

The Academy in Peril: William Carlos Williams Meets the MLA

The occasion of Williams's 100th birthday celebration at the professional conference of American literary scholars is an appropriate one in which to evaluate the inroads that Williams's poetry and poetics have made in the official literary culture of the United States.

Williams, more than almost any other American poet of his time, took an activist position in respect to the place of poetry—his work is an intervention within the culture against static forms of knowledge, against schooled conceptions and traditional formulation. Williams vociferously rejected the predominant academic forms of writing he confronted: verse fiction masquerading as poetry and logocentrism claiming the rights of “philosophy and science”. *The only real in writing is writing itself. . . . To transcribe the real creates, by the same act, an unreality, something besides the real which is its transcription, since the writing is one thing, what it transcribes another, the writing a fiction, necessarily and always so* [p. 13]. Taking Stein and Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* as cases in point, Williams insists *writing to be of value to the intelligence is not made up of ideas, emotions, data, but of words in configurations fresh to our senses* [p. 17].

What characterizes the officially sanctioned verse of our time, no less than Williams's, is a restricted vocabulary, neutral and univocal tone in the guise of voice or persona, grammar-book syntax, received conceits, static and unitary form. In Williams's terms, writing like this is *used* to convey emotions or ideas rather than allowed to enact them. This is the kind of writing Richard Tillinghast recently extolled in *The New York Times* (5/1/83): “Mr. Halperin is expert at appealing to the senses in order to create convincing illusions of reality . . . all is comfort and contentment—a mood that predominates in this very readable book. . . . Good wine and well-prepared food are frequently at hand. . . . This is pleasingly done.” Tillinghast, who surprisingly enough is listed as teaching English literature at Harvard (I thought he must be with Club Med's continuing education division), goes on, in an aside, to condescend to John Ashbery, rebuking him for too much “verbal sleight of hand, bedazzlement for its own sake”, concluding his review with some stock sentences that Williams found tiresome a half-century ago—“in jettisoning the attempt to accomplish what is commonly known as ‘making sense,’ also cut their ties to any traditional notion of form, thereby obviating a satisfying resolution.” Says Williams, *all* traditional notions of form, unless they can be “de-formed,” are not “*used* but copied.” They preclude “invention” by *anchor[ing] beyond the will . . . not liberat[ing] the intelligence but stultify[ing] it—and by . .*

. *cleverness, apt use stultifies it the more by making pleasurable that which should be removed* [p. 17].

The divisions in our literary culture threaten to continue to make inaudible the bulk of Williams's work, and that of his contemporaries and those who continue in his spirit. As Williams passes through the narrow and well-guarded gates of official verse culture, it likely will be at the expense of so decontextualizing and neutralizing his work that it will be unrecognizable on his own terms. I say this because official verse culture is no more hospitable to Williams's literary politics now than it was fifty years ago, though the name William Carlos Williams—signifying in some cases only a few of the man's tamest poems—is no longer being ignored since to continue such a visibly adversarial practice jeopardizes the authority of official verse culture itself. Faced with an author who writes that poetry's function *is to re-kindle language, to break it away from its enforcements, its prostitutions under all other categories. . . . Thus Jefferson said, Liberty to be preserved requires a revolution every twenty years* [p. 20], the response has been to ignore the "rhetoric" and "draw the line" at Williams, continuing to bypass the many relatedly heterogeneous currents in American writing and in Williams's own writing. In the end, Williams may be a token inclusion in a canon that excludes what he stands for.

This schism in American literary culture cannot be adequately explained by allowing official verse culture the mantle of the academic or the traditional—mantles I think Williams was too quick to cede in his tendency to identify the dominating strains of "philosophy and science" with these subjects as such. Of course, official verse culture is housed and boarded by the academy and drapes itself in the veils of traditionalism. But as is evident from Tillinghast's review—and analyzed in Eliot Weinberger's amusing account of Frederick Seidel in *Sulfur* No. 1—official verse culture is more a celebration of middle-class, middle-brow lifestyle than a continuation of those literary and humanist traditions that have something more at stake. For instance, Williams has done more to further the prosodic tradition than any of his so-called more traditional contemporaries by *not* replicating received forms and *not* voiding an audible acoustic dimension from his poetry. Meanwhile, the self-proclaimed defenders of the tradition have abandoned it by repetition: love requires not miming but response, continuation, new acts inspired not beholding to the old. *It is to divorce words from the enslavement of the prevalent clichés that all the violent torsions (Stein, Joyce) have occurred; violent in direct relation to the gravity and success of their enslavements. Language, bearing this relation to the understanding, is the care of [persons] of letters. . . . Does it not occur to someone to stress the reality of the word—as distinguished from the things which the word engages and which kill it finally?* [p. 143–4].

Let me be specific as to what I mean by “official verse culture”—I am referring to the poetry publishing and reviewing practices of *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *American Poetry Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry* (Chicago), *Antaeus*, *Parnassus*, Atheneum Press, all the major trade publishers, the poetry series of almost all of the major university presses (the University of California Press being a significant exception at present). Add to this the ideologically motivated selection of the vast majority of poets teaching in university writing and literature programs and of poets taught in such programs as well as the interlocking accreditation of these selections through prizes and awards judged by these same individuals. Finally, there are the self-appointed keepers of the gate who actively put forward biased, narrowly focussed and frequently shrill and contentious accounts of American poetry, while claiming, like all disinformation propaganda, to be giving historical or nonpartisan views. In this category, the American Academy of Poetry and such books as *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing* stand out. (Any so-called guide to American poetry that amidst citations of about 170 poets in its poetry sections (commenting here only on the older poets in the book’s purview—it is even more shameless in the breadth and blatancy of its omissions among subsequent generations) that doesn’t even *mention* the writing of Stein, Reznikoff, Eigner, or Mac Low, that merely lists the names of Zukofsky, Oppen, Spicer, and that hurries over H.D., Loy, and (Riding) Jackson in the same half-paragraph, while going on to lavish page after page on the usual suspects, even while extolling Williams, doesn’t have a clue about American literature or Williams.)

Official verse culture is not mainstream, nor is it monolithic, nor uniformly bad or good. Rather, like all literary culture, it is constituted by particular values that are as heterodox, within the broad context of multicultural American writing, as any other type of writing. What makes official verse culture official is that it denies the ideological nature of its practice while maintaining hegemony in terms of major media exposure and academic legitimation and funding. At any moment its resiliency is related to its ability to strategically incorporate tokens from competing poetry traditions and juggle them against one another while leaving for itself the main turf. These other traditions—which are usefully, if necessarily only partially, mapped in several of Jerome Rothenberg’s anthologies—flourish outside official verse culture often by setting up institutions of their own. Within a context that

would include Williams, a few are university-affiliated (*Sagetrieb*, *Credences*, *boundary 2*), some (like Williams’s publisher New Directions) are independently successful, most are poet-run and transient.

Williams has written persuasively about polarization within American literary culture within the context of his irascible opposition to conventional education and rationalistic scholarship. While these issues are conceptually separable, for Williams they share the common ground of the academy. This fact is particularly important for Williams scholars, who, finding the object of their studies believes “the more you learn the less you know” can choose to ignore the resulting dilemma only at the risk of losing their subject.

A solution might well be what Williams calls the “humanization” of knowledge—where abstraction would give way to “emplacement” as scholarship acknowledges its material base as writing. In contrast, deconstruction, which is quickly becoming a dominant critical style of academia, is not the answer. Indeed, Williams would have had little to learn from our American deconstructionists, for there is little that they have said that is not better said by Williams in *The Embodiment of Knowledge and Imaginations*, or for that matter by Thoreau or Dickinson, whose much more radical critique of logocentrism has led them not to theatricalize absence but rather to take that critique as a starting point of a project of building meaning, “embodying” it, in Williams’s phrase, to make it our own, owned. *In writing there are depths to be sounded as deep as any sky—as material, as full of value* [p. 129]. The deconstructionists are flailing their hands at the starting line of a race they know shouldn’t be run without quite realizing that this new drama provides the only interest this race has anymore, since the race track itself has long been abandoned by the descendants of its master-builders and only schoolchildren frequent the place as part of field excursions organized by their emeritus professors. The histrionic attempts to stop the race gather huge new crowds to the stadium because they remind the nouveau audience of a time when the stadium was full in its own name and they miss that and so come to see a reconstruction so that it can be demolished. No wonder deconstruction has found so little use for poetry not content to reject Origin and Voice, poetry, that is, which takes as its task finding and inhabiting origins and voices. Such work goes unnoticed because it fails to engage the nostalgia of the crowd.

What Williams insisted on was that no theory has any value except as enacted in a practical or particular context—for a writer, a text; that writing has its own exigencies that can be ignored only at the risk of saying what is not meant. Indeed, his insistence on no ideas but in things is not only a now-familiar critique of transcendental formulas removed from historical material circumstances but an attempt to formulate a practice of *embodying* a knowledge not grounded in the abstract universals of logocentric “science and philosophy” but in the language practices of living, i.e. *invented*—communities. *It is unescapable that on this, emplacement of the understanding, everything else rests, every action, thought, system* [p. 133]. Williams, at 100, is heard but not listened to.

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