-being as crop shortages used to have on the isolated communities of a simpler age.' The desire to explain things in terms of a 'simpler age' was one of the fundamentals of New Deal rhetoric. For further discussion see also, Ronald Paul Hill et al., 'The Birth of Modern Entitlement Programs: Reports from the Field and Implications for Welfare Policy,' *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 15:2 (Fall, 1996), p.264.

²⁷ Williams, 'Address to Writing,' Buffalo, WCW Papers, C2.

from the sky to the beach, to the boat, the oars and finally to a single severed cod-head, on whose unique materiality the poem resides:

now a lulling lift
and fall—
red stars—a severed cod-

head between two
green stones—lifting
falling.²⁸

Fourteen years later, Burke would argue that the title is a pun on ‘the God-head’ – even if Williams hadn’t been conscious of it, imagining that the poem is a comment on spiritual ennui (*HP*, 92-3). Whilst Burke’s analysis may (or may not) be right, it runs contrary to the philosophy of *Contact*, the entire purpose of which is to emphasize the uniqueness and authenticity of this severed cod-head, its refusal to be poeticized, in opposition to the multiple and clichéd ‘red stars.’²⁹

What Williams was attempting both politically and artistically was a kind of ‘clarity’ which would once again make the relationship between signified and signifier whole. ‘A magazine without opinions or criteria other than words moulded by the impact of experience,’ Williams writes in his first *Contact* manifesto, ‘would be timely to a period such as this.’³⁰ If ‘bad writing’ leads to the sort of abstract, theoretical thinking that allows food reserves to rot whilst people starve, Williams argues, then good writing is that which can restore a direct, unmediated understanding of the social realities that people are actually facing; good writing must have contact with the authentic. *Contact*, like much 1930s art, purported to define itself on the same terms that the people understood themselves. The non-ideological approach

²⁸ Williams, ‘The Cod-Head,’ *Contact*, 1:2 (May 1932), p.37-8.

²⁹ The poem had in fact been written on a trip to Newfoundland in the summer of 1931 and refers to the very real cod-heads he found in fishing villages there. Mariani, *William Carlos Williams*, p.318.

³⁰ Williams, ‘Comment,’ *Contact*, 1:1 (Feb, 1932), p.9.

implied by the concept of contact consequently occupied a strange middle ground in which it attempted to tackle political issues without discussing them in political terms.

Along similar lines, Veitch argues that West's work reflects a 'crisis of representation' in the 1930s. Responsibility for the financial crisis had been passed from institution to institution and any understanding of the Depression was mediated by the propaganda of special interest groups. As a result, with the collapse of the American economy, 'many Americans discovered to their dismay that they did not understand the nature of the debacle that was so deeply affecting their lives.' This leads to what Veitch calls a 'vertiginous loss of the capacity to represent social reality' and prompted 'a wide variety of attempts to reconstruct the "hidden logic" of that elusive reality.'³¹ Simply put, the Depression was seen to be a function of the 'system,' which, like some intangible monster, had already outgrown democracy's ability to control it, leading to a situation where America was being eaten alive by an invisible force, with no concrete person or thing to blame. Such 'hidden logic' inevitably implied the hidden self-interest of capitalist autocrats and their 'invisible empires,' which had sewed up America's financial, legislative and judicial bodies into a *fait accompli*. The task of uncovering these 'invisible empires' was taken up (in the same year that *Contact* was published) by Roosevelt, and his 'crusade to

³¹ Jonathan Veitch, *American Superrealism*, p. 4, p.xviii. Veitch's essential argument is that West was aware that all language is mediated by certain ideologies and thus he attempted to uncover the nature, or rather form of this mediation, whereas Williams believed in a pure non-ideological language. In fact no other writer could have been more aware of the ideological mediation of language. The fundamental difference, as I shall uncover here, is that Williams attempted to find solutions, not all of them convincing, to the problems posed by the 1930s, whereas West simply did not.

restore America to its own people,'³² and Roosevelt's political battle is directly mirrored in Williams' own crusade to restore America's language to its own people.

Amongst writers, politicians and Americans everywhere, this 'crusade to restore America' consequently prompted a return to 'first principles' which often took the form of a sentimental pastoralism. Faced with the inexplicable absurdities of the Depression – people starting fires in order to get work putting them out, crops left uncut because the value of the crops was less than the wages of the workers and so on – people turned back to the simplicity of a previous era in protest against an economic, financial and political juggernaut that they could neither understand nor control. This initiated a reliance on seemingly 'native wisdom' and the common sense logic of tradition that may have been as reactionary as it was liberating for the masses. Rita Barnard, for instance, notes that writers on the left, in their rejection of consumerism, frequently embraced traditional values that came out of an earlier historical period. James Agee and Walker Evans' documentary novel, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), which practically defines our conception of Southern agrarian life in the 1930s, was fiercely admired by Williams. He describes it as 'one of the most neglected books published in a generation' and commends the 'spiritual courage' of those desperately clinging to survival in rural poverty. He also commends Agee and Walker for their ability to 'transfigure' these starving and desperate people into aesthetic objects that have 'the entrancing beauty of wild flowers.'³³ Regardless of whether Williams' reading of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is accurate, it is significant that his understanding of it responds to precisely the sort of sentimental pastoralism that solemnizes and aestheticizes poverty, even as it challenges it.

³² FDR, 'Nomination Address,' Chicago, Illinois, 2nd July, 1932, in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Volume I: The Genesis of the New Deal*, ed. Samuel I. Rosenman (New York: Random House, 1938), p.659.

³³ Williams, 'The Most overlooked book of the past quarter century,' Yale, WCW Papers, Box 43, Folder 1088.

Indeed the relationship between the 1930s and 'pastoral' literature is an area of considerable debate. Barnard, following on from William Empson, describes proletarian literature from writers such as Fielding, Burke and Grace Lumpkin as a 'Covert Pastoral.'³⁴ Denning opts for the more complex term 'Ghetto Pastoral,' which indicates the interpolation of 'pastoral' values into a post-industrial, urban literature. The idea of residual pastoral values coming out in the literature of the city, is one that has a bearing on both West and Williams. They both, for instance, shared a fascination with the figure of the Native Indian, and alternative 'collective' models of society. Williams' writings on the significance of the Native American in *American Grain* may even have played a part in encouraging West to plan a screenplay about the Seminole leader, Osceola, in 1939.³⁵

Arguably Williams' entire oeuvre, beginning with his Keatsian imitations, represents an attempt to rethink and modernise concepts such as 'native' and 'pastoral,' in such a way as to rid them of their idealized and Romantic associations. However, his writing of the 1930s was also undoubtedly influenced by Precisionism and the documentary aesthetic, and it consequently takes on a distinctly industrial aspect. Poems such as 'Between Walls,' show a preoccupation with oppressive and sterile urban settings. In other ways, Williams was attempting to merge these concerns – his pastoralism, his nativism, his industrialism, and his documentary aesthetic – into a single ongoing quest for the immediacy of direct experience. It is therefore not difficult to find a continuity between Williams' early 'pastoralism' and his emphasis on urban experience during the 1930s through the concept of 'contact.'

'Contact' was therefore implicated in the pastoral, but it was never the equivalent of Meridel Le Sueur's attempts to create a 'regional' tradition of mid-

³⁴ Barnard, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance*, p.32.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.157.

western radicalism.³⁶ Indeed, whilst the word ‘localism’ might suggest regionalism, it is important to see these as two separate concepts. Williams’ editorial comment for the second issue attempts to justify his position:

at this point, some blank idiot cries out, ‘Regionalism’! Good God, is there no intelligence left on earth. Shall we never differentiate the regional in letters from the objective immediacy of our hand to mouth, eye to brain existence?³⁷

Riddel argues that Williams’ emphasis on the ‘local’ does not merely refer to the uniqueness of art from the perception of place or ‘locus,’ but rather implies a more general principle of ‘presence.’³⁸ It is this principle of presence that Williams obliquely makes reference to in his concept of ‘objective immediacy.’ Tied up with this argument is the Deweyan principle already discussed, that the ‘locality is the only universal,’ or in other words, that the particular, through its very singleness, connects with the whole, and that likewise the whole can only be described in terms of particulars. This approach was echoed in the works of 1930s photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Margaret Bourke White and the photographers of the Farm Security Administration, whose close-ups of working men and women focused on the physical, bodily existence of America’s people, their material lives, shunning any attempt to abstract them into a political entity.

³⁶ Julia Mickenberg, ‘Writing the Midwest: Meridel Le Sueur and the Making of a Radical Regional Tradition’ in *Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives on Women’s Regional Writing*, eds. Sherrie A. Inness, Diana Royer (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1997), p.143-4.

³⁷ Williams, ‘Comment,’ *Contact*, 1:2 (May 1932), p.109.

³⁸ Riddel, *Inverted Bell*, p.21-4. Riddel argues, ‘The “refus du commencement,” as Foucault said of Nietzsche, posits a world of interpretation grounded upon interpretation, of text preceded by pretext... Rejecting this search for some lost center, authority, presence, or plenitude, Williams turns to the local as a centerless center, and rediscovers the “joy” of Nietzschean invention.’ *Ibid.* p.12.

It was in very much this spirit that Williams published ‘The Colored Girls of Passenack’ in the first issue of the revived *Contact*.³⁹ The piece is a character sketch of various colored girls he has known, and he makes it very clear that these are the ‘authentic’ American people he has been looking for. In describing his first encounter with the black maid of his childhood he describes her sheer vitality and ‘animal attractiveness,’ focusing on her physical presence. Written in a frank and direct mode, he seems to make a point of not choosing his words carefully. ‘The American white girl today is shop worn compared to the negress,’ Williams writes, ‘All the simplicity of mind which “virtue” should imply lies with the negress.’⁴⁰ There are some serious problems with this mode of thinking, not least that ‘less shop-worn,’ viewed from a certain perspective, is just an inventive euphemism for poverty. The ‘negress,’ Williams argues, has an integrity that has yet to be compromised by consumer culture – a culture which erodes the sense of individuality on which Williams’ sense of the ‘authentic’ relies.

The question of authenticity and integrity comes out in ‘The Coloured Girls of Passenack’ in the form of a middle class voyeurism. ‘Naturally she [the black maid] was to us boys like the rest of femininity, a source of sexual curiosity.’ Persuaded by the other boys, Williams goes to peep on her whilst she is in the bathroom. ‘She knew we were there, she even spoke to us whilst we were up to our smart trick... I suppose Georgie was the first woman I ever saw naked... She was standing... facing me fully naked and washing herself down with a sponge.’⁴¹ The aesthetic logic continues the themes that Williams began in *American Grain*. Unlike the puritanical white American women, Georgie’s native and down-to-earth courage allows her to

³⁹ According to Mariani, this was written for Nancy Cunard who was putting together an anthology of writings that would eventually be published as *The Negro Anthology* in 1934. Mariani, *William Carlos Williams*, p.314.

⁴⁰ Williams, ‘The Colored Girls of Passenack, Old and New,’ *Contact* 1:1 (February 1932), p.57, p.60.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p.57-8.

face sexuality head on without shame. This is a theme that runs throughout Williams work beginning with his 1924 Rome journal where he notes that unlike bourgeois imitations, the classical statues of Rome show what is really there, ‘the fucking, feeding body with a planted cock shooting it between the legs.’⁴²

Certainly this kind of observation leaves Williams himself and his readers in the position of a white bourgeois voyeur looking through the keyhole at the lives of ‘real’ people. Williams was very aware of that dynamic, however, and even early in his career drew attention to it in poems such as ‘The Housewife.’ More generally this was a problem with the idea of contact and its associations with proletarian realism; it raises the issue of how the middle class writer can successfully portray ‘authenticity’ in proletarian subject matter for his middle class reader. The writer can partake of that ‘authenticity’ only vicariously, only by continually acknowledging that such contact is artificial, and for his bourgeois readers the ironies become multiple.

3.2. *Miss Lonelyhearts*

It is this relationship, between the writer and his proletarian subjects, which is the topic of West’s second novel *Miss Lonelyhearts*. The novel was initially serialized in *Contact* before eventually being published by Liveright’s in January 1933. The original idea for *Miss Lonelyhearts* came by accident in March 1929 when West went with S.J. Perelman to visit a woman who was writing the ‘advice column’ for the *Brooklyn Eagle*. The woman had collected the various letters from the economically, sexually and spiritually defeated readers of her column, for whom she

⁴² William Carlos Williams, ‘Rome Journal’ reprinted in *William Carlos Williams Review*, 26:2 (Fall 2006), p.28.

was charged with writing replies. She had collected them on Perelman's behalf, and he was planning to turn them into comic material. When it became clear that the letters were more heart-breaking than comic, West asked if he could use them instead. From that meeting West took not only the idea of making his hero, Miss Lonelyhearts, the writer of an advice column, but he also used specific letters to form the basis of the ones in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, even keeping the pseudonyms ('Broad Shoulders', 'Disillusioned') which the readers used to sign their names.⁴³

Like much of Williams' own prose, *Miss Lonelyhearts* therefore appears at first glance to find its inspiration in contact with reality. Later, in a review of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Williams would write, 'The letters-to-the-papers which West uses freely and at length must be authentic. I can't believe anything else. The unsuspected world they reveal is beyond ordinary thought.'⁴⁴ The idea that the authentic thoughts and feelings of real people reveal an 'unsuspected world' that cannot be faked is typical of his own preoccupations, but Williams appears to have misunderstood West's real intention.

Firstly, it is worth noting that West substantially changed the letters he included to make them more grotesquely humorous. The original letter from 'Broad-Shoulders' written to the *Brooklyn Eagle*, for instance, is simply the story of a woman who knew she had 'made a mistake' in marrying her husband, despite staying with him for the sake of the children, and is thinking of divorcing him now they are grown up. In the first issue of *Contact*, West turns this into the story of woman who gets pregnant by the rich son of an oligarch. When she tells him the baby is his, he pretends not to know her and in her desperation she is forced to marry a cripple who

⁴³ See Martin, *Nathanael West*, p.110 for the full story.

⁴⁴ Williams, 'Sordid? Good God!' in *Contempo*, 3:11 (July, 1933), reprinted in *Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jay Martin (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc, 1971), p.71.

happily pretends that the baby is his despite not being allowed into the marriage bed. These changes mark out West's own obsession with physical, sexual and economic exploitation as well as his attempt to combine the utterly tragic with the comic. West's sympathetic biographer, Jay Martin, writes that West was 'deeply affected by the letters,' and wrote only 'from compassion.'⁴⁵ Perhaps Martin is right on one level; there is a strong element of compassion, mirrored in *Miss Lonelyhearts*' 'Christ complex,'⁴⁶ and in many ways this compassion is not at odds with the dark and cynical comedy that runs underneath. But West also changed the letters in more sinister ways, inserting spelling mistakes and other misspoken or misunderstood words, to further degrade the conception of mass man that the letters invoke.

Whatever West's reasons, Williams is incorrect to assume that the letters have an 'authenticity' which cannot be faked. But more importantly, for West, 'authenticity' is an already codified concept. The purpose of the letters is not to educate his readership into a social awareness, but to show how 'social awareness' is syndicated and distributed in such platforms as the newspaper advice column. The 'people' in *Miss Lonelyhearts* are not the 'authentic' American people of Williams' poetry and fiction (such as the woman in 'To a Poor Old Woman'), they are the disembodied voices of a fragmentary modernity.

Josephine Herbst notes in her 1933 review that, by refusing to give the characters names, West raises the action of the story to an allegorical level where the characters become 'representatives of a great Distress.'⁴⁷ The concept of a 'great Distress' (spiritual, moral or aesthetic) to match the great Depression (economic, political, social) is one that *Miss Lonelyhearts* bears out. However, West would

⁴⁵ Martin, *Nathanael West*, p.139.

⁴⁶ NW, *Complete Works*, p.81.

⁴⁷ Josephine Herbst, 'Miss Lonelyhearts: An Allegory,' originally published in the symposium on *Miss Lonelyhearts* in *Contempo* 3:11 (July 25, 1933), reprinted in *Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jay Martin (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc, 1971), p.70.

almost certainly have disagreed that *Miss Lonelyhearts* was an ‘allegory’ of any kind, since once the reader has peeled through all the layers of cliché, propaganda and mysticism, there is fundamentally no content underneath, no lesson to take away, no fundamental ‘meaning’. Instead we might say that West creates a tension between those political elements, which is to say, the part of the novel that attempts to expose the despair and rage of marginalized and dispossessed Americans, and those surrealist elements which attempt to sublimate the story into a nightmarish unreality. Rather than depicting his characters in all their material vitality, as Williams would, the disembodied voices come to be identified by the clichés that they employ. Thus they ultimately become a function of the discourse that defines them, burdened by the weight of all the hackneyed and degrading myths that America uses to perpetuate its founding principles. As Shrike, the character who embodies the narrator’s cynicism, says:

‘Explain that man cannot live on bread alone and give them stones. Teach them to pray for their daily stone: Give us this day our daily stone.’

Matlock had given the readers of his column many stones – suffering is good for the soul; the meek shall inherit the earth; laugh and the world laughs with you; the simple joys are the best – but he could not give them the stone that had formed in his gut, and it was the only stone he had left.⁴⁸

Such clichés have a totalizing effect. Throughout *Miss Lonelyhearts* we see how the ‘simple joys’ and other such phrases allow the conditions that created the Depression, the ‘first principles’ of Americanism, to perpetuate themselves in a deluge of idealistic sentiment. The fundamental problem which eventually drives *Miss Lonelyhearts* to insanity and despair, is that there is no solution to the letters. As Williams writes in his review, ‘The fact is that the newspaper by this means capitalizes misfortune to make sales, offering a pitiful moment’s interest to the casual

⁴⁸ NW, *Complete Works*, p.81.

reader while it can do nothing but laugh at those who give it their trust.⁴⁹ Or as Miss Lonelyhearts himself says:

The job is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke... after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him... For the first time in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator.⁵⁰

These last two sentences could be an epigraph for the Depression. In forcing Americans to (re)consider their values, writers on all sides began to reject the financial calculus as a measure of worth, and to turn to other interpretive frameworks. For Miss Lonelyhearts, this becomes a tortuous struggle to try and recover his faith in Christ, ‘the Miss Lonelyhearts of Miss Lonelyhearts.’⁵¹

As I discussed in the previous chapter, for Williams, the solution was to be found in his notion of ‘good writing,’ a contact between words and things, text and context. Critics such as Johnson see Williams’ continued emphasis on the poet’s ability to restore the relationship between signified and signifier as naïve at best, at worst, mystical nonsense. Johnson, for instance, describes ‘contact’ as ‘a rhetorical gloss over the ontological and epistemological mystifications that were at work in his aesthetics.’⁵² Whilst it is true that Williams was prone to over-privileging the poet’s role in shaping society through language, it is unfair to Williams to suggest that there was anything mystical about ‘contact’. Like Dewey, Williams was more interested in leaving behind centuries of arcane philosophical discussion about subject and object and working towards a practical solution. Rather ‘contact’ should be seen as a basic methodology which indicates that the artist attempt to express the poetic object

⁴⁹ Ibid. p.70.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p.106.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.73.

⁵² Bob Johnson, ‘A Whole Synthesis of His Time,’ p.190.

without imposing an ideological structure on it. Admittedly this position also brings its own problems; frequently it meant that the poet must articulate the masses without offering an ulterior meaning for their existence. West's fiction, on the other hand, is solely about recovering and understanding those prefabricated structures through which such ulterior meanings are already constructed and disseminated. The advice column is precisely one such medium and in a way is a perfect example of 'bad writing' (a writing which abstracts signified from signifier) that Williams was talking about. Like some proto-Orwellian nightmare, the readers of Miss Lonelyhearts' column buy the newspaper not because it gives them meaningful advice but because, as Benjamin says of fascism, it gives them 'a chance to express themselves' and make their voice heard. The advice column thus pretends to discover the true or 'natural' voices of the American people. In this way it circumvents the actual democratisation of production by offering the people the illusion that they are complicit in the process of production. In reality, West's characters are merely parroting the clichés that they have been taught.⁵³ West's thinking should therefore only very cautiously be aligned with Marxism, as the term was understood in the 1930s, since he does not acknowledge the proletariat in their capacity as laborers or workers; he does not acknowledge the authentic voices of the American people expressing themselves honestly, but considers them only in their capacity as consumers – both material and ideological.

As Rita Barnard notes in her analysis, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance*, the 1930s was a time in which America was moving from a production-based economy, founded on America's rapid economic expansion at the turn of the

⁵³ This complex power relationship bears some similarity to Benjamin's reading of fascism: 'Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves.' Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p.241.

century, to a consumer-based economy, founded largely on the creation of artificial needs. The crash of 1929 was the single most important catalyst for the demise of the era of big production.⁵⁴ West's work certainly reflects the fear and uncertainty of modernism towards such a cultural and economic shift. In *Miss Lonelyhearts* West writes about the formation of American cities:

Americans have dissipated their radical energy in an orgy of stonebreaking. In their few years they have broken more stones than did centuries of Egyptians. And they have done their work hysterically, desperately, almost as if they knew that the stones would some day break them.⁵⁵

The dissipation of America's radical energy is a theme that was frequently taken up during the Depression. Dewey writes in his 1930 essay 'Toward a New Individualism' that the protests of the 1930s are not the protests of those straining for an outlet in action, as did the 'rugged individualists,' the pioneers of previous eras. Rather, they are 'the protest against a weakening vigor and a sapping of energy that emanate from the absence of constructive opportunity.'⁵⁶ The implication of West's passage is of course that the Depression represents the moment where America was finally 'broken' by the collapse of its production-based economy, and its attendant version of individualism. Unlike many other literary magazines of the 1930s, *Contact* faced the issue of consumerism and shifting attitudes towards individualism head on without simply rejecting the mass market. During the original run of *Contact* in

⁵⁴ Rita Barnard, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), especially p.17. This argument reflects the logic of the 'Commonwealth Club Speech,' September 23rd, 1932 which was mentioned in the introduction to this thesis; 'As long as we had free land, as long as population was growing by leaps and bounds, as long as our industrial plants were insufficient to supply our needs, society chose to give the ambitious man free play and unlimited reward...In retrospect we can now see that the turn of the tide came with the turn of the century. We were reaching our last frontier, there was no more free land.' FDR, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Volume I*, p.747-8.

⁵⁵ NW, *Complete Works*, p.100.

⁵⁶ John Dewey, 'Individualism Old and New. III: Toward a New Individualism' in *New Republic* 62 (19 February, 1930), pp.13-6, reprinted in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 5, 1929-1930* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), p.80.

1921, Williams had attempted to bring some of his ideas about the role of the arts in a consumer society together, which appeared in *Contact 4*, his ‘Advertising Number.’ The issue was intended as an exploration of the relationship between art and advertising, and the cover art attempted to turn a collage of advertisements into what Eric White calls a ‘visual poem.’⁵⁷ In that number, Williams also published Pound’s favourable review of C.H. Douglas’ *Credit-Power and Democracy*, in which Pound wrote that ‘the symbolist position, artistic aloofness from world affairs, is no good now,’ encouraging artists to involve themselves in the economic and the political.⁵⁸ As a philosophy, *Contact* positioned itself as the antithesis to the artistic and philosophical ‘aloofness’ of the symbolists, and this led Williams to engage with all aspects of art, including art-as-advertising. In this sense *Contact* had always been bound up with ideas about the discourse of the mass market, and specifically the rejection of capitalist notions of how ‘credit’ (both economic ‘credit’ and cultural ‘credit’) should be disseminated.

Amongst the most interesting pieces published in the second run of *Contact* is Mexican artist Diego Rivera’s brief thesis on Mickey Mouse. Rivera argues that in the future when ‘theatres’ (televisions) are possessed by everyone, and the masses have ‘realized by then the genuine revolution’ (perhaps referring to an equalization of the means of production and distribution?), then the future masses ‘will not interest themselves greatly in the revolutionary films of today.’ The ‘cine-dramas’ and other ‘revolutionary’ literature of the 1930s, Rivera argues, are not the true history of the 1930s. Instead, ‘the esthetes of that day will find that MICKEY MOUSE was one of the true American heroes of American Art in the first half of the 20th Century, in the

⁵⁷ See Eric White, *Transatlantic Avant-Gardes: Little Magazines and Localist Modernism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp.112.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* pp.121-2.

calendar anterior to the world revolution.⁵⁹ One doubts that the revolution that took place – the consumer revolution with TV sets streaming adverts into every home – was the revolution that Rivera was hoping for. The consumer revolution already precluded any notion of an ‘authentic’ contact, and likewise, any notion of an ‘authentic’ people, since both would be defined by new ‘invisible empires’⁶⁰ such as Warner Bros. (incorporated 1923) and Walt Disney (founded as The Disney Cartoon Company in 1923 and reincorporated as Walt Disney Productions in 1929).⁶¹ As Eric Mottram notes, ‘Hollywood is the index of Depression images which Americans were afforded of their lives.’⁶² The emergence of Mickey Mouse was therefore in some ways superannuating the philosophy of *Contact* even as Williams was attempting to establish the little magazine.

This debate also relates to a division that was taking place within Marxist theory. As Denning notes, European Marxism tended to focus on issues of production, labour and capital – the remnants of the old industrial system. A newer ‘American Marxism’ was emerging in figures such as Sidney Hook, Kenneth Burke and Louis Adamic, that was focused on issues of consumption; advertising, mass psychology, standardization and newer modes of complicity which the mass market engendered.⁶³

Williams’ own ideas about individualism during the 1930s are much harder to define, and closer to Dewey’s than to Burke’s. Dewey’s 1930 essay, ‘The United

⁵⁹ Diego Rivera, ‘Mickey Mouse and American Art,’ *Contact* 1:1 (Feb, 1932), p.39.

⁶⁰ I refer, again, to Roosevelt’s Nomination Address. See pp.166-7.

⁶¹ See Warren Susman’s critique of *Fantasia* in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p.103. See also *Culture and Commitment, 1929-1945*, edited by Warren Susman (New York: George Braziller, 1973), pp.12-3. Susman argues that ‘Mickey Mouse may in fact be more important to an understanding of the 1930s than Franklin Roosevelt,’ Susman points towards the growing disengagement of ‘the people’ from the political sphere, even as the rhetoric of ‘the people’ was being utilised by politicians.

⁶² Eric Mottram, ‘Living Mythically: The Thirties,’ *Journal of American Studies*, 6:3 (Dec., 1972), p.280.

⁶³ See Denning, *Cultural Front*, especially pp.425-7.

States, Incorporated,' discusses the rise of the corporate mindset in America. In every part of life, Dewey notes, from business, farming, grocery stores, leisure and even crime, those who had formerly operated on an individual scale were being collectivized into corporations and organizations. 'The artist remains,' Dewey writes, 'as a surviving individual force.'⁶⁴ This is certainly the view that Williams held. Williams himself was still an independent professional, a 'skilled artisan' of the previous era, as Dewey refers to them, both in his capacity as a doctor and a poet. As such Williams' poetics might offer a reply to the sort of ideological control inherent in the advice column.

However, frequently critics take far too much for granted in casting Williams as an individualist. Tapscott, for instance, makes the startling assertion that 'once we have acknowledged the uniquely dual perspective which Williams provides for his *Paterson*, we should also recognize that Williams' much-touted fealty to the "local" and to the common man is largely a fiction.'⁶⁵ Though Tapscott notes Williams' devotion, as a doctor, to the poor and vulnerable, he argues that overall Williams felt largely nothing more than 'disgust' for mass man, the 'great beast' of the people (to adopt a phrase of Alexander Hamilton's that Williams uses in *Paterson*). In his original unpublished draft of his first *Contact* manifesto, Williams does explore some of these ideas: 'It has always been so in history, that an entire generation has owed its freedom to the inner freedom of one individual.'⁶⁶ However, Williams' ideas about the role of the individual do not simply end there, clinging to a previous model of individualism. Like Dewey, Williams recognised the emergence of collectivism and

⁶⁴ See John Dewey, 'Individualism Old and New. I: The United States, Incorporated,' *The New Republic* 61 (22 January 1930), pp.239-41 in *The Later Works, Volume 5*, p.60.

⁶⁵ Stephen J. Tapscott, 'Williams' *Paterson*: Doctor and Democrat,' *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 8, American Literature Special Number (1978), p.82.

⁶⁶ Williams quoting from an unknown source I have been unable to identify. See Buffalo, WCW Papers, C2.

was fascinated by the idea of newer modes of organising society for the benefit of the individual.

Again Dewey's pragmatist approach helps to shed some light. During the previous century Protestantism had effected a neat synthesis between capitalist individualism and moral/spiritual individualism, combining the two into one coherent world view. This world view, as Dewey sees it, had been drastically undermined by the rise of corporatism. As the older individualism passed, it left behind a 'vacuum' which was now filled by the debris of consumer culture. Dewey saw in the 1930s a bland 'crowd psychology' and he felt considerable anxiety towards 'conformity and standardization' of American opinion through media propaganda and 'publicity agencies.' This state of affairs is encapsulated, for Dewey, in the terms 'radio-conscious' and 'air-minded' which were in use during the 1930s. Such superficial conformity, Dewey argues, is the result of a nation that is spiritually and morally in chaos. Dewey's thesis is therefore that individualism is actually a *social* concept, 'the mental and moral structure of individuals, the pattern of their desires and purposes, changes with every great change in social constitution.' Individualism is not something that has a 'static content' in every age, but rather society's evolving structures and processes define the individual quite as much as individuals define society. Dewey applauds the socialist attempts to wrestle control of the nation's resources from the hands of the few, but his criticism of the left is that too frequently they expect to merely extend the earlier conception of pioneer individualism to the many, thus herding the masses into 'regulative norms.' Instead he imagines a new type of individualism in which the individual's ideas and beliefs

are ‘the spontaneous function of a communal life in which he shares,’ rather than a function of big media, standardized education and conformity.⁶⁷

This is, in fact, the essence of Williams’ fascination with Social Credit. For Williams Social Credit represented a viable way to retain the intellectual and moral individualism that he considered to be an integral part of American identity, whilst empowering and re-organising individuals into a collective that had the power to return control of the nation’s finances back to the people.⁶⁸ In a discussion with Fred Miller on Social Credit, Miller remarks that Williams was in fact not a true ‘Douglasite’ but had merely adopted Social Credit to avoid the ‘shackles’ of communist ‘dogma,’ and to keep his artistic independence in a climate where there was incredible ‘pressure’ from ‘the Reds’ to conform. This is a remarkably keen insight into what motivated Williams. Social Credit was founded on the principle of individual consumer choice, rather than collective communist control, and such a philosophy appealed to Williams’ dual needs – individualism and collectivism.⁶⁹ Both Dewey and Williams were searching for a new individualism that would offer the freedom to pursue one’s own moral and intellectual fulfilment in a way that wasn’t at odds with the re-organization of society into a more collective model. Neither felt that communism would be the answer.

⁶⁷ Dewey, ‘The United States, Incorporated’ in *The Later Works, Volume 5*, pp.80-1.

⁶⁸ Williams, ‘The Attack on Credit Monopoly from a Cultural Viewpoint’ (*ARI*, 97-118). See also equivalent essays from Gorham Munson and James Laughlin in the Gorham Munson Papers, Wesleyan Library, Special Collections, Box 26, Folders 573-579. I will continue my discussion of these concepts later in chapter four, p.207-8.

⁶⁹ Yale, WCW Papers, Box 15, Folder 453. Fred Miller to WCW (undated letter, sometime between 1932 and 1934).

3.3. Native Violence

It might be said then, that the purpose of *Contact* was very simply to reconsider the relationship between the particular and the general, both in art and in society. As an aesthetic methodology, *Contact* encouraged the artist to re-imagine and re-fashion the associative qualities of thought from a non-ideological standpoint. As social comment, *Contact* encouraged the reader to rethink his own complicity in the production, consumption and dissemination of ideas, and to become more aware of his own ‘contact’ with ideological forces in society. However, whilst such a program worked out fine in theory, it is often hard to reconcile with the poetry that was actually being published. ‘The Canada Lily’ published in the second issue is an excellent example:

Sometimes a farmer’s wife
gathers an armful

for her pitcher on the porch—
Topping a stone wall

against the shale-ledge—
a field full

By the road, the river
the edge of the woods

—opening in the sun
closing with the dark—

everywhere
—Red lily

in your common cup
all beauty lies—⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Williams, ‘The Canada Lily,’ *Contact*, 1:2 (May 1932), pp.37-8. This poem was renamed ‘The Red Lily’ when included in the *Collected Poems*.

Williams' two lined stanzas are a recurring form during his 1930s works, yet whilst in poems such as 'Between Walls' the form is used to narrow the experience of the poem down to an oppressive binarism, here it is used as lyric counterpoint to provide an ebb and flow that lulls the reader into a pastoral sentimentalism. The central conceit of the poem is the association of people and flowers, the natural rhythms of the day ('opening in the sun / closing with the dark') imply an overwhelming sense of 'natural' or 'pastoral' man. The poem thus presents an idealized vision of people as flowers, at once singular and multiple. The image of 'Red' lilies at the end is evidently intended to associate this utopian vision with Marxism, but again, this is not a theoretical appreciation of Marxism but an aesthetic one. The last stanza ('in your common cup / all beauty lies') represents that sublimation as the poet abandons himself to a utopian communality in a final aesthetic leap. It is in this occasional utopianism that Williams differs from other more cynical Marxist contemporaries, and in particular Zukofsky, who in the previous issue had published his 'Madison, Wis.: Remembering the bloom of Monticello (1931)'

But if Mr. Citizen
 sells apples
 In New York by
 the sea

Maybe that's
 where we
 should be—
 I'll die

The heart all
 a queen's
 the brain
 Lenin's— (41-2)

The ironic ‘Mr. Citizen’ of Zukofsky’s poem lies in stark contrast to the aestheticized vision of Williams’ ‘farmer’s wife.’ The over-riding imperative of Zukofsky’s poem is to subordinate the aesthetic content of the poem (the ‘heart’) to that final denouement – ‘the brain Lenin’s,’ firmly validating intellectual supremacy over aesthetic indulgence. Williams’ poem works almost in reverse, opening up the end of the poem to the aesthetic appreciation of the commonality of man.

In the pages of *Contact* we can also see the shadow of the darker side of this native agenda, which frequently borders on nationalism. In the same issue, Marxist painter and fellow member of the *Others* group, Marsden Hartley, contributed his own seemingly nationalist poem, ‘The Return of the Native.’

Rock, juniper, and wind,
and a seagull sitting still,
All those of one mind—
He who finds will
to come home
will surely find old faith
[...]
A seagull signs the bond
makes what was broken, whole.⁷¹

The renewal of old faith was a theme common to writers of the 1930s, finding the Depression an occasion for cultural as well as political renewal. The pastoral imagery, that elusive mysticism in those three poised images, ‘rock, juniper, and wind,’ the antiquated, almost religious sentence structure (‘surely find old faith,’ ‘makes what was broken whole’), all this coupled with an exhortation towards unity, wholeness, totality, demonstrates how a latent political content was glossed by certain corresponding aesthetic associations by writers on the left during this period.

⁷¹ Marsden Hartley, ‘Return of the Native,’ *Contact* 1:2 (May, 1932), p.28. See also Donna M. Cassidy, “‘On the Subject of Nativeness’: Marsden Hartley and New England Regionalism,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, 29:4 (Winter, 1994), pp. 227-245

Whilst contemporary critics typically think of nationalism as a right wing phenomenon, in the American 1930s, nationalism was common on both left and right.⁷² Denning in fact identifies ‘localism’ itself, or what he calls ‘proletarian regionalism’ as a significant trend in 1930s left-wing nationalism. Proletarian regionalism refers to the use of authentic or ‘folk’ expression to craft a nationalistic version of America. ‘Regionalism’, in its celebration of authentic America, was therefore almost always part of a wider nationalist discourse.⁷³ Eric White similarly notes that localism and nationalism were, ironically, not exclusive concepts during the 1930s, but correctly distinguishes between the ‘cultural localism’ of Williams and what he calls the ‘*New Republic* style cultural nationalism.’⁷⁴ Nevertheless it would be inaccurate to suggest that there was absolutely no slippage between these two types of localism.

The longing for pastoral, regional simplicity is seen in a very different light in West’s work, especially in *A Cool Million* and *The Day of the Locust*, which imply that the need for simple American virtues must inevitably lead to the growth of fascism, and indeed such ‘pastoral’ institutions as the Ku Klux Klan, whose slogan also began with the word ‘native’: ‘Native, White, Protestant Supremacy.’ One wonders whether West welcomed Williams’ characterization of him in his 1933 review as a ‘first rate native author.’⁷⁵ The irony, of course, is that whereas the Ku Klux Klan turned to pastoralism in order to shore up a failing tradition, and to suppress those subversive elements of the fragmentary urban world, Williams turns to pastoralism to focus the consciousness in the present, to liberate America from its European past, and to reawaken America’s radical instincts.

⁷² See the introduction to this thesis, p.26.

⁷³ Denning, *Cultural Front*, p.132.

⁷⁴ Eric White, *Transatlantic Avant-Gardes*, p.9.

⁷⁵ Williams, ‘Sordid? Good God!’ in *Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p.71.

Indeed, the problem of finding 'old faith' in the modern world was one of the central concerns of Depression literature. If the American story is the story of rags to riches, the ordinary man who makes a success of himself, then the Depression should have been an occasion to rethink the fundamental principles on which that myth was founded: no amount of hard work or triumph of the human will could overcome the hostile environment of the Depression. However, the revision of America's values that one expected did not come. Instead, as Conn argues, the Depression's dispossessed typically blamed themselves rather than society for their failure, seeing in their personal failure the failure to be truly 'American.' The 1930s thus saw a reversion to America's myths rather than a revision of those myths.⁷⁶

In the first two issues of *Contact*, Reznikoff explored some of these ideas in his ironically named collection, 'My Country 'Tis of Thee,' a series of anecdotes taken from the various legal historical documents which he, as a lawyer himself, had occasion to read. The passages are a series of case histories, describing such American activities as the senseless killing of Dr. Selser by Dr. Beall because of a chance remark, the story of two slaves who after running away are tracked down and beaten, the story of an indentured servant whipped till death for attempting to visit his wife, and the story of a fight between a judge and a man named Price to the lethal detriment of the latter, to name but a few. Essentially it constitutes a litany of the insane violence at the heart of America. The word 'gentleman,' with its formal façade, jars profoundly throughout the piece, and it is written in a factual legalese that further propounds the sense of bizarreness inherent in most of the cases. The underlying theme is that violence is largely motiveless, or done for the most utterly

⁷⁶ Peter Conn, *The American 1930s: A Literary History* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), p.4.

senseless of reasons. The general disregard for life, and the racism and anti-Semitism on display are deeply shocking, and the fact that Reznikoff doesn't give any dates lends it the strangest feeling that these stories are in fact still happening. If this is America's cultural heritage, Reznikoff implies, then the glorification of those ideals is an occasion for contempt.

A comparison of Hartley's poem and Reznikoff's piece offers a surprisingly coherent vision of the aesthetics of *Contact*, which were deeply conflicted in nature. *Contact* was torn between on the one hand glossing over an American nationalism, with its reliance on the idea of 'old faith' and the inherent promises of American ideals, and on the other hand, urging a complete renewal of American identity through a radical re-evaluation of American identity from a local perspective.

In *Contact III*, West published his own 'manifesto' of sorts, 'Some Notes on Violence.' He starts by noting, 'almost every manuscript we receive has violence for its core.' He argues that broadly speaking every decade has a theme: before the war it was 'sweetness and light' (emotive romanticism), after the war it was art itself, and in the 1930s that subject is violence.⁷⁷

He takes his thesis in part from Williams' discussion of violence in *American Grain*. For Williams, violence represents America's only unfettered and unrepressed moment of immediacy in a society that usually 'holds off from embraces' (*ITAG*, 175). Indeed, in *American Grain* Williams was even one of the first writers to portray the Destruction of Tenochtitlan as a story of violence and loss, rather than triumph. 'America adores violence' (*ITAG*, 177), Williams writes. He sees America's Puritan past as creating an almost hysterical desire for the atavistic and the violent in the media.

⁷⁷ NW, 'Some Notes on Violence,' *Contact*, 1:3 (October, 1932), pp.132-3.

In his manifesto for *Contact* West takes this further and implies that there is a relationship between the upsurge of violent content during the 1930s and the Depression. Attempts to explain this phenomenon as a swell of sadistic rage in the American people brought on by economic suffering, although tempting, are likely to miss the mark. More profitable is the argument that the increase in violence and sex was a direct product of consumerism and the growth of hard-boiled fiction and films around this time. West himself in fact knew Dashiell Hammett, who had helped him to edit *Balso Snell*.⁷⁸

Hard-boiled fiction, especially in the detective genre, presented an entirely new and inherently American way of thinking about plot lines and story. Whereas traditional European detective fiction was concerned with finding the murderer, and by extension with such things as motive, causality and characterization, hard-boiled detective fiction completely eviscerated psychology from the work of art, presenting simply the surfaces. It is here that West makes his case:

In America violence is idiomatic... For a European writer to make violence real, he has to do a great deal of careful psychology and sociology. He often needs three hundred pages to motivate one little murder. But not so the American writer... He is far from the ancient Greeks and still further from those people who need the naturalism of Zola or the realism of Flaubert to make writing seem 'artistically [sic] true.'⁷⁹

West's work indicates that beginning with the mythologizing and aestheticizing of violence on the frontier and continuing through American culture up to the hard-boiled fiction that was prevalent during the 1930s, violence represents an absolute emptiness at the core of American values. This is a trope in West's work that began in *Blaso Snell* and continues throughout his oeuvre. In *Balso Snell*, John Raskolnikov

⁷⁸ For a further discussion of the relationship between hard-boiled fiction and the politics of the 1930s I strongly recommend Sean McCann's *Gumshoe America: hard-boiled crime fiction and the rise and fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000) which contains an excellent chapter on the aesthetics of the Ku Klux Klan.

⁷⁹ NW, 'Some Notes on Violence,' *Contact*, 1:3 (October, 1932), pp.132-3.

Gilson, taking his cue from Dostoyevsky, murders the kitchen worker next door, not for any obvious reason, but because of the shape of his throat, the sound of his laugh and the fact that he does not wear a collar. In order to restore his ‘sense of balance’ and the order demanded by his internal world, he must kill the man, ‘just as I had to kill, when a child, all the flies in my room before being able to fall asleep.’⁸⁰ West’s work is full of this sort of hysteria – a hysteria that came to dominate his conception of 1930s America in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. ‘I felt certain that it would be safe to commit the murder,’ he writes. ‘Safe, because its motive would not be comprehensible to the police.’⁸¹

For West, violence is therefore the equivalent of Williams’ ‘authentic’ and ‘actual’ – it cuts through to the reality of things, it is West’s own brand of ‘contact.’ Williams and West, in their different ways, were therefore both attempting to remove motivation and intention from their works. But where Williams finds enormous stability in the actual, the physical existence of the poetic object, West finds a world that is fundamentally unpredictable.

In the final issue of *Contact*, Williams published his own collection of vignettes, entitled ‘For Bill Bird,’ dealing with various ‘hard-boiled’ themes: teenage sex, abortion, racketeering, adultery and prostitution. In some respects, the collection of anecdotes is a form that is suited to this American detachment. Like Reznikoff’s piece, the stories are all self-contained vignettes, without any attempt to explain the back-story or meaning in them. Similarly, West once described *Miss Lonelyhearts* as being ‘a novel in the form of a comic strip.’ Each vignette is a square ‘in which many things happen through one action. The speeches contained in the conventional

⁸⁰ NW, *Complete Works*, p.20.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* pp.19-20.

balloons.’⁸² There are no character names, or back stories, only what we can glean from the surface.

The speech bubble, too, is an apt comparison in that it presupposes a form of language that is already constructed as comment. Williams notes in his review of West that writing ‘plain American’ speech is difficult, and that it doesn’t happen naturally (as the term naturalism might suppose). ‘Anyone using American must have taste in order to be able to select from the teeming vulgarisms of our speech the personal and telling vocabulary which he needs to put over his effects.’⁸³ Williams and Reznikoff’s pieces both seem to imply that the snapshot is the form of comprehension most suitable to American modernity and its culture of surfaces. Williams in particular is trying to put forward an Americanism that is not planned out, but caught in the act; the little vignettes are ultimately bits of gossip, overheard conversations that he has discovered in the course of his daily life. However, the problem that becomes evident in ‘For Bill Bird’ is that the language of mass man is not a ‘natural’ language, revealing instead a preoccupation with themes from the movies.

All this points to the enormous difficulty of Williams’ vision for *Contact* and the reason why it eventually failed. On the one hand, Williams’ ideal writer had to write what he saw without imposing his own ideological agenda on his subjects. On the other hand he also had to be an individualist, sensitive to the currents of consumer culture, but ultimately unswayed, not writing for an audience, but for the writing itself. Above all the writer must not write for money. The ‘small magazine,’

⁸² Nathanael West, ‘Some Notes on Miss L.’ in *Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jay Martin, p.66.

⁸³ Williams, ‘Sordid? Good God!’ Ibid. p.73.

Williams comments, ‘represents the originality of our generation thoroughly free of an economic burden.’⁸⁴ In this he sees all Little Magazines as taking part of ‘one expression’ – namely, the expression of those who aren’t writing for money. This position, which may have been relevant to the twenties, was not tenable in an era when ‘economic burden’ and market forces were defining the way that people were thinking and acting. *Contact* failed therefore because it set out to examine the influence of market forces that were shaping literature, and not to take part in them. Its failure to engage with the mass market is almost its defining feature, its *raison d’être*, and its economic failure was in a way built-in.

Unfortunately, it seems that neither Williams nor West had informed Kamin about this higher calling. Kamin, himself a Marxist, rightly recognised that in order to make any headway with an avant-garde readership a thirties magazine had to publish radical literature. He began to put pressure on Williams, to include a stronger political content. ‘Contact III must be a huge issue and it must have contributions from Gorky and Rollan down to Mike Gold . . . I have lists of authors who contribute regularly to the USSR magazine of the Social Revolution and we’ll have to write to them.’ Williams demurred, arguing that *Contact* had to be ‘a forum of good writing. All we’ll get by a Communist issue is a reputation for radicalism and not for good writing – which is our real aim.’ Kamin replied questioning his Marxist credentials, ‘Do you want scientific application and interpretation of Karl Marx, or merely material on the proletarian awakening, unscientific, devoid of conscious formulae?’⁸⁵ The phrase ‘devoid of conscious formulae’ demonstrates the enormous difference between them. Williams and Kamin came down on different sides of the debate that was dividing the literary left during this period; whether art should be a tool used

⁸⁴ *Contact* I, pp.89-90.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Martin, *Nathanael West*, p.149.

knowingly and consciously in the service of social change, or whether art ultimately answers to something else, to history, or truth, or in Williams' case to the writing revolution.

At any rate, the third issue did not turn out to be the radical issue for which Kamin had hoped and West and Kamin quarreled irrevocably over *Contact's* new political mandate, with West finally saying that there would be no fourth issue. Williams compromised by writing a radical editorial for the third and final issue. As one of the few attempts that Williams ever made to explicitly tackle his own Marxist tendencies head on, this editorial is amongst the most fascinating statements in the Williams canon. In it he claims that all great writers, from Shakespeare to Dante have been of a 'communist intelligence' in as much as they looked at the whole:

Never may it be said, has there ever been great poetry that was not born out of a communist intelligence. They have all been rebels, against nothing so much as scism that would have the spirit a lop sided affair of high and low.⁸⁶

The task of communism as Williams sees it, is to foster a 'communal' understanding of literature in which artificial distinctions between the 'high and low' in the human 'spirit' are broken down. But Williams' comment, whilst appearing to legitimise 'communism,' in fact completely eviscerates communism as a political movement. What is at stake here is a reinterpretation of what the word 'communism' means. Communism, for Williams, is only worthy in as much as it represents the most current form of 'radicalism.' 'The unchristian sweep of Shakespeare, the cantless, unsectarian bitterness of Dante against his time, this is what is best in

⁸⁶ Williams 'Comment,' *Contact*, 1:3 (October, 1932), p.131.

communism⁸⁷ – in other words, both were radically rebelling against the received ideologies of their day.⁸⁸

However, having accepted the idea of a radical communal literature which attacks the hegemonic ideologies of its day, Williams goes on to note that radical revisions of one generation will become the received ideologies of the next generation, which must once again be replaced. One must therefore seek to prevent ‘communism’ from becoming set in stone like its predecessors. Communism must seek to constantly supplant itself with even newer more radical ideas. In the end, the radical instinct of the writer must therefore inevitably turn on communism itself: ‘It [radicalism] will not down or speak its piece to please, not even to please “communism.”’⁸⁹

One notices immediately that what he has done here is to strip communism of its content, namely its Marxist aspect, and replaced it with a formless and eternal revolution, what (ironically) Mao once called a ‘permanent revolution.’ It is for this reason, as John Beck notes, that Williams had no problem reconciling radicalism with his own conception of American Democracy.⁹⁰ America as a nation had to embody that timeless and permanent revolution, a revolution that was inscribed into its very being from the moment of its founding. Jefferson himself wrote (and Williams quotes it) that there should be a revolution ‘every ten years.’⁹¹ The irony here is that in taking the revolution and making it permanent, Williams freezes its

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ It is not my intention to support or deny Williams’ claims that Shakespeare was ‘un-Christian’ and Dante ‘unsectarian,’ though no doubt many critics would find reason to argue against this characterization. Certainly Shakespeare did include characters of low birth in his plays, and I believe this is the significant factor for Williams.

⁸⁹ Williams ‘Comment,’ *Contact*, 1:3 (October, 1932), p.131.

⁹⁰ Beck argues that both Williams and Dewey saw Democracy as inherently the most radical form of government in as much as it is the form of government most open to continuous evolution and revision, and that they were both dismayed to see that the party political system had ‘reduced its radical promise to ideology.’ *Writing the Radical Center*, p.17.

⁹¹ Williams includes this quotation in his early drafts of *The First President*. Yale, WCW Papers, Box 58, Folder 1294.

revolutionary instincts and perpetuates it indefinitely in a timeless stasis. The revolution thus becomes an eternally empty signifier.

Nothing is beyond poetry. It is the one solid element on which our lives can rely, the 'word' of so many disguises, including as it does, man's full consciousness, high and low, in living objectivity... If poetry fails it fails at the moment since it has not been able enough to grasp the full significance of its day.⁹²

Williams strenuously attacks the proposition that 'poetry increases in virtue as it is removed from contact with a vulgar world.' He wants to rescue art from the bourgeois standard of eternal truths. However, in doing so he sets up his own eternal standard for art, namely that it should 'grasp the full significance of its day,' that it should always bring to consciousness the full force of the present; or, as he puts it, 'an arrest of self-realization: that eternity of the present.'⁹³ In the end, it was *Contact* itself that was most guilty of failing 'to grasp the full significance of its day.' Williams and West, in their desire to provide a forum that was truly free of ideology failed to grasp that the 1930s *was* a time of ideology. In the end, it was Williams' refusal to compromise with the radical market that prevented it from continuing – and this is exactly as Williams wanted it.

Whilst *Contact* was only one of a number of magazines that supported localist modernism during the 1930s, and no doubt much of the poetry it contained will be forgotten, it did carve out a space for those left-leaning writers who were interested in discussing social and cultural changes in America, but were not happy with communism as a vehicle for their beliefs. Unlike the stodgy articles of the *New Masses*, which focused on bashing capitalism and glorifying the proletariat, the

⁹² *Contact* III, p.131.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

literature of *Contact* was far more concerned with issues such as consumerism, advertising and new modes of complicity in popular culture. It attempted to excavate the relationship between the local and the national, as well as the individual and society. If it failed to find convincing answers to these issues in 1932 then it was certainly asking the right questions. In relation to the long term value of *Contact*, Williams wrote a tribute for Pound's magazine, *Il Mare*:

When another of the little reviews that appeared in the United States during the last quarter of the century died, I thought it was shame. But now I think differently. Now I understand that all those little reviews ought by necessity to have a short life, the shorter the better. When they live too long they begin to dry up. But only after they have had at least one excellent writer who would not otherwise have had the means to develop. *Contact* has produced Nathanael West. Now it can die.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ William Carlos Williams, 'A New American Writer,' *Il Mare*, 11, January 21, 1938, p. 4.

4. An Ambiguous Past: The Founding Fathers and Social Credit

If, as Conn suggests, the Depression precipitated a battle over America's past and 'a debate over the meaning of America' then it seems natural that this debate should focus on the constitutional and cultural legacy of the Founding Fathers.¹ Indeed, America has historically placed an unprecedented degree of importance on the intentions and beliefs of its Founding Fathers, leading to an entire area of legal, scholarly and political debate referred to as 'originalism,' or 'original-intent jurisprudence.'² Whilst this has been a constant feature of American history, R.B. Bernstein points out that in no other period was the clash over the intentions of the Founding Fathers as 'intense' as it was during the 1930s:

The Roosevelt administration's experiments with the creative use of government power to remedy the damage that the Great Depression wreaked on the American economy... collided with the fierce opposition of conservative politicians and scholars who insisted that these experiments violated the original intent of the Constitution as expressed by the Founding Fathers. In response, not only Roosevelt and his supporters but a host of scholars and journalists reinterpreted the Constitution's origins, stressing the Founding Fathers' creative experimentation.³

Despite Conn's insistence that the fundamentals of American identity – individualism, opportunity and enterprise – did not change during the 1930s, radical

¹ See Conn, *The American 1930s*, p.5. Conn notes the increased gathering and administration of historical records during this period, including the National Archives, the *Dictionary of American Biography*, the Historical Records Survey, the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Index of American Design.

² R.B. Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.163.

³ *Ibid.* p.132.

shifts to the left certainly encouraged philosophers, artists and journalists to re-examine America's cultural identity.⁴

In many ways, this was the project that Williams himself had been pursuing since the publication of *American Grain*. In his introduction to his 1936 libretto on the life of George Washington, *The First President*, Williams describes his purpose as being to provoke an engagement with history that would 'galvanize us into a realization of what we are today' (*ML*, 303). In this respect, Williams saw his task as being to uncover the true 'meaning of America' from what he perceived to be the distortions of the Anglo-Puritan tradition.⁵

In this chapter, I will begin by uncovering some of the basic premises that Williams laid down in the 1920s concerning the founding of the nation, and the failure of America to recognize its revolutionary potential in the years immediately following the Revolutionary War, focusing in particular on the figure of Hamilton and the founding of the First Bank of America. However my chief concern is to show how those ideas played out during the 1930s, when they began to acquire a new urgency. I will focus on Williams' 1936 libretto, *The First President*, and I will demonstrate that it was written in response to the growing dictatorships in Europe

⁴ See David Nicholas Eldridge, *American Culture in the 1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p.22 for a more detailed discussion of this topic. The revision of American cultural identity is also the subject of Warren Susman's classic study, *Culture as History* in which he argues that the 1930s precipitated a 'self-conscious search' for a new American culture that would 'make sense' of a world that had been thrown into chaos. According to Susman isolationism and nationalism, the two concepts which I shall deal with during this essay, were manifestations of this desire to create a new American identity. Warren Susman, *Culture as History* (New York: Random House, 1973).

⁵ I refer several times to the 'Anglo-Puritan tradition' during this chapter, as a reflection of Williams' own terminology. In *American Grain*, Williams clearly associated Puritanism with England and with the desire to strip the New World of all its natural resources. In opposition to this tradition he places French Catholicism and in particular the figure of Père Rasles. Unlike the English, who wished to superimpose their culture onto the New World, Williams believed that the French were more comfortable with joining the New World on its own more primal terms, learning the native languages and trying to adapt. I am not concerned with the truth of these assertions but only with their place in Williams' thought (*ITAG*, 108, 117).

and the claim that the American liberal tradition had failed its people. If communism and fascism were claiming the rhetoric and ideological space of ‘the people,’ then what better way to re-establish democracy as the politics of the people than to invoke the revolutionary spirit of Washington? Whilst European dictators were building up their own national cults, based on the central presence of a strong individual, the *Führer-Prinzip*, Williams sought to establish Washington as a figure to rival the European dictatorships. In writing *The First President*, Williams also sought to re-imagine the liberal tradition on different terms. In particular, he tried to separate Washington from the Anglo-Puritan tradition of industrialism and finance capitalism, thus creating space in America’s founding mythologies for a reformulation of American capitalism that was closer to Jeffersonian agrarianism. Not only was *The First President* an attempt to define the ideals that were inscribed into the founding of America, but it also gives us an insight into Williams’ feelings towards revolution, change and government during the 1930s as well. *The First President* allows us to trace a series of overlapping concerns that inform Williams’ politics and his writing: state’s rights vs. federal government, isolationism vs. involvement (in foreign policy especially), the ideal vs. the terrestrial, the individual against the masses.

4.1. The American Grain

Self-consciousness with regard to America’s past may have intensified during the 1930s but establishing and defining a sense of American identity had in some ways been Williams’ lifelong ambition. In his prose sketch, ‘Effie Deans’ (c.1937),⁶

⁶ This piece was reprinted in *A Recognizable Image* ed. Bram Dijkstra, and dated 1937, but it is unclear what evidence there is for Dijkstra’s assertion, no dates are included on the manuscript. (*ARI*,

Williams recalls being left a picture he had particularly admired by a patient in her will, causing him to reminisce about the various ‘delightful objets d’art’ that a physician has the opportunity to encounter whilst doing home-visits to patients. He imagines putting on a show at a local museum filled with the various ‘Early Americana’ that he has encountered in New Jersey houses over the years: ‘I think we could get a whole arsenal of Revolutionary fire arms, muskets and pistols, swords and powder horns.’⁷ These artefacts are not only the authentic items of an American past, they are also ‘found objects’ in much the same way that Williams frequently uses ‘found poems,’ appropriating snatches of conversation he has overheard. He recounts taking Mina Loy to see some of these undiscovered household gems, in particular, a collection of paintings in a similar style to Henri Rousseau by an unknown American artist: ‘We looked at it for a moment and then Mina broke the spell. She shook herself as if breaking a dream and said, What fools we are to stand here like this comparing them with Rousseau.’ This response, that the one is a charming but amateur household item (American) and the other a symbol of high culture (European) goes a long way toward explaining the aesthetic battle that Williams had been fighting for years. For Williams these art objects are most important in their capacity to represent the real history of a nation, the local history, which for Williams is more important than any grand cultural narrative or meta-history. The fact that these items were not collected, appraised, or often even considered to be art is another sign of the disdain that (according to Williams) Americans held for their own cultural heritage.

At the end of the piece Williams tells another story about ‘a pair of blackened bellows,’ covered in soot and seemingly worthless, which a European art repairer (or

128).

⁷ Ibid. p.130.

‘gilder’) had spotted at a friend’s house. The gilder was desperate to repair the bellows, but the owner, fearing the cost, refused to spend money on such a worthless item. When the repairs had eventually taken place, it was seen that they were an intricately painted pair of vintage bellows that had in fact been given by the French Ambassador to President Van Buren during his administration and were nearly priceless.⁸ It is hard not to read this passage as a metaphor for the American art tradition in general: disguised beneath a layer of soot, and seemingly worthless, American disdain towards its own cultural history prevents it from recognizing it for what it is.⁹ Thus Williams hoped to provoke Americans into an awareness of their own past and their own importance.

In *American Grain*, Williams blames the Puritan suppression of anything gaudy, ornate or pleasurable (including art) for engendering this lasting disregard of American art and culture. He refers to a Quaker book, *New England Judged by the Spirit of the Lord*, denouncing the practices of the Puritans between 1656-1660. The book describes the Puritan practices of ‘merciless whippings, chainings, finings, imprisonments, starvings, burnings in the hands, cuttings off of ears and putting to death, with other cruelties, inflicted upon the bodies of innocent men and women only for conscience’ sake’ (*ITAG*, 112). Williams asks:

Why does one not hear Americans speak more often of these important things?
Because the fools do not believe that they have sprung from anything: bone, thought and action. They will not see that what they are is growing on these roots. They will not look. They float without question. Their history is to them an enigma.

⁸ Ibid. pp.132-3.

⁹ Miles Orvell notes that the key concept in this story is that of ‘reframing’ especially the reframing of everyday objects to take on what Orvell calls the ‘special aura of Reality.’ It seems more likely that Williams had intended it the other way round, to destroy the ‘special aura’ of the European objet d’art, but it is certainly true that he wished to reframe American history and culture to recognize the worth of the American artist. Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p.292.

(*ITAG*, 113)

For Williams, the Puritans brutally suppressed the primal and creative instincts (the instincts of the artist) that the New World should have unleashed. In their self-negation, they erased any trace of individuality or self-affirmation and immersed themselves wholly in the fate that God had prepared for them, believing that he would reward the just and punish the wicked according to their true natures.

There is also a political undertone to his rejection of Puritanism throughout *American Grain* which is connected to his celebration of individualism. The history of America that Williams presents is in some sense a history of great individuals, Eric the Red, Cortez, Columbus, De Soto, Washington and so. The Puritans on the other hand won the battle for the heart of America by making themselves ‘small and several’ (*ITAG*, 64):

They were the first American democracy--and it was they, in the end, who would succeed in making everything like themselves. No man led them; there was none. The leaders had failed long since for them at home. (*ITAG*, 63)

There is a tension that runs throughout *American Grain* between the great man and the lowly people. The story of the sailor who stands out by bullying the others and is consequently killed by ‘ye just hand of God,’ Williams notes, is a good demonstration of ‘the collective sense of the destiny common to lowly people’ (*ITAG*, 64-5). The moral of the story is that small folk should seek humility: it is not wise to stand out. Williams is quick to point out that it is here that the roots of ‘American democracy’ lie, the so-called ‘herd instinct’ of the masses.¹⁰ Yet it is clear that he holds some disdain for the idea. Like Pound, with his infatuation with the cult

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.88.

figure (from Sigismundo to Mussolini), Williams was prone to idealizing great men.

Modernist critics, following on from John Carey's *Intellectuals and the Masses*, have frequently emphasized the Nietzschean influence on modernist thought.¹¹ Many critics continue to claim that Pound in particular is Nietzschean, despite his denunciation of Nietzsche and his philosophy of 'will to power' in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*.¹² In fact, Pound's notion of a 'will to order' was explicitly in opposition to Nietzsche's 'will to power.' Whereas Nietzsche privileged the will of the great individual over the sheepish masses, Pound sought to inscribe the responsibility of the individual towards society as a whole, a point that I shall discuss in relation to Williams later on. Williams was strongly influenced by *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* and the call for a modernist Jeffersonianism in the mid 1930s, and it is a key text that informs Williams' ideas in relation to Social Credit. Williams, on the other hand, has suffered from the opposite fate: in their desire to make Williams the acceptable face of American modernism critics frequently fail to acknowledge the non-democratic, Romantic strain in his thinking. One cannot deny the political implications that *American Grain* stirs up, especially in the figure of Montezuma, the God-king, who, like George Washington, embodies his people: 'The whole waking aspirations of his people, opposed to and completing their religious sense, seemed to come off in him and in him alone: the drive upward, toward the sun and the stars. He was the very person of their ornate dreams' (*ITAG*, 35). Williams does not appear uncomfortable with the idea of a God-king, and even celebrates the mystical trappings of the Montezuma figure. The same, I argue, is true of his

¹¹ See for instance Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and the Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), pp.157-230, in which he traces the influence of Nietzsche on modernism.

¹² Pound describes Nietzsche as a 'hysterical teuto-pollak' in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini: L'Idea Statale: Fascism As I Have Seen It* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corp, 1934), p.99.

depiction of George Washington in *The First President*, who, Williams almost gleefully notes, was offered a crown in the wake of the Revolution (*ML*, 140). In *The First President*, Washington even takes on an almost Christ-like quality, as the ‘sacrifice to the mob’ (*ML*, 143).

The question of democracy and individualism in America is, for Williams, also deeply embedded in the historic battle between Jefferson and Hamilton, which inscribed the conflict between Republicanism and Federalism into the very inception of America. Very few historians would dispute the decisive impact that the conflict between Jefferson and Hamilton wrought on America’s political landscape, with their beliefs and personalities now an ingrained part of America’s national character. Republicanism against Federalism, agriculture against industry, low taxes against high taxes, a strict interpretation of the constitution against a loose interpretation of the constitution, the South against the North; it is easy to see how the issues that Jefferson and Hamilton fought over drew up battle lines which have continued to define America ever since.¹³

In his 1909 book, *The Promise of American Life*, which was extremely influential on the Progressive movement of the early twentieth-century,¹⁴ Herbert Croly argued that the historic opposition of Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian thought had only ever been detrimental to America’s progress. He therefore attempted to find

¹³ The issue of different interpretations of Jefferson and Hamilton over the ages has been the subject of numerous books. A selected list of works pertaining to interpretations of Jefferson and Hamilton in the 1930s would include: *The Many Faces of Alexander Hamilton: The Life and Legacy of America’s Most Elusive Founding Father* ed. Robert Martin (New York: NYU Press, 2006); Brian Steele, *Thomas Jefferson and American Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960); Francis D. Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Thomas Engeman, ‘Herbert Croley’s Progressive “Liberalism”’ in *History of American Political Thought*, ed. Bryan-Paul Frost, Jeffrey Sikkenga (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2003), p.521.

a synthesis of the two by arguing for ‘Hamiltonian means for Jeffersonian ends’ – the mind of Hamilton and the heart of Jefferson.¹⁵ Such was the official mantra of the New Deal in Roosevelt’s ‘Concert of Interests’ speech in 1932, where he aimed to unite Southern Jeffersonians and Northern Progressives into a single ‘Populist’ movement.¹⁶

However, Stephen Knott and Graham J. White irrefutably demonstrate that whatever the official policy, in reality Roosevelt spent a great deal of time smearing Hamilton and idealising Jefferson throughout the 1930s. Prior to the 1930s Jefferson was nowhere near the iconic figure that he is today. Knott shows that Roosevelt was actively involved in raising Jefferson to the same level as Lincoln and Washington by erecting monuments, becoming a member of the Board of Governors of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation in 1930, and most crucially of all, in his political speeches.¹⁷ The foundations for what White calls the ‘Bowers-Roosevelt’ view of Jefferson had been laid down in Claude G. Bowers’ book, *Jefferson and Hamilton: The Struggle for Democracy in America* (1925). The book fostered the unmitigated idealisation of Jefferson at the expense of Hamilton. Since Bowers was also an activist for the Democratic Party (later Roosevelt appointed him ambassador to Spain) his book was instrumental in selling the New Deal to southern Republicans by giving them their own southern figurehead during the 1932 elections.¹⁸ In his 1932

¹⁵ Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York Macmillan, 1909), pp.27-51. See also *Jeffersonian Legacies: Conference : Revised Papers* ed. Peter S. Onuf (University of Virginia Press, 1993), p.462.

¹⁶ FDR, ‘A Concert of Action, Based on a Fair and Just Concert of Interests,’ Jefferson Day Dinner, St. Paul, Minn. 18th April, 1932, in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Volume I: The Genesis of the New Deal*, ed. Samuel I. Rosenman (New York: Random House, 1938), pp.627-639. See also his ‘Commonwealth Club Speech’ where he makes the same Hamilton vs. Jefferson argument, *ibid.*p.745. See also Christopher M. Duncan, *Fugitive Theory: Political Theory, the Southern Agrarians, and America* (Lexington Books, 2000), p.159.

¹⁷ See Stephen Knott, “‘Opposed in Death as in Life’: Hamilton and Jefferson in American Memory’ in *The Many Faces of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Robert Martin, p.46.

¹⁸ For an in depth discussion of Roosevelt’s review and the relationship between Roosevelt and

campaign Roosevelt attacked the Hoover administration for their ‘Hamiltonian’ disdain for the people, and cast himself as a modern day Jefferson, ‘combating the forces of privilege.’¹⁹ Indeed, the only book that Roosevelt ever reviewed was Bowers’ *Jefferson and Hamilton*. In his review, he wrote that he was ‘fed up’ with the ‘romantic cult’ around Hamilton, and he criticized Hamilton for his ‘contempt for the opinion of the masses’ and his fondness for industrialisation and ‘Chambers of Commerce.’²⁰ The simplistic Bowers-Roosevelt version of history shows Jefferson rescuing the emerging nation in ‘escape after escape’ from the evil clutches of Hamilton and his aristocratic friends. Knott argues that Roosevelt’s ‘conversion to Jeffersonianism’ was ‘complete by the time of his Presidency.’²¹ During the 1930s Jefferson therefore experienced an enormous resurgence of popularity. Bernstein argues that it was only during the 1930s that ‘Jefferson achieved apotheosis as a symbol of human rights, religious freedom, separation of church and state, and democratic revolution – values and principles given new value and urgency by the amassed experiences of the Great Depression.’²² Hamilton, in contrast, had gone from being a national hero to being seen as ‘a hybrid mix of Ebenezer Scrooge and Benito Mussolini’ by the end of the 1930s.²³

Williams’ idealization of Jefferson and his rejection of Hamilton in *American Grain* (published in 1925, the same year as Bowers’ influential book) was therefore

Bowers, see Graham J. White, *F. D. R. and the Press* (University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp.143-150.

¹⁹ Stephen Knott, ‘‘Opposed in Death as in Life’’: Hamilton and Jefferson in American Memory’ p.46. Certainly FDR painted Jefferson as anti-industrial, but in keeping with Claudio Katz’s revisions I also see Jefferson as essentially anti-capitalist. See Katz, Claudio J., ‘Thomas Jefferson’s Liberal Anticapitalism’ in *American Journal of Political Science*, 47:1 (Jan, 2003), pp.7-9.

²⁰ Ibid p.43.

²¹ Ibid p.45.

²² R.B. Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered*, p.140.

²³ See Stephen Knott, ‘‘Opposed in Death as in Life’’: Hamilton and Jefferson in American Memory,’ p.47.

very much of its time. The issue of Hamilton founding the First Bank of America as a private company is at the heart of his radicalism during the 1930s: namely, that Hamilton enabled the Biddle family to take control of the First Bank of America and allow private individuals to control the nation's primary resource, its financial credit. The idea of preventing individuals from charging interest on public funds for private profit is the *raison d'être* of Social Credit, and the primary factor that convinced Williams that Pound was correct in his search for an alternative economic model.

During the 1930s Williams came to see Social Credit as the best hope for that alternative economic model, and his support for Social Credit was explicitly derived from his own understanding of America's founding history. In his 1936 Charlottesville speech in support of the American Social Credit Movement (AMSC), reprinted as 'Revolutions Revalued: The Attack on Credit Monopoly from a Cultural Viewpoint,' Williams writes:

There were battles fought about the figure of George Washington more important to our condition today than Yorktown or Monmouth. The memorable engagement centering about the new Constitution, when Hamilton and Jefferson split the Cabinet of the first President, lost us the real fruits of the win from resort to arms... If the social demands Jackson later realized and fought for – the avenues that had been left open permitting the Biddle group to get hold of public moneys under the guise of the First Bank of the United States – if such ways toward subtle tyranny by Credit Monopoly could have been foreseen and forestalled at the beginning by some such philosophy as Social Credit now proposes – the dearest fruits of the first Revolution could have been unending to this day. (*ARI*, 117)

Williams goes on to dispute the extent to which America could call itself 'democratic' whilst its finances were being controlled by an economic autocracy. 'The United States is a political democracy in form,' Williams writes, 'but one thoroughly subverted by a rival economic structure which in fact negates much of the democratic intention' (*ARI*, 99). For Williams, America could only truly become democratic once it had managed to create an economic democracy to match its

political democracy. Williams' insistence on the primacy of economics, or rather, his assumption that the fiscal sub-structure necessarily outlasts and outvotes the political superstructure, ultimately goes all the way back to Marx.²⁴ But through Social Credit Williams was able to take these ideas in a thoroughly non-Marxist direction. Williams saw Social Credit, unlike communism, as being fundamentally concerned with preserving individualism and the 'democratic principle in economic affairs.' Rather than a 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat,'²⁵ Social Credit would revitalise America's time-honoured concept of liberty and would extend individual freedom into the economic sphere as well.

In his 1934 article on Social Credit for the *New Democracy*, Williams describes Social Credit as a 'Defense of the Realm Act' against the onslaught of fascism and communism. He argues that America and England rightly feel 'assailed by the implied dangers to individual liberty inherent in the trend of modern thought' and the emergence of European totalitarianism. He describes fascism as being 'founded on the destruction of civil liberties and the control of credit by the same old gang.' Communism, Williams argues, also 'connotes the immediate destruction of individual liberty.' He therefore sees Social Credit as a third way, implementing economic change on democratic terms, and 'an attempt to check the trend toward a Dictatorship of the Proletariat at a specific point this side of the loss of the ideal of personal liberty.'²⁶

It is important to note that Williams' support of Social Credit was therefore

²⁴ In his 1934 short story 'Dawn of Another Day,' for instance, Williams writes, 'I read that lousy book [*Das Kapital*] till I damned near knew it by heart. And the old bugger is right. To hell with the Capitalists that enslave the resources of the nation. You know yourself 5% of the people of the United States own 95% of the money. And 95% of the people own only 5% of the money. Now that's not right. We got to have a revolution and take it away from them.' Williams, 'The Dawn of Another Day,' *Blast* 1 (Jan-Feb, 1934), p.5.

²⁵ Williams, 'Social Credit as Anti-Communism,' *New Democracy*, 1:10 (15th January, 1934), p.2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

born out of his fear of totalitarianism as much as his desire for economic change. Nor is there any evidence that the Social Credit policies of Major Douglas would have succeeded in creating the economic democracy for which he hoped. Social Credit was only ever put into practice once, in Alberta, Canada, 1935, where it was quickly dropped after massive social and economic failure.²⁷ It is also important to note that Williams was not interested in a dogmatic version of Social Credit. Rather he was interested in the general principle of ‘socialising’ credit whilst retaining democratic government. He wrote to Munson in 1934, ‘It is true, as Pound says, that some sort of economic fabric underlies the effectiveness of any government... But that economic fabric need not by a long shot be Douglasism. It might be The Single Tax, it might even be common honesty... Douglasism, a step by step progress to the economic objective, seems preferable sometimes, to stupidity, as that which the soap box orator so loves.’²⁸ Unlike Pound, Williams was very aware that he lacked the economic qualifications for judging the soundness of Douglas’ economic proposals.²⁹ The American Social Credit Movement (ASCM) appealed to Williams because it positioned itself as being an economic package that could be implemented within any existing political system. In the words of Gorham Munson, the leader of the ASCM, the ‘underlying principles’ of socialized credit could ‘be directed along any line desired’ and ‘must, as a matter of course, be determined by the dominant cultural and philosophical concepts in the State.’³⁰ It is for this reason that the ASCM, also appealed to people such as James Laughlin, and indeed it was through Gorham Munson and the ASCM that Williams first came to meet the man who would become

²⁷ See Alvin Finkel, *The Social Credit Phenomenon in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989).

²⁸ WCW to GM, 5th March, 1934. Yale. EP Papers, Box 55 Folder 2521.

²⁹ See for instance his unpublished critical sketch, ‘The Address to Writing’ (1932), Buffalo, Wms Papers, C2.

³⁰ GM to JL, 5th June, 1940, Wesleyan University, Gorham Munson Papers, Box 12.

his publisher, and in many ways determine his legacy.³¹

Interestingly, Williams chooses not see Social Credit as something particularly 'new.' Rather he sees it as correcting the fundamental error that lay at the heart of the founding of America. If America 'started crooked as a nation' (*ARI*, 101), then Williams saw the Great Depression as a golden opportunity for American to realize the flawed nature of its past, and to finish the work of the Founding Fathers. For Williams, Social Credit was the only alternative economic model which respected America's past and built on it. It was an extension rather than a revision of Americanism: 'The history stands to be built upon, not ignored. Only some such view as social credit is designed not to subvert it,' he writes in an early draft of 'Revolutions Revalued.'³²

One notes that the narrative that Williams creates for America is fundamentally lapsarian. Indeed, it would be more accurate to say that Williams extends the lapsarian narrative that writers such as Whitman, Melville and Hawthorne have traditionally used to describe the American experience into the realm of economics as well.³³ In *American Grain*, for instance, the New World is a 'predestined and bitter fruit' or a 'flower' to be 'ravished' and the site of the New World contains both the Edenic promise and the concomitant 'predestined' fall. Certain moments throughout *American Grain* carry this narrative of the fall within them – when Columbus lands,

³¹ James Laughlin's 1936 Charlottesville speech is very similar in tone to Williams'. It is based around the idea of radically changing economics whilst retaining individual opportunity as the fundamental basis of the democratic state. James Laughlin, "The Artist, The Audience, and Social Credit," 11th July, 1936, Institute of Public Affairs, Charlottesville, Wesleyan University, Gorham Munson Papers, Box 26, Folder 577.

³² 'Revolutions Revalued,' Buffalo, Wms Papers, C9.

³³ The most famous book on this subject is probably R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (University of Chicago Press, 1955). See also Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor As Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp.16-7. For a discussion of how Williams continues the exploration of these Edenic myths in *Paterson*, see Harihar Rath, *The Poetry of Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams*, pp.281-2.

the slaughter of the Caribs, the destruction of Tenochtitlan. The Founding of the First Bank of America, and indeed the Revolution itself, constitutes another such moment of original sin. As Barry Shain remarks, ‘Americans envisaged the necessity of government itself through the lense of original sin.’³⁴ In other words, government is seen as the price that is paid for the severance from nature. For Williams, Hamilton failed to recognize the revolutionary potential of the New World – namely to recover that Edenic promise. For Williams the Revolution involved a ‘sense of rebirth, not so much a declaration of independence against little England as an announcement to heaven itself, full of pride and deep feeling’ Victory against England was a ‘false end’ for Williams, and what should have been a revolutionary mission for freedom and individualism ended with a pyrrhic victory in a materialist war, ‘liberty not won but lost anew in the melee’ (*ITAG*, 193-4). Thus, whilst there was a revolution, the true ‘revolutionary moment’ passed unfulfilled. Williams thus imagines an America of unbridled ‘liberty,’ freed not simply from English rule, but from all the things which English rule represents: materialism, the systemising principles of capitalism, government itself. ‘To rule is without sense’ Williams writes. In *American Grain*, the Revolutionary moment is not defined by a particular goal, for instance a tax revolt, or a revolution for fair representation, rather it is the revolutionary ‘spirit’ itself, the euphoria of a new world awakening. Jefferson had even attempted to enshrine this idea of a continuous revolutionary spirit when he proclaimed that America required a revolution ‘every ten years.’³⁵

Against the forces of industrialisation, which are nowhere more apparent than in the figure of Hamilton, Williams places the organicist tradition, represented by

³⁴ Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton University Press, 1994), pp.223-4.

³⁵ Williams includes this quotation in his early drafts of *The First President*. Yale, Wms papers, Box 58, Folder 1294.

figures such as Boone, De Soto and Père Rasles. The fall from a native grace, the despoiling of the land, and the economic exploitation of a nation are thus inherently connected in Williams' mind, and linked to the hated figure of Hamilton. For Williams, Hamilton is the epitome of America's denial of the native impulse, its Puritanism. There is also a clear connection here between Puritanism and industrialism. Williams implies that the mechanization of the continent is a continuation of the work of the first settlers. The American economy and its success with industry and innovation is for Williams driven by a fear of the hostile wilderness and the desire to tame and control it: 'Our immense wealth, the product of fear' (*ITAG*, 174). Wealth, and in particular the capitalist system, Williams sees as the wall that civilization builds around itself to keep out the wilderness. In contrast to this kind of wealth he posits the wealth of nature: Boone, for instance, was called by 'the forbidden wealth of the Unkown... Boone's genius was to recognize the difficulty [of civilization vs the wilderness] as neither material nor political but one purely moral and aesthetic' (*ITAG*, 131, 136).³⁶ Like Washington, Boone's enemy is not the Native American but Congress, who ultimately appropriated the land he had pioneered, leaving him with nothing. Like Washington, Boone had huge populist approval but many enemies amongst the establishment. The historical framework that Williams builds for America therefore ultimately takes part of the same romanticism that informs *The Cantos*, a romanticism that for Williams frequently goes under the name of 'native.' Rather than property or legal union the Native American's possessed 'the realization of their primal and continuous identity with the ground itself' (*ITAG*, 33).

³⁶ The opposition between 'nature' and 'capitalism' that Williams creates here is somewhat simplistic. In reality, Boone was very much a part of the capitalist system, being paid as a jobbing surveyor. See Dwight B. Billings, Kathleen M. Blee, *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.34-7.

These arguments and the overall theme of *American Grain* would seem to support the view, as Alec Marsh claims, that Williams was merely another romanticist, individualist, anti-Federalist agrarian, much like Pound.³⁷ But though Williams was certainly a ‘nativist,’ this only tells part of the story. Pound ultimately divided history into a struggle between two simplistic forces, the force of ‘usura’ (which is ‘contra naturam’) and the Confucian force of natural harmony between man and earth.³⁸ Williams in contrast offers a more complicated case. Williams does indeed idealize the pre-European life of the Native American and its mystical harmony with the natural world in much the same way that Pound relied on the mysticism of the Eleusinian rites. Unlike Pound, however, Williams did not seek to reaffirm these forces in the mystical or the divine; he immerses himself in the historical. Thus Williams argues that the modern poet must incorporate ‘the whole armamentarium of the industrial age into his poems’ (SE, 282) if he is to successfully reflect the times in which he lives. In *American Grain*, Williams writes:

what has been morally aesthetically worthwhile in America has rested upon peculiar and discoverable ground. But they think they get it out of the air or the rivers, or from the Grand Banks or wherever it may be, instead of by word of mouth or from records contained for us in books--and that, aesthetically, morally, we are deformed unless we read. (*ITAG*, 109)

In this respect the entire thrust of *American Grain* is actually towards uncovering the ‘grounds’ on which history is constructed, rather than mystifying

³⁷ Alec Marsh, *Money and Modernity: Pound, Williams, and the Spirit of Jefferson* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), p.1. Marsh’s book is in fact the only systematic attempt to deal with Williams’ economics and his support for the ASCM from a Jeffersonian perspective. Marsh’s book, however, is deeply flawed by his own personal support for Social Credit, and his naive regurgitation of anti-capitalist arguments put forward during the 1930s. Nevertheless, his basic argument, that modernist political aesthetics are derived from the Jeffersonian Populist movement, is highly compelling, though perhaps slightly more relevant for Pound than Williams.

³⁸ See for instance Cantos XLV, L, and LXXXII.

them, as Pound did, in the promise of pre-lapsarian harmony. Williams' peculiar historical methodology lies in his attempt to combine his conception of history as the local, the immediate, and the material, with his conception of history as a textual affair. By uncovering these grounds, by immersing oneself in the original historical documents and their subsequent exegeses, Williams believed America would be able to see through the Anglo-Puritan propaganda, and rectify the injustices of its age:

we have no conception at all of what is meant by moral, since we recognize no ground our own--and that this rudeness rests upon the unstudied character of our beginnings; and that if we will not pay heed to our own affairs, we are nothing but an unconscious porkyard and oil-hole for those, more able, who will fasten themselves upon us. (*ITAG*, 109).

This latter comment is clearly a reference to European exploitation, and again I refer in particular to the English, who Williams believed took the New World's resources without acknowledging the New World on its own terms: 'It was to them a carcass from which to tear pieces for their belly's sake... They gave to it parsimoniously, in a slender Puritan fashion' (*ITAG*, 108). Williams perceives this as not simply an economic question but as a cultural and linguistic one. Thus he believes that it is imperative for America to express its independence first by legitimating its own culture.

Marsh makes the interesting point that there is a chain of debt extending from east to west throughout America's history. Just as the Bank of England originally financed the movement into the New World and then later extracted interest on that debt on a vast, national scale (eventually leading to the Revolution), so Eastern American banks similarly financed expansion into the West, expecting similar returns

and causing a similar resentment towards New York bankers.³⁹ Indeed this is one of the central concerns of the debate between Jefferson, who wanted to completely eradicate the national debt, and Hamilton who wanted to sell the national debt in the form of bonds and turn it into a source of credit for the nation.⁴⁰ ‘At bottom, Jeffersonianism is war on debt,’ Marsh writes, leading him to conclude that ‘the writings of Pound and Williams [on Social Credit] can be read as the continuation of the American War of Independence at the cultural level.’⁴¹ In other words, Williams’ desire not to be ‘indebted’ to European culture was simply a legacy of American Revolutionary sentiment. The impression that finance capitalism was the act of powerful individuals enslaving the nation through perpetual indebtedness, was certainly not unique to the Depression, indeed it was a mainstay of The People’s Party of the 1890s.⁴² Henry George’s Single Tax Movement, which Williams’ father supported, was a part of the Populist movement against agricultural debt in the 1890s, for instance.

The desire to deal with the problem of indebtedness did acquire a new urgency in the 1930s, however, in the works of writers such as Steinbeck. One clearly finds this chain of debt extending from west to east in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Oklahoma farmer who is being evicted from his property by the banks starts thinking about who he would kill in retribution. He considers killing the man who comes to knock his house down, but he just works for the farm manager. Killing the farm manager would be unfair because he gets his orders from the bank, and they work for

³⁹ Marsh, *Money and Modernity*, p.14.

⁴⁰ For a discussion of Jefferson and Hamilton’s battle over the national debt see Herbert E. Sloan, *Principle and Interest: Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Debt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). See also Robert E. Wright, *One Nation Under Debt : Hamilton, Jefferson, and the History of What We Owe* (McGraw Hill Professional, 2008).

⁴¹ Marsh, *Money and Modernity*, p.14.

⁴² H.W. Brands, *The Reckless Decade: America in the 1890s* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), p.186.

the bank manager, who 'gets orders from the East.' His question leads him to consider taking it up with someone on the board of directors on the East coast. 'But where does it stop? Who can we shoot?'⁴³ Like most agrarian/proletarian literature of the 1930s, the earthy tangible world of the farmer exists in opposition to the abstract world of finance in which no-one is ultimately accountable, 'Maybe there's nobody to shoot.'⁴⁴ The bank is portrayed as a monster that must be continually fed profits: 'Men made it but they can't control it.'⁴⁵ The several families who raised the land are replaced by a single tractor, the living symbol of the monster. Unlike humans, the monster is deprived of the sensuous, aesthetic appreciation of the land, 'He [the tractor-monster personified] could not see the land as it was, he could not smell the land as it smelled; his feet did not stamp the clods or feel the warmth and power of the earth.'⁴⁶

But whilst Williams did indeed indulge in these Jeffersonian fantasies of agrarian timelessness and natural harmony, he did not buy into them in the way that Steinbeck, and especially Pound, did.⁴⁷ Indeed, Williams was more interested in legitimising American culture, the culture of the earth, by revealing the pre-European roots of that culture, and offering a counter-narrative that destabilizes and decentralizes hegemonic European versions of concepts such as individualism, liberty, property, culture, and most crucially money itself, which Social Credit sought to radically redefine.

⁴³ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (London: Penguin Classic, 2000), p.40-1. Jonathan Veitch makes the argument that this represents a failure of the system of representation. The system itself grew so big and so far from the control of any given individual that it took on a life of its own, one that could not in fact be held to account for any of its actions. Veitch, *American Superrealism*, p.3.

⁴⁴ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, p.41.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p.36.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p.38.

⁴⁷ See footnote 36, p.213.

4.2. George Washington in the 1930s

Williams' first writings on George Washington date back to *American Grain* in 1923, a book which Williams conceived whilst he was away in Europe. From his later correspondence with George Antheil, it is clear that it was during his 1923 Paris trip that the two of them first met and conceived of the idea of doing an opera about the life of George Washington together. The initial plans for the opera therefore extend back to the same point at which Williams planned *American Grain*, but he did not put them into action until Antheil wrote to him in 1932, saying that he had 'always been thinking back on the Washington opera' and that since arriving in New York he had been 'discussing the idea with some very powerful people'⁴⁸ at the Guggenheim Foundation, leading Williams to think there was a strong chance they could get the project funded. The terms in which Antheil originally presented the idea to Williams made it clear that he was expecting a work of misty-eyed patriotism and the romance of the American landscape: 'I think that you would be the only man of my own native country who could express that country as I feel it... a thousand nostalgies... [sic] our earth, which has never been expressed in great music, even if there has been some tradition in letters.'⁴⁹ The original impetus for writing a patriotic account of Washington, and the 'nativist' expectations of the libretto, therefore came from Antheil as much as from Williams. When the funding opportunities fell through, however, Antheil gradually withdrew from the project, leaving Williams to find another composer. Zukofsky set Williams up with the Hungarian composer, Tibor Serly, in May 1933, but the two were not able to successfully complete the project.

⁴⁸ GA to WCW (undated, though from its place in the Williams-Antheil correspondence, this letter can be dated between Jan and March 1932 with confidence). Yale, Wms papers, Box 1, Folder 23.

⁴⁹ GA to WCW, 2nd May, 1932. Yale, Wms papers, Box 1, Folder 23.

Williams felt that Serly was attempting to turn the opera into a biography of Washington set to music, rather than an ‘effect,’ as he wrote to Zukofsky,⁵⁰ that conveys the sense of Washington as a character, as a historical force. Eventually they parted ways and Williams published the finished libretto in the 1936 *American Caravan*, without music, but with a long introduction giving instructions to any future composer.⁵¹

The libretto would take up a huge amount of Williams’ time from 1933 to 1935, the period in which he was also writing two of his most successful volumes, *An Early Martyr* and *The Knife of the Times*. Though the finished product is not nearly as successful as either of those other two works, Williams was more personally invested in his opera than almost anything else he ever wrote, and the project required not only an enormous amount of research into the life of Washington, but put a huge personal strain on him. ‘I have labored at it until my eyes are almost hanging out,’ Williams wrote to Zukofsky in June 1933, ‘I’m pretty well convinced that it’s the end of me as far as writing is concerned.’⁵² Even long after the 1936 publication, Williams carried on working on it ‘unconsciously’ and he still planned on revisiting and completing it.⁵³ The critical reception of the libretto has justifiably been reserved. Loevy rightly asserts that the introduction is a much more important piece of writing than the opera itself.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, I wish to show that understanding how Williams perceived the figure of George Washington is important

⁵⁰ WCW to LZ, 14th Nov, 1934, p.203.

⁵¹ See WCW to LZ 22nd Oct 1935, p.221. Williams tells Zukofsky he has decided to pursue his part in the libretto independently. For the final version of the libretto see *The New Caravan* ed. Alfred Kreyenbourg, Lewis Mumford and Paul Rosenfeld (New York: W.W. Norton, 1936), pp.563-602, reprinted in *Many Loves*, pp.310-358.

⁵² WCW to LZ, 20th June, 1933, p.160.

⁵³ See WCW to LZ, 19th April, 1939, p.267. Even in later life Williams planned to redo the libretto ‘without snow maidens’ (A, 301).

⁵⁴ Steven Ross Loevy, *William Carlos Williams’ A Dream of Love* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1983), p.6.

in understanding how Williams perceived his native country and the role of the American artist.

There is no denying that the figure of Washington is important for Williams. Not only did he write an entire libretto on Washington, but he even came back to the story of Washington in his unfinished farce, 'The Battle of Brooklyn' written in 1939, as well as his 1944 imagined dialogue between Washington and Lafayette, 'Under the Stars.'⁵⁵ It also no co-incidence that this flurry of writing about Washington began in the same year as the George Washington bicentennial. Washington's bicentennial, coming in the worst year of economic depression in 1932, was an enormous affair. It lasted for 9 months and was congressionally mandated, consisting of numerous fife and drum parades as well as millions of 'pageants, eulogies, masses and banquets' as well as histories, paintings and other works of art.⁵⁶ A staggering 15,500 items per day appeared in U.S. newspapers in 1932 on the subject of Washington. A Bicentennial commission was established and tasked with writing an official history of George Washington, which was published in five volumes as *The History of the George Washington Bicentennial Celebration*.⁵⁷ Williams owned the first of these volumes (though he also relied on J.D. Sawyer's two volume 1928 biography of Washington).⁵⁸

The Bicentennial Commission even published suggestions for thirty different

⁵⁵ 'Under the Stars: A Dialogue', *University of Kansas City Review*, 11:1 (Autumn 1944), pp.26-8.

⁵⁶ Sol Bloom, 'The George Washington Bicentennial Celebration,' *Advocate of Peace through Justice*, 93:3 (August, 1931), p.163. For an indication of the sheer size and scope of the celebrations as well as the organization that went into planning them see Greenhalgh, "'Not a Man but a God": The Apotheosis of Gilbert Stuart's Athenaem Portrait of George' in *Winterthur Portfolio*, 41:4 (Winter 2007), p.272.

⁵⁷ See Adam Greenhalgh, 'Not a Man but a God,' pp.271-2. I rely heavily here on Greenhalgh's fascinating and extensive research into the 1932 Bicentennial. Greenhalgh focuses on the argument that the famous Athenaem portrait of Washington was used as a cult religious symbol during the Bicentennial to unify the nation and inspire social cohesion.

⁵⁸ Buffalo, WCW Papers, B37.

pageants, each based on episode from Washington's life that schools and communities could use to celebrate the Bicentennial. Five of these appear in Williams' libretto, which Capucci lists as 'Washington's troops in Valley Forge'; 'Washington rallies the troops at Monmouth'; 'Washington replies to the Newburgh addresses on Army complaints'; 'Washington's Inauguration as the first President' and 'Washington discusses the Neutrality Proclamation with his Cabinet.'⁵⁹ In fact Williams was eager to assert in his introduction that his libretto would not be a 'pageant' (*ML*, 309) like the other pageants that were being performed to celebrate the Bicentennial. He argues that in a normal historical pageant the character 'moves through' history as through facts in chronological order, whereas his portrayal intended to capture the idea of Washington as a historical force: 'he himself moves the scenes'. In keeping with this agenda, my own research therefore focuses on the 'unofficial' scenes that Williams includes in his libretto, the scenes that cannot be found in history books, those points at which Williams attempted to creatively imagine Washington as a character.

Williams was therefore not the only one to think about re-enacting the life of Washington in 1932. In fact, the entire nation was thinking and writing obsessively about him. Moreover there was a certain self-consciousness involved in this retrospective. As Greenhalgh writes, 'The difficult times demanded a show of national unity built around Washington's symbolic presence.'⁶⁰ Pastors, politicians, journalists and critics frequently made the same point; that, in the words of the Reverend Peter Guilday, 'we need the lessons of Washington's life... to carry us

⁵⁹ Paul Cappucci, 'A Libretto in Search of Music: The Strain of Collaborative Creation in William Carlos Williams's *The First President*' in *Journal of Modern Literature*, 36:2 (Winter 2013), p.101.

⁶⁰ Greenhalgh, 'Not a Man but a God,' p.272.

safely through the turbulent waters of discontent and depression which Almighty God has permitted to sweep across the face of the nation.’⁶¹ In addition to the flag-waving and celebrations, the 1930s was also a time of debunking when it came to Washington, as people became interested in the real Washington behind the legend.⁶² Schwartz writes:

Since Washington’s death, every generation of Americans has found it necessary to reassess his personal character... Throughout the 1920s, Washington came to be regarded by some as a complete businessman and captain of industry. In the late 1920s and early 1930s he became the object of both cynical debunking and spectacular bicentennial birthday rites.⁶³

In many ways, this combination of debunking and renewed faith was similar to the paradox that one sees in *Ballad for America* (1939) or Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith goes to Washington* (1939). The realization of a pervasive cynicism towards America's sentimental democratic ideals is precisely the time to renew those ideals, despite the understanding that it is, as Capra's film has it, a ‘fool’s faith.’

Roosevelt, who at the time had yet to enter office, was also quick to use the occasion of the Bicentennial for his own political purposes. His speeches during this time reinforced the proposition that America *is* able to solve its current crises by reaffirming its founding principles. At the same time he used the image of Washington to cast himself as a strong and revolutionary leader and to align the New Deal with the Revolutionary period, describing Washington as a ‘great man who met

⁶¹Ibid. p.271.

⁶² This debunking became the main strand of Washington scholarship following on from William E. Woodward's *Washington: The Image and the Man* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926) and Rupert Hughes, *George Washington: The Human Being and the Hero, 1732-1762* (New York: W. Morrow & company, 1926). See also *A Companion to George Washington*, ed. Edward G. Lengel (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2012). Lengel writes, ‘By the late 1920s, as plans for Washington's Bicentennial took shape, the pedestal began cracking under his feet.’ I argue that Williams’ ‘debunking’ of Washington, like other parts of the Bicentennial celebrations, actually created a less cold and aristocratic image of Washington which allowed writers to bring him into alignment with Popular Front ideals and incorporate him into the wider populist ideology of the decade.

⁶³ Barry Schwartz, ‘Social Change and the Collective Memory: The Democratization of George Washington’ in *American Sociological Review*, 56:2 (April, 1991), p.221.

and overcame the same kind of problems by which we are beset.⁶⁴ Seen in this light the New Deal would be a second Revolutionary period continuing the work of the Founding Fathers in protecting the rights of man from tyranny, economic exploitation and political repression. In particular the rhetoric of both periods was aimed at the injustice of the ruling ‘plutocracy.’⁶⁵

As the 1930s progressed, the figure of Washington was increasingly used as a counter-point for European dictators. Under threat from radical forms of government on both the left and the right, the figure of Washington was systematically appropriated to create a sense of historical, ideological and political continuity, and to reaffirm American democratic ideals.⁶⁶ Grant Wood, who painted Parson Weems’ apocryphal story in 1939,⁶⁷ even made a case for deliberately creating an American ‘historical romance’ around the figure of Washington. He wrote, ‘while our own patriotic mythology has been increasingly discredited and abandoned, the dictator nations have been building up their respective mythologies and have succeeded in “making patriotism glamorous.”’⁶⁸ This latter quote is a reference to an article by Howard Mumford Jones in which he argues that ‘The only way to conquer an alien

⁶⁴ Quoted from Paul Cappucci, ‘A Libretto in Search of Music,’ p.101.

⁶⁵ Williams uses the term in his review of Pound’s *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*. See ‘Jefferson and/or Mussolini’, *New Democracy*, Oct. 15, 1935, p.62.

⁶⁶ Ironically Lloyd George described Hitler as ‘the George Washington of Germany’ in an article in *The Daily Express*, 17th September 1936.

⁶⁷ The story goes that Washington, having been given a hatchet as a birthday present by his father, was so happy with his new toy that he cut down his father’s favourite cherry tree. His father asked him if he knew who did it and Washington replied, ‘I cannot tell a lie, Papa. I did cut it with my hatchet.’ This was taken as evidence by Parson Weems of Washington’s literal inability to lie. The story is entirely anecdotal and Parson Weems appears to have invented it, using the exemplary character of Washington as moral instruction for his readers.

⁶⁸ Greenhalgh, ‘Not a Man but a God,’ p.300. James MacGregor wrote a fascinating article on this subject in 1942, in which he discusses Roosevelt’s open request for the people of America to ‘think up a name’ for the war. MacGregor argues that where the 1930s was characterized by the question, ‘How can we stop people from being misled and dominated by symbols?’ the war effort had proved that the premise of this question was flawed and had instead given rise to a new question, ‘How can we strengthen the democratic symbols?’ James MacGregor, ‘The Roosevelt-Hitler Battle of Symbols’ in *The Antioch Review*, 2:3 (Autumn, 1942), pp. 407-8.

mythology is to have a better mythology of your own.’⁶⁹

It is this tension between the mythology of Washington, what we might call the ‘historical romance,’ and the ‘cynical debunking’ of Washington, exposing the man behind the myth, that underscores Williams’ libretto. The libretto begins with Washington at his native Mt. Vernon on the eve of his inauguration. Unlike traditional portrayals of Washington, which focus on the public Washington, Williams begins and ends in the private, domestic space of Washington, as he relates his intimate thoughts to his wife:

For me
the chair of government will bring
feelings not unlike those of a culprit
going to the place of execution

Williams’ Washington is significantly more vulnerable than traditional portrayals; he is filled with self-doubt and insecurity about his ability to lead the nation. The idea behind this of course is to get at the ‘real’ Washington behind the legend, his inner vulnerable core. Much like *Citizen Kane* (1941), the public life of Washington, as played on the pages of history books, is constantly intertwined with the interior/domestic space of Washington, as encapsulated in his private discussions with his wife. These correspond also to two movements that exist side by side in *The First President*, the apotheosis of Washington as a national hero, and the humanizing of Washington as a man. The former is a story of triumph – in battle, at the inauguration, in foreign policy etc. The latter would be, as Williams describes it, a ‘tragedy’ (*ML*, 306): the tragedy of a man who is a ‘sacrifice to the mob,’ subject to the whims of a fickle and ungrateful crowd, who spends his entire life in service to a

⁶⁹ Ibid.

country that ultimately turns on him. Of these two contrasting narratives however, Williams clearly privileges the personal narrative. The ‘true theme’ of *The First President*, Williams writes, ‘is the inner drama of his life’ (*ML*, 308).

In this regard Williams discusses the immense importance of the music for his portrayal of Washington. He argues that music was the only way that the audience could gain access to the private thoughts and feelings of Washington, his inner song. Music is the ‘natural language’ of the imagination, Williams argues, and it allows us to inhabit the past, not as a dry sequence of facts, but to think of the past as a human product. In this sense we can see *The First President* as a continuation of the project that Williams had started in *American Grain*: namely to perceive history as biography. The term ‘history’ may be somewhat confusing here. Williams did not in fact see *American Grain* as ‘history’ since the term was too closely aligned with academic methodology: ‘history follows governments and never men. It portrays us in generic patterns, like effigies or the carvings on sarcophagi, which say nothing save, of such and such a man, that he is dead. That’s history’ (*ITAG*, 188). Williams desired to make history ‘living’ again by reconstructing the inner life of its protagonists. What Williams says about Aaron Burr is also true for Washington, ‘He’s in myself and so I dig through lies to resurrect him’ (*ITAG*, 197). Indeed, Williams had always intended his libretto to be a self-portrait of sorts: ‘I am Washington’ Williams asserts in his autobiography (*A*, 301).

Through the music Washington ‘becomes a contemporary in the inventions which prove our souls, in a common setting, to be the same as his’ (*ML*, 304). It is for this reason that *The First President* could never have simply been a play. In music ‘The world of recollection is real,’ Williams writes, and the past becomes alive in ‘the dream’ of the opera (*ML*, 305). Thus Williams does not portray Washington’s life

chronologically. Instead the technique of ‘recollection’ (breaking up any continuous narrative development with chronological shifts) forces the audience to consider the story from the perspective of what it means (interior) rather than what actually happens (exterior). ‘Liberated’ from ‘the mere historicity of events,’ Williams anticipates that the non-chronological order will encourage the audience instead to ‘*look for the meaning*’ actively (*ML*, 306-7).

The expunged Senator scene from Act III is most revealing in this respect. Williams planned to include a scene showing a secret love affair between a Senator and his mistress. Set in Washington D.C. in roughly 1925, it shows the Senator with his mistress in a private room overlooking the Washington monument, with the sounds of a party coming from next door. The senator is attempting to put an end to the affair with his mistress, paranoid that it has already been discovered. He is ‘remorseful’ to the point of being suicidal and ‘accuses himself as a false servant of the country.’ The senator’s mistress on the other hand is simply drunk and wants to dance. A ‘wild nigger jazz’ comes on and the mistress dances alone. Williams then gives a rather strange stage direction: ‘as she dances a partner appears in her arms. The music has changed to the old style. It is the young Washington dancing.’ To be precise, Williams planned for the ghost of Washington to appear to be dancing ‘by the use of light and shadow’ rather than for an actor to appear on stage. The scene then snaps back into 1925 with the sound of a gunshot as the Senator kills himself.⁷⁰

One may well ask exactly what Williams’ purpose was in including this strange and unpleasant scene from 1925.⁷¹ If, as Williams writes in the introduction, his

⁷⁰ Yale, WCW Papers, Box 58, Folder 1294.

⁷¹ The entire Senator scene, one might speculate, could be intended to represent Williams’ own illicit affairs. Amongst the notes for his unfinished novel is a plot outline called ‘The Senator’s Wife,’

purpose was to ‘project the figure of Geo. Washington across the panorama of American history’ (*ML*, 303), then this seems like an extremely odd way to express the spirit of Washington. Williams wrote that the third and final act would have to be ‘the very *soul* of Washington’ and yet we cannot be sure whether it is the wild spirit of the Senator's mistress, with her jazz and her dancing, or the sombre melancholy spirit of the Senator, racked with guilt and public duty, that is intended to express this soul. In another version of this scene, Williams intended to intersperse the 1925 Senator scene with scenes of Sally Fairfax (Washington's alleged mistress) teaching him how to dance. The idea behind this scene, we must finally conclude, is to show the two contrasting aspects of Washington: the dutiful Washington of public life, repressed, Puritanical and rigid, and the wild Washington of the frontier, the ‘great wench lover’ (*ITAG*, 143). Marzán argues that Williams’ Washington contains traces of his own father, in as much as he represents the tension between an external rigidity and repression and an inner erotic, primal desire. He argues that the act of procreation and the founding of America by the nation's ‘fathers’ are often aligned in Williams work: ‘she / opened the door! Nearly / six feet tall, and I... / wanted to found a new country’ (*CPI*, 331).⁷²

Fortunately Zukofsky was able to persuade Williams to drop the entire scene, arguing that ‘the audience won’t know what’s happened to your opera of gen. Washington.’ In order to capture the same effect of Washington's impact in the modern era, Zukofsky wanted to replace the scene with a Dos Passos-style ‘news-reel’ display of contemporary American scenes, giving a ‘frank picture’ of the United States in the 1930s. The action would momentarily stop to show pictures of a Mid

focusing on the figure of Dolores Marie Pischak, a pseudonym for a woman with whom Williams was almost certainly having an affair. Yale, WCW Papers, Box54, Folder 1227.

⁷² See Julio Marzán, *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams*, p.101.

West farm, and Oklahoma oil-field, the construction of the Boulder Dam, breadlines in the Bowery slums, Broadway at night and many others, ending with a picture of a statue of Washington.⁷³ Certainly Williams wished to show how the spirit of America was shaped by Washington, but he did not ultimately accept Zukofsky's idea of the 'newsreel' to end his libretto. The Washington that Williams wished to create was not a documentary Washington, it was a spiritual Washington. It was the way in which Washington was imagined and re-imagined by successive generations that particularly intrigued Williams. In this respect we can see how important the 'imaginary' Washington is in Williams' libretto, the idea of the 'dream' Washington, his ghostly spirit, corresponding to a 'dream' America. In the introduction he writes:

Upon what do we stand? Have we a history at all? Certainly we should have had a very different one had not Washington passionately defended it in his imagination.

It was an imaginary republic he created and defended with a very real array, as a servant of the people. It was a country he pasted together a good deal out of shoddy to represent the thing we still endeavor to perfect. (*ML*, 303)

Williams implies that the true America is not the America existing in the mid-1930s, but rather the 'dream' America which Washington had imagined, and which can never in fact be realized, but only worked towards. These dream sequences pervade the opera. Indeed, dream becomes a framing device for the entire play. At the beginning, when Washington is suffering from nightmares on the eve of his inauguration, Martha lulls him back to sleep. As Washington falls asleep he goes back into a fitful dream, and the audience are left with the impression that the entire play is actually the dream of Washington recollecting his life. Likewise, the scene of Arnold's betrayal is even witnessed by an 'Imaginary Figure' of Washington hovering above the stage near the roof of the theatre. Williams writes, 'The

⁷³ LZ to WCW, 1st August 1934, p.192-3.

Imaginary Figure... is the personification of Washington's recollecting, feeling spirit as he recalls this bitter moment of his life' (*ML*, 325). Interestingly, Williams opens the framing device at the start but he doesn't close it at the end. Throughout the libretto, there are several such moments of stepping-outside-the-text, which are intended to create the effect that we, the audience, are even now living inside Washington's dream.

These two contrasting aspects of Washington, the ideal/dream Washington and the earthy/terrestrial Washington, also reflect the change that was taking place in how Washington was being portrayed. For the first half of the nineteenth-century, Washington was portrayed as the very exemplar of noble aristocratic ideals, often described as 'grave,' 'boring,' 'dead' and 'stiff.' As Schwartz explains, 'Restrained laughter, disciplined emotions, limits on expression in general, go along with rigid social structures and formalized social relations.'⁷⁴ In the first two decades of the twentieth-century, during the Progressive Era, the aristocratic ideals of the Founding Fathers and their distrust towards the rule of the masses became unfashionable. Such populist ideals had of course been a mainstay of Williams' work since 'The Wanderer', and continued into the 1930s with, for example, his 1935 'Poem for Norman Macleod,'

The revolution
is accomplished
noble has been
changed to no bull. (*CPI*, 401)

In response to the new social and political climate, the image of Washington

⁷⁴ Schwartz, 'The Democratization of George Washington,' p.225.

changed, and he became ‘increasingly Lincolnesque.’⁷⁵ The *Chicago Tribune* wrote in 1912, ‘he did not hesitate to lay aside his coat and labour with his workmen, and there were few whose strength could vie with his’ (12th Feb, 1909). Painters such as J. L. G. Ferris portrayed Washington in various everyday situations, such as his 1919 painting ‘The American Cincinnatus’ showing Washington with hammer and tongs in a blacksmiths. In short the ‘neoclassical’ version of Washington (which we might also see as a ‘Puritan’ Washington, concerned with moral and social loftiness), was replaced by the romantic version of Washington. This was also the explicit aim of the Bicentennial. Sol Bloom, the project organizer, declared that in order for citizens to ‘instinctively emulate his character’ it was necessary to ‘humanize him.’ ‘Washington and his generation must be stripped of all the myth and legend which have been accumulated for nearly two centuries and their sterling human qualities allowed to appear,’ he wrote.⁷⁶

At first glance it appears that Williams’ design in writing the libretto is to portray Washington as a man of the people: ‘He was used to living in his Virginia environment’ Williams writes, ‘where he talked with everybody rich and poor.’ And yet one cannot deny that there is still something of the old, aristocratic Washington in *The First President*. In his notes at the end for instance he tells the story of when Washington walked into a room full of young men having fun. Immediately upon seeing Washington everyone froze in their tracks, leaving Washington no choice but to walk out again. It was his fate, it seems, to be a ‘great man,’ isolated from the rest of the world. Furthermore, if Williams was genuinely interested in portraying Washington as a man of the people, why did he choose the traditionally aristocratic

⁷⁵ Ibid. p.226.

⁷⁶ Greenhalgh, ‘Not a Man but a God,’ pp, 276, 299-300.

form of the opera, which was so far removed from the entertainments of ordinary Americans?

The second act is most revealing in this respect. It begins in a tavern where the ‘Townsmen,’ the ordinary people are singing ‘Come my lad and have some beer,’ and being boisterous.

What’s the news, Garry? News!
I hear he met General Washington
riding in the street
and the General asked him how
to whip the British – and which
way to the inn. (*ML*, 334)

Washington does not actually drink beer in the tavern with the townsmen, but his spirit is invoked there as part of the unruly spirit of revolution. Williams shows that the common soldiers have a connection to Washington, they appropriate him as one of their own, so that in some sense he belongs to them. Washington is contrasted throughout this passage with Lee, who has just failed at the Battle of Monmouth. Williams’ understanding of Monmouth (as related in the text itself) is that Lee spent more time making sure that the troops were retreating in nice orderly rectangles than he did attacking the enemy, and that it took Washington’s enormous daring and courage to rescue the day. Lee’s bumbling aristocratic incompetence, and his absurd offer to pay the man who finds his dog a small fortune, are contrasted with Washington’s get-the-job-done attitude (*ML*, 336, 340). We do not actually get to see Washington during this scene, but we hear about his legendary fury at Lee’s incompetence through the other officers. The fact that Washington’s actions are seen through the other officers in this manner serves a dual purpose: firstly it heightens our sense of the Washington legend even more by not simply relating what Washington did, but also how we should interpret those actions (i.e. as heroic), and

secondly it allows Washington to continue to appear modest. Williams implies that it is the roughness of Washington, his willingness to tough it out, in short, the traits he shares with ordinary soldiers, that allows Washington to succeed where the aristocratic Lee fails.

From the tavern scene the opera moves straight to its cultural opposite, the ballet scene at Valley Forge. The ballet scene is perhaps the most inexplicable part of the opera. Williams, no doubt sensing this, reassures the reader that it is ‘a serious and essential part of the opera, representing the lot of the common American soldier and his relation to Washington’ (*ML*, 341). The ballet starts by showing a foot soldier on sentry duty. As snow begins to fall, the scene slides into an unreal, dream space, and the sentry is approached by snow maidens. The snow maidens then start to dance, taking the action momentarily out of the war into the realm of romance. The reference to Rimsky-Korsakov also serves a clear purpose here. Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Snow Maiden* is a story which self-consciously deals with the desire of the mythical Snow Maiden (representing Winter) to enter the terrestrial world in order to find love. In the Romantic tradition, the lofty realm of idealized love must be abandoned at the end, so that the characters can take part in the messy but fertile world of the living. At the end the snow maiden literally melts, showing herself to be nothing more than an idea. In a similar fashion, the process of the libretto represents an abandoning of the ‘dream’ Washington (representing the ideals of an imagined promised land) and the engagement in the practicalities of the Revolution, most of which was characterized by ‘illiberality and jealousy’ (*ML*, 323) as well as betrayal and suffering. Washington himself then enters the snow maiden’s dance with his officers. In the midst of this mythic snow-scape, reality suddenly rushes back in again, as the British army attack the dancers. The effect of this scene is a kind of

surreal stepping-outside-the-text. Nor is it properly resolved. Unlike *The Snow Maiden* where the ideal is shown to simply melt away, in Williams' libretto, the soldiers actually seize the snow maidens, leading to what can only be described as a bizarre clashing of the real and the unreal, the historical and the mythical. In an act of personal sacrifice and hero-worship, the common soldier throws himself on a bayonet to prevent Washington from being captured.

From this scene it cuts to a discussion of the officers at Valley Forge, where Washington is considering resigning. The reason for this (and here Williams is offering his own interpretation) is that Congress had lost faith in the war, and had been hijacked by a 'cabal' run by General Gates and The Board of War. In a plot to oust Washington from command, they had been attempting to starve their own army (this latter claim appears to be an exaggeration on Williams' part). Washington wishes to resign his commission to spare his men, but General Knox dissuades him:

You were always to obey
Your superiors. You were commanded
To lead this army. No one
Has commanded you to cease leading it. (*ML*, 345)⁷⁷

Just as the common foot soldier does his duty, so Washington does his. In this way, the condescending idolization of Washington and the transparent social injustice of the foot soldier's death are absolved by a military hierarchy that removes the will of the individual from the equation and substitutes legitimate democratic relations for sentimentalized hero-worship. Ultimately the ballet scene and the Valley Forge scene following it do not explain the relationship of the common man to Washington, but merely idealize it.

⁷⁷ Knox also makes a pointed reference to the knife that Washington is holding in what is clearly an allusion to Parson Weems' fable.

The early drafts of the libretto serve to clarify the problematic nature of this hero-worship even more. In the initial drafts for the first scene, Williams created the character of an ageing slave called Jed (who is replaced by the character of Doll in the final version). Jed gives the following speech in the first scene:

They tell me
the General's goin' away and
he don't wanna go.
Then why he go?
Who's makin' the General go
when he don't wanna go?
We's scared, the people is
awful scared. You ain't
sendin' us away too is you
is you, Mistress Martha?⁷⁸

The obsequious fawning of this imagined slave, along with his adamant desire not to be 'sent away' from the plantation that has enslaved him is morally and politically demeaning as well as racially insulting. Williams' design in including this character, who Martha affectionately refers to as 'Uncle Jed,' is abundantly clear: he is there to show that Washington is loved by all the people, and especially by reliable, morally upright people like 'Uncle Jed,' who represents the honest working man. The result, however, is not only that Williams ends up indulging in a kind of patriarchal slave fantasy, but that he reinforces the idea of Washington as an, albeit unwilling, dictator, forced against his will to lead slaves and soldiers alike.

4.3. Washington, Whiggery and Isolationism

It is worth examining the terms on which Washington became a cult figure. In some sense Washington is the pinnacle of the heroic individuals that constitute the

⁷⁸ Yale, WCW Papers, Box 58, Folder 1294.

main subject matter of *American Grain*, as well as the ‘living embodiment,’ as Williams refers to him, of America. Washington shot to fame after being named commander of the Continental Army, and was a national hero even before he had fought his first battle, en route to Boston, but it wasn’t until his Farewell Address of 1796 that he became more than just a man in the eyes of the American people. The figure of George Washington in many ways embodies the paradox of the Revolutionary period. The problem of the powerful individual in a nation that favours individualism was at the centre of Jefferson’s political philosophy, and Locke’s before him.⁷⁹ And yet, paradoxically America chose to venerate a single man, George Washington, as a national icon and a living symbol of the united concerns of the individual states. At the start of the Revolution, before the states had formally declared their united allegiance and separation from Great Britain, George Washington was given a personal charter to lead the Continental Army. The charter referred to Washington by name and Congress pledged to ‘maintain and assist... the said George Washington’ personally in his endeavours.⁸⁰ Washington therefore took personal responsibility for the entire Revolution in its early stages: it would live or die with him. The army itself, as the only body that united the individual states, became the new symbol of the unity of the states, though ironically it was not democratic. ‘The army was Washington’s own possession,’ Williams writes in his notes on the libretto. ‘It had but one leader (finally), one soul. It lived, the only permanent body amongst a disorganized, doubting people. And it came to be a symbol of national unity’ (*ML*, 315). Throughout the war, wherever the King’s

⁷⁹ ‘Real Whigs’ such as John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, who were popularizing the philosophy of John Locke, helped propagate the essentially Neo-Calvinist idea that no man can stand up to the temptations of power (only constitutional checks and balances could accomplish that), and they placed a corresponding Whiggish emphasis on the cult of virtue.

⁸⁰ Barry Schwartz, ‘George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership’ in *American Sociological Review*, 48:1 (Feb, 1983), p.21.

statutes and portraits were torn down, Washington's were immediately put up.⁸¹ Washington fulfilled the need for a central unifying symbol. Naturally, there was some considerable paranoia during Washington's lifetime, especially on the part of Congress, that he had become too powerful. When the Revolution was over many expected Washington to march on Congress and take up government. When he resigned his commission, thus acknowledging civilian rule over the armed forces and proving himself to be more than just another Cromwell, his popular approval soared to new heights.⁸²

Schwartz makes a case that the philosophy underpinning this rejection of power, and indeed the entire tenor of the Revolution, was decidedly Whiggish. Schwartz argues that historically there have been two main modes of leadership. The first he defines in accordance with Max Weber's conception of 'charismatic leadership' (though he could equally have drawn on Nietzsche) as being in the tradition of the *Führer-Prinzip*. Leaders of this nature, Weber argues, are 'authoritarian' and refuse to be governed by 'abstract legal codes'. Such leaders are 'dedicated exclusively to radical change,' transforming traditional values and breaking normative forms, in other words revolutionary leaders.⁸³ The second form of leadership, he defines as 'Whig leadership' and this is characterized by a conspicuous rejection of power, a tendency towards self-sacrifice, and a privileging of the 'ordinary.' Where a 'Weberian' revolution would be one that sought to create new values and new social structures to go along with them, a 'Whiggish' revolution

⁸¹ Ibid. p.24.

⁸² William Rasmussen, Robert S. Tilton, *George Washington: The Man Behind the Myths* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1999), p.155.

⁸³ Originally from Weber's *Economy and Society, Volume 2*. Quoted here from Schwartz, 'George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership,' p.19.

would be essentially conservative in nature, in other words, a revolution that sought to restore previously held rights and values.⁸⁴ Washington is almost the archetype of this latter form of leadership, which is ultimately underscored by a Christian narrative of self-sacrifice and humility.⁸⁵ In this we can also clearly that Williams' support of the ASCM is decidedly 'Whiggish' in this respect: he saw the mission of the ASCM as being to correct the mistakes of the Founding Fathers and bring about a restoration of America's true purpose, rather than to break up traditional social structures and experiment with new forms of government.

Though it dipped for periods during his time in office, Washington's popularity remained high, and calls for Washington to remain in office for a third term threatened the integrity of the fledgling democracy. When Washington published his Farewell Address to the nation in 1796, announcing that he was giving up the Presidency and urging national unity, there was such an outcry of popular approval for Washington that he became the figurehead for what Greenhalgh argues can only be described as America's 'civil religion.' The principles of this civil religion were inspired by the inherent promise of American democracy, immortalised in Jefferson's words, that all men are created equal, that man is born with certain 'inalienable

⁸⁴ 'The American revolution, as has been frequently noted, was a conservative uprising which aspired not to the creation of a new order but to the restoration of previously held rights and liberties.' Ibid.

⁸⁵ The Newburgh Conspiracy, which Williams describes in Act 1, scene iii, offers a concrete example of this. Crippled by poverty, Congress was unable to make good on its debts to the army. The army consequently threatened to rebel against Congressional rule, hoping, as Williams puts it, to 'arouse fears in Congress and / the country and so obtain / justice for ourselves' (*ML*, 330). Such an act would have utterly undermined the republican principles of the revolution. Washington's decisive action and impassioned speech to his officers single-handedly warded off the rebellion in its infancy, returning power once more to Congress, and cementing the public's trust in Washington as a man in whom the Whig virtues of selflessness and devotion to duty were exemplified. Washington does not crush the rebellion by force, but by sentiment and persuasion. He appears almost as a defeated man. The final line of the first Act, as he attempts to read out a letter from Congress, is the famous line from the Newburgh Address; 'You see, I have grown grey / in your service. / And now I find myself / growing blind' (*ML*, 332). The great sacrifice of Washington brings tears of devotion to the eyes of his officers and becomes the Christ-like example of public duty that holds the newly established republic together. A. Ward Burian, *George Washington's Legacy of Leadership* (New York: Morgan James Publishing, 2007), pp.117-8.

rights,' and that the authority of government derives from the will of the people. Williams, in the tradition of most literature on Washington, inscribes these ideals into the figure of Washington himself: 'Few realize how much the growth and development to manhood of George Washington was identified with the development of the country itself' (*ML*, 430) Williams writes. The people 'saw the inextinguishable democracy which was the man himself, one such as they' (*ML*, 313). In some sense, then, Washington is living proof that individual power and public duty could exist side by side, the very antidote to the self-serving plutocrats of the Depression. What Washington represents, Schwartz argues, is the 'transformation, by social definition, of the ordinary into the heroic.'⁸⁶ If we substitute 'poetic' for 'heroic' then this would be a remarkably accurate description of Williams' entire poetic project, and in this light we can clearly see that Williams' glorification of ordinary things and ordinary people descends directly from the Whig values of the Revolutionary era.

It also here that we can see the great importance of Washington for Williams and why Williams spent such a considerable amount of time thinking and writing about him: Washington combines those two aspects that Williams strove so hard to reconcile during the 1930s, individuality and totality. The role of Washington, as portrayed in *The First President*, is in fact the role of the artist, as Williams perceived it to be. Washington is of the people, he belongs to the people, he is the consummate American, an individualist, a frontiersman, a revolutionary, and yet, precisely because of this individualism, he becomes the archetype for the nation. The fragment thus comes to represent the whole: 'his was the meaning that wrested the fragments

⁸⁶ Schwartz, 'George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership,' p.20.

of events into a whole,' Williams writes. Just as it is the job of the artist (Williams tells us in *Paterson*) to give the lives of the masses meaning, to make them understand their own higher significance, so the character of Washington gave meaning to the Revolution and embodies the will of the people. Williams does not see any contradiction in the notion of Washington as individual and Washington as symbol since for Williams the two are inextricably connected through an (admittedly hazy) notion of America's 'inextinguishable democracy.'

Despite this continual emphasis on democracy, Williams' conception of Washington also moves uncomfortably close to the cultish understanding of Mussolini that Pound articulates in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*. The similarities are particularly apparent in Williams' imagined conversation between Washington and Lafayette published in 1944, and here I quote Lafayette's speech to Washington:

You are not in the present circumstances a man, Your Excellency, not even to me - though we speak tonight underneath the stars as though we two are equals. But I know this cannot be. You are the embodiment of our consciences, which is beyond our reach and reason, the head of the purpose for which we live and die. You are the fountain from which humanity must drink. That which controverts your orders cannot be condoned... There is no other reason for being if you do not live to bring a humane order in the world.⁸⁷

Much of *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* is concerned with the idea of a 'will to order' similar to the 'humane order' of Lafayette's speech.⁸⁸ Williams and Pound both imagine the dawning of an enlightened era in which the rights of the individual would finally be enshrined by the example of a single individual. 'This is the beginning of the enlightenment,' Lafayette declares, 'the human spirit will raise its

⁸⁷ Buffalo, WCW Papers, B116.

⁸⁸ Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, p.99.

head over the whole world from this day forward.’⁸⁹ For both Williams and Pound this order is ultimately sanctioned by the will of the great leader (Mussolini/Washington) who is more than just a man, and whose leadership moves beyond the mundane affairs of state into becoming an almost spiritual phenomenon. The argument that Lafayette puts forward is ultimately the same argument that supporters of Mussolini were putting forward in the mid 1930s, that Washington is the ‘single, flaming reason from which we all get life.’⁹⁰

Indeed, it is in the last act that we begin to see that perhaps Williams in fact goes beyond a mere celebration of Washington as a democratic symbol to engage with something else entirely. The theme of the final act (although as we have already seen the original drafts were somewhat different) is Washington’s relationship with the masses. It begins with the inauguration, when the overwhelming support of the people almost causes Washington to faint with emotion. From there the cheers of the crowd literally morph into the jeers, as the French Ambassador, Edmond-Charles Genêt, supported by the Jeffersonian faction, incites the people into a revolutionary fervour in support of the French in their war against England. When Hamilton drafted the Jay Treaty, Genet and Jefferson felt that it was stacked in favour of British war interests, and tried to create enough popular resentment to force Washington into changing his mind. Williams says of the signing of the Jay Treaty, ‘Washington by his sheer obstinate silence imposed his will on the people and signed the treaty’ (*ML*, 317). This moment in fact marks the point at which the Federalists gained the upper hand in government. In the second scene, Williams shows Jefferson, who had of course spent much of his life as a diplomat in Paris, resigning from the cabinet over the Genet affair. Considering Williams’ opposition to Hamilton and the Federalists in

⁸⁹ Buffalo, WCW Papers, B116.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Paterson one would expect Williams to side with Jefferson. Indeed, one would expect the speech of Genet in Act III to represent Williams' true feelings:

Revolution bred you! Revolution
made you strong Revolution
calls you to the side of France.
Who is George Washington
to block the people's will?
A doddering old man, who served
you once, it is true. But a tool
of England now. Rise up, be free
again and let all tyrants die
beneath your trampling feet!

Yet it is here that we arrive at Williams' explicit political purpose in writing the libretto. Williams supported Washington's stance on American neutrality, and in doing so was effectively making a case for American isolationism during the 1930s. The speech that Washington gives in Act 3, scene ii, based on his 1796 'Farewell Address' expresses the nationalistic sentiment behind this isolationism, and is in many ways the seminal speech that established Washington as a cult figure: 'Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor, or caprice?' This speech was frequently used during the 1930s to justify the Neutrality Acts and America's isolationist foreign policy.⁹¹ Paul Viotti writes, 'Invoking non-interventionist guidance from George Washington's farewell address to legitimize their position, isolationists in the 1930s... held sway.'⁹² In one of the original drafts of the third act, the chorus comes on at the

⁹¹ Whilst American isolationism of the 1930s is a given for historians, revisionist critics such as David Lake have argued that the very concept of 'isolationism,' a blanket term that is often used to describe America's foreign policy during the 1930s, is misleading. I will refer to 1930s 'isolationism' as a historical convention though I acknowledge that the word may gloss over America's continued involvement in international affairs during this period. See David Lake, *Entangling Relations: American Foreign Policy in Its Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p.78.

⁹² Paul Viotti, *American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p.181.

end to sing a refrain, 'Farewell sweet lover. Keep us from entangling alliances.'⁹³ This phrase is repeated over and over as Washington and Martha once more appear in their peaceful, domestic environment back at Mt. Vernon. In the draft version the play ends on that phrase, 'Keep us from entangling alliances.' In the final version Williams took this out to keep only 'Good night, good night, sweet lover' (*ML*, 357), but one can still sense the presence of that missing line in Williams' final stage direction, 'The effect is to bring the whole, with a tremendous sweep, out of the past up to today—the uncertain fruits of Washington's labours' (*ML*, 358).

The fruits of Washington's labours are 'uncertain' precisely because America was at risk of being drawn back into European wars, a lesson that America, as far as Williams was concerned, had failed to learn from the previous war. Such sentiments, especially anti-British sentiment, had been growing since the Treaty of Versailles, a document which Williams detested since it meant that America was continually sending aid to Britain and other European countries.⁹⁴ David Lake writes, 'World War I is often understood as a political watershed, the violent break between the "Pax Britannica" and the "American Century."' ⁹⁵ By supporting Washington's stance of neutrality Williams was in effect declaring his opposition to British war interests, and to the alliance between America and Britain that had existed ever since Hamilton first drafted the Jay Treaty.

Williams' stance is typical of the sort of opinion exemplified by Senator Gerald Nye in the 1930s. A Jeffersonian agrarian, Senator Nye was appointed in 1934 to lead a committee, subsequently known as the Nye Committee, to establish whether the

⁹³ Yale, WCW Papers, Box 58, Folder 1293.

⁹⁴ See chapter five, p.276, footnote, 100.

⁹⁵ Lake, *Entangling Relations*, p.79.

U.S. Decision to enter the First World War had been influenced by the interests of the arms manufacturing and banking sectors. Naturally the committee became the focal point for conspiracy theorists and anti-capitalist movements across America. Williams had of course been exposed to such conspiracy theories, especially concerning the role of the big banks in lobbying for war, through Pound.⁹⁶ Moreover, the Nye Committee and Senator Nye himself were instrumental in pushing for the Neutrality Acts of 1935, 1936 and 1937, which prevented America from selling munitions to Britain and France. Williams therefore uses the figure of Washington to justify a kind of Jeffersonian nationalism. Unlike the nationalism issuing from Europe, which was largely industrial, dictatorial and expansionist, American nationalism of the 1930s was agrarian, domestic and isolationist.

The fact that becomes evident through Williams' 1930s writings on Washington, is that the 1930s Washington is a *Jeffersonian* Washington. Indeed, this was not the case for his portrayal of Washington in *American Grain*. In 1925, Williams' portrayal of Washington had been somewhat equivocal, suggesting that he had been tricked by Hamilton into pursuing Federalist policies of industrialization and centralization: 'Washington – with shrewd dog Hamilton at his side – locking the doors, closing the windows, building fences and providing walls... The Federal Government was slipping in its fangs. The banks were being organized' (*ITAG*, 197). By 1936, however, Williams' portrayal of Washington borders on hero worship. In particular, he sees Washington as bridging the gap between the spirit of the New World, its sensuality and its atavism, and the European forces of 'culture'. At the end of the Washington-Lafayette dialogue, Williams even has Washington declare, 'You

⁹⁶ See also the influential book by Walter Millis, *Road to War: America 1914-1917* (New York, H. Fertig, 1935).

know they say part of my blood is French.’ Conrad notes that ‘Williams posits the French themselves as his corrective to the moral deformity of the Puritans.’⁹⁷ Throughout the libretto Williams is attempting to separate Washington from the Anglo-Puritan tradition, the Hamiltonian faction, by his focus on his connection with the local, the earthy and the native. Indeed, Williams creates the same lapsarian narrative for Washington that he creates for America in *American Grain*. Washington is literally torn from his Edenic home at the start of the opera, ripped from the womb of his homeland, and thrown into the fallen world of politics, of ‘illiberality’ and ‘betrayal,’ industrialization and modernity. In the original version of the first Act, Washington even ‘enters as a farmer’ with Nelly on his arm holding some flowers before a messenger from the capital forces him to return to Congress. The Edenic Mt. Vernon re-emerges in the final Act as an imagined space of wholeness and well-being. Washington, sitting at his desk in the oval office, imagines Nelly with her slave Doll singing pastoral songs about fertility in the countryside. In this Williams’ portrayal of Washington comes close to the one that Pound provides in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*. ‘Washington could see mathematics from the ground end, geometry in its initial sense, measuring of the earth. Quincy Adams took it as astronomy, furthest possible remove from all human contact... a man suffering from puritanitis.’ Thus Pound and Williams both incorporate Washington into the Jeffersonian pantheon as a man of the earth. Such romanticising of the natural bounty of America underpins the politics of *The First President*, summed up in Washington's closing aria as he returns to Mt. Vernon, which is, incidentally, the first moment in the entire opera that he properly breaks into song.

All dangers changed

⁹⁷ Conrad, *Refiguring America*, p.44.

to pleasantness,
my happiest
reward

to live to know
without alloy
the sweet
enjoyment

of good laws
among
my fellow
citizens – in all

the dearest object
of my heart
this soil
where I was born

Thus in the last instance, in his final song, Washington becomes the symbol, not of Hamilton's industrial legacy, not the 'captain of industry' as he was frequently portrayed during the 1920s, but rather a symbol of the 1930s back-to-the-land movement, of 'good laws' and agrarian localism: 'this soil / where I was born.' In the end, Washington projects the hopes of the Progressive Movement and justifies them historically. He becomes the embodiment of Williams' ideal America; an America that is fully aware of who and what it is, legitimated by its awareness of the historical forces that have shaped it, and finally free from the Anglo-Puritan plutocratic tradition.

5. Objectivism: Williams, Pound and Zukofsky

When describing Williams' poetry of the 1930s, critics often refer to his 'Objectivist period.'¹ Whilst I do not wholly agree that Williams' poetry of the 1930s forms a distinct 'Objectivist period' that can easily be distinguished from his works of the 1920s, in this chapter I will discuss Williams' poetry of the 1930s in relation to some of the key Objectivist themes.

As I shall demonstrate presently, the term 'Objectivist' is not something that can be taken for granted, either as a historical movement or as a critical construct. Williams himself referred to Objectivism in an unpublished note as a 'manufactured [sic] term which can mean anything.'² Later, when pressed to write a description of Objectivism for the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Williams portrayed Objectivism as a response to Imagism, which he felt was too hazy and 'not specific enough'. He defines Objectivism as mode of writing which 'recognises the poem, apart from its meaning, to be an object' and thus 'looks at the poem with a special eye to its structural aspect.'³ In his autobiography, he explains that the structural emphasis of Objectivism was intended to be 'an antidote, in a sense, to the bare image haphazardly presented in loose verse.' Objectivism, in effect, adhered to many of the tenets of Imagism, whilst reinstating the importance of 'form' (A, 265). Though the anti-Imagist rhetoric was certainly nothing new for Williams, and indeed, he makes similar comments in *Spring*

¹ See, for instance, Jerome Mazzaro, *William Carlos Williams: The Later Poems* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1973), p.82. Vivienne Koch, *William Carlos Williams* (Norfolk, VA: New Directions, 1950), p.107. Henry M. Sayre, *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams* (University of Illinois Press, 1983), p.71.

² Yale, WCW Papers, Folder 1036.

³ *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger (London: Macmillan Press, 1974), p.582.

and *All*, this emphasis on the structural aspect of poetry was something that emerged from his contact with Zukofsky and the other Objectivists.⁴

One way to view the Objectivist movement is as a specific group of people: Louis Zukofsky, Chales Reznikoff, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Basil Bunting, Lorine Niedecker, and arguably, Williams and Pound. Heller, for instance, describes Objectivism as a product of ‘friendship, correspondence, proximity,’ naturally entailing certain united concerns, which he lists as ‘urban experience, politics, the influence and example of Pound and... mutual obscurity and distance from the academy.’⁵ Du Plessis and Quartermain similarly define Objectivism in terms of a genealogy of influence: ‘those who identified with and extended the practices of Pound, Williams, and, in some cases, Stein, Stevens, and Moore.’⁶

Uniting this group of people was The Objectivist Press itself, an independent publishing venture masterminded by Zukofsky in an attempt to get members of the Objectivist circle into print. Zukofsky originally conceived of the Objectivist circle as a kind of commune of writers which he called WE, the Writers Extant, and which he hoped could generate the critical mass required to establish its own readership, a kind of parallel and self-sustaining industry existing on its own terms. Pound also referred to it as the ‘kommy TEE,’⁷ mocking writers on the left for their fondness for organizations, committees and, dare I say, acronyms. An initial charter was drawn up specifying that

⁴ See my discussion on pp.261-2.

⁵ Michael Heller, *Conviction's Net of Branches: Essays on Objectivist Poets and Poetry* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), p.xi.

⁶ Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999) p.2.

⁷ EP to LZ, 2nd Nov, 1928, *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky* ed. Barry Ahearn (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p.20. All further correspondence between EP and LZ taken from this text unless otherwise stated.

only writers who ‘have in their possession an available and complete book manuscript of high quality which is unacceptable to the usual publisher’ could join: in other words, it was an exclusive self-publishing venture for marginal modernists.⁸

However, it would be naïve to assume that the word ‘Objectivism’ can be defined solely as a historical and social grouping. In some ways, it is purely as a critical construct that Objectivism has taken on a life of its own. As Fredman writes, ‘the term *objectivist* has been employed in literary history not only to designate a particular poetic movement that came to prominence in the thirties... but also to give a name to a poetics that is empirical, socially engaged, and linguistically compressed—a poetics that has played a major role in twentieth-century American poetry.’⁹ Fredman, quoting DuPlessis, describes this poetics in terms of an emphasis ‘on history not myth, on empiricism not projection, on the discrete not the unified, on vernacular prosodies and not traditional poetic rhetoric.’ In other words, what Fredman makes clear is that the term ‘Objectivist’ frequently spills out into critical discourse as a kind of catch-all term for post-Williams poetry.¹⁰

⁸ LZ to WCW 6th May, 1933, *The Correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky* ed. Barry Ahearn (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), p.156. All further correspondence between WCW and LZ taken from this text unless otherwise stated.

⁹ Stephen Fredman, *A Menorah for Athena: Charles Reznikoff and the Jewish Dilemmas of Objectivist Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p.viii. See also p.151.

¹⁰ Denis Donoghue, for instance, characterizes Objectivism as the antithesis to the sort of mystical poetry that Yeats was writing, and argues that Objectivism was ‘an option taken up by Ezra Pound and several poets of similar disposition, including William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore.’ The fact that Donoghue has no problem suggesting that Moore was an ‘Objectivist,’ clearly shows that the term has grown in modernist studies into a catch-all term that describes a general trend in American poetry away from the mythological. See Denis Donoghue, *Irish Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) p.88-9. Likewise critics such as Kirsten Blythe Painter use the term ‘Objectivism’ to refer to post-Williams poetry in general. See Kirsten Blythe Painter, *Flint on a Bright Stone: A Revolution of Precision and Restraint in American, Russian, and German Modernism* (Stanford University Press, 2006), p.52 (where ‘Objectivism’ is portrayed as Williams’ own personal movement, intended as declaration of independence from Pound). Albert Gelpi argues that Objectivist writers such as Zukofsky and Oppen were much closer to Williams than they were to Pound, and thus Gelpi sees Objectivism as an explicitly post-Williams movement. Albert Gelpi, *A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910-*

Likewise, Rosenquist notes that ‘very little about any of the Objectivist movement was decided by any of its contributors.’¹¹ Indeed, the term ‘Objectivist’ was coined only after Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry*, insisted to the young Louis Zukofsky that if he wished to guest-edit the February 1931 issue of the magazine he must have a name for his ‘movement’ and none of the so-called Objectivists had ever agreed to being labelled with such a name.¹² Rosenquist argues that the standard list of ‘Objectivists’ (Zukofsky, Reznikoff, Oppen, Rakosi) ‘has little to do with 1931; instead, each member owes his or her place in the group to the critical formulations of the 1960s or after.’¹³ The term ‘Objectivist’ itself only came to prominence as a critical construct after the group of poets around Zukofsky were rediscovered during the 1960s. As a result, Rosenquist argues, ‘the Objectivists are a group coherent only in retrospect’ and he points out the importance of the 1968 interviews with L.S. Dembo in shaping this retrospective unity.¹⁴

In this chapter I do not wish to add anything new to the critical debate surrounding Objectivism. Rather I wish to do three things. Firstly, I wish to undertake a brief literary history of Objectivism to define Williams’ role in the movement, and to consider to what extent Williams’ poetry of the 1930s should even be considered ‘Objectivist.’ In this section I also wish to consider two of the most significant features

1950 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). My purpose is only to show that there is a great deal of critical discord over what Objectivism signifies.

¹¹ Rod Rosenquist, *Modernism, the Market and the Institution of the New* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.141.

¹² See Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), p.136.

¹³ Rod Rosenquist, *Modernism, the Market and the Institution of the New*, p.141. Heller also discusses the entirely arbitrary way in which certain poets were labelled as ‘Objectivists’ poets by literary historians after the fact. Michael Heller, *Conviction’s Net of Branches*, p.xi.

¹⁴ Rod Rosenquist, *Modernism, the Market and the Institution of the New*, p.141.

of Objectivism, namely, the focus on ‘structure’ or ‘objectification’ and the concept of demythologization, to show how these concepts are reflected in Williams’ poetic writings of the 1930s. Secondly I wish to discuss Objectivism in relation to anti-Semitism and the growth of fascist ideology within the United States during the 1930s. In this regard I wish to demonstrate that the uneasy political positioning of Objectivist poets such as Zukofsky (who was caught somewhere between the reactionary politics of Pound and the radical politics of the left) reflects Williams’ own position. Finally I wish to show how some of the key ‘Objectivist’ principles, which were in part derived from Williams’ poetic output of the 1920s, relate to Williams in the 1930s. This section will undertake a broad review of Williams’ poetic output of the 1930s, focusing in particular on the concept of the ‘Objective’ and how this relates to the documentary aesthetic of the 1930s.

5.1. Objectivism: History and Myth.

Williams’ involvement in Objectivism was a product of his relationship with Zukofsky, whom he came to know through Pound’s introduction in 1928. After reading ‘The’ (Zukofsky’s take on *The Waste Land*),¹⁵ Pound wrote to Zukofsky in August, 1928, insisting that Zukofsky meet Williams and ‘make an effort toward restarting some sort of [literary] life in N.Y.’ Pound proceeded to supply Zukofsky with a list of every New York intellectual known to him and expressed his hopes that Zukofsky would

¹⁵ Zukofsky deliberately wrote ‘The’ as a response to *The Waste Land*, and their dissatisfaction with Eliot’s brand of modernism is perhaps one of the things that brought Williams and Zukofsky together. WCW to LZ, 2nd April, 1928, pp.4-5. See also Stanley, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics*, p.48.

become the organizer of this group – Pound’s man across the Atlantic, with Williams as the ‘patriarchal elm.’¹⁶ After some attempt to mobilise Pound’s contacts Zukofsky was forced to give in. Members of the older generation such as Marianne Moore declined to be involved. ‘No one seems especially enthusiastic,’ he wrote to Pound, ‘especially your enemies.’¹⁷ Indeed, by the end of 1928 Pound’s influence in America was waning, and one way of reading Objectivism is as a series of attempts by Williams to wrench American letters even further from Pound’s control.¹⁸

Meanwhile, Zukofsky was coordinating his own network of poets. During the first months of 1930, Zukofsky sent Pound various poems by Charles Reznikoff and George Oppen, both Jewish like Zukofsky himself, sparking what Pound considered to be a Jewish movement.¹⁹ It is surely no coincidence that the majority of those writers to whom the title of Objectivist has stuck (Reznikoff, Oppen, Zukofsky, Rakosi) were of Jewish immigrant origin and Marxist orientation.²⁰ Unlike Yvor Winters and the writers of *Hound and Horn*, the Objectivists were not interested in sustaining or being part of

¹⁶ EP to LZ, 12th August 1928, pp.11-15.

¹⁷ EP to LZ, 2nd Nov, 1928, p.19. LZ to EP 5th Dec 1928, p.22.

¹⁸ See my discussion on pp.257.

¹⁹ EP to LZ, 9th December, 1929, p.26.

²⁰ Some critics may argue that Objectivism should not be considered a Jewish movement due to the inclusion of non-Jewish members such as Basil Bunting, Lorine Niedecker and, of course, Williams himself. This debate is complicated by the question of whether Bunting, Niedecker and Williams can even be considered Objectivists in the first place (all three were peripheral members). There is very little critical consensus on either issue. I do not have the space to explore fully the relationship between Objectivism and Judaism, but it is worth noting that critics such as Heller see a fundamental relationship between Judaism and Objectivist poetry in terms of ‘their ethical concern, their love of visible and objective fact, and most significantly, their questioning relationship to a Jewish God.’ See Michael Heller, ‘Diasporic Poetics,’ in *Jewish American Poetry: Poems, Commentary, and Reflections* ed. Jonathan N. Barron, Eric Murphy Selinger (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2000), pp.216-7. Stanley also sees Zukofsky’s Judaism as a significant factor in creating a sense of being ‘outside the predominant culture,’ a sense of alienation in his work. See Stanley, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics*, p.49. For a full account of the relationship between Judaism and Objectivism see Stephen Fredman, *A Menorah for Athena: Charles Reznikoff and the Jewish Dilemmas of Objectivist Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Chicago Press, 2001). See especially p.151.

the Anglican literary canon.²¹ Rather they were writing the alien poetry of a new and emerging world, one that they hoped would be explicitly Marxist.

After much hectoring, Pound arranged for Zukofsky to edit an issue of *Poetry*.²² Pound insisted that the writers should be both young and American. Zukofsky complied, but also wanted to include Williams, Cummings, Pound and other established names: 'point is that Wm. C. W. of today is not what he was in 1913, neither are you if you're willing to contribute.'²³ Apart from McAlmon, Williams was the only one of the older generation of modernists to contribute. Despite the fact that Pound had more direct influence on the formation of Objectivism, it is thus Williams, not Pound, who is frequently considered an Objectivist.²⁴

Zukofsky suggested a few names for the movement, 'Poets, 1931,' 'The Third Decade,' 'U.S.A.' and finally 'Objectivists'.²⁵ We can only wonder if the name Objectivist was intended to cover the same vast intellectual territory as 'U.S.A.' or 'The Third Decade.' Certainly Objectivism was a phenomenon of the 'third decade,' but in many ways it was different from other politicized movements of the 1930s: for one, it was aesthetically aligned with the high modernism of Pound, whilst it was politically aligned with Pound's enemies on the left. This led to a wilful apoliticism in Zukofsky's theoretical discussions of Objectivism that ran counter to the deep-rooted politicism of

²¹ For an entertaining description of the animosity between Yvor Winters and the Objectivist circle see Richard Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us: The life of Basil Bunting, Britain's Greatest Modernist Poet* (Oxford: Infinite Ideas, 2013), pp.209-10.

²² Pound initially wanted Zukofsky to undertake the project in conjunction with Donald McKenzie, the editor of *Morada*, who later became known for editing one of the most famous anthologies of American poetry of all time. LZ to EP, 6th November, 1930, p.67. However, Zukofsky quickly assumed sole responsibility for the project.

²³ LZ to EP, 6th November, 1930, p.67.

²⁴ Rosenquist argues that this was a deliberate move by Pound, who wanted it to be known that he was not part of the Objectivist poets, and that Objectivism was derived from his own critical theories. Pound's aim, Rosenquist argues, was to create his own 'Poundian' tradition. See Rod Rosenquist, *Modernism, the Market and the Institution of the New*, p.140.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.69.

Objectivism's members. In his correspondence with Pound, Zukofsky would mimic the same scepticism towards the left that Pound had made his default position. In April 1931 he wrote to Pound that at a Marxist conference he had

the satisfaction of setting several proletarians on their writing asses – Roskolenkier – etc if they profit by my lessons. But I'm afraid they need continual tutoring. – I suppose I cd. drop in on [Norman] Macleod & the rest of the New Asses – when I'm in N.Y. but they'll probably fire me out because my name has occasionally been associated with E.P. & W.C.W.

Zukofsky clearly suggests that being 'associated with E.P. & W.C.W.' alienated him from the *New Masses* group, and he appears to embrace this in spite of his own personal Marxist convictions. But if the association with Williams and Pound entailed a political choice, there is no evidence that this was sanctioned by some of the more overtly communist members of the group such as Oppen, who gave up writing and joined the Communist Party in 1935. In fact Williams published in the *New Masses* on a number of occasions during the 1930s and the opposition that Zukofsky creates between Williams, Pound and the 'New Asses' is largely contrived in the case of Williams. More importantly, a letter from Zukofsky to Pound in 1930 clearly shows that the only reason that *New Masses* poets such as Kenneth Fearing, Langston Hughes, and Raymond Kresensky were not included in the Objectivist issue of *Poetry* was because the managing editor, Walt Carmon was slow to respond to Zukofsky's request for their addresses.²⁶ Thus there appears to be a fundamental discrepancy between the image of Objectivism that Zukofsky was crafting and the reality of the situation, which was that

²⁶ LZ to EP, 12th December, 1930, p.82

Zukofsky was prepared to print any name under the Objectivist banner if it would boost the movement's credibility.

A glance at the table of contents for the 1931 issue provokes the question, why are Rexroth, McAlmon, or Norman Macleod rarely considered Objectivist writers, whilst Rakosi and Basil Bunting are? That Zukofsky published a poem such as Rexroth's 'Last Page of a Manuscript' under the Objectivist banner could only have aggravated the general confusion as to what Objectivism was or stood for. The poem begins,

Light
The sliver in the firmament
The stirring horde
The rocking wave
The name breaks in the sky
Why stand we
Why go we nought
They broken seek the cleaving balance
The young men gone²⁷

Such a poem, reminiscent of H.D., with its inversions, its clichés, its sentimentality, its pseudo-classicism, and its quasi-religious invocations, could not be further from the poetic program that Williams (and Zukofsky after him) were advocating. Objectivism can therefore only be considered a unified movement by excluding elements such as this which do not conform to what is fundamentally a Williams-inspired agenda whose unity was crafted in retrospect by American literary critics.

It is hardly a surprise that the reaction to the Objectivist issue in 1931 was one of confusion. Stanley Burnshaw questioned what defined an 'Objectivist' poem and what

²⁷ Kenneth Rexroth, 'Last Page of a Manuscript,' *Poetry*, 35 (February 1931), pp.254- 255.

made the movement original: 'why call these poems Objectivist?'²⁸ Monroe herself criticized Zukofsky for his 'gaseous definitions' and his 'theoretic scheme spun out of brain fabric by a group of empirical young rule-makers.'²⁹ Yvor Winters likewise described them as merely 'sensory impressionists of the usual sort' without any degree of 'rational intelligence.'³⁰ This shows the general lack of comprehension which greeted Zukofsky's program, which was nothing if not rationalist. Unfortunately this lack of comprehension extended to Pound as well. Pound had initially supposed that the reason why he couldn't understand Zukofsky's poetry was because it was a new, more abstract poetry that would take Pound's poetic method and add something entirely new: 'Every generation has to do something that its granpap can't quite make out.'³¹ But he quickly came to think of 'A' as a mere curiosity, comparing it to 'letter puzzles and sequences of pure consonants,'³² certainly not something that could sustain a reader's attention over several volumes. He advised Zukofsky to drop the idea of a long poem, which Zukofsky declined to do. Over time, Pound became increasingly dismissive of Zukofsky's poetry. Williams too, despite enjoying 'The,' quickly came to realize that he would never understand 'A.' As Stanley notes, a kind of inverse relationship ensued in which the younger poet edited the older poet.³³

Despite the poor reception that the Objectivist issue of *Poetry* received, Zukofsky and Oppen set about launching the publishing arm of the Objectivist circle, which they

²⁸ Stanley Burnshaw, 'Letter to the Editor', *Poetry* (April 1931), pp.53-5.

²⁹ Harriet Monroe, 'Comment,' *Poetry* (March 1931), p.330.

³⁰ See Michael Heller, *Carl Rakosi: Man and Poet* (Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1993), p.100.

³¹ EP to LZ, 22nd December, 1932, p.123.

³² EP to WCW, 22nd December, 1931, p.123.

³³ See Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics*, p.141-2.

named 'To Publishers.' With Oppen's private income they were able to print a small run of an Objectivist anthology.³⁴ Under the 'To' imprint, Zukofsky went on to publish Williams' *A Novelette*, which he had been unsuccessfully trying to get into print since 1929. As a spontaneous prose poem, the *Novelette* is more in alignment with surrealist works such as *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris*, that Williams was translating at the time. Certainly it isn't one of Williams' more 'Objectivist' works.³⁵ Zukofsky also published the first instalment of Pound's so-called 'collected prose', containing 'How to Read' and 'The Spirit of Romance.' The other instalments never appeared, however, as Oppen's income expired, forcing him to leave France and return to New York.

In the summer of 1933, the Pound-Zukofsky relationship changed permanently when Zukofsky accepted a cheque for \$112 from Pound and another of \$100 from Williams to travel to Europe to visit Rapallo. Prior to his trip to Europe, Zukofsky had looked up to Pound as a father figure, frequently beginning his letters, 'Our Favver' and frequently referring to himself as 'sonny.'³⁶ Although no-one knows exactly what happened in Rapallo, we can assume from the subsequent correspondence that Pound must have attempted to stop Zukofsky from writing such dense, impenetrable poetry, telling him that otherwise he could no longer recommend his work to any of his contacts.³⁷ But we can also assume that politics had come between them. After 1933, Pound seems increasingly cold and aggressive in his correspondence, as well as more

³⁴ See LZ to EP, 15th October, 1931. This letter is not published in the *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky*. However it is quoted in *The Correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky*, p.101.

³⁵ See Altieri's definition of Objectivism on p.262. If, as Altieri claims, Objectivism was a deliberate reaction against symbolism, surrealism and any form of modernism that indulged the allegorical or mythological, then this is not born out by the publishing history of The Objectivist Press. *A Novelette* is without a doubt one of Williams' most 'surrealist' work.

³⁶ See for instance, LZ to EP, 15th Dec, 1932, p.138.

³⁷ See in particular the letter from EP to LZ, 6th April, 1935, p.162. 'I am getting an English opinyun on yr/ damn poems/ but I know what it will be/ and damn it I told you so, when you were here.'

fanatical with regard to the economic theories of C.H. Douglas. Zukofsky increasingly refused to accept Pound's anti-Semitism or his fascism, and he now also began to challenge his economics as well. Pound argued that the old theories of Marx to the new theories of C.H. Douglas was the equivalent of 'hand plow to tractor.' In other words, Marx may have been appropriate for an agricultural age, but he was hopelessly out of date in an industrial economy.³⁸ Zukofsky, on the other hand, felt that, 'In Marx's economy, of all economies, alone there is substance for doing the new canzone.'³⁹

Among these three writers, Williams was therefore alone in his continuing support for the traditional model of democratic capitalism and his belief that such an economy could support poetry. In an early draft of his review of *The Man with the Blue Guitar* Williams congratulated Stevens for securing a mainstream publisher: 'Without capital investment the market for poetry, like every other market, regardless of values, will slump. Poetry here is in a chronic slump.'⁴⁰ Williams wanted poetry to engage with the commercial market, and he blames the decline of poetry on a lack of capital investment, yet at the same time he insists on poetry's ideological autonomy from market forces (a somewhat unrealistic position).

Pound was also starting to put pressure on Williams during this period, exhorting him to take up his economic battle in America. The following rant, still unpublished today, is one of many that were sent to Williams:

God damn it/ have you any acquaintance with ANYbody in touch with anybody who thinks.
Labour party or any organization open to reason.

³⁸ EP to LZ, 14th October, 1933, p.154.

³⁹ LZ to EP, 29th October, 1933, p.154-5.

⁴⁰ This quote comes from an early draft of Williams' review of *The Man With the Blue Guitar* in which he seems jealous that Stevens has managed to find a publisher. Al Filreis, *Modernism from Right to Left* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.135.

do you ever see Mike Gold.. last manifesto of Douglas/ (Liverpool Credit Asn.) communism brought of to needs of industrial, as distinct from largely peasant society.

Certain ideas have got to be batted thru into Roosevelt or his ouster.⁴¹

Pound's writing style was becoming increasingly hysterical during this period, but we can interpret this to mean that whereas Marx's ideas were appropriate to the era of 'peasant society,' Douglas had resolved the problems of capital and the producing classes for the 'needs of the industrial' age. Pound therefore clearly saw Douglas as Marx's successor and he is interested to see whether Mike Gold or any of the *New Masses* intellectuals can be persuaded to this point of view. Williams declined to take up Pound's cause or to get involved in antagonising the American left-wing establishment. He would remain aloof. 'IS there any chance of you or Bill W. wakin up to where we are in 1933??' Pound wrote to Zukofsky. 'Where we are in 1933?' Zukofsky shot back, 'you're there and I'm here.' Zukofsky would become increasingly 'worried' about Pound's 'racial characteristics – sobriety, financial outlook, hoariness,' warning him that he was not being read in the U.S.A. 'for reasons you ought to be able to find out for yrself.'⁴²

Since as early as 1928, Williams had been influencing Zukofsky against Pound, creating a divide across the Atlantic: 'To hell with Pound's collectives,' Williams told Zukofsky in response to Pound's initial call for a group of American writers, 'In that mood he gives me a pain in the ass. Let him come over here and do some grubbing before he starts that with me.'⁴³ Over time, Zukofsky came to side with Williams.

⁴¹ Yale, Ezra Pound Papers, Box 55, Folder 2519.

⁴² LZ to EP, 15th March, 1935, p.164.

⁴³ WCW to LZ, 30th August, 1928 (p.15). See also WCW to LZ, 15th September, 1929, 20th September, 1929, 15th January, 1931 for examples of Williams venting his anger at Pound to Zukofsky.

Ironically, the group of American writers that Pound had initially called for ended up far from the influence of his politics. From 1933 onwards Pound became increasingly tied to the *New English Weekly* circle of writers centred on the Social Credit agenda.

Despite their growing political differences, in October of 1933 Zukofsky asked Pound if he wanted to be part of The Objectivist Press, a company that would include 'only you, Bill and me.'⁴⁴ Zukofsky admitted that he could not see C.H. Douglas as the saviour of the proletariat, as Pound claimed, but he offered to publish Pound's book on economics and was prepared to be persuaded.⁴⁵ At the same time, Zukofsky was still determined to create a writer's collective and he drew up a charter outlining an organisational structure with elected positions. Pound replied that it was no use trying to 'organize' him: 'If you can affect the OUTER world, and scattered units that AREN'T being useful, O.K.'⁴⁶ Williams toyed with the idea but eventually replied, 'I've tormented my soul long enough over our Writer-Publisher proposal: I think it's no go and we should give it up... And don't forget that with every advantage in their favor large publishing houses are going broke.'⁴⁷ He pointed out that Stevens and Herbst both had mainstream publishers, and that West (who would get a publishing contract himself in the same year) was also opposed to the idea.⁴⁸ The 'Objectivist' writers were therefore in some ways the writers who were left behind by mainstream publishers.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ LZ to EP, 29th October, 1933 p.154.

⁴⁵ LZ to EP, 14th October, 1933.

⁴⁶ EP to LZ, 8th January, 1933, p.142.

⁴⁷ WCW to LZ, 24th May, 1933, p.158.

⁴⁸ WCW to LZ, 31, May, 1933, p.159.

⁴⁹ Unlike Zukofsky, Williams was not comfortable with the idea of an isolated and self-sustaining society of writers, and indeed the desire to engage with a consumer audience is a key difference between them. Zukofsky's poetry often forms a kind of self-contained universe, hard to access from the outside, but forming a perfect order within itself. Williams' poetry, however, strives to create a dialogue that reaches out to the reader as a consumer. The conversational nature of the opening lines of his poems often reveal

After months of refusing to put forward any of his own money towards what he considered would be a doomed self-publishing venture, Williams finally relented and agreed to put \$100 forward for the publication of the first ever collected edition of his poems, *Collected Poems, 1921–31*, published with an introduction by Wallace Stevens, and edited by Zukofsky.⁵⁰ In 1934, at the age of fifty-one, Williams was therefore no further forward in securing a publisher than he had been at the age of twenty-five. He was still paying for the publication of his poems, but now Zukofsky rather than The Four Seasons Press would take care of the sales and administration under the name of The Objectivist Press.⁵¹

Williams specified that he wanted a cheap format ('The book to sell at \$2 and to be the most saleable we can find') with the royalties split '60% to the author, 40% to the group, which 40% is to be used to publish book #2 and to pay the Executive secretary who will be the sole officer of the group.'⁵² The Objectivist Press therefore emerged as a compromise between a traditional publisher and a writer's society, using the proceeds of previous books to fund the publication of new books. Williams' *Collected Poems* was followed by Oppen's *Discrete Series*, three works by Reznikoff (*Testimony*,

this trait, 'This is just to say,' 'Ladies, I crave your indulgence,' 'I will teach you,' and so on (*CPI*, pp.372, 72, 122).

⁵⁰ Zukofsky did actually attempt to have this volume published professionally. It was only after the major publishers rejected it that he proposed to publish it with The Objectivist Press, or rather he invented The Objectivist Press specifically for the purpose. See Mariani, *William Carlos Williams*, p.314. Robert Cirasas undertakes a study of the *Collected Poems, 1921-1931* in *The Lost Works of William Carlos Williams: The Volumes of Collected Poetry As Lyrical Sequences* (London: Associated University Presses, 1995) making a case for this volume as a 'long poem' comparable to *The Cantos* or 'A' (p.133). Personally I find this unconvincing. The poems remain largely as they did in their original forms, the only difference being that Zukofsky removed the prose sections from *Spring and All* and *The Descent of Winter* and insisted that the individual poems have titles. A number of older poems were also dug out of various little magazines for the purposes of this collection. It would be difficult to make a case for this collection as being 'Objectivist' in any way.

⁵¹ Duffey argues that the collection should really be called 'selected' rather than 'collected' poems. Zukofsky was ruthless in weeding out Williams' early, more sentimental efforts. Duffey, *A Poetry of Presence*, p.150.

⁵² WCW to LZ, 2nd October, 1933, p.165.

Jerusalem the Golden and *In Memoriam 1933*), and Zukofsky's 'A,' – all of them published in 1934. The press came to an end that year when Zukofsky, who had been drained of all energy and enthusiasm by months of hard work with little reward, was forced to take a job with the Columbia CWA project, part of the New Deal projects for artists.⁵³ This would be the end to Zukofsky's brief career in independent publishing.

Looking back on the Objectivist movement, Williams could only describe it as something 'never widely accepted' that had to be 'early abandoned'.⁵⁴ And yet despite this, Objectivism is still invested with an enormous amount of critical credibility, often as an adjunct to criticism on Williams and Pound, but also in its own right.⁵⁵ The critical discourse seems to indicate that it was an important moment in American poetry. To understand why this is so we must turn to the aesthetic theory that underpins the Objectivist movement.

In some ways the first mention of the word 'Objectivist' in Zukofsky's November 1930 letter to Pound encapsulates the core precept of Objectivism: that the 'poems will be such as are objects. Or Things.'⁵⁶ In his autobiography Williams looks back on the Objectivist movement in similar terms: 'it all went with the newer appreciation, the matter of paint upon canvass as being of more importance than the literal appearance of the image depicted' (A, 265). Here Williams is referring to a certain self-awareness that Objectivist poetry carries with regard to its own 'reconstructed' nature. This central idea

⁵³ See Mark Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life*, p.162.

⁵⁴ Williams, 'Objectivism,' undated note, Yale, WCW Papers, Box 43, Folder 1094.

⁵⁵ Monique Vescia, for instance, refers to Objectivism without any irony as 'the most historically important movement of the 1930s.' Monique Vescia, *Depression Glass: Documentary Photography and the Medium of the Camera-Eye in Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, and William Carlos Williams* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p.xix. No doubt Vescia is referring to the retrospective importance of Objectivism when using the word 'historical.'

⁵⁶ LZ to EP, 9th November, 1930 p.69.

behind Objectivism – of looking at the poem as an ‘object’ which is ‘apart from its meaning’ or as Altieri phrases it, ‘refusing the temptations of closure: both closure as a fixed form, and closure as writing in the service of an idea, doctrine or abstract aesthetic ideal’⁵⁷ – is undoubtedly derived directly from Williams’ critical and poetic output from *Spring and All* onwards.⁵⁸ Critics such as Riddel have argued that Williams’ continual refusal to think of the poem as a ‘carrier’ of ‘ideas’⁵⁹ is in many ways like a precursor to structuralism.⁶⁰ Indeed much of Williams’ philosophical output was almost proto-Saussurean, and this is perhaps one of the reasons why his work was embraced so readily by critics of the 1970s.⁶¹ In his 1932 review of the *Objectivist Anthology* Williams would write, ‘the personality of the writer must be suspect. If a poem is made of words those words are not sacred. They may be arranged’⁶² – a statement which could almost have been written by Barthes some forty years afterwards. This purely formal or structural understanding of language as an arrangement of signifiers, severed from the intentions of the poet, allowed the Objectivist poet to focus on creating ‘an object consonant with his day’ (A, 265).

⁵⁷ See *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Peter Quartermain (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), p.33.

⁵⁸ See my discussion in the Introduction, pp. 61-2.

⁵⁹ This is a point that Williams makes on numerous occasions. His unpublished essay, ‘An Address to Writing,’ puts it in terms which are especially relevant to this debate. ‘Two things have been confused in writing from the beginning. Until they have been finally separated and defined nothing can be done with it toward clarity of purpose: the art and the overwhelming burden of practical information which the words carry. / The art [of writing], as with all arts, is addressed to the imagination to the non-informative play of the intelligence, a corrective, critical readjustment of the senses - in which non-sense has a masterful part / It moves through words as through colors, seeking dissociations, accuracies of impact rather than accretions of matter. It is a purely objective play of words.’ See Buffalo, WCW Papers, C2.

⁶⁰ This is the entire thrust of Riddell’s argument, that Williams was not concerned with the opposition between ‘ideas’ and ‘things’, but rather with words and their ability to structure reality. See Riddel, *The Inverted Bell*, p.26-7.

⁶¹ It was J. Hillis Miller who first began to think of WCW in deconstructionist terms in his *Poets of Reality* (1965). See also Paul Bové’s, ‘The World and Earth of William Carlos Williams: Paterson as a “Long Poem,”’ *Genre*, 11 (Winter, 1978), pp.575-96 for a discussion of Williams and deconstruction.

⁶² Yale, WCW Papers, Box 64, Folder 1367.

Charles Altieri's seminal 1979 essay, 'The Objectivist Tradition,' offers perhaps the most lucid description of what this emphasis on structure entails. Altieri divided American modernism into 'two basic modes of lyric relatedness – symbolist and objectivist styles.'⁶³ He sees Objectivism as a deliberate reaction against symbolism, surrealism and any form of modernism that indulged the allegorical or mythological. Altieri argues that where symbolism engages the 'interpretive mind,' Objectivism seeks to engage the 'measuring mind' by constructing its own relational structures into a 'perceptual field.' The implication of Altieri's approach is that where Symbolism attempts to uncover the 'essence' or 'being' of the poetic object, Objectivism attempts to deconstruct that 'being' as a nexus of 'objects,' each of which is a node in a relational field. Oppen sums up this approach in the phrase, 'things explain each other, / Not themselves.'⁶⁴ According to Altieri, this relational field enables the mind to think 'with' things rather than 'about' things.⁶⁵ Williams' 1931 essay on Marianne Moore describes this relational field in clearer terms:

A course in mathematics would not be wasted on a poet, or a reader of poetry, if he remembers no more from it than the geometrical principle of the intersection of loci: from all angles lines converging and crossing establish points. He might carry it further and say in his imagination that apprehension perforates at places, through to understanding – as white is at the intersection of blue and yellow and green and red. It is this white light that is the background of all good work. (*SE*, 122)

⁶³ Charles Altieri, 'The Objectivist Tradition,' *Chicago Review*, 30:3 (Winter, 1979), p.6.

⁶⁴ Oppen, *Collected Poems*, p.134. For further elaboration on this concept see Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), p.32.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p.8.

The confluence between the individual ‘nodes’ (or poetic objects) and the overall structure or form is what Zukofsky refers to as ‘objectification.’⁶⁶ Williams writes, ‘Objectivism has to do with the whole poem – the structure of the poem as a metrical invention, a complete object.’⁶⁷

The word ‘structure’ is also important for understanding the change that was happening in the way that Williams theorized the importance of his own writings during the 1930s. Whilst Williams had always been concerned with crafting a visual structure for his poetry, it was not until after he met Zukofsky that he began to look for a theoretical approach to poetry that justified this practice. Later in his career, as he became more influenced by Einstein and Madame Curie (both of whom had redefined our entire understanding of matter and the structure of the universe), he would replace the word structure with ‘measure.’⁶⁸ In a 1955 letter to John Thirwall, Williams would write:

The first thing you learn when you begin to learn anything about this earth is that you are eternally barred save for the report of your senses from knowing anything about it. Measure serves for us as the key: we can measure between objects, therefore, we know that they exist. Poetry began with measure, it began with the dance whose divisions we have all but forgotten are still known as measures. (*SL*, 331)

⁶⁶ Zukofsky, *Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays of Louis Zukofsky* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1993) p.194-5. Similarly, Williams argues in his unpublished notes on Objectivism that the key difference between Imagism and Objectivism was that Imagism required ‘no essential relationship between form and content.’ Buffalo, WCW Papers, C49.

⁶⁷ Williams, ‘Dartmouth College Talk,’ unpublished, 1939. Buffalo, WCW Papers, C49.

⁶⁸ See Stephen Cushman, *William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985) for a full account of the concept of ‘measure’ in Williams’ works. See also Margaret Glynn Lloyd, *William Carlos Williams's Paterson: A Critical Reappraisal* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1980), pp.168-9.

Undoubtedly, this emphasis on ‘measure’ originated in his contact with the critical climate of the 1930s.⁶⁹ Objectivism not only encouraged Williams to think about the poem in structural terms, it also gave him a way to view his poetic experiments as part of a larger philosophic, intellectual and social program. In his 1934 review of Oppen’s *Discrete Series*, for instance, he talks about the ‘new poetic economy’ (*STS*, 55) which would be co-present with the new financial economy. Through the Objectivist writers, Williams thus began to imagine the birth of a ‘new social order’ (*STS*, 57), synonymous with a new intellectual order, and he came to believe that he was part of the wider process of creating these new social, economic and linguistic structures through his experiments in verse. Whilst Williams’ attempts to create a new intellectual paradigm through poetic structure may seem somewhat farfetched, nevertheless, his assertion of the importance of discovering ‘a new way of measuring that will be commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living’ (*SE*, 283) is one of the most consistent and significant features of his critical writings of the 1930s.⁷⁰

Williams and Zukofsky both felt that the blueprint for this newer structural understanding of poetry had already been laid down by Pound in the fugal form of *A Draft of XXX Cantos*. The correspondence between Zukofsky and Williams shows that the publication of *XXX Cantos* in 1931 was on both Williams and Zukofsky’s minds

⁶⁹ See, for instance, WCW to LZ, 26th January, 1947, p.387, in which Williams looks back on ‘The’ (which he read for the first time in 1928) and discusses how the ‘consciousness of a new measure’ comes through in the poem. It must also be said that the work of Moore may have helped Williams develop his theories about the importance of structure in poetry. See, in particular, Williams’ 1931 essay on Moore (*SE*, 128-9). See also WCW to LZ, 25th February, 1937, pp.244-5, in which Williams commends Zukofsky for having ‘invented a form’ in ‘A.’ See WCW to LZ, 4th March, 1937, for similar comments in relation to ‘A.’

⁷⁰ See my discussion of this subject in chapter one, pp.83-4.

during the period in which Objectivism was being formulated.⁷¹ Williams and Zukofsky even planned a collection of essays in 1931 to celebrate the launch of *XXX Cantos*, though it never materialized.⁷² In a discussion of Mencken's *The American Language*, Williams puts forward the case that 'the practice of the poem has been the decisive factor in determining the character that any language has taken,' and that the reason for this is chiefly structural.

The English language had come long since to a point of stasis as far as, especially, the structure of its verse is concerned [...] In language which we know, for lack of a better term, as the American, though the structure of the poem may seem to have nothing to do with the matter, what we do with our poetic opportunities nevertheless will determine how our language is to be formed. That is the importance of Ezra Pound for us, he, though it is not blatantly apparent, is forming our language.⁷³

Williams advances the case here, as well as in his 1931 review of *XXX Cantos*, that Pound's poem represents a *structural* revolution in the history of the American language, opening up a new explicitly American form. Central to the structure of *XXX Cantos* is the concept of the 'luminous detail.'⁷⁴ The 'luminous detail' refers to a historic detail which uncovers a trans-historical truth.⁷⁵ Its truth is derived from history but ultimately rests on the mythological. The form of *The Cantos* sets these luminous

⁷¹ See WCW to LZ, 2nd and 23rd February, 1931, pp.79, 81.

⁷² LZ to WCW, 3rd May 1951, p.87.

⁷³ Yale, WCW Papers, Box 30, Folder 890, 'The American Language - again' (1936).

⁷⁴ The phrase 'luminous detail' is originally from Pound's essay 'I Gather the Limbs of Osiris', *Selected Prose, 1909-1963* ed. William Cookson (New York: New Directions, 1973), p.21.

⁷⁵ The first example of a luminous detail that Pound chooses in 'I Gather the Limbs of Osiris' is from *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*: 'In this year the Venetians refused to make war upon the Milanese because they held that any war between buyer and seller must prove profitable to neither.' Ibid. p.22. A luminous detail is therefore a single historical insight that can be turned into an idea or a principle that will hold true across history. See Michael North's excellent study, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.134 for further discussion.

details ‘whirring together’ in a fugal form, a ‘ply over ply’ technique, as Yeats described it, with no clear distinction between myth and history, ideology and praxis.⁷⁶

In his review of *XXX Cantos*, Williams describes this methodology as ‘objective.’ For Williams, *The Cantos* were a pragmatic record of the evolution of ideas spanning from Confucius to Jefferson – pragmatic because it shows history in use rather than the meta-history of text books. In fact, this tells us more about Williams’ idealized version of *The Cantos* than it does about Pound’s own design. For Williams, it is the ‘use’ of words and not the ‘idea’ behind them that determines their ‘objective’ functioning. This is after all the program that Williams begins in *American Grain*. Where *The Cantos* seek to sublimate history into a single unified vision,⁷⁷ Williams seeks to uncover our own history-making processes and to demythologize them.⁷⁸

It is here that Williams exerted a decisive influence on Zukofsky and all the Objectivists. Zukofsky, despite retaining Pound’s fugal form for ‘A’, replaces the ‘luminous,’ or trans-historical detail with his own more mundane ‘historic and contemporary particulars.’⁷⁹ In essence, this eviscerates Pound’s methodology of its mythological aspect and reduces the scope of poetry to an arrangement of historical, material and cultural artefacts. The opening passage of ‘A’ is an excellent example of this Objectivist demythologization. As Stanley and other critics have noted, the beginning of ‘A’ describes not only Bach’s *St Matthew’s Passion*, as heard by Zukofsky in New York, but also includes details of the program and taking the wrong exit on his

⁷⁶ Yeats, *A Vision* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 5. Pound, *ABC of Economics*, reprinted in *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, p.239.

⁷⁷ Lawrence Rainey refers to this as the ‘transcendent testimony’ of *The Cantos*. See Lawrence Rainey, *Ezra Pound and the Monument of Culture: Text, History, and the Malatesta Cantos* (Ann Arbor: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p.165. See also Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Language, Sexuality, and Ideology in Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), pp.89.

⁷⁸ See, for instance, *ITAG*, p.109.

⁷⁹ Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, p.12.

way out. Like Williams, Zukofsky delighted in juxtaposing quotidian subject matter against the great ideas and art objects of history, and much of his epic, 'A', focuses on his own domestic environment, especially his wife and children.⁸⁰ This wider philosophical program of demythologization, coupled with an emphasis on the local and domestic, is undoubtedly Williams' contribution to Objectivism. Zukofsky famously wrote:

The poet wonders why so many today have raised up the word 'myth,' finding the loss of so-called 'myths' in our time a crisis the poet must overcome or die from, as it were having become too radioactive, when instead a case can be made out for the poet giving some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a*: both of which are weighted with as much epos and historical destiny as one man can perhaps resolve. Those who do not believe this are too sure that little words mean nothing among so many other words.⁸¹

It is interesting to see how Zukofsky's emphasis on the 'little words' mimics the New Deal rhetoric of the 'little man.' Indeed, Zukofsky's most famous poems are named after prepositions, 'The' and 'A', and his concern for prepositions serves a dual purpose. Firstly it is intended to de-centre the cultural authority of 'big' words and big ideas in favour of the little ones. Similarly Williams' attempts to capture conversations overheard, scenes encountered in everyday life, were like little forays into a history that is severed from any meta-narrative. More than that, they are frequently an attempt to show the *functional* aspects of human life. All of the Objectivists had been influenced by Williams in this regard, especially Reznikoff, whose *Testimony* was another such attempt to 'cleanse' history of myths.⁸²

⁸⁰ See for instance Zukofsky's 'A-12', in 'A', p.214. See also Barry Ahearn, *Zukofsky's 'A': An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p.72.

⁸¹ Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, p.10.

⁸² *Testimony* was based on the sketches in 'My Country 'Tis of Thee' published in *Contact* (see chapter three, pp.186-7). *Testimony* was the 'Objectivist' work which Williams admired the most, securing

Williams' contribution to the Objectivist issue of *Poetry*, 'The Botticellian Trees,' shows him grappling with many of these concerns: the desire for a poetic structuring of the world, an engagement with the concept of the mythological, and his own complex relationship with the 'Objectivist' mode:

The alphabet of
the trees

is fading in the
song of the leaves

the crossing
bars of the thin

letters that spelled
winter

and the cold
have been illumined

with
pointed green

There are obvious rhymes here, 'trees,' 'leaves' and 'green'. But there are also less obvious ones: 'thin,' 'winter' 'with,' and even the coupling of 'fading' / 'crossing,' as well as 'spelled' / 'illumined' / 'pointed.' On a literal level, the poem likens the bare branches of trees to a form of writing, and then imagines that writing spelling 'winter.' Williams appears to be searching for structural qualities in nature. Like all structures or 'alphabets' the branches can be coded and decoded. They can be scanned for a kind of meaning which cannot be read literally but must be intuited. The intricate structure of those branches is also replicated in the delicate rhyme scheme of the poem.

Kenneth Burke's approval of it and urging Zukofsky to lead with it as the first publication by The Objectivist Press in 1933. See WCW to LZ, 10th February, 1933, p.165.

But if 'The Botticellian Trees' shows Zukofsky's influence on Williams, it also shows his resistance to the Objectivist program. Certainly, Williams' poetry challenges the all too easy dichotomy of 'symbolist' and 'objectivist' styles, and he never relinquished the lyrical aspects of his poetry. The second half of 'The Botticellian Trees,' for instance, seems more expressive than one would expect from an Objectivist poem:

The strict simple
 principles of
 straight branches
 are being modified
 by pinched-out
 ifs of colour, devout
 conditions
 the smiles of love –

 until the stript
 sentences
 move as a woman's
 limbs under cloth
 and praise from secrecy
 quick with desire
 love's ascendancy
 in summer—
 In summer the song
 sings itself
 above the muffled words (*CPI*, 348-9)

One way to view 'The Botticellian Trees' would be as a movement from an 'objectivist' to a 'symbolist' mode of writing, which is here formulated as the

movement from winter to summer. It starts out with 'strict simple / principles of / straight branches.' As we have already seen, the rhyming structure at the beginning is clean and neat, if complex and delicate. As the poem progresses these structures are slowly replaced by the 'ifs of colour.' The purely Objectivist understanding of poetry (as a series of structural relations) gives way to 'love' and desire, with the language also moving into a more lyrical and figurative mode: 'move as a woman's / limbs under cloth.' Towards the end the 'sentences' are 'stript' of their meaning, but it is not by analysis that they are finally interpreted, it is by desire, with that word 'stript' suggesting an undressing, a seduction. The latter half of the poem is clearly reminiscent of Williams' 1927 poem, 'The Young Sycamore' (*CPI*, 266). In typical Williams style, the sexual urgencies of spring are solemnized and worshipped, becoming 'devout / conditions.' The poem thus moves from a 'winter' of signs, in which we must read and interpret the meanings that are written around us, to a 'summer' of experience, in which the joy of being rushes up and usurps the page without need for interpretation or exegesis: 'In summer the song / sings itself.'⁸³

The only 'object' in the poem is the tree itself, which is approached through synecdoche, simile and metaphor. The poem brings to our attention the mechanical structural elements of meaning (in the form of the tree and the alphabet) only to surpass them with an elopement into the Romantic. The tree in bloom points towards a world of hidden meanings, and a kind of knowledge which can only blossom once we set aside systems of interpretation and hear the song of summer directly. In this respect, the tree clearly partakes of that 'symbolism' which Zukofsky was so keen to avoid. Ultimately the poem is not wholly 'symbolist' nor is it wholly 'objectivist'; rather it shows us the

⁸³ *Poetry* Feb, 1931 (*CPI*, 348-9).

process by which we construct meanings out of things such as ‘winter’ and ‘summer.’ In the end, sensuality remains the most significant force in the poem.

Williams benefitted from the theoretical framework which Objectivism provided, and the movement enabled Williams to think of the kind of poetry that he was writing as chiefly structural. But despite the attempts of various critics to claim Williams as Objectivist, those claims must be tempered by the knowledge that Williams’ poetry continued to display the same traits and concerns as it had formerly, some of which were antithetical to the theory of what an Objectivist poem should be.

5.2. Objectivism and Anti-Semitism

In *Conviction’s Net of Branches*, Heller describes Objectivism as ‘the first deliberately American movement’ of poetry,⁸⁴ and this claim continues to be echoed by Objectivist critics today.⁸⁵ Ignoring, for a moment, the difficulty of evaluating such a claim, the idea of Objectivism as a ‘deliberately’ American movement is somewhat ironic, since in addition to having a British member (Basil Bunting), the Objectivist poets were nearly all immigrants and not one of them experienced a traditional American upbringing. Three of the Objectivists were not even writing in their first language. Even Williams was somewhat removed from the American tradition, with his English-Puerto Rican background. Despite this, when Zukofsky was interviewed by *Pesti Naplo* on his trip to visit Pound in 1933, he stated: ‘In America we have grown out of this interest with Europe. We take and have taken only the best that Europe

⁸⁴ Heller, *Conviction’s Net of Branches*. p.1.

⁸⁵ Such as Monique Vescia, *Depression Glass: Documentary Photography and the Medium of the Camera-Eye in Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, and William Carlos Williams*, p.xix.

possessed. I came here chiefly to meet the master of American poetry and in a sense its father, Ezra Pound.⁸⁶ But though Zukofsky names Pound as the father of American poetry, in the hint of cultural nationalism that one sees in his rejection of Europe he is undoubtedly echoing Williams.

Williams critics have often displayed a certain smugness when comparing his politics to the reactionary politics of Pound and Eliot. One of the reasons why Williams' nationalistic calls for American self-expression were received so warmly was undoubtedly that they allowed critics to dissociate 'American' modernism (Williams' brand of modernism) from the expatriate, reactionary modernism of Pound and Eliot.⁸⁷ One of the key components of the sense of superiority that supporters of Williams display in relation to Eliot and Pound relates to America's desire to forget its own anti-Semitic fervour of the 1930s.⁸⁸

The question of anti-Semitism is one of the most striking aspects of the Pound-Williams-Zukofsky relationship. It seems almost implausible that in the first years of the Depression, when America's anti-Semitic fervour reached fever pitch, one of the main proponents of anti-Semitism (Pound) became involved with a group of Jewish writers. The issue of anti-Semitism may not have any direct bearing on Williams' own poetics (though it is highly relevant to Pound and Zukofsky's poetry), but nevertheless it is well worth excavating this issue here. Not only does it shed further light on the Pound-Williams-Zukofsky relationship, but I also intend to present new evidence that

⁸⁶ See Stanley, *Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics*, p.9. Stanley argues that Zukofsky was able to appropriate the American tradition through Henry Adams.

⁸⁷ See for instance, Julio Marzan, *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams*, p.125; Bremen's, *Diagnostics of Culture*, pp.188-9. See also Frail, *Early Politics*, p.54; Beck, *Writing the Radical Centre*, p.4; Harihar Rath, *The Poetry of Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams* (New Delhi, Atlantic Publishers, 2003), p.85, 27. I do not wish to suggest that these critics are wrong, only to point out that there is often a hint of smugness in their comparisons to Pound.

⁸⁸ See, for instance, Alec Marsh, *Money and Modernity*, p.68.

challenges the smugness of critics who see Williams as being above the prejudices that plagued Pound and Eliot.

Dinnerstein's excellent volume, *Anti-Semitism in America*, explores the sudden increase of anti-Semitism in America during the 1930s. Dinnerstein notes that 'the deepening economic crisis contributed to an explosion of unprecedented anti-Semitic fervour.' He argues that the period between 1933 and 1939 was the height of anti-Semitism in American history, a phenomenon that has not been seen in America 'before or since,' with even 'respectable social and religious leaders' stirring up America's fears that the Jews were planning a hostile takeover of 'Christian America' through its legal and financial institutions.⁸⁹

Pound's anti-Semitism, often seen as an aberration in liberal, democratic America, was actually fairly typical of popular sentiment of the 1930s. This may go some way to explaining why Zukofsky was often so submissive and accepting of Pound's anti-Semitic rants. As early as December 1929, Pound had suggested to Zukofsky that the lack of good prose in German was a result of 'all idiomatic energy being drawn off into Yiddish.' Zukofsky, ever deferential in the first years of their friendship, did not challenge this bizarre claim,⁹⁰ and he even tried to distance himself from his own Judaism by branding himself as an 'antisemite': 'I hope you don't feel the Jews are roping you in.'⁹¹ As time progressed Pound's comments became more outspoken, and by 1933 his anti-Semitism had grown into something more akin to an obsession – an obsession which grew in tandem with his interest in economics and the Social Credit

⁸⁹ Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-semitism in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.105.

⁹⁰ EP to LZ, 9th December, 1929, p.26.

⁹¹ LZ to EP, 19th December, 1929, p.28.

theories of C.H. Douglas, himself an anti-Semite. In a letter of April 1933, Pound asks Zukofsky to forward him Roosevelt's books on economics whilst at the same time throwing him a bizarre question about Jewish practices: 'Can Jewish gentleman meet sodomitical gentlemen in New York without irritations of interactive prejudice, or do ONLY jewish sodolitical gentlemen meet sodomitical gentleman of other religious persuasions???' Zukofsky, not really understanding the question attempted to make light of it – 'only in literary cases,' he replied.⁹²

Pound also increasingly bought into Douglas's theory that a Cabal of Jewish financiers were responsible for funding Roosevelt's socialist program.⁹³ In this he was far from alone. Dinnerstein notes how frequently communist anxiety and 'The Jewish Problem' became entangled in the rhetoric of the period.⁹⁴ Even Roosevelt himself became a victim of anti-Semitic prejudice. As a result of Roosevelt's policies 'more minorities and women achieved responsible positions in the Federal government than ever before,' from which Jews benefited more than any other group. 'Within months of Roosevelt's taking office in March 1933,' Dinnerstein writes, 'rumours spread that Jews were running the government.' As a result, for the first time in history the President's religious heritage was called into question.⁹⁵ Roosevelt's radical socialist program, widely seen as a betrayal of libertarian American ideals, also became known as the 'Jew

⁹² EP to LZ, 5th April, 1933 p.143. LZ to EP, 15th April, 1933, p.147.

⁹³ Leon Surette provides an excellent history of how these two concepts became linked in Pound's mind. Surette argues that it was in 1934 that Pound moved decisively into a phase of 'biological racism' and 'conspiracy theories.' Leon Surette, *Pound in Purgatory: From Economic Radicalism to Anti-Semitism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p.239.

⁹⁴ For instance he looks at the speeches of Father Charles Coughlin who founded the anti-Semitic 'National Union for Social Justice.' Dinnerstein, *Anti-semitism in America*, p.116-122.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p.108.

Deal,' thus entrenching an 'us' and 'them' patriotism that operated along an axis that was both economic and religious.⁹⁶

The association of Judaism and Socialism may have been more than mere prejudice. Halten notes that during the early 1930s Jews, especially young Jews, joined the CPUSA in numbers that were 'radically disproportionate' to their American counterparts.⁹⁷ The Objectivist circle certainly didn't contradict this trend. Zukofsky was as dissatisfied with Roosevelt's economic plan as Pound was, but from the left rather than the right, arguing that he couldn't support any system, Social Credit included, that attempted to prop up capitalism.⁹⁸

At the root of the growing resentment among Zukofsky, Williams and Pound was the tension building between democratic and totalitarian states, and the first beginnings of the road to war. As Roosevelt began to align himself with the anti-fascist forces, the left was beginning to split into those who supported war and those who didn't. 'Can one say that Mussolini in his conference with Ramsay [MacDonald] really intended to prevent war?' Zukofsky probed Pound, at the same time criticizing Pound's review of C.H. Douglas' *The Secret International* (an exposé on the arms trade) for its unmitigated support of fascism.⁹⁹

In fact, Williams, Zukofsky and Pound, all desperate to avoid war, had very different ideas about what might bring it about. Williams was convinced that the previous war had been about profiteering and that America had become 'the milk-cow

⁹⁶ See Richard Breitman, *FDR and the Jews* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), p.78. See also Sander Gilman and Steven Katz, *Anti-Semitism in Times of Crisis* (New York: NYU Press, 1993), p.10.

⁹⁷ See Burton Halten 'Objectivist Poets in Context', *The Objectivist Nexus*, p.44-8.

⁹⁸ LZ to EP 11th May, 1935, p.xviii.

⁹⁹ LZ to EP, 15th April 1933, p.148.

of England' through the Versailles Treaty.¹⁰⁰ Although he despised fascism, he was therefore, like Pound, convinced that the banks had a share in the blame. Zukofsky was convinced that Hitler and Mussolini were going out of their way to look for war.¹⁰¹ Pound had bought into the classic conspiracy theory that people such as C.H. Douglas were propagating, namely, that the war was part of a New York conspiracy to keep the arms trade in business (to the lasting benefit of certain very rich Jews).¹⁰² In Pound's mind, Zukofsky and Williams had become increasingly associated with the tainted liberalism of the New York scene – a liberalism that was economically complicit in the upcoming global devastation and at the same time unequivocally associated with Judaism and the stock exchange in 'Jew York' as he called it.¹⁰³

In the March 1933, 100,000 gathered in Washington Square to protest against the recent spate of Jewish killings in Nazi Germany. In fact, violent physical attacks against Jews were far from unique to Germany; they happened in Boston and New York as well.¹⁰⁴ Zukofsky, however, criticized the Rabbis leading the rally for making the 'pogrom' in Germany 'a matter of Judaism.'¹⁰⁵ One could argue that Zukofsky's zeal to create a new Marxist world in which all the customs and prejudices of the past could be left behind, had blinded him to the facts of the case – this *was* a question of Judaism, and the impending destruction of an entire race on a tribal basis. As the world at large, and in particular his very own literary hero, Pound, turned against the Jews, Zukofsky

¹⁰⁰ Williams, 'A present day and recurrent modification of the American Spirit,' Yale WCW Papers.Box 44, Folder 1101.

¹⁰¹ LZ to EP, 15th April 1933, p.148.

¹⁰² Ludicrously, Pound even endorses Bizmark's idea that the Civil War was a Jewish conspiracy and that Lincoln was killed by the same secret forces as the six Romanov czars and various other heads of state. See EP to LZ 6th May, 1934. See also Leon Surette, *Pound in Purgatory*, p.242.

¹⁰³ EP to LZ, 28th October, 1931, p.104.

¹⁰⁴ Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America*, p.105.

¹⁰⁵ LZ to EP, 15/04/33, p.148.

increasingly rejected his own Judaism on a Marxist basis. Pound even believed Zukofsky to be a fellow ‘anti-semite’.¹⁰⁶ Halten argues that in gravitating toward the left, even at the expense of their heritage, the Jewish Objectivists (Reznikoff, Zukofsky, Oppen and Rakosi) were typical of the generation of Mike Gold’s *Jews Without Money*, a book that tells the struggle for survival in the Jewish areas of the Lower East Side, where Zukofsky was brought up.¹⁰⁷ These ‘Jews without money,’ Halten argues, were eager to exercise a responsibility ‘toward all human beings’ through Marxism.¹⁰⁸ Jewish socialism was clearly at odds with the Poundian conception of an insular, nepotistic, often elitist religion. The American public therefore complained about wealthy Jews at exactly the same time as they complained about socialist Jews, a contradiction that indicates a distinct lack of logical analysis and an overabundance of irrational abuse.

To date, very little work has been done to excavate Williams’ own anti-Semitism.¹⁰⁹ Three unpublished poems survive that point to, at the very least, an uncomfortable relationship with Judaism. The most vitriolic of these is the undated poem, ‘Blagh’:

The Hitlers of Jewry
are drunk to the gums
Let them drop in the stew
reconsider their sums

Stand up and teach
the Goy to behave
- give up the cash

¹⁰⁶ See the exchange between LZ and EP, 6th May, 1934 and 23rd May, 1934.

¹⁰⁷ Halten refers to Oppen as a ‘partial exception.’ See *The Objectivist Nexus*, p.39.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.45.

¹⁰⁹ Bram Dijkstra notes Williams’ disparaging remarks about the Jews in *A Voyage to Pagany*; see *Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* p.83. Leibowitz also notes a slight anti-Semitic current in Williams’ letters in the 1930s; see *Something Urgent I Have to Say to You*, p.294.

It's the soul we must save¹¹⁰

Depictions of Jews as spiritually despoiled by materialist culture, whilst common for the era, seem surprising for Williams. The fact that he was writing rhyming quatrains, a form practically unknown to Williams, suggests that he wasn't taking it too seriously, and its childish simplicity (both in content and form) is no doubt the reason why this poem was never published. Nevertheless it does have to be considered as part of a wider trend, a surge in anti-Semitism during the Depression.

Although Williams was much better at censoring his poetic output than Pound, he certainly felt some degree of resentment towards Jewish wealth.¹¹¹ Amongst the discarded material is an excised scene from *White Mule*, written in the mid-1930s, in which a caricature Jewish landlord of a grocery store refuses to queue with the rest of the customers and pushes straight to the front, throwing his money down on the counter (some of it spilling onto the floor) and walking out. This prompts some anti-Semitic comments from our hero, Gurlie, and the other people in the shop: 'The dirty Jews. They never learn. [...] things we don't ordinarily put into words they don't seem to feel.' This leads to a Shylock moment of protest from a second Jewish woman, unrelated to the caricature landlord, who stands up for her people:

'That's not true!' boiled out a stocky Jewish woman, bare headed and in plain house clothes near them. 'That man's a pig.'

'Good for you.' said Gurlie.

'I know him,' went on the woman. 'He was always a pig. That's why he's rich. But I'm a Jew and I'm not dirty. I have feelings just like anybody else.'¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Buffalo, WCW Papers, A43.

¹¹¹ Ironically, poor Jews also feature in stories such as 'A Face of Stone.' He even calls Marx a 'Kike' (*FD*, 148).

¹¹² Buffalo, WCW Papers, B51.

The naivety of this moral lesson is overshadowed by a lingering anti-Semitism. Throughout this passage there is an emphasis on the spiritual, which harkens back to the Christian rejection of materialistic wealth, that to be rich is to be a ‘pig.’ One might compare Williams’ simplistic attempts to overcome his own anti-Semitism with Zukofsky’s wonderfully rich and resonant Shylock imitation in ‘The’:

251 Assimilation is not hard,
 252 And once the Faith’s askew
 253 I might as well look Shagetz just as much
 as Jew.
 254 I’ll read their Donne as mine,
 255 And leopard in their spots
 256 I’ll do what says their Coleridge,
 257 Twist red hot pokers into knots.
 258 The Villainy they teach me I will execute
 259 And it shall go hard with them,
 260 For I’ll better the instruction,
 261 Having learned, so to speak, in their colleges.

Zukofsky, Reznikoff and Rakosi were all writing in a second or third language, and thus their poetry was always an ‘assimilation,’ an act of appropriating to an extent. We can also sense a hostility toward the literary establishment here: ‘I’ll better the instruction / Having learned, so to speak, in their colleges.’ On one level, Zukofsky seems to be saying he has literally learned how to ‘speak’ in colleges, how to talk the language of the establishment.¹¹³ On another level he seems to be qualifying the word

¹¹³ Jonathan Freedman describes how ‘Culture’ (particularly University culture) became the primary means by which Jewish immigrants assimilated into European nations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He goes on to make the case that for precisely this reason Semitism and ‘high culture’ have been in tension with one another. Since German philosophy tied the ideal of culture to ideas of cohesion and unity in the eighteenth-century, successive purveyors of culture, continuing through Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, Henry James, T.S. Eliot, have needed the ‘outsider’ figure of the Jew to define that cultural cohesion. Jonathan Freedman, *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), see especially, pp.11, 17, 34.

‘learned’ with the phrase ‘so to speak,’ as though he is being careful not to give this sort of academic ‘learning’ too much credibility.

Another of Williams’ anti-Semitic poems, ‘Some Women,’ shows him struggling to overcome his own prejudices in much the same way as the excised passage of *White Mule*:

Oh Jewess who rejects Christ
 Why are you so beautiful?
 You are not evil
 but gentle and kind

Is the need mine alone
 because I reject the Jew?
 You shine, pre-Christian
 a lily of the field.¹¹⁴

One way to read this poem might be to see it in terms of the stirrings of primitive libidinal forces. According to Freedman images of the ‘primal corrupting sexual power’ of Jews were common to the period.¹¹⁵ In the poem above these sexual stirrings are externalized onto the Jewish woman as ‘pre-Christian.’ The poet then seems almost surprised to find that these libidinal forces (contrary to Puritan teachings) are not ‘evil’ but in fact ‘gentle and kind.’ There is a complex power relationship in his ‘need’ for this woman and his rejection of her.

Yet the nature of Williams rejection of Judaism is, like Pound’s, finally political. In his 1939 essay ‘Against the Weather,’ Williams even compares Judaism to fascism, arguing that they are both part of a ‘tribal-religious cult’ (*SE*, 216). His unpublished ‘Essays for Martians,’ considers the implications of diaspora in similar terms:

¹¹⁴ Buffalo, WCW Papers, A189.

¹¹⁵ Jonathan Freedman, *The Temple of Culture*, p.18.

There is a race of men upon the earth called Jews who live outside the laws of whatever country they happen to inhabit. This gives them certain advantages over the others which makes them generally despised.

It gives them an objective attitude toward the laws under which they live, too, which enables them to treat those laws without emotion or feeling, merely as something to be circumvented when the occasion warrants it.¹¹⁶

The very idea of it being an ‘Essay for Martians,’ that is, an essay that attempts to look at the Jewish question objectively and in culturally relative terms, is in itself fascinating, but he goes on to describe the Jews as having an ‘objective attitude,’ one not limited to national prejudices. This passage certainly has echoes of Henry Ford’s *The International Jew*, which argued that as a result of diaspora, Jews had ‘a clearer world sense than any other people’¹¹⁷ (though unlike Williams, Ford believed in a conspiracy of Jews which he called the ‘Jewish World Program’). Although Williams pretends to see the benefits of being an ‘objective’ or ‘international’ people, his words are clearly loaded with his own particular nationalist prejudices. Williams considers the Jews to be cut off from the ‘local’ and thus severed from the sense of place.¹¹⁸

Whilst Williams may have expressed a certain anti-Semitic feeling (tied to his patriotism), he was very careful never to display these thoughts in public. Indeed, his embracing of immigrants and diversity must still be considered by far the more powerful force in his literature.¹¹⁹ The only occasion when Williams became associated

¹¹⁶ Yale, WCW Papers, Box 40, Folder 1020. This was the only ‘Essay for Martians’ that Williams wrote although the title suggests he might have intended to write a series.

¹¹⁷ Henry Ford, *The International Jew* (Minneapolis: Filiquarian Publishing, 2007), p.102.

¹¹⁸ Similar arguments are employed by T.S. Eliot in his defence of tradition and homogeneity in *After Strange Gods*. Eliot defines tradition as ‘the same people living in the same place.’ It therefore appears somewhat strange to see Williams rehearsing the same ‘traditionalist’ arguments against the Jews, as his arch-enemy, Eliot. Nevertheless such was the cultural climate of the 1930s that even Williams, despite his much touted fealty to diversity, was not immune to it. To ignore Williams’ anti-Semitism, however, is to ignore the undercurrent of nationalism that runs throughout his work. See T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934).

¹¹⁹ See my discussion of the role of immigrants in Williams’ short stories in chapter two, p.140. For a reminder of the importance of immigrant stories in Williams’ oeuvre, one need only read *White Mule*,

with anti-Semitism in public was through his connection with Social Credit. Douglas had in fact been associating Social Credit with anti-Semitic fervour from 1938 onwards (the same year that he was deposed as the political leader of the Social Credit movement).¹²⁰ Williams, however, had absolutely no idea that Social Credit was associated with anti-Semitic propaganda until 1941. Floss wrote to Gorham Munson, the head of the American Social Credit Movement: ‘Bill and I were talking to Louis Zukofsky, about Social Credit in particular – much to my amazement Louis stated that Major Douglas & Social Credit were anti Semite... Have Bill & I been asleep all this time?’¹²¹ The short answer to this question is yes. The same is also true of Laughlin who, as I mentioned in the introduction, did not realize that the Honest Money Foundation’s ‘Directory of Monetary Reform Leaders’ had been distributing anti-Semitic and Christian-fascist literature.¹²² Anti-Semitism was therefore a popular theme amongst organizations that were advocating radical economic change. Munson replied to Floss that American Social Credit (unlike British Social Credit) was not anti-Semitic and that he had personally ‘initiated the money-reformer’s protest against Father Coughlin’ and ‘contributed articles against antisemitism’ in various places.¹²³ Nevertheless, despite his demonstrations that Social Credit was not and should never be associated with anti-Semitism, he could not conceal the fact that its founder had turned anti-Semitic. Despite this Munson insists that ‘Douglas’s economics remain

which portrays the quintessential ‘American’ story as an immigrant story. It is also worth noting that a majority of Williams’ patients were immigrants, and consequently many of his poems and a large number of short stories reflect the immigrant culture of Paterson. In addition, Williams’ own family were also immigrants and in his early years he grew up speaking Spanish at home. For further discussion of Williams and immigration see Julio Marzan, *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams*, especially pp.5-6, 129.

¹²⁰ GM to FW, 4th Novemeber, 1941, Wesleyan University, Gorham Munson Papers, Box 14.

¹²¹ FW to GM, 23rd August, 1941, Wesleyan University, Gorham Munson Papers, Box 14.

¹²² GM to JL, 13th June, 1939. Wesleyan University, Gorham Munson Papers, Box 12.

¹²³ GM to FW, 4th Novemeber, 1941, Wesleyan University, Gorham Munson Papers, Box 14.

unimpaired.’ ‘As for Pound, he was never a pure S.C’er but a mixture of Gesell, Douglas and fascism. We take no responsibility for him.’¹²⁴

Williams was therefore as conflicted in his anti-Semitism as he was in his attitude towards Marxism, and he was often at pains to try to see things from the Jewish perspective. Evidently feeling confused about media propaganda against the Jews, Williams wrote to Fred Miller in 1933 asking for his opinion. Miller, a vehement Marxist and editor of *Blast: A Magazine of Proletarian Fiction*, went to a Jewish school as a non-Jew. He replied to Williams that despite being a rational minded person and despite his hatred of blind prejudice, he was ‘forced to concede’ that there was a lot of truth behind popular notions of Jews as money-grubbing, over-ambitious nepotists who monopolized certain influential financial and government positions with their ‘own’ people.¹²⁵ Although Williams was receiving plenty of anti-Semitic propaganda in his personal correspondence from Pound at the time, I believe this letter from Miller which deals with the subject in some considerable length was more likely to be influential in providing justification for Williams’ own anti-Semitism. Miller’s attitude seems to be proof that in America anti-Semitism, like nationalism, existed on both the left and right. Anti-Semitism, it seems, was appealing to many of those who felt betrayed by economic collapse. Ultimately, though it is important not to overlook Williams’ own prejudices, critics such as Frail, Beck and Bremen¹²⁶ are correct to make a firm distinction between Williams’ wholistic conception of a culturally inclusive America and the exclusionary,

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Fred Miller to WCW, undated letter, Yale, WCW Papers, Box 15, Folder 453.

¹²⁶ See my note on p.272, footnote 88.

elitist, anti-Semitic, ‘high’ culture in which Pound and Eliot were implicated, and which Jonathan Freedman describes in *The Temple of Culture*.¹²⁷

5.3 Objectivism and the Documentary Aesthetic

Perhaps the most significant and universal influence on 1930s writing was the rise of ‘documentary expression.’ The explosion of the documentary form in the 1930s has already been thoroughly explored by critics such as Warren Susman, William Stott and Alan Trachtenberg,¹²⁸ and typically a select list of works are drawn on: Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor’s *An American Exodus* (1939), James Agee and Walker Evans’ *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Pare Lorentz’s *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and the documentary works of the WPA, such as, The Federal Writers’ Project’s book of first-person ‘proletarian’ accounts, *These Are Our Lives*.¹²⁹ However, the concept of ‘documentary expression’ was not limited to explicitly ‘documentary’ works. Stott argues that there was a documentary ‘motive’ at work in everything from theatre to education and the social sciences. As result of the enormity of the social realities of the

¹²⁷See my note on p.279, footnote 113. Jonathan Freedman, *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.11, 17, 34.

¹²⁸ Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Patheon, 1973). William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Ann Arbor: University of Chicago Press, 1973). Alan Trachtenberg, ‘Signifying the Real: Documentary Photography in the 1930s’ in *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere* ed. Alejandro Anreus et al. (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2006), pp.3-20. Stott, in particular, charts the growth of the term ‘documentary’ during the late 1920s, and I rely heavily on Stott’s reading of the history of documentary expression in this chapter. See Stott, *Documentary Expression*, p.9.

¹²⁹ Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: The Viking Press, 1937). Dorothea Lange and Paul S. Taylor, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939). James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (London: Peter Owen, 1939). Federal Writers' Project, *These Are Our Lives* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

1930s, the impulse to capture ‘the real’ was ever present, even in fictional works.¹³⁰ Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* and Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.*, for instance, are notable for incorporating documentary techniques and forms.

Whilst the term ‘documentary’ may imply an objectivity that precludes political partisanship, Stott argues that there was a clear ‘New Deal’ agenda running through the documentaries of the period, combining the desire for political reform with a kind of cultural nationalism. Stott writes:

The New Deal’s central motive, historians agree, was to preserve the American socioeconomic system by reforming it. The documentary reporters of the latter thirties were interested in reform and propagandized for it. But their primary emphasis was on what they felt to be constant and valid in American experience. All would have said, as Louis Adamic said in *My America* (1938): ‘I want America to remain America.’¹³¹

In other words, there is a tension that runs throughout the documentaries of the period between, on the one hand, questioning American identity and American values, and on the other, meticulously recording and preserving America’s cultural life (which was under threat from economic collapse at home, and fascism abroad) and protecting what is ‘valid’ in American experience. The idea of ‘looking for America’ also gave rise to the 1930s phenomenon of ‘on the road’ documentary reportage, such as Sherwood Anderson’s *Puzzled America* (1935) and Erskine Caldwell’s *Some American People* (1935).¹³² The metaphor of ‘looking for America’ had always been a part of American literature, since Whitman began his own ‘documentary’ search for an indigenous American culture.¹³³ During the 1930s, however, this became a literal search, as writers

¹³⁰ Stott, *Documentary Expression*, pp.128-134.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p.241.

¹³² Sherwood Anderson, *Puzzled America* (New York: Scribner, 1935). Erskine Caldwell, *Some American People* (New York: R.M. McBride & Company, 1935).

¹³³ Stott argues that Whitman was the forefather of American documentary writing. *Ibid.*, p.36.

sought a 'real' education in first-hand, lived experience amongst the poorest and most marginalized people. Stott argues there are three things which documentary writers of the period were typically seeking: to witness first-hand 'the rich heterogeneity' of America, to find a simplicity of insight in 'the wisdom of the people,' and to learn 'humility' in the face of the Depression.¹³⁴

In her book *Depression Glass*, Monique Vescia points out that whilst a great deal of work has been done on 1930s documentary expression in photography, film, art and non-fiction, to date very little work has been done on documentary expression in poetry, and she credits Williams, Oppen and Reznikoff with being America's foremost 'documentary' poets of the 1930s. Vescia's book lays out the argument that Objectivism represents the closest thing to a 'documentary' poetry that existed in the 1930s, and she sees the fundamental purpose of Objectivist poetry as being the creation of 'textual objects' which aspire 'to the condition of photograph.' In a time when the people were mistrustful of the print media and the vested interests of media owners, Vescia argues, the photograph acquired a proportionate amount of credibility: 'photographic evidence was equivalent to truth.'¹³⁵ In this respect, Vescia argues that Williams' poetry, in particular, 'anticipated' the work of 1930s documentary photographers such as Walker Evans.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Stott, *Documentary Expression*, p.242

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, p.xx.

¹³⁶ Monique Vescia, *Depression Glass*, pp.xviii, 16, 29. For a discussion of Williams' poetry in relation to the visual arts see Peter Halter, *The Revolution in the Visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Henry M. Sayre, *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams* (University of Illinois Press, 1983) and especially Dickran Tashjian's excellent work, *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

Though it is uncertain whether Williams would have welcomed the description of his poetry as ‘documentary,’ Vescia is certainly right that the concept of an ‘objective’ or ‘documentary’ expression is one of the most significant factors in understanding his 1930s poetry. Much of Williams’ poetry of the 1930s reveals an obsession with documenting low-down America.

A Polack in
the stinging wind, her arms
wrapped to her breast
comes shambling near. To look
at what? Downstream. It is
an old-world flavour: the poor
the unthrifty, passionately biased
by what errors of conviction – (*CPI*, 350)

This passage is taken from Williams’ 1930 poem, ‘A Marriage Ritual,’ and it is similar in many ways to his early poem, ‘The Wanderer,’ in that it describes a ‘marriage ritual’ between the poet and modernity, between that which is ‘poetic’ and all the filth and decay of post-industrial society. In a sense, Williams is reaffirming his commitment to be ‘a mirror to this modernity’ (*CPI*, 108) in 1930. The poem begins with the wide-angled image of ‘the silhouette of the city’ before focusing in on a single individual. This ‘zooming in’ is typical of Williams’ 1930s style.¹³⁷ As usual, Williams makes no attempt to understand the interior landscape of his subject, rather he focuses exclusively on surfaces. It is in this ‘objective’ depiction of surfaces that the poem is reminiscent of the documentary photography of the period, as though the poem itself were a ‘camera-

¹³⁷ See, for instance, ‘Between Walls’ or ‘The Cod Head’ (*CPI*, 453, 357)

eye.’¹³⁸ Indeed one might easily compare this poem to iconic Depression images such as Dorothea Lange’s ‘Migrant Mother’ (1936) or Walker Evan’s ‘Subway Passengers’ (1938). One notes that in ‘A Marriage Ritual’ (as in ‘Migrant Mother’ and ‘Subway Passengers’) the subject is looking away, their attention caught by an unknown entity outside the frame. This device of ‘watching the watcher’ is one that Williams used elsewhere in his 1930s poetry, as in ‘View from a Lake’ (*CPI*, 380-1). The carefully placed line break in the phrase ‘To look / at what?’ emphasises the primacy of the gaze. In this way, the real subject of the poem is the act of watching itself, and the focus of attention becomes reflexive, so the reader/viewer is forced into an awareness of their own participation in the camera-eye.

The idea of the poem as a ‘camera-eye’ which frames and records a given moment as a kind of historical ‘document’ is in many ways the essence of Zukofsky’s original Objectivist manifesto. In the Feb 1931 issue of *Poetry*, Zukofsky laid out the framework for the ‘documentary’ approach to poetry in his concept of ‘sincerity.’ Sincerity represents a mode of writing in which language is used to create what Zukofsky calls the ‘detail, not mirage, of seeing.’ In her book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag refers to this as a mode of ‘intensive seeing.’¹³⁹ In his manifesto, Zukofsky inscribed this concept of ‘intensive seeing’ into his definition of the word ‘objective’: ‘An Objective: (optics)—The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus.’¹⁴⁰ In this sense, it is clear that Zukofsky was heavily influenced by Williams’ poetry of immediacy when he

¹³⁸ My use of this term is derived from the ‘Camera Eye’ of Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.* Michael North, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) p.140. See also Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations*, p.243.

¹³⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1973), p.96.

¹⁴⁰ LZ, *Prepositions*, p.11.

conceived of an Objectivist mode of writing.¹⁴¹ Likewise, Kenner compares Zukofsky's notion of sincerity to Hemingway's idea of 'One True Sentence,'¹⁴² both imply the capturing of one truly real moment/thing in words.

An epigram that Williams wrote for the Alcestis Press (c.1935) gives some indication as to what this means in practice:

Do you know what a dancer's feet look like?
Do you know what a professional musician's
finger's [sic] look like?
Or a shoemaker's thumb? If so you already have
something of a knowledge of poetry.¹⁴³

The role of the poet, it is implied, is to work with skill and dedication at a craft (much like a shoemaker),¹⁴⁴ but the specific task that the poet is engaged in is that of 'intensive seeing.' The poet is one who reads and studies life's surfaces (the dancer's feet, the musician's finger, the shoemaker's thumb). It is interesting to see that Williams, as a physician, chose the metaphor of a bodily 'diagnosis' to represent this concept of the 'detail, not mirage, of seeing.'

Yet sincerity is a more complex idea than Hemingway's 'One True Sentence.' Sincerity also implies a responsibility, one might even say a moral obligation, on the part of the artist to remain faithful toward one's subject matter, and the nature of this responsibility is ultimately social/political. Unlike the propagandizing of the print media, Objectivist poetry carries an unwritten promise that the writer will not sugar-coat or gloss over reality, but will confront it head on: or as DuPlessis and Quartermain

¹⁴¹ For a discussion of Williams and the poetics of immediacy, see the introduction to this thesis, pp.21-6.

¹⁴² Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp.165-8.

¹⁴³ Buffalo, WCW Papers, A98

¹⁴⁴ See my discussion of the writer as artisan in Williams' works, pp.115-6.

phrase it, ‘social purpose without agitprop posturing.’¹⁴⁵ Williams’ 1935 collection, *An Early Martyr*, in particular, contains numerous poems which elicit this sense of social responsibility ‘without agitprop posturing,’ such as, ‘An Early Martyr,’ ‘To a Poor Old Woman,’ ‘Proletarian Portrait’ and ‘The Raper from Passenack.’ ‘The Sun Bathers’ (1934) is another such poem:

A tramp thawing out
on a doorstep
against an east wall
Nov. 1, 1933:

a young man begrimed
and in an old
army coat
wriggling and scratching

while a fat negress
in a yellow-house window
nearby
leans out and yawns

into the fine weather (*CPI*, 371)

In a 1929 interview Williams remarked, ‘I like most my ability to be drunk with a sudden realization of value in things others never notice’ (*ARI*, 1). The idea of a ‘drunkenness’ of sensory input gives some indication as to how seriously Williams took the idea of ‘intensive seeing’ and ‘The Sun Bathers’ (like ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’) reveals a desire to accord an almost visionary significance to an everyday scene.¹⁴⁶ Williams’ aim in ‘The Sun Bathers’ is therefore comparable to the documentary photography of the period: namely to restore the importance and dignity of the

¹⁴⁵ Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, *The Objectivist Nexus*, p.9.

¹⁴⁶ See my discussion of ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ and the debate concerning empiricism/ Romanticism in Williams’ work in the introduction, pp.58-9. I am not taking a side in this debate or trying to portray Williams as a Romantic, I am merely using the phrase ‘visionary significance’ as a figure of speech.

commonplace, and to recover that which is forgotten, overlooked, repressed or marginalized in society.

The first stanza of this poem, 'A tramp thawing out / on a doorstep / against an east wall / Nov. 1, 1933,' would hardly look out of place as the caption to one of the Depression era photographs of the FSA.¹⁴⁷ The specific date, 'Nov. 1,' is also significant and indeed it emphasizes a key difference between Williams' 'documentary' poetry and the modernism of Pound (and arguably Zukofsky).¹⁴⁸ Where Pound purposefully removes the poetic object from its context and abstracts it, thus enabling it to become a universal and transcendent signifier,¹⁴⁹ Williams does exactly the opposite. Williams' poems are historical 'documents' in this manner: they are expressive of a particular time, and embedded in a particular social and political context. Though Williams does not mention the word Depression in this poem, one can immediately tell that it is a poem of the Depression era, in the same way that one immediately recognizes Depression anxiety in 'Migrant Mother.' Like the documentary photography of the period, 'The Sun Bathers' highlights in a non-intrusive way, and without any morally high-minded editorializing, a ubiquitous economic imbalance. The aim is not to expose the conditions of dispossessed America in a sociological sense; rather it is to capture a feeling, the feeling of dispossessed America.

The idea of these protagonists as 'sun bathers' is both ironic and sincere. On the one hand, it highlights their unemployment, their purposelessness in society. These are

¹⁴⁷ For further study on the documentary photography of the Farm Security Administration see Sara Blair and Eric M. Rosenberg, *Trauma and Documentary Photography of the FSA* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). The image of the 'fat negress' leaning out of the window is also strikingly similar to Gordon Parks' 1943 image, 'A Woman and Her Dog in Harlem.'

¹⁴⁸ Michael North, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound*, p.144-6.

¹⁴⁹ See Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Language, Sexuality, and Ideology in Ezra Pound's Cantos*, p.82.

the people struggling hardest with the Depression. The young man in the second stanza clearly has lice of some sort and his 'old / army coat' compels the reader to recall the sacrifice paid by young men in the trenches of WWI for the preservation of a democratic way of life that has now failed them. And yet Williams does not seek to proselytize or educate the reader. On the contrary, by portraying the protagonists as 'sun bathers' he also lends the scene a feeling of wildness, a kind of joyous Whitmanian liberty of a life lived in the open air. The final line, 'into the fine weather,' celebrates this feeling of freedom. In this way, the poem maintains a tension between the 'documentary' and the 'lyrical.' On the surface, the poem seems to describe only a limited number of material facts (the 'documentary'), and yet as in 'The Red Wheelbarrow' an almost inconceivably grand sense of social expression comes through (the 'lyrical'). One might compare this with his 1938 poem, 'The Poor':

It's the anarchy of poverty
delights me, the old
yellow wooden house indented
among the new brick tenements

Or a cast-iron balcony
with panels showing oak branches
in full leaf. It fits
the dress of the children

reflecting every stage and
custom of necessity— (*CPI*, 453)

The tension here between the 'lyrical' and the 'documentary' is even easier to deconstruct. On the one hand, Williams is careful not to aestheticize poverty, or make it glamorous, on the other hand, he is clearly suggesting that there is a beauty in poverty. What Williams admires about the shanty houses of the poor is that they are patched

together from different materials, some natural, some industrial, all of which reveal the 'necessity' of use. In other words, the beauty that Williams discovers is one that reflects both diversity (the rich heterogeneity of America) and his own pragmatist aesthetic. One recalls what Williams said about Washington's America, 'It was a country he pasted together a good deal out of shoddy to represent the thing we still endeavor to perfect' (*ML*, 303). The shoddy here is literally reflected in the 'dress of the children,' and it brings those two ideas together: heterogeneity and pragmatism.

Like most of Williams' Depression poetry, 'The Poor' does more than 'document' the Depression. The Objectivist poem, like the camera, frequently 'zooms in' on the specific details of the ordinary, offering us an image of everyday life that is magnified and made significant. As those details become the focus of the gaze, they acquire a certain 'iconic' (one might even say, 'sacred') quality. Iconic Depression photographs, such as 'Migrant Mother' did not simply verify America's experience of the Depression, they also vivified it by providing an 'objective correlative' for the times. Likewise, it is not simply the 'documentary' quality of Williams' poetry that makes his 1930s works stand out, it is also their transformative power, the power to create a tangible feeling and context.

Thus far, one might wonder what aspect of Williams' brand of Objectivism, if any, is unique to the 1930s. Indeed, it might be more accurate to say that 'Objectivism' and 'documentary expression' are merely terms that emerged in the 1930s to describe a poetics that Williams himself had helped to define many years previously in poems such as 'The Red Wheelbarrow,' 'The Great Figure' and 'The Young Housewife' among

others. However, there is a key difference between these 1920s poems and 1930s poems such as ‘A Marriage Ritual,’ ‘The Sun Bathers’ and ‘The Poor.’ In chapter two, I discussed the idea of a ‘Criterion of Framing’ in relation to Williams’ short stories, and the notion that an ‘objective’ organisation of the materials of the age would in and of itself be political.¹⁵⁰ In 1931, Williams had a break-through moment, during which his creative dam broke and he began pouring out the proletarian short stories that make up *The Knife of the Times*.¹⁵¹ From this point onwards, Williams’ poetry also subtly changed, and he shifted towards writing a more gritty and urban poetry that incorporated all the down and out characters of the Depression. From this point in his career onwards, one finds an increased awareness of a political ‘framing’ in his poetry too. To go back to ‘A Marriage Ritual,’ one can see this political framing in the interplay between the various elements.

A Polack in
 the stinging wind, her arms
 wrapped to her breast
 comes shambling near. To look
 at what? Downstream. It is
 an old-world flavour: the poor
 the unthrifty, passionately biased
 by what errors of conviction – (*CPI*, 350)

Clearly this is a portrait of struggle: the ‘stinging wind’, the fact that the subject’s arms are ‘wrapped to her breast’ in a defensive posture, the ‘shambling’ nature of her walk, the ‘old-world flavour’ of poverty. None of these elements are political in themselves, and indeed, Williams clearly acknowledges that these poetic objects can, as L.S. Dembo phrases it, ‘only be known “imagistically,” by one’s sensation of them, and

¹⁵⁰ See chapter two, p.136.

¹⁵¹ See chapter two, p.126.

not discursively.¹⁵² However, one also recalls Williams' assertion that the individual nodes of the poem form a relational field, and that 'understanding' comes through at the intersection of those nodes, 'as white is at the intersection of blue and yellow and green and red.'¹⁵³ In the same way, a vivid sense of political turmoil clearly comes through as a result of the combined effect of these images. Indeed, what comes through at the intersection of these nodes is what Frederick Jameson might have referred to as a 'political unconscious': the poem attempts to expose the gaps in the narrative that society creates for itself, so that raw, untamed truth can percolate through.¹⁵⁴ This latter idea is encapsulated in those lines, 'passionately biased / by what errors of conviction.' Oppen wrote, 'there is a moment, an actual, time, when you believe something to be true, and you construct a meaning from these moments of conviction.'¹⁵⁵ 'A Marriage Ritual' is precisely such a moment of 'conviction,' a moment of 'sincerity.' What Williams sees in this moment is that we are also 'nodes' in the relational field of society, and each of us is 'passionately biased' in our own ways. We are also inexplicable; he looks at this woman as she looks away elsewhere. And yet despite the inexplicability of others, what it is they are looking at, what it is that they see, the gaze of the poet can still allow us to glimpse something much larger concealed in the pattern of the surfaces that constitute our reality. To demonstrate this, compare Williams' unpublished poem, 'Prayer on Contemporary Events' (c.1937):

Dust-bowl farmland turned to sterile silt

¹⁵² L. S. Dembo 'The Existential World of George Oppen,' *The Iowa Review*, 3:1 (Winter, 1972), p.64.

¹⁵³ See my discussion on p.262.

¹⁵⁴ It may be helpful to view this issue on the context of Jameson's distinction between the 'ideological deep structure and the sentence-by-sentence life of the narrative text.' Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Oxon: Routledge, 2002), pp.250-1.

¹⁵⁵ Quoted in L. S. Dembo 'The Existential World of George Oppen,' *The Iowa Review*, 3:1 (Winter, 1972), p.64.

ravaged by sadistic ruthless wind
 baked by scorching sun that makes the human spirit wilt
 lets the conscious [sic] wonder if it wasn't nature
 who originally and cruelly sinned.

Prayer:

Teach us to compete with the past
 in experimenting with experience
 not to be limited to history's repetitions,
 [...]
 May we be not as these, dim souls submitting
 But bold at least as wild geese, with leaders of our own
 permitting¹⁵⁶

This is Williams at his most political, matched only perhaps by 'A Democratic Party Poem' (Appendix 1). And yet, like 'A Democratic Party Poem,' this poem is not included in his *Collected Works*. It is too honest in its political message for Williams' liking. The references to the dust bowl crisis and the 'dim souls submitting' (an allusion to fascist states in Europe) are too open. This poem does not attempt to grasp the truth 'imagistically' but rather attempts a 'discursive' engagement with the truth. Compare this poem to 'Election Day,' a poem from his 1939 collection *Detail and Parody for the Poem Paterson*.¹⁵⁷ 'Election Day' also gives a good example of how these ideas continued to find a place in his poetry in the late 1930s and early 1940s:

Warm sun, quiet air
 an old man sits

in the doorway of
 a broken house—

boards for windows
 plaster falling

from between the stones
 and strokes the head

¹⁵⁶ Buffalo, WCW Papers, A261.

¹⁵⁷ See Christopher MacGowan's note, *CPII*, p.450.

of a spotted dog (*CPII*, 25-6)

The specific details of the poem – the ‘boards for windows,’ the falling plaster, the spotted dog belonging to the tramp – all create a vivid sense of disenfranchisement that impacts the reader far more than a discursive exposition could have done. This political framing is arguably something that never left his works. Many of Williams’ poems after 1935 are written in a similar style: ‘Portrait of the Times,’ a poem describing two W.P.A. workers; ‘The Sleeping Brute,’ on the war in Europe; ‘Sketch for a portrait of Henry Ford,’ which portrays society as a machine which is spinning out of control; ‘Detail (Doc, I bin’ lookin’ for you),’ a snatch of conversation from real life; ‘Predicter of Famine,’ which is most likely a rewriting of ‘A Prayer on Contemporary Events’ in a more ‘objective’ style.

What Williams does in ‘Election Day’ and these other poems is not simply to create a context, but also to create a sense of ‘social purpose,’ in other words, to make us care. By portraying only the most essential physical details, he asks the reader to infer something much larger, and more mysterious than he could convey in any other way. In his 1940 poem, ‘From a Play,’ Williams expresses his aim perfectly:

I am a writer
and I take
great satisfaction
in it

I like to time
my phrases
balance them by
their sensual

qualities and make
those express
as much as

or more
 than the merely
 literal
 burden of the thing
 could ever tell (*CPII*, 44-5)

There is the suggestion that non-discursive or ‘poetic’ speech portrays something ‘more,’ something extra, that the literal meaning of words cannot convey. Here critics such as Rapp would argue that this concept of ‘more’ (a thing that cannot be expressed literally) is simply another manifestation of the Romantic sublime.¹⁵⁸ However, this is manifestly incorrect. Williams’ aim is to avoid abstracting the poetic object or turning it into a transcendent signifier. Nor is it correct, as Bremen might argue that Williams is simply portraying empirical facts in these poems, and indeed, Williams openly admits that he is trying to capture something ‘more.’ What Williams is trying to capture here is very simply a Pragmatist version of man, as seen through the lens of his social context. Such a thing cannot be expressed theoretically, or through what I have been referring to as ‘discursive’ speech, because these forms of writing necessarily abstract their subject matter into ‘ideas.’ For Williams, the only way to approach and understand this political framing is to show it in action. And with that in mind, it seems appropriate to end this thesis by letting Williams’ 1930s poetry speak for itself:

Good Christ what is
 a poet – if any
 exists?
 a man
 whose words will
 bite
 their way

¹⁵⁸ See introduction p.58.

home – being actual
having the form
of motion

At each twigtip

new

upon the tortured
body of thought (*CPI*, 339)

Conclusion

To conclude this thesis I would like to begin by examining the subject matter presented so far from a slightly broader historical perspective. In *Culture as History*, Warren Susman describes twentieth century America in terms of the collision of two different cultures, the older ‘Puritan-Republican’ culture and a new ‘culture of abundance.’¹ The former culture was born out of a society that was well-accustomed to scarcity and consequently was based around the virtues of thrift, hard work, moral character, and self-denial. The latter refers to the emerging culture of materialism, which was expressed in a new vocabulary of consumerism: ‘*plenty, play, leisure, recreation, self-fulfilment, dreams, pleasure, immediate gratification, personality, public relations, publicity, celebrity.*’² According to Susman, the rise of advertising, the commoditisation of wellbeing, the creation of artificial needs and identities, and the demonstration of selfhood through branding, these would be the significant factors defining forms of communication in the culture of abundance. He describes the 1930s as the turning point in the transition from the former to the latter, revealing ‘a world somehow suspended between two quite distinguishable systems and ways of life.’³ The Depression precipitated a wave of traditionalism that sought to reaffirm those older values of self-denial and thrift, but at the same time it also ushered in a new era of utopian desire for a world of material prosperity.

These two ‘cultures’ also correspond to differing political structures. The moral, political and intellectual life of the Lincoln republic cohered around the

¹ Susman, *Culture as History* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p.xx.

² Ibid. p.xxiv

³ Ibid. p.xx

concept of individualism. The sole wish of the Founding Fathers had been to protect the individual from centralized government. In return, it was expected that the individual would directly contribute to the process of government through participatory democracy. The significant factor in the political life of the republic was thus the vote itself. After the Civil War, however, almost all of the rights and protections afforded to the individual had been eroded, and the United States had formed into precisely the sort of centralized European-style 'state' that the Founding Fathers had attempted to avoid.

The New Deal, Susman argues, instigated a completely new political order, and a different way of looking at politics, that was shaped by the revolution in communications; the telegraph, the telephone, Roosevelt's unprecedented reliance on radio broadcasts, talking pictures, and so on. Marx had seen the essential problem as being one of property. He had never factored in the emergence of a new class of professionals (journalists, managers, bureaucrats, white-collar workers, and so on) that would not wield power in terms of property, but would nevertheless have considerable cultural power in terms of their ability to communicate. The significant factor in the political life of the 1930s was therefore the emergence of the 'communicating' class.

During the 1930s an entire new realm of sociological thought opened up as a result of the communications revolution, exemplified in the new discipline of 'public relations,' namely the study of how to influence mass behaviour and belief. Self-consciousness about communication and its problems, about methods and mediums of persuasion, was itself one of the defining features of the communications revolution, so that the revolution was also shaped by its own self-awareness. Even as ordinary citizens were becoming disengaged from participatory democracy, with the

percentage of people visiting the ballot box slowly in decline, the American citizen was increasingly wielding a new form of power through the concept of ‘public opinion.’ Democracy would now become about focus groups, opinion polls and other ways of understanding and measuring the will of the ‘people.’ Consequently the discourse of the 1930s was largely based around this concept of the ‘people’ rather than the individual.⁴

This broader historical perspective offered by Susman helps to clarify Williams’ poetic output of the 1930s, which was similarly characterized by an interplay between the competing concerns of two modes of thought: individualism and populism, localism and nationalism, fragment and totality. The former might be tentatively described in terms of a ‘liberal’ strain that runs through Williams’ writings. Williams, one must conclude, did not fully abandon the older conception of the Jeffersonian republic and the role of the individual, but simply sought to revise it for an age of centralization and corporatism. Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to show that Williams’ works of the 1930s must be considered as a sustained meditation on the concept of the ‘people,’ and that he did everything he could to deny that the role of the ‘people’ consisted only in ‘mass belief’ and ‘mass behaviour.’ This is the part of Williams’ works that is strongly anti-totalitarian. In his writings of the 1930s he attempted to recover our understanding of ‘the people’ from what he perceives to be the dehumanising forces of modernity. Thus he continually attempts to portray ‘the people’ only as concrete individuals. His emphasis is always on contextualizing the individual, and understanding society not as a ‘mass’ phenomenon but as a series of localities.

⁴ Ibid. pp.xxii- xxv.

I have also attempted to demonstrate that during the 1930s Williams shows considerable awareness of how literature intersects with the symbols of mass belief and behaviour. In his critical writings and manifestos, this took the form of a continual resistance to 'propaganda' in literature. From his 'Objectivist' period, Williams learned to see the work of literature in terms of 'structures,' which are similar to Burke's rhetorical 'strategies.' Unlike Burke, however, Williams was not interested in manipulating those 'structures,' in order to create symbols of mass culture. Rather he was interested in doing the exact opposite, undermining the symbols of mass culture in order to recreate the 'structures' of everyday experience. It would be fair to argue that in some ways Williams sees the work of the poet as the very epitome of individual resistance to mass psychology. For Williams, the poem takes part in exactly the same processes as advertising, namely, creating structures of association and recognition, but its purpose is the exact opposite to advertising: to free the mind from its dependence on the symbols of mass culture.

At the same time, there is a quite separate strain of thought in Williams' works that runs counter to this supposed 'individualism.' If one thinks of Williams as an 'individualist,' as critics have tended to do, then in this thesis I have attempted to show that such an argument must always be qualified by the counter-assertion that he is also a 'socialist.' In his writings of the 1930s, Williams is keenly aware that the older concept of individualism had become 'anti-social.' Rather than see Williams works of the 1930s in terms of a dialectic between individualism and collectivism, it would be more accurate to say that he was attempting to redefine individualism as a *social* construction.

This emphasis on the 'social' is a continual feature of Williams' works of the 1930s, and it comes out of his deep seated belief in Pragmatism, and the contextual nature of knowledge. From the 1920s onwards, Williams' poetic project had been focused on undermining 'Puritan' or 'transcendental' modes of discourse (the language of 'high' culture), and uncovering the American language as it was used *in praxis*. Academia itself Williams saw as the last stronghold of 'Puritan' thought, and his rejection of the hegemonic discourse of the establishment was also a rejection of the very idea of 'institutionalism' or ideology in language. During the 1930s, Williams attempted to combine this Pragmatist conception of language as something only born out of use with his own political agenda, the rejection of ideology and institutionalism in politics.

During the 1930s, Williams came to perceive a fundamental connection between language and politics, namely, that a political system is always necessarily a phenomenological and language system. For Williams, 'good writing' and 'good politics' were part of the same process of restoring a direct, unmediated understanding of the social realities that people were actually facing. Such a restoration could take place only through a contact with the authentic. Similarly, Williams' radical sympathies were not derived from the theoretical writings of Marx or Lukács, but through his first hand experience of Depression life through his medical practice. If, as Philip Rahv says, Williams' writing was 'elated by its closeness to the object' then it is equally true that his politics were elated by his closeness to the people.⁵ His philosophy of 'contact' thus indicated a basic methodology: the artist must express the poetic object without imposing an ideological structure on it.

⁵ Philip Rahv, 'Torrents of Spring,' in *William Carlos Williams: The Critical Heritage* p.144.

Williams' so-called 'nationalism' also takes part in this same anti-ideological discourse. Whilst it cannot be denied that Williams' writings do form a part of the wider 'nationalist' discourse of the 1930s, the nationalism that Williams espoused was nothing like the reactionary nationalism that was issuing from Europe during the 1930s. Whilst dictator states were creating an essentially imperialist form of nationalism, based on a homogenous cultural and social order, Williams' brand of nationalism was born out of his belief in American exceptionalism. Far from attempting to impose a homogenized version of 'Americanism,' rather it was an attempt to redefine 'Americanism' in terms of pluralism and to incorporate all cultures and creeds into a pro-social, democratic community. In this sense, the Americanism itself would be defined by its anti-ideological approach.

Whilst Williams' writings of the 1930s must therefore be considered anti-ideological, it is not the case that he is opposed to any conception of 'totality.' On the contrary, throughout this thesis, I have attempted to draw attention to those aspects of Williams' writings that seek to embrace the idea of 'totality.' His belief that art is man's highest calling was founded upon his belief in totality, and in the ability of the imagination to intercept reality as a whole. Similarly, his rejection of the dominant modes of discourse, 'science and philosophy,' can be seen as a movement away from the 'anatomization of knowledge' and towards envisioning reality as 'totality.'

There are two concepts at play throughout Williams' works of the 1930s: firstly, his desire to engage with the individual and the fragmentary, to approach the poetic object on its own terms, and to uncover its own internal logic; secondly, his desire to engage with the totality, to contextualise the fragment and see it the poetic object, not in terms of 'meanings,' but rather as a series of 'relations.' Ultimately, it is in the concept of democracy itself that this tension between part and whole is

resolved. In contrast to the top-down approach to knowledge that he discovered in much of the Marxist literature of the period, Williams' democratic and miscellaneous approach to literature was intended to instill the idea of an open network of relations, which precludes apriori systems of structuring and controlling thought.

Ultimately I wish to argue that Williams was a radical writer, and more importantly, that a space must be made in the 'radical' literature of the 1930s for writers such as Williams, who were attempting to reclaim democracy as a radical enterprise, a continuous and permanent revolution. Williams' poetic project had always been concerned with 'fracturing the stereotyped.' But what his works of the 1930s show is how readily modernist iconoclasm gave way to socialist politicism in America, a narrative that has been consistently undermined by the association of 'modernism' and 'conservatism.' Williams' achievement in the 1930s is to create a new 'socialism,' combining Marxist economic determinism with American populism and the democratic tradition.

In many ways, Williams never got to see the fruits of the revolution in the arts that he himself helped to define. Yet there can be no doubt that his poetics, and his desire to politicize his poetic program during the 1930s, forms an integral part of the American counter-culture, perhaps more so than for any other American poet of his generation. A future direction for this research would be to see how Williams' ideas of the 1930s played out, not only in his later works, and in particular his epic poem, *Paterson*, but also how his works continued to influence the American counter-culture in the decades to come.

Appendix 1. A Democratic Party Poem¹

Preface

The strongest feature of the Russian Soviets is their
local character

The first characteristic of the United State is that of so many decayed soviets

The old strength of Europe is its traditional localism
fixed by a variety of languages

The loss of China has been that of the conglomerate

States rights precede all other political virtues

The renaissance was the flowering of rival cities

It is inevitable that in all things one man must always
know more than the rest of the world

And what he knows is bred of some place

1

Party Government

There is something more important than automobiles, radios and silk stockings

It is government. It is yours for the taking

The Russian soviets are not a pattern for us. Many of their characters are the
result of a temperament foreign to ours.

Others are hang-overs from a former distressed condition.

They had to rebel against a crushing imperial machine

But we have always had a guarantee of self-government.

We have the means in our hands. We are still a republic in form. We have a
party traditionally pledged to that which we require - traduced and
misled though it may be

¹ Buffalo, WCW Papers, A76. Permission to publish has been granted by New Directions and the Estates of Paul H. and William Eric Williams. Williams' own autographed corrections are in square brackets. Illegible autographed corrections are in curly brackets. I have chosen to show the earlier of the two drafts that are contained in the Buffalo archives. Whilst it is less polished it is more politically honest.

Take the government over, as it was originally intended that it should be taken over, by party action

2

A Class instrument

The republican party is now the official organ of class dominion - a plutocratic instrument

Under it the decay of local government has been accelerated at ever increasing speed

It is the pattern for the turning of certain minds through ignorance and cupidity and in ever increasing numbers to the illusory independence of gang law

The Republican party in effect pays so much a head for votes and keeps the tariff high that a sufficient number of us may get the cash [thus provided]

The scheme works but it is thoroughly corrupt in principle, thoroughly subversive to the constitutional guarantees under which we as states joined together to make a nation.

[To such rulers] We sell the power of self-determination for being fed, watered and exercised.

The general picture is that of forty eight swiftly degenerating soviet - the sense of local responsibility, the only hope in a democracy, having been milked almost completely away

“Prohibition” is an index, a measuring rod by which to gauge opposition - and, at the same time the dread of those who fear resort to popular referendum

It is only an index but a great one

It is ~~at the same time~~ [also], conversely, a hope for the return of government to the electorate

For there can be no end to such a situation as Prohibition presents save by turning over the problem to the States for individual settlement by local choice.

And this is the beginning for the return of responsibility to the county, the town, the individual generally.

But this, the work of the Democratic Party, may not be undertaken before the country is close to revolution - or worse, dictatorship.

We may end where we began, with a whisky rebellion, its home today the wine cellars of the rich.

3

Perhaps you won't think these poems - because they are bare truths - party truths

They are subject to strictest tests, things political orators have no time for in a campaign. They are the gist of thought.

They go to the point; things which may not be too boldly stated by some man seeking office. He himself may disown them [for fear of being tied to them later.]

But there they remain nevertheless {to be stated}

Thus under a discipline known only to poets who have to determine accurately what the words weigh and what they mean - so that science as well as politics may express itself well - they are poems

Don't forget that there is a taboo in poetry as well as in all other forms of human activity.

A man is expected to talk as he has been taught to talk in poetry as in everything else. For what reason?

Those who feel a certain way, and have a certain hold of what they want, and keep that hold

When this has been loosened by a superior truth they grudgingly acknowledge that, yes, that is poetry, but not till then

Poetry, let me tell you is accurate statement

That sort of thing is dangerous.

Get out of your heads all ideas that poetry must be romantic, tuneful, rhymed. Forget it.

Get to the idea that poetry tells the truth in a way that can't be forgotten and creates a music of its own.

The Recruits

In the Democratic Party is a great practical instrument for getting what we need and must have.

If Smith, Raskob are not what we want - and I don't say they are not - are there no longer men of democratic mind in the country?

This would be the worst sign of all

There must be, once they are aware of what issues are dominant, even in the Republican Party, men alive to the future, men of alert understanding who can be drafted.

But don't forget Smith's speeches on false prosperity in the last campaign
{(1928)}

Nor, as Democrats, cease to be appreciative of the fact that he was not elected to inherit, as Cleveland did from Harrison, the financial crash which Republican tactics had created

Remember such things - and Smith's good luck

~~Then if you care to propose to yourself this picture : Owen D. Young as the next president and Smith in his cabinet.~~

Keep your minds also on several other things needless to mention now taking place in ~~congress~~ {Washington : such as the attempt to discredit Senator Wagner + to steal his credit for Republicans not fit to lick his shoes}

That poetry, among the ~~true~~ substantial values of ~~the~~ place, may get ascendancy above the crass so-much-a-head political philosophy of Republicanism

5

History

Understand our history and pay attention to it

We began as a revolt. After that we were so many loosely allied states. We united into a firmer union but we remained still so many independent though united states

At this point there began to show signs of degeneration

It was Alexander Hamilton who first ~~attempted to fix~~ {rigged} the power of the central government above that of the states.

This was the Federal Party

Against him stood Jefferson ~~who realized at once the danger and combated it throughout his lifetime~~ whom the Republican Theodore Roosevelt had the effrontery to wish to brand as "the most dangerous influence the country ever sheltered."

To, what dangerous ? [sic] Jefferson was the first to realize the danger {to us} of ~~plutoeratic~~ beaucocratic [sic] domination and to strive to combat it.

The Civil War

The Civil War did the greatest harm in the world - whatever its other virtues may have been - to local self government

One can take an example like that and profit by it without being blinded or led astray.

Do that, think out these things for yourself

It did the greatest harm to our original form of government

Remember, the government is yours when you can feel it yours

Take hold of it and say what you will not do and have done according to the part of the country you live in

It is yours when it comes home to you

Make it come home to you. Make it live at home. Demand that it do not interfere with your local life {but serves it}

City Governments

[this sentence from second draft]

You must see that whatever the faults of Tammany and other political groups usurping the control of cities may be it is local self government and it is a type - irresponsible and bad no doubt - but a type of that what is desired

Its faults are lack of responsibility

And how will you get responsibility when it is denied you by a distant central government? It must end sometime.

The insane advertising campaign which has put liquor in every home in the United State and taught an abstemious nation all the refinements of brewing, wine making and the distillation of spirits on a grand scale {is a fair example of what prohibition has done to us}.

The unutterable stupidity of it with its 600% increase in deaths from alcohol among the state over a period of ten years

[2nd draft:

And wise is he who realizes that the rancor against the saloon is largely a desire to abridge the right of free assembly by cutting of the one place men could go publicly for social intercourse.]

These things are directly due, see it, believe it, never forget it, to the false theory of Republicanism, of centralization, of distant rule, inhuman codification and the necessity for cash support

[These things are directly due - see it, believe it, never forget it, - to a top heavy centralization of government, to the false theory of Republicanism]

8.

Rich Men

1% of the population possesses 35% of the country's wealth

They want to keep this among themselves for the power there is in it.

This is the hidden ground on which Prohibition is based
the irremediable obstacle to its success
and the subversive implication in its attempted enforcement

That which you desire is temperance, ordered by self-control
and a life of usefulness
possibly beauty
which {?} excess vitiates

Very well. This is what the intelligent well to do may possess [sic] in fact today
and the poor as a class do not
{But} Liquor gives the unfortunate relief, {gives him}
"happiness" {in interim}

~~as it gave it to Horace, Virgil or any man many men in times past
To get something more solid than this, the poor
must get what the better off have.
But rather than acknowledge this~~

~~and the slow correction with the reservation of rights
which
they have us guaranteed by the Constitution with the rich
all this is blotted out by force.
They can't do it
You take away their dreams, their happiness but
worse
you, the Henry Fords, the John Rockefeller, Jrs. the
cash dictators, you deny them a subtle power
of decision—the very basis of their hope—
{They} You the wealthy manufacturers who are backing
prohibition
and without whom it could not be continued
do not want to see this
precious [sic] power of self determination and ownership
go out of their hands. This is why you love the
humane
enforcement of that denial which liquor, wine beer
mean to a poor man and along with that you
deny him the right to learn temperate habits~~

~~you teach him lawlessness and rebellion~~

Henry Ford

says that if liquor is again permitted free sale in
America he will go out of business - Fine.

Why not move to Ireland where he has now
taken his tractor plant. We'd trade him any time
for

good Irish whisky. But look tought [sic] that threat.

He'd dump his workers in five minutes, he says
if they get the upper hand

and to prove that liquor hasn't anything directly to
do with it notice that right now, in Ireland, where they have
excellent liquor to drink, he has set up a great
plant from which we, here, must now buy our {machine} parts {off him}

*

These men are Republicans and it is in tune with their
practice

In the South, meanwhile the whites ~~are determined to~~ absolutely control the
negro + vote "dry" playing, in this, directly into the Republicans hands

This is precisely the proof necessary for what I have
been saying. The basis of Prohibition is a
determination to deny the right of self-determination
to the electorate. It is understandable. That is not
the point.

Like it or not. That has nothing to do with the question.

All I ask is that it ne

*

Wickersham says we need
a deep reform, deeper than

the violations of the
prohibition legislation ~~sanctions~~

He is right - and the fact
that we have had

Prohibition inflicted
upon s is evidence of
how deep a reform is required.

*

A Democratic Party Poem

I can't go on writing like this or telling you this sort of thing for the rest of my life as a reformer might, forcing you to conviction by the singleness and drive of his personality

I'm no reformer (a thing Whitman failed to see about himself) but a poet - good bad or indifferent is no matter to you

I'm not interested in politics but in writing

Yet I'll tell it to you once, that's as far as I will go - that's a writer's business.

Appendix 2. *Blues*, Volume 1, No.7, Fall 1929, p.3.

introduction

to a collection of modern writings

by William Carlos Williams

We live, gentle reader, in a world very much gone to pot, the thought of it tortured, the acts of it blind, the flight from it impossible.

What to do?

Either retreat, swallowing whole, as complete as it is the *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*, the philosophy dependent therefrom and the poetry pinned thereto and go to rest with John Donne in that tight little island of dreams where all past wealth is garnered; or face the barren waves—

Precisely, the advance is problematical and uncharted, the profits from it uncertain, perhaps nil. Tho' possibly they will be the most that living affords.

Here is a choice. Ours is purely in the second half of it. For what else can we value when the known—tho' St. Thomas have never been so wise—is no more than the sum, really, of all that we suffer?

We now boldly assert that saving the retreat there is no other way for writing in the present state of the world than that which *BLUES* has fostered.

“You **MUST** come over.”

Or witness what will become of you: “For a while I have been playing at being intelligent and having something to say. But I am quite convinced that the possible queer idea I had is beyond anything but indirect expression.”

“We waddle in a morass of significant detail, so we clothe it in sentimentality, like C., or excitement, or hardness, like A., or obscurity. Anything for a single immediate response. Child's play because a bomb is more permanently effective. . . .”

“Personally I am going to Oxford to do research in astrophysics and theoretical thermodynamics.”

Thus also one may turn his face entirely from writing. Or do you believe it?

Appendix 3. *Pagany* 1:1, January-March, 1930

PAGANY

A NATIVE QUARTERLY

Edited by



Richard Johns

VOLUME I . NUMBER 1

JANUARY-MARCH 1930

ANNOUNCEMENT

"A new magazine should announce a reason for existence": PAGANY, perhaps, more than another, for it will avoid any attempt to seek a standard, it is neither entering into connexion nor competition with any magazine trying to make a point, to formulate a policy. There is much danger in such freedom, in leaving unarticulated one or two precepts of editorial limitation. Yet even a hint of regimen is made impossible by the connotations of the title.

Pagus is a broad term, meaning any sort of collection of peoples from the smallest district or village to the country as an inclusive whole. Taking America as the *pagus*, any one of us as the *paganus*, the inhabitant, and our conceptions, our agreements and disagreements, our ideas, ideals, whatever we have to articulate is *pagany*, our expression.

This *Native Quarterly* is representative of a diverse and ungrouped body of spokesmen, bound geographically. Wary of definite alliance with any formulated standard, PAGANY (as an enclosure) includes individual expression of native thought and emotion.

RICHARD JOHNS

MANIFESTO:

William Carlos Williams

"The ghosts so confidently laid by Francis Bacon and his followers are again walking in the laboratory as well as beside the man in the street",* the scientific age is drawing to a close. Bizarre derivations multiply about us, mystifying and untrue as — an automatic revolver. To what shall the mind turn for that with which to rehabilitate our thought and our lives? To the word, a meaning hardly distinguishable from that of place, in whose great, virtuous and at present little realized potency we hereby manifest our belief.

*Scott Buchanan, *Poetry and Mathematics*, p. 18.

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