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Voyage to Ithaca: William Carlos Williams in Paris*

BY NOEL RILEY FITCH

THE siren song of Paris and her presiding goddesses Gertrude Stein and Sylvia Beach proved irresistible to wandering American writers on their literary odysseys during the twenties. For some the attraction was fatal; for others restorative. They came to visit Gertrude Stein in the rue de Fleurus; to talk to Ezra Pound and Ford Madox Ford, who might help them place their work in a little review; and to glimpse James Joyce at his publishers, the Shakespeare and Company bookshop at 12 rue de l'Odéon. Paris was the center of creative ferment in letters, painting, and music. Almost all, with few notable exceptions such as Wallace Stevens, at some time booked passage to Paris and its literary influence and freedom. Stein arrived in 1903 and remained; Hemingway stayed for six years and Pound for four; Sherwood Anderson, E. E. Cummings, and William Carlos Williams made visits of only a few weeks.

Williams's name appears in all the indexes of the literary histories and memoirs of Paris between the wars. But these references are chiefly to his publications by the little magazines and presses, well documented in Hugh Ford's *Published in Paris* and Emily Wallace's *Bibliography of William Carlos Williams*. Almost no interest has been taken in Williams's response to, and reception in, Paris. Williams wrote in Rutherford, New Jersey, but Rutherford was not listening. He published and was distributed in Paris. As Hugh Kenner suggests, "in Rutherford he might as well have lived in Paris."¹ But he deliberately chose his hometown, a choice

* Previously unpublished material by William Carlos Williams, including letters, copyright © 1979 by The Estate of Florence H. Williams. Published by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

¹ *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 387.

which reflected both personal experiences and his literary theory. He made only two literary trips to Paris. For many decades, however, he was a loyal friend of many Americans there, particularly of Sylvia Beach, who operated the Shakespeare and Company bookshop. Williams's career as a doctor—he was the leading pediatrician of Rutherford—prevented sustained or frequent trips to Europe. But his second career, as author, impelled him to take two leaves of absence—his only leaves from medical practice—and to go abroad in 1924 and 1927. His ambivalent response to Paris during these two trips, manifested in subsequent works, is a study in miniature of the fascination of American writers with Paris.

These voyages were not Williams's first trips to the city of light. As an adolescent he had studied French in Paris where he had relatives. And in 1910 he visited Paris again after studying medicine in Leipzig. Ezra Pound, whom he had met at the University of Pennsylvania when they were both students there, had set sail for England only six months earlier. He had written to Williams urging him to "come across and broaden your mind."² They met for a week in London in March of 1910.

Pound also encouraged Williams's next trip, his first literary pilgrimage. Williams was practicing medicine in Rutherford and working with Robert McAlmon in New York on the publishing of *Contact*, their literary journal. Pound urged him to take a year off, or at least six months, and not be afraid to leave Rutherford. "I think you are suffering from nerve,"³ he taunted. Although busy completing his historical study, *In the American Grain*, and committed to the "essential contact" between words and the roots of one's American experience—the credo he and McAlmon preached—Williams followed Pound's advice. He sailed on January 9, 1924 for Europe, toward "a strange New World."⁴

When Robert McAlmon took him to the Shakespeare and Company bookshop, the center of Anglo-American literary activities in the twenties, Williams was no stranger to Sylvia Beach, a

² 3 February 1909. *The Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), p. 7. Pound moved to Paris in 1920.

³ 18 March 1922. *Letters of Ezra Pound*, p. 173.

⁴ "If he goes to France, it is not to learn a *do re me fa sol*. He goes to see a strange New World." *In the American Grain* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1956), p. 213. All quotations from *In the American Grain*, *Selected Essays*, *Selected Letters*, *The Autobiography*, and *A Voyage to Paganry* reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

fellow New Jerseyite. She had written him as early as 1919, when she got his name from the Egoist Press as a possible subscriber to her edition of *Ulysses*. He had purchased no. 441 of the first printing of Joyce's work in May of 1922.

Williams spent six weeks of his first European literary trip in Paris. During that first visit to Shakespeare and Company he looked in the window for his books. He was not disappointed. In 1922 he had sent Sylvia Beach several copies each of *Sour Grapes*, *Kora in Hell*, and *Al Que Quiere!* According to bookshop records in the Sylvia Beach Collection at Princeton University, his books always sold well and the lending library gave them a wide circulation. From the bookshop, Williams visited Pound again. And he met and became an admirer of Adrienne Monnier, a close friend of Sylvia and the proprietor of *La Maison des Amis des Livres*, the French bookshop across the street. Sylvia and Adrienne arranged a dinner for Williams with Valéry Larbaud, a French critic and admirer of American literature. They talked of Bolivar and Cotton Mather. And Williams remembered this meeting as the best moment of his six-week trip. Adrienne, with Sylvia's advice, published an all-American issue (March 1926) of her *Le Navire d'Argent*. In her introductory piece entitled "Letter to Larbaud," she identified Williams as "the best man of letters in the United States at present." The issue carried a portion of Williams's *The Great American Novel*, his first appearance in French. (Auguste Morel—who had been translating Joyce's *Ulysses*—was the translator.) Williams also met Ernest Hemingway, the bookshop's best customer, who was working on the *transatlantic review* while its publisher, Ford Madox Ford, was out of town. Williams and Hemingway played tennis together, attended prizefights, and had dinner at the Hemingways' apartment.⁵ There were a number of other writers Williams could have met during this time. According to bookshop records, they include fellow Americans Archibald MacLeish, Lincoln Steffens, Janet Flanner, John Dos Passos and, at the center of the shop's activity, James Joyce, whose *Ulysses* had been published by Sylvia Beach in 1922. But Williams wished to, and felt he must, return home. He wrote to Kenneth Burke

⁵ Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 584. During this visit, Dr. Williams contradicted Hemingway's order that Hadley give Bumby mother's milk only. With Williams's new diet, the baby was soon bursting with energy. Alice Hunt Sokoloff, *Hadley: The First Mrs. Hemingway* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1973), p. 71.



Sylvia Beach and James Joyce in the doorway of Shakespeare and Company.
Sylvia Beach Collection. The gift of Graham Mattison '26.

from Austria: "I have heavy bones, I am afraid—there's little here for me . . . only America remains[,] where at least I was born."⁶

Following this first trip to Paris he wrote "Père Sebastian Rasles," an essay published in *In the American Grain*, which opens with a tribute to all the personalities of Paris, from Picasso to Adrienne Monnier, and to Paris itself. He had gone to France, he writes, to shed his "nerves" after the "brutalizing battle of twenty years to hear myself above the boilermakers in and about New York." His "antennae" were "fully extended." Yet he found no succor.

Nothing came of it save an awakened realization within myself of that resistant core of nature upon which I had so long been driven for support. I felt myself with ardors not released but beaten back, in this center of old-world culture where everyone was tearing his own meat, *warily* conscious of a newcomer, but wholly without inquisitiveness—No wish to know; they were served.⁷

In frustration he wants to "shout out in the midst of it," to loosen what is holding him back from embracing the vitality of the old-world culture, which he calls "this turning, shouting, rustling, colored thing." But he cannot do it. These opening paragraphs express an ambivalence toward Paris—an ambivalence which was to grow with time.

Three years later he returned to Paris and, of course, to Shakespeare and Company, which he claimed "must always be a calling place for right Americans when they are in Paris."⁸ He continues, in a letter written 18 August 1926 (more than six months before sailing for Europe), that he is writing "a kind of novel . . . a straight account of a man of forty seeing something of Americans in Europe."⁹ Although begun before his second trip, *A Voyage to Pagan* reflects the growing conflict in his attitudes toward Paris and toward Americans in Paris.

⁶ 14 April 1924. *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, ed. John C. Thirlwall (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957), p. 64.

⁷ *In the American Grain*, p. 105. Later, in *A Voyage to Pagan* (New York: New Directions, 1970), he uses one of these images again when he states that a trip to Europe is an "opportunity to shed the nerves" (p. 14).

⁸ Letter to Ezra Pound, *Selected Letters*, p. 69. During the spring before this second voyage Williams flirted with the idea of opening a small bookshop in New York City.

⁹ This and the unpublished letters following are in the Sylvia Beach Collection, Princeton University Library.



**Pencil sketch of Robert McAlmon and James Joyce by Paul-Emile Bécát, 1921.
Sylvia Beach Collection. The gift of Graham Mattison '26.**

On this trip the Williamses brought their sons, who were to have a year's study abroad as their father and uncle had had. The boys fell in love with Sylvia and her dog Teddy. In a Citroën which she and Adrienne had recently purchased, Sylvia took the family—who thought her a “demon driver”—to Versailles for a day's outing. Williams also attended several literary dinners, with a group that usually included Sylvia, Adrienne, Bryher (Winifred Ellerman), McAlmon, and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle). He went to a concert by the New Jersey composer, George Antheil; dined again on Adrienne's famous roast chicken; and continued to meet fellow artists. An important French writer he met at this time was Phillippe Soupault, the Dadaist, whose *Last Nights of Paris* appeared the following year. With his mother, who spoke French well, Williams translated Soupault's book soon after it was published.

In Paris, Williams also read Joyce's *Work in Progress*, which was appearing in *transition*. He praised it in an essay¹⁰ that was undoubtedly a response to a private criticism by Pound, who labeled *Work in Progress* “backwash.” When Sylvia later asked Williams if she could publish his piece in her collection of essays, *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, he agreed immediately: “Use my bit about [Joyce's] work and welcome” (4 November 1928). Six months later, in a June 8 letter to Sylvia, he praises their efforts to defend Joyce's *Work in Progress*:

. . . I am tremendously stimulated by this new book [*Our Exagmination*] about Joyce. I see it as another stroke against the bulwark of literary intolerance and veritable stupidity which is holding back an unsuspected ocean. God how I do see it and how powerless and prone I feel myself. But not always. I'd rather be engaged in this momentous undertaking (it hasn't even a name) than to have all there is else in the world.

Williams is paradigmatic among the visitors to Shakespeare and Company because he exemplifies the divergent views concerning what has been called “expatriation.” Initially he violently debunked America, a stance epitomized by Harold Sterns's *Civiliza-*

¹⁰ “A Note on a Recent Work of James Joyce,” *transition* 8 (November 1927), 149-154. Entitled “A Point for American Criticism” in *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (Paris: Shakespeare and Company, 1929), pp. 173-185.

tion of the United States. Bryher, the English novelist and by then the ex-wife of his good friend Bob McAlmon, remembers that Williams “denounced the States in stronger terms than his fellows.” She remembers that he was outspoken in his “hatred of his native land” and made “inquiries about what he would have to do before” practicing medicine in Europe.¹¹ Some of this hostility appears in the early portion of his novel, *A Voyage to Pagany*, when “Dev” Evans, the hero of the novel, refers to the “washed-out soul of his own country.” Williams says, “A fury always made Evans’ head swell with blood when he thought of the U.S.” Evans prefers “syphilitic” Vienna on the one hand to the “caponized athlete [America] on the other.”¹² Earlier, Williams had made a similar contrast between America—the “virginal young woman”—and Paris. In “Sample Prose Piece: The Three Letters,” a sketch published in *Contact*, his impressionable young artist (Evans Dionysius Evans) sees a bold and experienced but syphilitic woman as representative of Europe: the “reek” of her body separated “her forever from the clean muslin souls of Yankeedom . . . there she lived with three dogs . . . and a barrier of filth and refuse against the spoiling grey bath of Methodist-Episcopal sunlight.”¹³

This hostility toward America stemmed both from his hatred of American Puritanism and his love of France. Williams’s love began in his youth; his mother had studied French painting in Paris and often spoke of France as her lost Eden. He was one of the few American visitors who could speak French. He loved the language and the food and the flowers. Although Williams denied any French literary influences—asserting he had not read one modern French poem—he acknowledged being “influenced by French painting and the French spirit, which, through my mother, is partly my own.”¹⁴ This spirit he admired was the openness of the French—their recognition of artistic talent and their sexual freedom. He expresses this admiration in his essay entitled “A Matisse.” He comments on Matisse’s painting of a nude woman “lying on the French grass” (*The Blue Nude*, 1907), on display

¹¹ *The Heart to Artemis: A Writer’s Memoirs* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. 218.

¹² *Voyage to Pagany*, pp. 157, 158, 159. Williams was writing *A Voyage to Pagany* while he was translating Soupault’s *Last Nights of Paris*, which represents a similar view of decadent Paris.

¹³ 4 (Summer 1921), 11.

¹⁴ Letter to Wayne Andrews, 10 March 1932. *Selected Letters*, p. 119. Williams published a number of essays on French painting.



**Portrait of Sylvia Beach, ca. 1923. Photographer unknown.
Sylvia Beach Collection. The gift of Graham Mattison '26.**

in a Fifth Avenue gallery: "So she came to America. No man in my country has seen a woman naked and painted her as if he knew anything except that she was naked. No woman in my country is naked except at night."¹⁵

The hostility Williams directed against America while in Paris was later muted, and by 1928, when *A Voyage to Pagany* was published, he had turned his critical arrows toward Europe. Several events changed his mind. The first, certainly, was his failure to feel at home in Europe. Although he was both a professional man of Rutherford and a literary figure in Greenwich Village, he felt awkward in the Parisian literary atmosphere which both energized and intimidated him. He was also an older man in a rather young crowd. Forty-four during his second visit, he was 17 years older than George Antheil and 13 years older than Bob McAlmon. Although the age difference was less with Sylvia, who was only four years younger, she looked like a schoolgirl. He was a medical doctor who dressed conservatively, acted older, was considered provincial and middle-class by some of his younger fellow writers.¹⁶ Bryher claims that "he was not particularly popular but we tried to help him, this was our code."¹⁷ In his *Autobiography*, Williams confirms that he felt "out of place, self-conscious and alone. . . . My clothes were dull, my manners worse. . . . Among the whole crowd of talents about me not a face was open, not even among my own group."¹⁸ He quarreled with his closest friend among the crowd, McAlmon. A line from a draft of Sylvia Beach's memoirs indicates that she alone among these Americans may have respected his maturity: Williams "had the rather unusual view that a poet should be self-supporting and [that] society owes him nothing." She also respected his ability to speak French. But unlike Hemingway and Pound and McAlmon, he was a short-term visitor and felt estranged, especially after the literary dinner given him by McAlmon, a party he recalls in both novel and autobiography. The dinner was at the Trianon, Joyce's favorite, an intimate and elegant restaurant at the corner of the boulevard du Montparnasse

¹⁵ *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1954), pp. 30-31. Originally in *Contact*, January 1921. I am indebted to Emily M. Wallace who has established the presence of the painting at the M. de Zayas Gallery, 549 Fifth Avenue, New York City, December 6-25, 1920, immediately before Williams wrote the essay.

¹⁶ Conversation with Boski Antheil, 11 February 1978.

¹⁷ *The Heart to Artemis*, p. 218.

¹⁸ *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1967), p. 215.

and the rue de Rennes. With all the literary crowd there—including Joyce, Sylvia Beach, and Ford Madox Ford—they nearly filled the left side of the restaurant. McAlmon gave a speech and sang some songs and everyone drank a great deal. Williams felt “humiliation after [the] stupid speech” he gave in response to McAlmon’s welcome. He said he was filled with “contempt for my drunkenness,” but he also adds “I saw a France that day which had wholly escaped me before.”¹⁹

In Paris he was more attendant lord than leading player. And by the time he had returned to Rutherford he was expressing a renewed love of his native land. He speaks of America as “my country that I strive so wildly to possess.”²⁰ Despite the Puritans, “his furies,” he renewed his call for a native literature. He scorned those who, like Eliot, fled their native country and adopted the European literary tradition. This fear of the influence of European forms was to be used increasingly to attack expatriation.

On the last day of Williams’s final trip to Europe, where he was to leave his wife and sons for a year, they had lunch with Adrienne, Sylvia and her mother, and the William Birds. He drove to Cherbourg with Sylvia, who was taking her sister Holly to the *S. S. Pennland*. They talked of the recent divorce of their mutual friends, Bryher and Robert McAlmon, and of a recent criticism of Williams’s Poe section of *In the American Grain*.²¹ Before bidding him goodbye, Sylvia gave him several books to read on board ship—including Joyce’s *Dubliners* and Gogol’s *Dead Souls*. During the eight-day voyage to New York, turbulent despite the auspicious name of the ship, Williams read, wrote long and loving letters to his wife Flossie, and spent time with Holly Beach.²² He also began several love poems which were to be part of a new volume of poetry he planned to call *Sacred and Profane*. When they parted in New York he gave Holly a medical certificate for the four Siamese cats she had on board and a poem:

¹⁹ *Autobiography*, p. 195. According to the various published reports of this famous dinner, the other participants included Boski and George Antheil, Louis Aragon, the William Birds, Kitty Cannell, Marcel Duchamp, Harold Loeb, Mina Loy, Man Ray, Laurence and Clotilde Vail, and Adrienne Monnier.

²⁰ “From: A Folded Skyscraper,” *The American Caravan* (New York: Macaulay, 1927), p. 219. Williams was preoccupied with the theme of America in the twenties.

²¹ Laura Riding in “Jamais Plus” (*transition* 7) argues against Williams’s view of Poe as a struggling, heroic figure. He responded to Riding in a letter to the editor in *transition* 10 (January 1928).

²² A full report of this voyage is recorded in his letters to Flossie, *Selected Letters*, pp. 71–79.

①

~~Portrait of My Friend~~
Portrait of my friend
There are no perfect waves -
your writings are ~~to~~ a sea
free of misspellings and
faulty sentences; level, troubled.
A water, distant from the land
touched by the wings
of nearly silent birds that never
seem to rest. yet it bears me
seriously - to a share ^{but} without
you.

This is the sadness of the sea
waves like words, all broken -
a sameness of lifting and falling mood.
I lean watching the detail
of brittle crests, the delicate
imperfect foam, the yellow ^{floating} weed
one piece like another - maybe
there is no hope ~~for~~, or a

Holograph manuscript of "Portrait of My Friend" by William Carlos Williams.
Sylvia Beach Collection. The gift of Graham Mattison '26.

(2)

volcanic island maybe, sticking up
or perhaps a coral atoll slowly,
slowly forming to wait for birds
to drop the seeds ^{we} make
it habitable.

William Carlos Williams

Sept. 30, 1927
St. Paul -

"Portrait of my Friend." The poem, dated Sept. 30, 1927, S. S. Pennland, was later published with some revisions as the first portion of "Descent of Winter." "Portrait of my Friend," in the Sylvia Beach Collection at Princeton, contains minor punctuation differences from the final, published version, which Williams cut for economy. But the most prominent changes were later deletions of more personal lines, probably addressed to Holly. Lines 8-10—"Yet it bears me / Seriously—to a shore but without / you" were suppressed in the published poem. And "for you" of line 18 is crossed out in the 1927 version of the poem. The poem—the first section of which appears here—was first published by Pound in *The Exile* (1928) and then in Williams's *Complete Collected Poems* (1938).

The Descent of Winter

9/30

There are no perfect waves—
Your writings are a sea
full of misspellings and
faulty sentences. Level. Troubled

A center distant from the land
touched by the wings
of nearly silent birds
that never seem to rest—

This is the sadness of the sea
waves like words, all broken—
a sameness of lifting and falling mood.

I lean watching the detail
of brittle crest, the delicate
imperfect foam, yellow weed
one piece like another—

There is no hope—if not a coral
island slowly forming
to wait for birds to drop
the seeds will make it habitable

During this stormy Atlantic crossing Williams continued to work on his novel, *A Voyage to Pagany*, a thinly disguised account of his trips to Paris. The narrative line follows his 1924 trip, yet

the attitudes toward Paris and America derive from the 1927 trip as well. Although he had warned Sylvia in a letter not to “fall into the usual confusion” of “imagining that the hero is myself,” he admits that “it is a kind of shallow dream in which I sometimes act a part.” The ambivalent attitude toward Paris of the protagonist clearly reveals Williams’s own and was to reecho in the *Autobiography*. When studied with his letters and the *Autobiography*, the novel provides an excellent record of Williams’s views of the artist-in-exile.

Dedicated to “the first of us all,” Ezra Pound, *A Voyage to Pagany* dramatizes an American’s encounter with Europe and that tension between America and Pagany (an old Roman term for Europe). The responses to Europe of “Dev” Evans, the doctor-writer protagonist, must certainly duplicate those of many travelers in the twenties. Full of romantic self-indulgence, his responses move from enthusiasm (“à Paris, à Paris, à Paris”²³) to fear and escape. Williams uses images of flight in portraying Evans’s movements from Carcassonne to Rome and Switzerland.

Evans’s opening responses to Paris are full of exhilaration. Using images of penetration, Williams sends Evans’s train flying into Paris, a city described as a woman waiting for her lover. The lover “must come of machines, he must break through.” Evans is that lover in the heart of the machine. (In May of 1927 Lindbergh had arrived in a flying machine and captured the heart of Paris.) Paris is “the beloved of men,” charming, serious; it “kept secrets and it offered its understanding.” Yet he hates the “frivolity” created by the Americans.²⁴

Certainly some of Evans’s ambivalence toward Paris arises from his own fear of inadequacy. At a literary dinner (a fictional version of the ill-fated Trianon party) Evans fears that he cannot handle himself and watches Jack Murray (Robert McAlmon) watching him. Evans, the physician and author, is afraid he will get drunk, which he does, and be rejected; he makes a “stupid” speech and suffers embarrassment; he denigrates his writing, considering himself not worthy.²⁵

²³ *Voyage to Pagany*, p. 9. The line could be a parody of the end of Berlioz’s opera *The Trojans* or of Zola’s novel *Nana*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14, 235. He loved an earlier Paris, his mother’s “lost Eden.”

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-45. Reed Wittemore (*William Carlos Williams: Poet from New Jersey* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975], p. 220) calls Evans’s response and Williams’s response in his *Autobiography* “confessional pity-me” attitudes. Both Evans and Williams, he adds, saw themselves as martyrs.

Evans concludes that he is “not of this club,” for Europe threatens the loss of his American identity. Thus the novel, which begins with the rejection of America—with its infuriating puritanism and “washed-out soul”—ends with a rejection of Europe. He leaves Bess, the sister who represents the incestuous tug or lure of Paris. Hoping that “art is a country by itself,” he returns to America: “Europe is poison to us Americans—delicious—distressing.”²⁶ This conclusion is a restatement of Williams’s belief, expressed several years earlier in *The Great American Novel*, that Europe is “our enemy.” He assumed, perhaps mistakenly, that living in Paris cut off the influence from one’s own society:

We must acknowledge to ourselves that the origin of the new is society, that each society not only originates but fertilizes its whole life, of a piece. . . . If man in his fatuous dreams cuts himself off from that supplying female [society], he dries up his sources—as Pound did in the end heading straight for literary sterility.²⁷

Williams’s antipathy for Paris, which was to culminate in the *Autobiography*, came largely from a sense of literary betrayal by Eliot, and to a lesser extent by Pound, whom he called in the prologue to the 1920 edition of *Kora in Hell*, “the best enemy United States verse has.” In his well-known response to *The Waste Land*, he asserts that it set American poets back twenty years and that “our brave sallies into the unknown were turned to dust.” *The Waste Land* was, in his words, “the great catastrophe to our letters” for it “gave the poem back to the academics.”²⁸

Williams reconfirms his attraction to Paris two decades later. But he warns that its influence is misleading:

Not that I am not and we are not envious of Paris. Of you in Paris. But what we should learn there would have to go through a convulsion before we could utilize it—what we should enjoy there needs no schooling in the arts. It is all a one sided transaction when an American would deal with the French.²⁹

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240; p. 157; pp. 251, 240.

²⁷ “Letter to an Australian Editor,” *Briarcliff Quarterly*, 3 (October 1946), 206.

²⁸ *Autobiography*, pp. 146, 174. He was less critical of Pound, who “brought back the modern language to the water of excellent poetic usage,” yet unfortunately was “teaching it classic dancing.” Letter to Kay Boyle, 1932, *Selected Letters*, p. 132.

²⁹ 6 May 1949.

In spite of the published hostility toward the lure of Europe, Williams was clearly influenced by the Paris scene. Hugh Kenner asserts that the influence was mutual: "Williams was the best theorist the Paris decade had."³⁰ Williams's letters to Sylvia Beach tell how Paris quickened his creativity. Upon his return from the second trip abroad, he expresses gratitude for his reception, adding: "When I am there I scarcely know what to think of myself so many generous words are spent on me. I come away so stimulated that I write and write . . . it opens me up as does nothing else I can imagine" (6 October 1927). Other letters to Sylvia, only one of which has been published, document his persistent involvement in the Paris scene. He writes about Robert McAlmon:

I like Bob as you know and find an excellent quality in his work which it is my pleasure to fight for. But naturally if he will not conserve his gift it is going to be wasted. (6 October 1927)

of George Antheil:

I was glad to send the check for George. . . . Such rare spirits as he should never lack for at best the bare necessities of existence. (24 June 1928)

and of James Joyce:

That's bad news about Joyce's eyes. If there were anything to say, medically speaking, God knows I should have said it long since. Without question he is getting the best advice available in Paris. (4 November 1928)

Am I presuming in asking you to use your influence with Joyce to have him join us in the forthcoming Imagist Anthology? (25 June 1929)

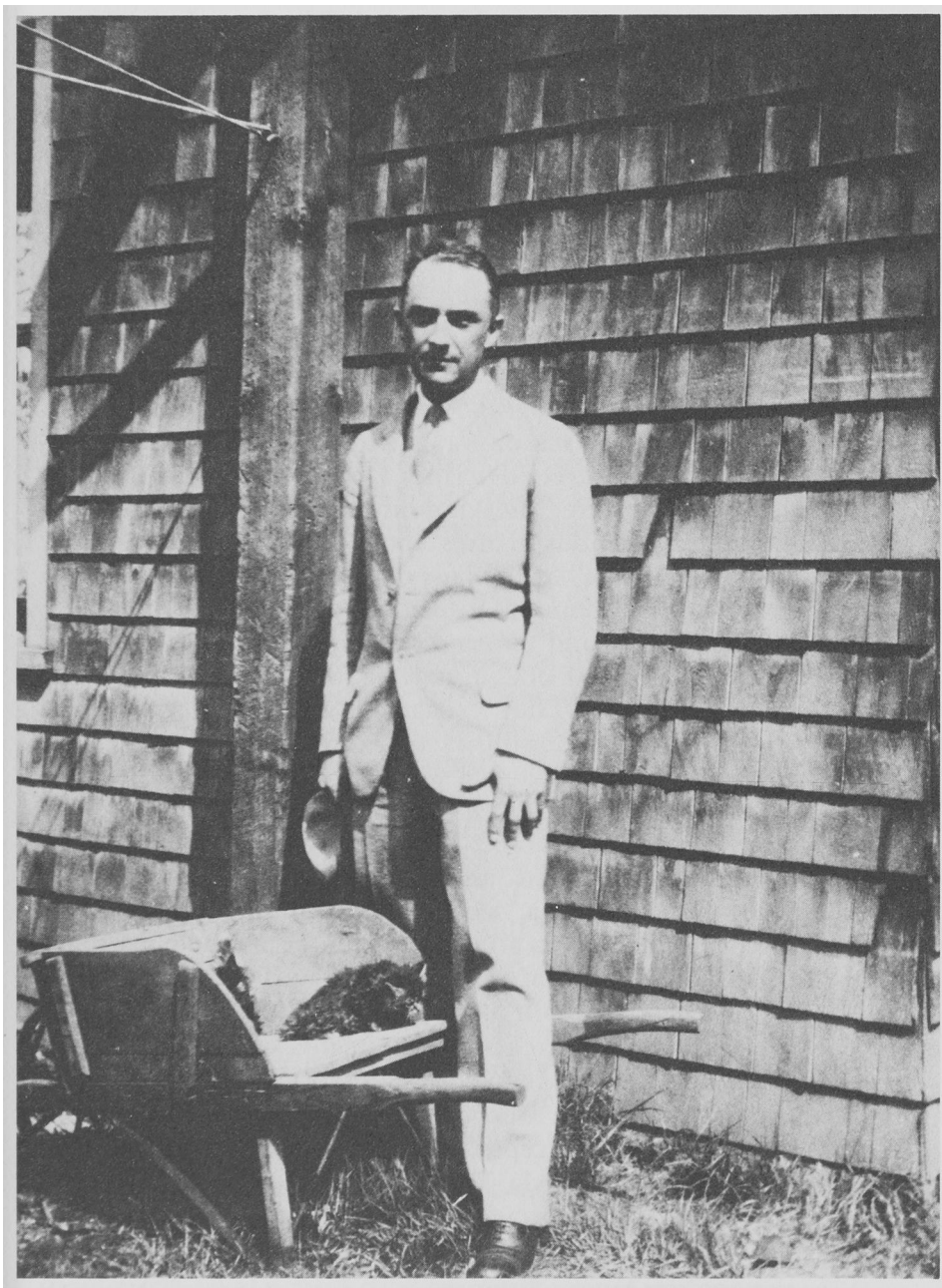
Williams was interested both in the bookshop activities and in his own standing among the Paris literati. In one letter he sent a snapshot of himself to replace on Sylvia's wall the Man Ray photograph he had so disliked. And he asked her advice on several of his manuscripts.

Under separate cover I am sending you a fifty page novelette which I did in January, during the epidemic, to quiet me late

³⁰ *The Pound Era*, p. 387.



Man Ray portrait of William Carlos Williams. Reproduced by permission of Juliet Man Ray. Sylvia Beach Collection. The gift of Graham Mattison '26.



Photograph of William Carlos Williams in Rutherford, New Jersey.
Sylvia Beach Collection. The gift of Graham Mattison '26.

at night so that I could go to sleep. . . . Will you read it please and if you think it worth while please give it to Eugene Jolas or Robert Sage for Transition? (10 April 1929)

She arranged for "A Novelette" to be published in *transition* and tried to get the Black Sun Press to publish it in book form. She sold his books, circulated his manuscripts, and found him publishers. Their infrequent letters after 1930 contain lingering devotion, for Sylvia remained his principal, perhaps only, contact with Paris. In an April 1937 letter he speaks fondly of Paris, of Adrienne's chicken dinners, and of French wines: "At times I am convince[d] that I shall never know such experiences again."

When Williams's *Autobiography* appeared in 1950, the reaction of his friends from the Paris days ranged from private disappointment to public hostility. He describes a party at Natalie Barney's salon, where women were "sneaking off together into a side room while casting surreptitious glances about them," and he tells of a man shaking "his tool" at lesbians dancing gaily past.³¹ He also tells a story about Adrienne Monnier biting Bob McAlmon's lip. Sylvia, H. D., Bryher, and others were offended by his vulgarity as well as by his account of the marriage and divorce of Bryher and Robert McAlmon. They exchanged letters concerning his autobiography and the possibility of a lawsuit. Bryher, on the advice of her lawyers, abandoned plans for legal action but later regretted taking their advice.³² Even McAlmon, the hero of Williams's *Autobiography*, granted the falsifications.³³ Sylvia is described as "mannishly dressed" and "violently drawn" to the earthy Adrienne Monnier.³⁴ Sylvia, who had served unofficially as his Paris agent, was hurt, and in an early version of her memoirs states that she does not like his "pregnant mother stories nor [the] autobiographical sneers and bile of later years." Bryher was angry at the "inaccurate and derogatory statements of myself and my friends"—particularly Adrienne Monnier: "I can forgive many things but not the person who turns on the people from whom he has both asked and accepted help."³⁵ There were no letters between Williams and Sylvia Beach after 1949. Both were busy

³¹ *Autobiography*, p. 229.

³² *The Heart to Artemis*, p. 218.

³³ The correspondence between Bryher and Sylvia Beach is in the Bryher Papers at the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

³⁴ *Autobiography*, p. 193.

³⁵ *The Heart to Artemis*, p. 218.

during the next decade with their “official” literary activities. Sylvia—on 6 October 1962—preceded Williams in death by only five months.

Although she was not one of the “determined women” whom Williams said “governed my fate,”³⁶ Sylvia helped him publish his books and sold them in Europe. His portrait of her in the *Autobiography* contrasts with the warmth of his letters. Certainly his harsh words about the Americans in Paris, if harsh they be, were uttered in the context of his recurring criticism of the artist-in-exile and with his typical salty frankness. His hostility was less toward Paris or France than toward the Americans who fled there. He had not been accepted by them. Paris did not need him, as America did. And most importantly, Paris, representing the artistic pull of Europe, threatened the development of fresh American forms. France was the “rival” of poetic invention. Yet Williams loved the French respect for artistic talent and the Gallic spirit, which he called his own.

In his ambivalence toward Paris, Williams did not take the course that Hemingway chose. The latter went to Paris to gain perspective on America, studied with Pound and Stein, and learned from the works of Turgenev and Cézanne;³⁷ yet he retained, even developed his distinctively American idiom and subject matter. Williams—disappointed in Pound’s and Eliot’s absorption in the European literary tradition—saw Europe and exile as a threat to the new American literature. He studied Pound and Stein and the French painters—as his essays attest—but he did so in the United States, in his own land. For “the local,” he declares in “French Painting” (1928), “in a full sense is the freeing agency to all thought.”³⁸ The persistence and integrity of Williams’s commitment to an American idiom and tradition was not provincial chauvinism, he insists, but his means of maintaining his own individuality as a writer and developing fresh poetic idioms and forms.

³⁶ The opening line of his biographical tribute to his mother, *Yes, Mrs. Williams* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959).

³⁷ Noel Fitch, “Ernest Hemingway—c/o Shakespeare and Company,” *Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual 1977*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli and C. E. Frazer Clark (Englewood, Colorado: Microcard Editions Books, 1978), pp. 160-161, 166-167. Ford Madox Ford was one of the first to contrast Hemingway and Williams in a *Paris Tribune* article (“A Few Friends,” 24 February 1924) which asserts that Williams’s work is “more European.” It is reprinted in Hugh Ford, *The Left Bank Revisited* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1972), pp. 258-259.

³⁸ *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, ed. Ron Loewinsoln (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. 107.

Recent literary history has romanticized the artist-in-exile. Yet recent American poetry—which will continue to feel the pull of contraries between the influences of Williams and Eliot, between American idiom and the European tradition—has affirmed Williams’s position. A writer must know and write about his own land. Seldom does Williams say it more clearly than in a letter to his old friend and adversary.

Dear Ezra, Fer the luv of God snap out of it! I’m no more sentimental about “murika” than Li Po was about China or Shakespeare about Yingland or any damned Frog about Paris. I know as well as you do that there’s nothing sacred about any land. But I also know (as you do also) that there’s no taboo effective against any land, and where I live is no more a “province” than I make it. To hell with youse. I ain’t tryin’ to be an international figure. All I care about is to write.³⁹

³⁹ 23 March 1933. *Selected Letters*, pp. 139-140.