

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: "I SPEAK OF FIERCELY CONTESTED THINGS:" WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, DEMOCRACY, AND THE AESTHETICS OF A "USABLE PAST"

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Exploring Williams in relation to progressive historians and literary critics of the 1910s and 1920s, this study places the poet in debates on modernist poetics, social change, and the uses of history, and builds on outstanding work of recent critics who explore Williams' writing as a defense of democratic principles in an illiberal age. Williams' "poem including history" furthered a progressive social agenda by moving beyond the economic determinism of his progressive peers to a kind of emotional determinism, what I call an "affective economics."

Williams historicized adaptation and an affective stance of extreme receptivity to the "moment," as his vision of the "usable past." There was no period of uncorrupted grace but only the ever-continuing necessity of adapting to the present moment, the often-feminized "primary." Where Eliot envisioned the "present moment of the past," Williams espied a repeating impregnating moment of "contact" and "touch" -- an historical, ever-recurring

present. Democratic renewal and contact with the primary were reinforced by the ability of individuals to decide for themselves without “intermediate authority,” to respond to their moment.

Williams' stylistics in Paterson and In the American Grain encoded a democratic ethos by compelling readers to exercise individual prerogative jeopardized by corporate power, fascism, and communism. His aesthetic animated the subject position of reader and writer, making the reader write his or her own imaginative history, based, paradoxically, on inhabiting the subject position of representative figures of the past and of the poet himself as they confronted the primary and a secondary culture that would suppress it. Williams thus structured a "participatory aesthetic" to engage the reader in the historical dialectic of “contact” and fearful “withdrawal.” In Paterson this dialectic was particularly refracted through fearful, dissonant encounters with contemporary female figures orienting us back to the “primary.”

Believing writers were a “passionate regenerative force” for society, Williams hoped his "new line[s]" would create "new mind[s]." He wanted to release "personality," the "personal" element, that writers of imaginative histories argued was endangered in a distinctly anti-liberal age and make readers define for themselves a relation to the primary through a "usable past."

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AND THE AESTHETICS
OF A "USABLE PAST"

by

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DEDICATION

To Alec Dean, Olivia Rae, and Ryan Matthew with greatest love: May you find your own joys in the “golden mean between the seasonal extremes.”

*But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.*

(Robert Frost)

To Nancy, my richest, deepest love and friend. This would not have been possible without your love, support, and patience.

*“none
Gives motion to perfection more serene
Than yours, out of imperfections wrought,
Most rare, or ever of more kindred air.”*

(Wallace Stevens)

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**Chapter I: “[T]he poem is a social instrument:”
William Carlos Williams, Social Change,
and the Modernist
“Poem Including
History”**

[T]he American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value. But is this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one? Discover, invent a usable past we certainly can, and that is what a vital criticism always does.

- Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past” (339)

Yes, most assuredly, I am conscious in everything I write of a usable past, a past as alive in its day as every moment is today alive in me: Work therefore as different from mine as one period can be different from another, but in spite of that preserving between the two an identity upon which I feed. In all work in any period there is a part that is the life of it which relates to whatever else is alive, yesterday, today, and forever. To discover that in past work makes that work important to me . . . The only question of any relevance is, Was that work alive to its own day? If so then it is alive every day. If it was a palpable denial of its own day then - if I can discover it as such - out with it. I want to look in a work and see in it a day like my own, of altered shapes, colors, but otherwise the same. *That* I can use to reinforce my senses and my intelligence to go on discovering in my own day such things as those old boys had the courage and intelligence to discover in theirs.

- William Carlos Williams, Partisan Review (41-2)

The most original and far-reaching discovery of modern times . . . is our growing realization of the fundamental importance and absorbing interest of common men and common things. Our democracy, with all its hopes and aspirations, is based on an appreciation of common men; our science, with all its achievements and prospects, is based on an appreciation of common things.

- James Harvey Robinson, The New History (132)

History . . . cannot be reduced to a verifiable set of statistics or formulated in terms of universally valid mathematical formulas. It is rather an imaginative creation, a personal possession which each one of us . . . fashions out of his individual experience, adapts to his practical or emotional needs, and adorns as well as may be to suit his aesthetic tastes . . . [T]he history which he imaginatively recreates as an artificial extension of his personal experience will inevitably be an engaging blend of fact and fancy, a mythical adaptation of that which actually happened.

- Carl Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian” (243, 245)

“If ANYTHING of the moment results – so much the better,” William
Carlos Williams declared at the outset of “Spring and All,” his 1923
masterpiece (88). “There is a constant barrier between the reader and his
consciousness of immediate contact with the world” (88). The poet’s

emphasis on the “moment” represented a fitting start to this early work, and it constituted a career-long preoccupation. Indeed, Williams declared in The Embodiment of Knowledge that the “first difficulty of the modern world is a difficulty of thought; . . . of imagination of the world, the immediate” (114). But for all of his interest in the “moment,” Williams was a deeply historically minded poet. Like his contemporaries T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Williams wrote what Pound would call the “poem including history” (qtd. in Longenbach 5). In fact, Williams followed the opening evocation of the “moment” and the “immediate” in “Spring and All” with a lengthy indictment by an unnamed reader that was predicated largely on the grounds of historical comparison. “Is this what you call poetry?,” she asks:

It is the very antithesis of poetry. It is antipoetry. It is the annihilation of life upon which you are bent. Poetry that used to go hand in hand with life, poetry that interpreted our deepest promptings, poetry that inspired, that led us forward to new discoveries, new depths of tolerance, new heights of exaltation. You moderns! it is the death of poetry that you are accomplishing. (88)

These opening passages suggest Williams’ acute awareness of the troubled relationship between the present and the past – between the “moment” and the continuity of history. “History that should be a left hand to us, as of a violinist,” he declared in In the American Grain, “we bind up with prejudice, warping it to suit our fears as Chinese women do their feet” (189). History and the future become the bookends of a sterile fantasy as “the reader” rests content with knowing “himself as he was twenty years ago” or embraces “a vision of what he would be, some day” (“Spring” 89). But the reader, “my fellow creature,” “doesn’t exist,” Williams claims, because “the

thing he never knows and never dares to know is what he is at the exact moment that he is" (89). History that, properly conceived, could help the reader know himself and his moment instead binds the poet to outmoded conventions that offer him little more than a means to "decorate" his age (89). "[T]his moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested," Williams declared (89). But, getting to that moment requires the poet to navigate an historical terrain and to forge some kind of meaningful relation to the past. Indeed, critic Alec Marsh notes in his seminal study, Money and Modernity: Pound, Williams, and the Spirit of Jefferson (1998), that Williams "needed to immerse himself in history to find himself in the present moment, in the world of what William James called 'pure experience'" (169).

This study places Williams in the debates on modernist poetics and social change, particularly modernist aesthetics and the uses of history. Williams' poem including history furthers a progressive, activist political and economic agenda. In this context, I want to consider Williams not simply in relation to other great modernist poets who write history into their verse, namely Eliot and Pound, but to recover him in relation to other authors. Williams' progressive contemporaries shared his apprehension that individual liberty and the democratic ethos must be preserved against accelerating corporate wealth and the ascension of political systems (in fascism and communism) hostile to democratic liberalism. For these contemporaries, American history was nothing less than the war of a corporate capital elite on the democratic mass and democratic spirit. It comprised a continual struggle

between a progressive, democratic impulse and a vast commercial, economic machine. This was the argument that consumed William Carlos Williams, and it was what called forth the best efforts of his progressive contemporaries. These like-minded peers consisted of progressive historians James Harvey Robinson, Charles Beard, Vernon Louis Parrington, Carl Becker, and Harry Elmer Barnes; New York liberal literary critics Waldo Frank and Van Wyck Brooks; and other creative writers like D.H. Lawrence, Hart Crane, Henry Adams and, of course, Ezra Pound. Whether they were writing imaginative histories (such as In the American Grain, The Cantos, The Bridge, or even twenty years earlier, The Education of Henry Adams), literary histories (such as Waldo Frank's Our America, Van Wyck Brooks' America's Coming of Age, or D.H. Lawrence's Classic Studies in American Literature), or scholarly historical treatises (such as Charles Beard's An Economic Interpretation of the U.S. Constitution or James Harvey Robinson's The New History), these figures sought to resist the modern effects of a culture of corporate capital and to release what they believed to be America's obscured and thwarted potential. Their shared aim of defending individual liberty and the democratic spirit animated the various writings and the variety of types of writing of the poets, critics and historians, binding them to one another and to their historical moment.

The main historians I am considering, Robinson, Beard, Becker and Parrington, have a unique relationship to Modernism. Noting that Pound and Williams' economic determinism made them "most modern and most like

other intellectuals of their time,” critic Alec Marsh identifies Beard, Parrington, J. Allen Smith, and Frederick Jackson Turner as “the most influential American historians of the Modernist moment” (Money 2). These figures and the poets had “been formed,” claims Marsh, “by the political experience of Populism, and all were to some degree consciously Jeffersonian” (2). Beard, Becker and Parrington were all born between 1871 and 1874, nine to twelve years prior to Williams (Robinson had roughly ten more years on his colleagues). Robinson and Parrington would die between the wars and Beard and Becker would die near the end and shortly after World War II. While the historians were mid-westerners, all would study or teach in the East. Beard and Robinson taught together at Columbia University and later founded the New School for Social Research in New York City. Becker would study briefly with Robinson, and Beard would recognize Parrington’s 1927 Pulitzer Prize-winning treatise Main Currents in a book review as evidence of “America’s coming of age” (qtd. in Skotheim 148). Robinson and Beard would publish their early seminal works in 1912, The New History and An Economic Interpretation of the U.S. Constitution, respectively, when Williams was nearing thirty years of age.

Van Wyck Brooks and Waldo Frank were almost exact contemporaries of Williams, both born in New Jersey within six years of the poet. Brooks would die, like Williams, in 1963, and Frank would live only another two years. These critics published their early seminal works just around the time that Williams published The Tempers in 1913 and Al Que

Quiere in 1917, which are recognized as his first accomplished volumes of poetry. Brooks published The Wine of the Puritans in 1909 and America's Coming of Age in 1915, and Frank published Our America in 1919.

Debates on literature, social change, and the uses of the past preoccupied Williams and his peers in the 1910s and 1920s. Critic Paul de Man's characterization, in "Literary History and Literary Modernity," of the essential paradox of modernism, and critic James Longenbach's related work in Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot, and the Sense of the Past, provide a larger context for understanding key aspects of Williams' own program for the "poem including history," and suggest how he is related to, and distinct from, Pound, Eliot, and others. Paul deMan argues that the struggle between fidelity to the "moment" and historical continuity is a seminal tension in literary modernism. Echoing the anti-historicism of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, modernist writers, de Man argues, exhibit a "desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure" (148). Literature, de Man contends,

has a constitutive affinity with action, with the unmediated, free act that knows no past; [t]he appeal of modernity haunts all literature, . . . [as] revealed in . . . the obsession with a *tabula rasa*, with new beginnings - No true account of literary language can bypass this persistent temptation of literature to fulfill itself in a single moment. The temptation of immediacy is constitutive of a literary consciousness. (151-52)

The fundamental paradox that de Man identifies is that when writers "assert their own modernity, they are bound to discover their dependence on similar

assertions made by their literary predecessors; their claim to being a new beginning turns out to be the repetition of a claim that has always already been made" (161). A "fatal interplay governs the writer's attitude toward modernity," then, as "he cannot renounce the claim to being modern but also cannot resign himself to his dependence on predecessors" (162). For de Man this means that "the distinctive character of literature," and not simply modern literature, is "an inability to escape from a condition that is felt to be unbearable" (162). "The discovery," de Man concludes,

of his inability to be modern leads him back to the fold, within the autonomous domain of literature, but never with genuine appeasement . . . The continuous appeal of modernity, the desire to break out of literature toward the reality of the moment, prevails and, in turn, folding back upon itself, engenders the repetition and the continuation of literature. Thus modernity, which is fundamentally a falling away from literature and a rejection of history, also acts as the principle that gives literature duration and historical existence. (162)

This is the paradox in which the poet finds himself at the start of "Spring and All." He is exclusively interested in the moment, but his moment cannot be reached without navigating at levels internal and external the pressure that is brought to bear by a literary past. This literary "duration and historical existence" forces the poet to articulate his own approach to his moment in the broader context of his predecessors' attempts to do the same. Indeed, this proved to be fertile ground for Williams as his search for a "usable past" in Paterson and In the American Grain would historicize adaptation to the moment, which he called "contact" or "touch."

The challenge for Williams and other writers, as James Longenbach asserts in Modernist Poetics of History, was to “negotiate between several conflicting types of historicism, and discover a vitalizing attitude toward history” (12). The paradox from which de Man claims that Nietzsche could not free himself, and which bedevils writers in every era, is that

If history is not to become sheer regression or paralysis, it depends on modernity for its duration and renewal; but modernity cannot assert itself without being at once swallowed up and reintegrated into a regressive historical process. (151)

How, then, can the poet realize James’ “pure experience” of a primary relation to his own time, as this very act immediately recedes into the “historical process,” and even contributes to history’s “duration and renewal?” This dilemma is not lost on Williams, and was, indeed, part of his own well-documented ambivalence about completing Paterson, about having his poem become one of the books in the library that the poet seeks to escape in Book III of that poem.

The resolution of this paradox may lay in the answer that de Man attributes to Nietzsche, namely in history itself. “Only through history is history conquered,” explains de Man, making “modernity . . . the horizon of a historical process” (150). Nietzsche, in fact, anticipates liberal literary critic Van Wyck Brook’s formulation of a usable past, noting that “we try to give ourselves a new past from which we should have liked to descend instead of the past from which we actually descended” (de Man 149-50).

Poets like Pound, Eliot and Williams had to reconcile literary modernity to literary history and thus carried the “burden of the more

sensitive of Nietzsche's heirs to forge a life-enhancing attitude toward the past" (Longenbach 11). Longenbach argues that modernist poets, particularly Pound and Eliot, employed an "existential historicism," which he defines as a view of history not "as a deadening influence on the present," but as "a living part of the present that cannot be destroyed" (10). "Historicity," as theorist Fredric Jameson argues, consists of "contact between the historian's mind in the present and a given synchronic cultural complex from the past" (qtd. in Longenbach 13). History "does not exist as a sequence of events that occurred in the past" but rather becomes a "function of the historian's effort to understand the past in the present" (Longenbach 14). For Longenbach, this historical praxis is romantic; "Pound understands the past through a process of imaginative reconstruction," as the poet bases his reading of history on his own subjective present (18).

Existential historicism is enabled, Longenbach contends, by a rejection in the latter half of the 19th century of "empiricism" and "positivism" in favor of Yeats' interest in the occult, Freud's interest in the unconscious and other difficult-to-quantify phenomena. This freed "historical knowledge" to be constructed as something that could be "gleaned from artistic intuition rather than scientific categorization" and "align[ed] it with the arts rather than with the sciences" (Longenbach 26). History, then, becomes a "product" of the writer's "own consciousness" (27). This existentialist historical method depends on an historian who looks beyond the "surface of events" to "uncover" what "lurks within them" based on the "investment of [his] own

experience into his work” (Longenbach 27). “The ‘poems including history’ written out of these pre-suppositions about the nature of historical knowledge,” Longenbach concludes, “consequently tend to take the form of a ‘palimpsest’ rather than a chronological schema” (27-28). What Longenbach claims of The Cantos and The Wasteland is no less true of Paterson or In the American Grain: they “display a present that is woven from the past in a complex tissue of allusions, a past that exists only as it lives in the texture of the present” (28).

I believe that Longenbach’s argument is particularly apt for the literary critics and poets. The move of history writing away from “scientific categorization,” however, should not obscure the progressive historians’ particular interest in recent advances in the social sciences, such as psychology, economics, anthropology, and sociology. James Harvey Robinson, in fact would argue that science and the democratic ethos share a focus on the “normal and prevalent,” “the seemingly homely, common, and inconspicuous things” (New History 149). “The most original and far-reaching discovery of modern times,” claimed Robinson,

is our growing realization of the fundamental importance and absorbing interest of common men and common things. Our democracy, with all its hopes and aspirations, is based on an appreciation of common men; our science, with all its achievements and prospects, is based on an appreciation of common things. (New History 132)

There is no doubt that Williams shared a vital existentialist historicism with Pound and Eliot. Williams looked, like Pound and Eliot, for hidden

history and obscured meanings. Indeed, he evoked in the preface to In the American Grain the “true character” of our history and ourselves “now lost in chaos of borrowed titles” (Grain, preface). Further, Williams processed history more as a collection of contemporaries than as a temporal schema or sequence, calling, for instance, those who have fought against usury and greed “contemporaries, in whatever time they live or have lived” (Essays 167).

"Language is the key to the mind's escape from bondage to the past," Williams declared in The Embodiment of Knowledge (19). How can a poet who so steeped his verse in the past, who wrote the poem including history, perceive his own medium as critical to the larger project of escaping the past as burden? This is the same quandary that de Man and Longenbach argue has plagued writers of every age. In Williams' case, the paradox is, at first blush, made more puzzling by the fact that an initial reading of T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" could suggest that Williams' own views of the past are not so disparate from Eliot's. This seems particularly odd given Williams' vociferous objections to Eliot's poetic method and to the publication of The Waste Land, which he called "the great catastrophe to our letters" (Autobiography 146). "There was," Williams explained years later in his Autobiography, "heat in us, a core and a drive that was gathering headway upon the theme of a rediscovery of a primary impetus," but "[o]ur work staggered to a halt for a moment under the blast of Eliot's genius which gave the poem back to the academics" (146). Williams

felt that Eliot's poem sucked the air out of the room, jeopardizing poets' nascent efforts to define a vital modern poetic "in the local conditions" (146).

The differences between Eliot and Williams were profound; they represented the distance between a regressive (and conservative) or a progressive vision of the reader and of poetry that went to the heart of Williams' defense of individual liberty and the democratic ethos. What each sought from or in the past and to what uses each put it, in fact, were quite distinct. Williams' poem including history was uniquely democratic. It was intended to convert readers into citizens. Williams' democratic poetic focused not simply on historical representative figures, but on the figure of the poet and, more particularly, the reader. It was geared towards animating readers, making them take an active stance of civic engagement in the service of their own present moment. Williams effected a participatory aesthetic that drew the reader into an essential American historical dialectic between what he identifies as "touch" and "withdrawal," "contact" and exploitation. If Pound and Eliot exhibited, as Longenbach contends, an existentialist historicism in which history is refracted through the imaginative sensibility and subjective experience of the poet, Williams wrote the poem including history so as to make the reader refract the past through his own subjectivity, thereby compelling him to articulate his own historical narrative of life in America. Williams' aesthetic, then, enacted the democratic ethos that he intended to defend by compelling readers to exercise the individual liberty and prerogative that he and his progressive contemporaries believed

to be jeopardized by corporate power, emerging fascism and communism. The democratic impulse informing Williams' stance toward the past, which I believe holds many likenesses to Stevens', must be distinguished from that of Pound and Eliot. I want to begin by considering Eliot's seminal essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," as a way to contrast Williams' with Eliot's view of, and uses of, the past.

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot foreswore "blind or timid adherence" to the "successes" of our immediate predecessors, much as Williams did (467). Eliot noted that it is not "preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (467). It is not difficult to imagine Williams agreeing in some measure with this assertion. Eliot contended that the "historical sense," so critical to tradition, "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (467). Here is the simultaneous present or omnipresent contemporaneity of past and present that critics like de Man and Longenbach, as well as Richard Ruland, note – and that the poets, including Williams, assert. Lastly, even Eliot's belief that no poet "has his complete meaning alone" may appear to apply to and help us better understand Williams (467). Eliot explains that the poet's "significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists," and he argued that "[y]ou cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (467). We could apply this position to describe Williams' encounters with representative figures in In the American

Grain. Indeed, Williams articulates in that volume multiple layers of complex identifications for himself and for his reader in his portraits of Champlain, Rasles, Poe and others. So strong are the identifications, in fact, that Champlain, as an example, becomes a kind of alter-ego or extension of the poet himself. These identifications will be further discussed in Chapter Four.

But these correspondences between the two poets should not distract us from the deeper differences in their vision of the past and in what the poem including history means for our stance toward that past. Eliot argued in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," for instance, that tradition "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor" (467). The past, in his scheme, sounded like a goal or treasure to be worked toward. The poet should write "not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of . . . his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (467). Williams, by contrast, expressed a greater urgency around the "moment" and the "barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world" ("Spring" 88). The critical distinguishing feature between Williams and Eliot was that for the former the past was usable only to the extent that it offered models of "contact" and "touch" with the "moment" and what he calls the primary. Thus, Williams was drawn to writers and other historical figures who had adapted to conditions as they actually existed in their own time. A "usable past," Williams attested, consisted of a "past as alive in its day as every moment is today alive in me."

If the work was not “alive to its own day” and thus “alive to every day,” “out with it,” Williams declared. History or the past was important, then, for uncovering an alternative tradition and model that could help us “touch” and make “contact” with the realities of life in our own time. Williams’ stance matched that of progressive historian Carl Becker and liberal literary critic Van Wyck Brooks, both of whom looked for a radical potential inherent in history. Van Wyck Brooks posited that we may need a vital criticism to discover or even create a usable past, one that can be utilized to speak to contemporary needs. Becker espied this as the “power” of the past that was contained “within” the present (“Some Aspects” 675).

The past and tradition are not open only to those who labor to inherit them, as Eliot would have it. Williams had faith in the common man’s ability to wade through the fragments of history. His aesthetic animates the reader as citizen to experience the debates of the past and to decide for himself what his stake is in them and where he stands. Williams would agree with Eliot that the poet “must develop or procure the consciousness of the past” (“Tradition” 468). But it was Williams’ purpose in procuring this consciousness to find the obscured, the “strange phosphorous of the life, nameless under an old misappellation” (Grain, preface). It was not, as in Eliot’s case, to master the “simultaneous order” of the past and to trace the particular uncorrupted grace of a golden, pre-modern culture. It is critical that Williams saw no such historical exemplar but historicized the ever-continuing process and necessity of adapting to the present moment. Where Eliot

envisioned the present in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" as the "present moment of the past" (471), Williams espied a recurring impregnating moment of contact and touch -- and that moment, to invert Eliot's formulation, comprised the past moments of the ever-recurring present. If you believe, as Williams did, that to "read, while we are imbibing the wisdom of the ages" means "imbibing the death and the imbecility, the enslaving rudeness of the ages," then you can meaningfully encounter history only as a model for adaptation to your own unique present moment (Embodiment 107). Our engagement with the past in Williams, then, was focused on the present -- the past present of various representative figures and our own present moment as readers navigating the text. It is an individual and therefore democratic focus in contrast to Eliot's rarified vision.

This suggests that the past, and the poem including history, in particular, held very different meanings for Williams and Eliot. For Williams the works of the past were as "dead as shells" that once carried a living man's desire to write and to express himself (Embodiment 106). Thus, Williams took a very different direction from the "surrender of himself, . . . [the] continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" that Eliot posited ("Tradition" 468). Where Eliot would lead us to develop this historical consciousness, Williams warned us of the "Mountain of dead words, cemeteries of words [that] befog the mind" (Embodiment 104). "[T]here is an antagonism between the ages," Williams posited (Embodiment 107). "Each age wishes to enslave the others" (Embodiment 107). Far from the

"extinction of personality" that Eliot espoused, Williams declared that the "conviction that fills the whole body of a man is nearer to him than all the books that have ever been written" (Embodiment 105). "And these other books," Williams contended

the great philosophies, the endless treatises of science, the books of religions and the lives of other men -- the biographies, the histories -- what are they? They are part of the very oppressive, stupid, aimless, ignorant world which has driven him to shelter, to prison within himself, to defeat from which he must escape. HE must escape, weak, comparatively unlettered, by himself. (Embodiment 105, emphasis in original)

The "extinction of personality" before tradition that Eliot desired, and that he argued was required for anyone who would be a writer beyond his 25th birthday, was, to Williams, a terrifying mistake.

Related as well to their differing views of the past were Eliot's and Williams' divergent opinions on poetic language. Eliot acknowledged that it may be necessary to "force" or "dislocate language" to our meaning. The language may need to be made new for the poet's contemporary purposes. Williams, by contrast, declared in The Embodiment of Knowledge that it "is by the breakup of the language that the truth can be seen to exist and that it becomes operative again. . . In language lodge the prejudices, the compulsions by which stupidity and ineptitude rule intelligences superior to their own" (Embodiment 19). Williams' program was thus much more radical and called for the smashing of conventional forms, not simply wrenching them to meet our contemporary needs. Indeed, Williams asserted in "Spring and All" that:

If I could say what is in my mind in Sanscrit or even Latin I would do so. But I cannot. I speak for the integrity of the soul and the greatness of life's inanity; the formality of its boredom; the orthodoxy of its stupidity. Kill ! Kill ! Let there be fresh meat." (90)

It is not surprising, then, that the "fragments I have shored against my ruins," to which Eliot would cling at the end of The Waste Land, were quite distinct from the constituent pieces of Williams' palimpsest in Paterson and In the American Grain (Complete 50). Williams' fragments and shards of history were not nostalgic backward glances to lost order that the poet hoped in vain to reconstitute. Rather, they were the glittering models of adaptation, touch, and contact offered by a variety of representative figures of the past. They were offered up to the reader to structure and model the road he or she must, ultimately, travel alone.

The sequence, then, that Williams found in time, to consider Paul deMan's thesis in "Literary History and Literary Modernity," was radically different from Eliot's. It was inflected by Williams' interest in the pattern of seemingly recurrent ruptures in time – moments of discovery and alienation, of anxiety in the face of an unknown and overwhelming continent. The poet, who felt that old words must be broken down and wonted usages must be escaped, used both of these things, through primary documents, to show the continuous, historical pattern of this necessary rupture, the continuous pattern of the discontinuous. Inherent in this pattern of rupture was the usable past – it was the moment of adaptation and regeneration. It was encoded in the aesthetic structures by which Williams presented a set of encounters and meta-encounters with the primary, life as it existed in the

New World, in the past and even in the reading process of the present. This democratic formulation – democratic by how it animated and activated the reader – corroborated W.H. Auden's contention in “The Poet and the City” in The Dyer's Hand, that the “mere making of a work of art is itself a political act” and it releases the radical potential inherent in history, now making it, as historian James Harvey Robinson hoped, the weapon of the progressive (88).

* * * * *

Debates on modernism and social change, literature and politics, the uses of the past, and the writing of more imaginative and subjective histories, which I will discuss, were playing out in the context of, and were conditioned by, sweeping economic and social changes that for Williams and others produced a sense of crisis. But what exactly threw them back on history in search of a usable American past and made them seek a “*new history?*” The answer lay in part in a truism: the United States underwent profound economic, social, political transformation in the latter part of the nineteenth century. After the effective close of the Reconstruction Period, America experienced substantial immigration, urbanization, industrialization and labor unrest. In 1890 the Bureau of Census declared the frontier “closed” -- there existed no broad expanse of unsettled lands. And what land there was sagged under a burgeoning population. In 1900 alone, nearly “425,000 Europeans arrived on the nation’s shores” (Cooper 2). Foreign-born Americans “numbered about eleven million, or 14 percent of the total

population, . . . the highest proportion of immigrants to ‘natives’ since the 1850s” (8). In the first decade of the new century, “over eight million more immigrants would come to the United States – the largest number in any decade before or since . . . [and they] would account for more than 10 percent of the entire American population” (3). This influx of new immigrants “stirred apprehension . . . appear[ing] to threaten the established way of life of white Protestant middle-class groups” (8).

The nation’s economy and corporate sector seemed to grow as impressively in this period. In the most general terms, an economic powerhouse was being born. American steel production “reached 28.3 million tons in 1910, almost triple the amount in 1900” (Cooper 82). Motor vehicle registration rose from “8,000 in 1900 to 458,000 in 1910” (82). Perhaps the greatest indication of industrial and broader commercial expansion was the explosion in railroading. Between 1865 and 1880, “the ton-miles of freight carried by the thirteen principal lines in the country rose from 2.16 billion to 14.48 billion, an increase of 600 percent” (Smith 90). During this time, “track mileage more than tripled -- from 35,000 miles to 115,647” while the “number of passengers carried on all [rail]roads increased from 289,000,000 to 520,000,000, and passenger-miles from 7 billion to 12 billion” (90). Further, between 1880 and 1890 “the average railroad mileage constructed per year totaled more than 6,000 miles; the peak year was 1887, when 12,000 miles of track were laid” (90). Perhaps most staggering, the

gross national product rose by fifty percent in the first decade of the twentieth century, “topping \$50 billion for the first time after 1907” (Cooper 82).

The corporate consolidation and monopolization of markets most aroused the apprehension of Williams and others. These accelerated precipitously in the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century as over 300 mergers were effected, totaling \$7.5 billion and “encompassing an estimated 40 percent of the country’s industrial output” (Cooper 11). Six railroads controlled “95 percent of all trackage” by 1899 (11). US Steel, formed in 1901, controlled 80 percent of steel production. John D. Rockefeller, the “devoutly religious but ruthlessly domineering petroleum magnate, . . . became the first American to amass a personal fortune worth \$1 billion” (11-12).

Capitalists were not the only ones on the move. Unionization of workers “nearly tripled between 1900 and 1910, from 548,000 to over 1.5 million” (Cooper 145). And political agitation and labor unrest advanced hand in hand. Critic Alec Marsh notes that in the 1890s, as Pound and Williams

were growing up, not only the radicalized farmers of the People’s Party but figures as diverse as the patrician historian Brooks Adams, the money agitator William ‘Coin’ Harvey, and the Christian Democrat William Jennings Bryan believed that the country was in the grip of an international financial conspiracy. They agreed that a clique of financiers and usurers was attempting to corner all the gold in existence for the purpose of enslaving the world through perpetual indebtedness. (Money 3)

While the “struggle between the politics of the debtor classes and the creditors came to a head in the presidential election campaign of 1896,”

economic conflict did not cease after Bryan's crushing defeat (Marsh, Money 2-3). Eugene Debs would win as much as 17% of the vote in several states in 1912 and "[a]t no time in American history was there greater tolerance and openness toward socialism than in 1910 and several years afterward" (Cooper 146). Williams' and Pound's participation in Major C.H. Douglas' Social Credit Movement of the 1920s and 1930s attests to the continuing resonance of issues surrounding economic and class struggle. Critic David Frail, in The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams (1987), refers readers as well to the larger economic and social agitation in the America of Williams' youth. Williams "was 17," Frail notes,

when Theodore Roosevelt assumed the presidency, and he came of age in the peak of the Progressive's 'strenuous' efforts to reform politics and society through exhortation. Little wonder he felt, as Unitarianism had taught him to hope, that humanity was progressing in spirit and the United States was moving onward and upward. (37)

The sense of incredible, even overwhelming changes, was registered by Williams and others. Frederick Jackson Turner, in fact, opened his 1910 presidential address to the members of the American Historical Association by noting:

The transformations through which the United States is passing in our own day are so profound, so far-reaching, that it is hardly an exaggeration to say that we are witnessing the birth of a new nation in America. The revolution in the social and economic structure of this country during the past two decades is comparable to what occurred when independence was declared and the constitution was formed, or to the changes wrought by the era which began half a century ago, the era of Civil War and Reconstruction. ("Social Forces" 154)

Henry Adams starkly characterized the current moment in his 1907 (published, 1918) The Education of Henry Adams: “[I]n 1900, the continuity snapped” and the mind found that “a new avalanche of unknown forces had fallen on it, which required new mental powers to control” (457, 461). “The child born in 1900,” he continued

would, then, be born into a new world which would not be a unity but a multiple. Adams tried to imagine it, and an education that would fit it. He found himself in a land where no one had ever penetrated before; where order was an accidental relation obnoxious to nature; artificial compulsion imposed on motion; against which every free energy of the universe revolted; and which, being merely occasional, resolved itself back into anarchy at last. (Adams 457-8)

Adams and Turner were not alone in their assessments. Williams echoed their sense that the march of industrialization and commercialism precipitated a broader crisis of meaning. “Who are we?,” Williams asked:

Degraded whites riding our fears to market where everything is by accident and only one thing sure: the fatter we get the duller we grow; only a simpering disgust (like a chicken with a broken neck, that aims where it cannot peck and pecks only where it cannot aim, which a hog-plenty everywhere prevents from starving to death) reveals any contact with a possible freshness – and that only by inversion. (Grain 108)

Waldo Frank, in Our America, cited New York as the apogee of the economic transformation besieging the nation. Its “high white towers[,] . . . arrows of will” revealed how modern man “has been fathered by steel and broken by it” (Frank 171, 174). In New York, and perhaps, cities everywhere, “the outside world has taken to itself a soul – a towering, childish soul: and the millions of human sources are sucked void” (171). The “brackish human flow . . . the molecular units” represent a “people turned debtor to its own

affairs” (172-73). For Frank this broader economic crisis also revealed that the “gods of the fathers were ridiculous or dead” (223). “Only the consciousness of life as a Whole,” he lamented,

in the consciousness of himself as a parabolic force with his feet upon earth and his head piercing the skies – the consciousness which all religions in their own ways preserve, all arts express – can man prevail against the clutter of a factual and emotional multiverse Now, America multiplied this clutter: America took away the consciousness that might have held it. (224)

The result: “The crisis finds us to-day, innerly depleted” (231). Vernon Louis Parrington in Main Currents, echoed Frank, arguing that he hoped in the history he was writing to “unhorse the machine that now rides men and to leaven the sodden mass that is industrial America” (3:xx).

Even a cursory view of the progressive historians and literary critics, as well as other poets, suggests how the vast social and economic changes of the early twentieth century produced a sense of rupture. Corporate capital, monopoly, industry and commerce were remaking their world. Progressives responded with a sense of crisis – their “moment” was one of urgency. Indeed, as Paul de Man implies, in “Literary History and Literary Modernity,” rupture in time was the essential modernist myth. Thus, Williams and his contemporaries felt that old cultural narratives and forms failed to speak to or suit the pressing demands of their time. The result was that new narratives rushed in to fill the vacuum. At a time of rising American hegemony, when America was assuming a leading role on the world stage, and when there were significant economic and political changes, and even

unrest at home and abroad, the task of identifying the essential historical American character in new ways and to serve new constituencies became all the more critical. Vast changes were remaking America's social and political landscape and the old narratives were proving to be outmoded and threadbare.

The progressive historians, critics, and creative writers offered a different kind of history in response to the pressing social and economic needs of their time. They sought, in short, through their different styles and methods, to deinstitutionalize history. For all three groups, de-institutionalizing history would mean three things, as revealed in the subjective and imaginative histories that they would write. First, they defined writing, and history-writing in particular, as a critical weapon in the battle to instigate social and economic reform. Second, they revealed how finance and power perverted democratic structures. Third, they emphasized in varying ways the subjective or personal. The histories of Williams and his contemporaries (especially the poets and critics) were more subjective and imaginative, personal in many ways, than the more institutional histories, focusing on the diplomacy and battles of great nations, that preceded them.

The first element of these subjective histories – namely, defining history writing as part of a movement for social change and a rejection of anachronistic social forms – was evident in the work of nearly every progressive historian and literary critic. The accelerating consolidation of market capital and the creation of whole new vistas of commercial wealth

and industrial initiative made writers of progressive literary and scholarly histories, alike, comb the past. They searched for elements of the American experience that could provide an alternative vision to stale academic histories. They sought to write histories that did not simply naturalize existing exploitative economic and social relations but rather revealed them as man-made forms and institutions that must evolve to remain relevant to their time. Social and economic inequities were not, then, immutable natural creations but were subject to change and could be rectified. This was the “genetic” or “evolutionary” view of history that Williams, Barnes, Brooks, Robinson and others espoused. They felt compelled to write histories that aided reform movements, that would help people adapt to changed and still rapidly changing economic and class realities. Writing history was not a sideline pastime – it placed the historians, critics, and poets at the center of the crisis of their moment and on the frontlines of efforts to remake their age.

Williams and his contemporaries, then, argued that history must become a force for social change. James Harvey Robinson would argue in his 1912 volume The New History that history, which “has been regularly invoked, . . . to substantiate the claims of the conservative, but has hitherto usually been neglected by the radical” is the radical’s “weapon by right” and must be “wrest[ed] . . . from the hand of the conservative” (252). Robinson argued that the “present has hitherto been the willing victim of the past; the time has come when it should turn on the past and exploit it in the interests of advance” (New History 24). Without a meaningful history that could recall us

to a vision of America apart from the triumph of corporate capital, we would “float without question” and remain vulnerable to blatant economic exploitation and an accompanying impoverishment of spirit (Grain 113). Williams and his contemporaries lamented the “unstudied character of our beginnings” and the fact that “we recognize no ground our own” (Grain 109). Writing the poem including history comprised for Williams “a basic attack” in the ongoing war between corporate powers and the democratic spirit (Autobiography 341). The poem was “a social instrument” the poet marshaled in defense, at multiple levels, of individual liberty and individual prerogative (Letters 286). Writing was the “active agent” in this struggle, and the economic and cultural consequences in this battle were tremendous for Williams’ time (Autobiography 341).

The problem from the start was one of continuity – or, more to the point, historical discontinuity. The writer’s task, according to Van Wyck Brooks, must be to discover or invent a usable past from the “inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals” of our American past (“Usable” 339). This is what Williams meant when he asserted in the prefatory paragraph to In the American Grain:

In these studies I have sought to re-name the things seen, now lost in chaos of borrowed titles, many of them inappropriate, under which the true character lies hid. In letters, in journals, reports of happenings I have recognized new contours suggested by old words so that new names were constituted . . . ; it has been my wish to draw from every source one thing, the strange phosphorus of the life, nameless under an old misappellation.” (Grain, preface)

Williams thus echoed Brooks' own formulation of the problem in a 1918 article, "On Creating a Usable Past," in The Dial, quoted at the start of this chapter.

Robinson's student and protégé, Harry Elmer Barnes, would laud the "newer or dynamic and synthetic history" in his 1925 volume, New History and the Social Sciences (ix). Examining the contributions of anthropology, psychology, sociology and other social sciences, Barnes argued for using these sister studies "to reach a correct notion of what is really essential and progressive in our civilization and of what is but an encumbering survival from primitive times" (15). He attacked anachronistic cultural "habits" that enabled the "preservation of the social order" and made it difficult for the "vested interests to recognize the defects in their domination and for the poor to sense properly their oppression or to grasp its causes" (Barnes 83-84). Thus, common phenomena met the common man as a history-writing infused with the progressive impulse and informed by the social sciences would, Barnes and other progressives believed, enable their contemporaries to more nearly adapt their social and economic relations to, and reform, actual conditions.

Whether they were writing imaginative histories, literary histories or academic tracts, the progressive intellectuals of the 1910s and 1920s aimed to remake the present by remaking the past. They attempted to steer the nation away from an impoverished culture of corporate capital, to fix the "organized anarchy to-day expressed in Industrialism which would deny to

America any life . . . beyond the ties of traffic and the arteries of trade” (Frank 9). For this reason Carl Becker spoke for his progressive contemporaries when he asserted that the “business of history is to arouse an intelligent discontent, to foster a fruitful radicalism” (“The New History” 21). The history they wrote privileged change and adaptation. It incorporated learning from sister social sciences. It sought to defend and empower democratic man against a corporate elite by denying conservatives’ efforts to naturalize exploitative social and economic relationships.

The second element of these subjective histories – namely revealing and resisting the corrupting influence of the money culture – was a central preoccupation for Williams and his progressive peers. Charles Beard, who was Robinson’s colleague and co-author at Columbia University, published in 1912 his seminal volume, An Economic Interpretation of the U.S. Constitution. This critical study revealed how corporate capital interests had shaped our constitutional forms and controlled our politics from the early life of the republic better to secure their property interests. Beard explored the individual financial holdings of the signers of the Constitution to expose the personal economic gains they realized from implementation of a strong federal system.

Liberal literary critic Van Wyck Brooks lamented how corporate interests came to thwart individual development and inhibit the masses’ greater potential. “How can one speak of progress in a people like our own,” Brooks inquired in his 1915 volume, America’s Coming of Age,

that so sends up to heaven the stench of atrophied personality? How can one speak of progress in a people whose main object is to climb, peg by peg, up a ladder . . . to the impersonal ideal of private wealth?" (176)

Brooks evoked the culture's commercial priorities in grim fashion in Seven Arts, a journal of art and culture that was published from November 1916 to October 1917 and that Williams in his Autobiography called "an important publication of the moment" (147). Brooks declared in Seven Arts that Americans "find themselves born into a race that has drained away all its spiritual resources in the struggle to survive and that continues to struggle in the midst of plenty because life itself no longer possesses any other meaning" ("Towards" 543). Williams asserted in In the American Grain 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" (109). This grim picture of economic exploitation reflected Williams' and others' apprehension about the vast changes corporate capital was imposing on the American landscape at the end of the nineteenth century and in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Their fears for America's present "moment" and belief that capital would co-opt America's future, compelled them to identify "a usable past" ("Usable" 339).

Brooks and Beard would appear together in the April 1918 issue of The Dial where they took special aim at academic historians for cheating the American writer out of his "most meager of birthrights" by putting a "sterile" "gloss upon the past," a fact that Brooks attributed directly to economic, capitalistic motives (338). The histories that they found had been credited

up to their own time were those that rendered the past “sterile for the living mind” (337). They were stale nineteenth century histories written by “professors who accommodate themselves without effort to an academic world based like ours on the exigencies of the commercial mind” (338). The result: they “cannot see anything in the past that conflicts with a commercial philosophy” (338).

The economic analyses and political stance of Williams and of his progressive peers such as Beard and Parrington is heavily inflected with Marxist critique but not teleology. This is evident in Williams’ interest and activity in the Social Credit Movement in the mid to late 1920s, which I will discuss in Chapter Two. It is important to note that Social Credit was understood to be a way of preserving democratic liberalism by reforming its economic structures. Communist collectivism was no more appealing, for its impact on individual liberty and prerogative, than was fascism. Social Credit thus sought to alleviate the economic misery of millions by democratizing the availability and distribution of credit. It is fair to say, then, that while it was informed by Marxist analysis it was not a vehicle for implementation of a Marxist social program. Indeed, Williams would tell critic Babette Deutsch in a 1947 letter that she could expect to find in the soon-to-be-published Book II of Paterson

more relating to the economic distress occasioned by human greed and blindness – aided, as always, by the church, all churches in the broadest sense of that designation – but, still, there will be little treating directly of the rise of labor as a named force. I am not a Marxian.” (Letters 29)

At the very height of his Social Credit activities, moreover, Williams reaffirmed to Pound his own freedom from “organized theories,” and recognized “getting rather too fascinated with the tip of my nose” as a risk concomitant with his focus on the local (Witemeyer 138). “My observation,” Williams informed his friend, “is that the too close organization of theories is likely to make one blind to what’s taking place” (138).

The third element of the imaginative histories of Williams and his progressive peers (particularly the poets and literary critics) can be found in how they sought to counter the impersonal forces of the age that threatened liberal democracy by affirming the subjective in the histories that they wrote and, in Williams' case, in the way that they wrote them. The ethos of the personal that Williams and his progressive peers espoused in response, even rebellion, we might say, to an age perceived to be impersonal and hostile to individual prerogative and liberty, made Williams develop a history writing aesthetic that forced the reader to adapt himself continually (and to experience historical figures as they adapted) to new and changing circumstances. Williams' subjective history was powerful for how it inhabited and spoke from the subject position of representative figures from the past and from the poet himself. It may be, then, as critic James Breslin contends of In the American Grain, that while “the work of his contemporaries often strikes us as dated polemic . . . Williams' book lives in the rich variety of its characters, moods, styles” (88) – but the impulse is nevertheless the same.

Reflecting their interest in the subjective and in the imaginative mind, Williams and the literary critics were also particularly drawn to literary predecessors. V. L. Parrington, Waldo Frank, Van Wyck Brooks, D.H. Lawrence and Williams, constructed an alternative, usable literary past consisting of such promising representative figures as Poe, Whitman, Thoreau, and even Dickinson. Gerald Graff has documented in Professing Literature that it was in this period that the American canon was defined and the work of American cultural studies, that would blossom in the 1940s with the work of Charles Fiedelson and Perry Miller, was begun. Graff establishes that by 1900 "American literature as an independent subject had been introduced into practically all of the American colleges" (qtd. in Graff 212). Those few exceptions "could hold out . . . only until the World War, when the 'demands upon the colleges for patriotism-inducing subjects' caused American literature to be added to the curriculum everywhere" (212). By the mid to late 1920s, Graff contends, there was a movement to "merge history and criticism in a larger cultural study that would bring literary studies into more intimate connection with American society" (214). This "impulse toward synthesis and integration more than anything," asserts Graff, gave the new field of American literary studies an "iconoclastic and populist aura that continued to be part of its image for decades to come" (214). Graff observes that "the initial aspirations of American literature studies were tied to a quest for cultural synthesis [recognizing wider economic and political forces] not unlike what Van Wyck Brooks and the young radical intellectuals

were calling for" (215). Brook's "impressionistic talk of a usable past," contends Graff, would be complemented by work that combined "synthetic vision with precise scholarship" (215). It was V.L. Parrington "who at first most influenced the shape of that combination" and whose 1927-30 volumes Main Currents in American Thought "reinforced the link between the academic study of American literature and the progressive social outlook of the nonacademic critics" (Graff 215).

Parrington, as the most prominent figure in this scholarship, explored the entire pantheon of America's literary forebears in Main Currents from an admittedly Jeffersonian progressive perspective. He turned to the "pretty largely neglected . . . field of American letters" Main Currents to trace the "broad path of our political, economic, and social development" (1: i, iii). Acknowledging his own position on contemporary economics and politics from the start, Parrington confessed: "The point of view from which I have endeavored to evaluate the materials, is liberal rather than conservative, Jeffersonian rather than Federalistic" (1: i). Viewing "the discussion of literature . . . [as] part of a social struggle, in which the theory and uses of literature were understood to be a weapon" (Hofstadter 388), Parrington, in his essay, "Economics and Criticism," asserted starkly that "Literature is the fair flower of culture, but underneath culture are deeper strata of philosophy, theology, law, statecraft – of ideology and institutionalism – resting finally upon the subsoil of economics" (98). "We may begin as critics," Parrington added, "but we end up as historians . . . [The critic and historian] cuts under

the feet of the humanist to the property basis of ideas and institutions. In every society, he discovers, property is sovereign" (100).

Parrington's purpose, of course, was to reaffirm the humanistic and progressive. To this end, he presented the historical dialectic of "the aristocrat and the republican, privileged minority and democratic majority, frontier democracy and Wall Street Whiggery, the middle class and the proletarian masses, producer and middleman" (Skotheim 140). Parrington lauded always the imaginative and creative power – the subjective worth, experience and vision – of democrats and artists.

Others histories, written by Waldo Frank, D.H. Lawrence, and Hart Crane, similarly sought to reaffirm the individual by validating the personal and subjective. Frank's 1919 imaginative history Our America turned to creative writers and authors as offering the "most salient and most pregnant utterances" of our expression of an American character apart from its obsession with corporate capital (7). Writers could best assist us, he argued, in the "whole vast problem of reaching down to the hidden vitals, and of bringing these up -- their energy and truth -- into the play of articulate life" (Frank 4).

D.H. Lawrence's imaginative history, Studies in Classic American Literature (1923), located a usable past in figures like Whitman, Melville, Poe, and Hawthorne. "There is a new voice in the old American classics," he declared, though he admitted that it "is hard to hear . . . as hard as it is to listen to an unknown language. We just don't listen" (1). Hart Crane, in his

1930 poem, The Bridge, likewise inquired of the contemporary scene, “Years of the Modern! Propulsions toward what capes?” (94-5). Looking, like Lawrence or Frank, to past literary figures, Crane invoked a saintly vision of Whitman as a partial guide – “yes, Walt,/ Afoot again, and onward without half, --/ Not soon, nor suddenly, -- no, never to let go/ My hand/ in yours,/ Walt Whitman” (95). This echoed Brooks’ own invocation of Whitman in America’s Coming of Age in 1915, as having “precipitated the American character” (118). “All those things,” Brooks attested,

which had been separate, self-sufficient, incoordinate –
action, theory, idealism, business – he cast into a crucible;
and they emerged, harmonious and molten, in a fresh
democratic ideal, which is based upon the whole personality.
(Coming 118)

The interest in earlier writers, of course, was fed partly by Williams' and others' feeling that the humanism of their literary forebears validated and confirmed the value of the individual, the subjective and the personal in an impersonal, anti-liberal, and menacing age.

* * * * *

Williams’ critics have long noted the need to put the poet in the context of his contemporaries. “We still need a study of Williams’s sense of American history,” Paul Mariani asserts, “which would cover not only In the American Grain but also other prose and poetry, including Paterson” (Critics 243). Mariani adds: “There is also room for a book on Williams and his contemporaries” (Critics 243). There is no shortage of excellent critical works addressing Williams’ relation to the visual arts, painters and artists

such as Charles Demuth, Alfred Stieglitz, Marsden Hartley, and Juan Gris. This study, however, builds on the outstanding work of recent critics like Brian Bremen, John Beck, and Alec Marsh, who explore Williams' writing as a defense of democratic principles and individual liberty.

Marsh positions Williams and Pound in Money and Modernity as "latter-day Jeffersonians . . . in a long tradition of American political and economic dissent" (x). Both poets seek to "democratize capitalism by reorganizing its benefits" and to return the "control of money" to the people (ix-x). Marsh argues that "it is their economic determinism that makes Pound and Williams most modern and most like other intellectuals of their time"(2). Thinkers like Turner, Beard, Parrington, and J. Allen Smith had, like the poets, the formative "political experience of Populism," which made all of them "consciously Jeffersonian" (2). Marsh argues that Williams and Pound believed that poetry must "restore true aesthetic, ethical, and moral values, an undertaking that entailed agitation in verse for a practical political program bent on defining exactly what money was and what it was not" (5). This meant distinguishing the "Jeffersonian version of capitalism [which] reflects a belief in use values" from Hamilton's "exchange values, 'worth' as opposed to 'value'" (12). Marsh characterizes Pound and Williams' work as partly "Jeffersonian jeremiads and partly experimental structures through which Jeffersonianism can be renovated and modernity reshaped" (14). Marsh focuses on historically "defining and tracing Jeffersonian economic ideals

and their aesthetic implications from the early United States to the 'corporate age,'" including in Pound's and Williams' work (9).

Marsh is particularly interested in how John Dewey's attempt to "adapt Jeffersonian idealism to the corporate industrial-age," "rescues the poet's critique of capitalism from the often cryptic, sometimes evil chatter that badly damages the latter half of Pound's Cantos" (Money 7). Marsh contends that through the "pragmatism of Dewey, Williams was able to see a way out of the otherwise unavoidably reactionary anti-industrialism that eventually crippled Pound's critique" (7-8). Pragmatism "taught Williams that we cannot go back to the past. We cannot deny history," and it "allowed Williams to maintain a constructive position as a poet and a social critic" (8).

John Beck, in Writing the Radical Center: William Carlos Williams, John Dewey, and American Cultural Politics (2001), claims that the poet's "conception of art is embedded in . . . the language of liberal democracy" and that the "questions Williams asks concerning art and the artist are, then, closely related to the conditions of American democracy, to the 'economic, the sociological' forces that shape this democracy, and therefore impinge upon the consciousness of its citizens" (2). Beck relates Williams, as a matter of "ideological confluence" and shared "social progressivism," to the educator and philosopher John Dewey, who "sought to answer the kind of questions Williams is so keen to consider" (2-3). Beck identifies Dewey and Williams with "progressive liberalism" of the 1920s and 1930s that "faced . . . with the impossible choice between fascism and communism, . . . made

much of their middle ground, of the possibility of change without bloodshed, of cooperation over conflict, and of communication over censorship” (4). Williams and Dewey, Beck claims, “speak the language of American democracy with a lack of equivocation not shared by many of their contemporaries (Williams’ long-running argument with his friend Ezra Pound comes to mind, not to mention his antipathy toward T.S. Eliot’s views)” (4). Williams and Dewey shared a desire to “recharge the dissipated power” of the “guiding principles” of American democracy (Beck 4). They are, “like other liberal intellectuals of their time,” contends Beck, “primarily concerned, not with internecine squabbles of professional elites and political ideologues, but with America in its entirety, and with the relation between the usefulness of knowledge and its application in the renovation or resuscitation of the polis” (6). Williams, then, redefines “artistic work as a form of social democratic praxis” and his critique “depends on individual agency in an age when such agency is thwarted at every turn” (Beck 136, 155).

Brian Bremen focuses his seminal study, William Carlos Williams and the Diagnostics of Culture (1993), on “Williams as a ‘medicine-man’ whose writing is always a form of criticism-as-diagnosis” (6). Bremen explains that Williams’ “understanding of language” is consistent with that of his friend, historian and critic Kenneth Burke, who held that art should be primarily understood as a “symbolic act of synthesis” of “myriad social and personal factors” (6). Any analysis of Williams’ work, then, requires appreciating how the poet constructs an aesthetic of “dialogue, dialectic” to encompass and

represent these factors (4). Bremen argues that by “asserting his own dialectical mechanism in opposition to customary forms of representation, Williams engages in a cultural critique that acts as both an engaged diagnosis and a step toward cure” (8). “Williams’s own concern with history, culture, and the word becomes the way in which he can extend his diagnostics beyond the individual to embrace both the language and the community, providing both cure and consolation” (7). Bremen explores, in particular, the political implications of prose and poetry, and the ways in which Williams distinguishes them. The larger dialectic movement of Williams’ work, of which the relation of verse to prose is just one facet, Bremen asserts, comprises “the promotion of ‘creative democracy’” and, quoting Cornel West, “the cultural enrichment and moral development of self-begetting individuals and self regulating communities by means of the release of human powers provoked by novel circumstances and new challenges” (8).

This study is broadly sympathetic with and seeks to complement the work of Marsh, Beck and Bremen. Indeed, without the able scholarship and thoughtful readings of Williams’ work contributed by these and other critics, the present study might not be possible, and certainly it would not have assumed its current form. My study explores in greater detail Williams’ work in relation to the progressive historians, liberal literary critics, and his fellow poets, all of whom are acknowledged but do not comprise the focus of the

preceding studies. I place Williams more in relation to Ezra Pound (and to a lesser extent, Eliot), in the manner of Alec Marsh.

My own argument that Williams asserted the democratic ethos in the face of illiberal forces means that I strongly agree with Marsh that Williams remains a “counterforce to anxieties about the status of the individual in a corporate age” (Money 7). I share as well Marsh’s awareness of the dilemma created for Williams and his peers by accepting economic determinism as a key to history. Marsh asks how, if the march of history is a simple matter of determinative economic forces, the individual could avoid being “abolished” (234-35). Marsh’s answer, which is a detailed analysis of Williams’ pragmatism and Jeffersonianism, comprises an extremely valuable contribution to Williams studies. My own answer to the dilemma of economic determinism is that Williams found a way to move past it to a kind of emotional determinism by making economic hierarchies contingent upon emotional resonances, by historicizing adaptation and choice, and by structuring an aesthetic to engage the reader’s active participation in forming an historical narrative. While I take a slightly different approach from Marsh, my argument does rely on two factors that Marsh notes were available to the poet and his contemporaries, namely, an “insistence” on the power of “human adjustment” and an approach that sought “to render human beings capable of mastering the processes of modernization that are changing them, allowing them to make their own way in it” (235).

While I do not place Williams in relation to theorists such as John Dewey or Kenneth Burke, I do explore what critic Bryce Conrad notes in Refiguring America: A Study of William Carlos Williams in the American Grain (1990), namely, the relation of In the American Grain, and other works by Williams, “to contemporary reevaluations of American history by Van Wyck Brooks, . . . Waldo Frank, D.H. Lawrence, . . . Hart Crane,” and others (9). This study explores the commonality of Williams’ views with other progressives in the 1910s through 1930s regarding the purposes and effects of writing history. I am interested, in particular, in the affective emphasis of Williams’ economic critique. I am interested as well in how his aesthetic structures the reader’s response in the specific context of the historical dialectic of “contact” (also called “touch,” “marriage”) and fear (or “withdrawal”). In these particular aspects, Williams’ history writing reflects how he moved beyond the economic determinism that he shared with his progressive peers.

In the chapters that follow I will explore in specific terms how Williams, in the context of his intellectual milieu, wrote history to re-establish the primacy of the individual and of the democratic mass and democratic spirit in an illiberal, often politically regressive, age. Chapter Two will address Williams’ existential historicism in the context of contemporary progressive notions regarding the very act of writing history. Williams shared his contemporaries’ belief in the need for a usable past, though he defined it in ways that were more nuanced, and crafted it into the very structure of his

work by what I will call in chapter four his participatory aesthetics. I will consider as well how Williams' activity in the Social Credit movement fit with his peers' view of history writing as a means of recovery, resistance, and release – as an act in defense of political democracy that had been subverted by a rival economic structure.

In Chapter Three I focus on In the American Grain, specifically, to explore what I call Williams' affective economics. I am interested in how the poet contextualized the war by corporate capital on the democratic impulse in the broader contest of primary versus secondary culture and in how he made the economic impulse rely on the human, emotive drama of fear in the face of the unknown. In this way, William moved beyond or beneath economics and made the corporate engine dependent on human factors, thus bringing it within our control. I explore as well how Williams figured our encounter with the New World along putatively economic lines, but transformed these into emotional stances towards New World experience. Thus, the representative historical figures who people In the American Grain enacted a binary of giving versus grabbing, sharing versus withholding. This has at least one effect, that of historicizing a stance of responsiveness and adaptation, which formed the core of Williams' version of the "usable past."

Chapter Four explores the participatory aesthetics of In the American Grain that complement the affective economics. The poet returned individual initiative and control to the reader by crafting a democratic, participatory and kinetic aesthetic. The reader writes the history he reads by the choices he

must make based on Williams' manipulation of primary source material. The poet constantly puts before the reader the essential historical binary, the conflict between primary and secondary, democratic and capitalist, contact and withdrawal. This compels the reader to decide for himself what is at stake and to situate himself in this conflict. Williams is the intermediate authority – he would guide us to corroborate his vision – but his aesthetic was consciously crafted to be open enough to enable the reader to choose for himself or herself. I explore, in particular, three stylistic elements of In the American Grain, namely, the aesthetic construction of the work itself, the use of a terminology of valuation to effect an economic and affective redistribution, and the introduction of a series of revelatory identifications between the poet, the reader, and representative historical figures.

Chapter Five focuses on Paterson. I am interested here in how Paterson further elaborated and fundamentally transformed the affective economics of In the American Grain. Fear of the primary was now complemented by fear of the secondary. Moreover, fear gets played out in Paterson in more deeply personal ways for the poet through his dissonant encounters with a series of contemporary female figures who represent the primary. The romantic identifications of In the American Grain were replaced by more complex, often conflictual, encounters with these representative figures, more particularly Cress, "She," Beautiful Thing and Madame Curie. All of the figures enact the poet's trope of discovery in dissonance as

Williams used writing to effect a release across economic and non-economic lines.

* * * * *

I want to note at the outset that my critical approach, generally, as well as my discussion of participatory aesthetics, in particular, throughout this study, corresponds to the theoretical Reader-Response framework of Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish. Iser's contention that the "reader and author participate in a game of the imagination" ("Reading Process" 51) recalls Williams' assertion in "Spring and All" that "In the imagination, we are henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader" (89). "We are one," Williams declared, "Whenever I say, 'I' I mean also, 'you.' And so, together, as one, we shall begin" (89). I am not claiming that Williams articulates the fundamental bases of reader-response criticism twenty or forty years prior to Iser's, Fish's and others' theorizing on the affective experience of the reading process. Indeed, at some points, Williams even posits reading as passive, and thereby dangerous. "If we read alone," he attested, "we are somehow convinced that we are not quite alive, that we are less than" our predecessors (Embodiment 107). "To read, while we are imbibing the wisdom of the ages, we are at the same time imbibing the death and imbecility, the enslaving rudeness of the ages" (Embodiment 107).

Yet, Williams does posit a different kind of engagement by the reader such that he would certainly share Iser's view that the literary text must "be

conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative" ("Reading Process" 51). Williams recognized in each man who writes the attempt to "strike straight to the core of his inner self, by words" (Embodiment 105). Williams' similar declaration that "WE are at the center of the writing, each man for himself" can apply equally to the writer or the reader in the unique participatory aesthetic that he crafted (107, emphasis in original). In animating readers as citizens, Williams' aesthetic recalls Iser's contention that as the "reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, and relates the different views and patterns to one another, he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion" ("Interaction" 106). Stanley Fish likewise argues that reading is a "[k]inetic art" – "it forces you to be aware of 'it' as a changing object" – and

also to be aware of yourself as correspondingly changing. Kinetic art does not lend itself to a static interpretation because it refuses to stay still and doesn't let you stay still either. In its operation it makes inescapable the actualizing role of the observer, [and recognizes] 'the movingness,' of the meaning experience and . . . the active and activating consciousness of the reader. (401)

These are not simply abstract or theoretical propositions about how a text processes a reader and how a reader processes a text. They are, rather, apt characterizations of what Williams requires of his readers and what he positions them to attain.

The "structured blanks" that fall between seemingly unrelated or even contradictory passages or textual segments, particularly in a work as complex and fragmented as Paterson, for instance, "spur the reader into

coordinating these perspectives and patterns – in other words, they induce the reader to perform basic operations *within* the text" (Iser, "Interaction" 111-12). Iser argues, and I believe that Williams' work offers a pure example of how in modernist texts, the reader is called to fill "gaps" and bridge "blockages" in the process of processing the text ("Reading Process" 55). Modernist texts are "often so fragmentary that one's attention is almost exclusively occupied with the search for connections between the fragments; the object of this is not to complicate the 'spectrum' of connections, so much as to make us aware of the nature of our own capacity for providing links" (55). This is the key to Williams' aesthetic program. He defended the prerogative and liberty of the individual by how he crafted what Fish calls an "affective stylistics" to make the reader actively compose the narrative. Williams wanted us to fulfill our capacity to make these "links," and his democratic programs relied on it.

Iser explains this aspect of the phenomenon of reading as an act of recreation, recalling William's own description of the artistic process. "In a process of trial and error," Iser contends, quoting John Dewey's Art as

Experience:

we organize and re-organize the various data offered us by the text. These are the given factors, the fixed points on which we base our 'interpretation,' trying to fit them together in the way we think the author meant them to be fitted. 'For to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent. They are not the same in any literal sense. But with the perceiver, as with the artist, there must be an ordering of the elements of the whole that is in form, although not in details, the same as the process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced. Without an act of

recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art.' (qtd. in "Reading Process" 62, emphasis in original)

Williams' own notion of the creative process as recreative, creating something co-extensive with life, echoes Iser's notion of reading as a recreative process. In language that can characterize writing or reading, Williams argued in "Spring and All" that the "imagination . . . attacks, stirs, animates, is radio-active in all that can be touched by action" (149). Indeed, Williams invoked John Gaunt's speech in Shakespeare's Richard II to illustrate the equally vital and active roles of the reader and writer. Williams contended that as the play is "written to be understood as a play, *the author and reader* are liberated to pirouette with the words which have sprung from the old facts of history, reunited in present passion" ("Spring" 149, emphasis added). The poet essentially demonstrates the truth of Iser's contention that in literary works the "message is transmitted in two ways, in that the reader 'receives' it by composing it" ("Interaction" 107).

Fish's and Iser's focus on reading as a "process of continual modification" (Iser, "Reading Process" 56), of recurrent "establishing and disrupting consistency," (61) and of an ongoing "interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment" ("Interaction" 111) is particularly fitting for such disjunctive texts as Paterson and In the American Grain. With such radically discontinuous texts, reading is best understood as "an *event*, something that *happens* to, and with the participation of, the reader (Fish 386), and it is necessary to analyze the "developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed

one another in time" (388, emphasis in original). Williams' aesthetic is all about structuring and enabling – necessitating, even– what Fish calls the "reader's actualizing participation" (389) as the reader 's mind works "on the raw material of the text" (Iser, "Reading Process" 54) in the same manner that representative historical figures encounter the "raw new" of life in this hemisphere. This accords with Williams' prescription in The Embodiment of Knowledge for "a useful body of knowledge made to serve the individual who is *primary*" (9, emphasis in original).

In conclusion, Williams' primary purpose was to re-animate what he called in Paterson the "thousand automatons" who "because they/ neither know their sources nor the sills of their/ disappointments walk outside their bodies aimlessly/ for the most part,/ locked and forgot in their desires – unroused" (1: 6). "They walk incommunicado," Williams declared, because the "equation is beyond solution The language is missing them/ they die also/ incommunicado. The language, the language/ fails them/ They do not know the words/ or have not/ the courage to use them" (1: 10-11). Williams hoped in the history he wrote to give democratic man his story, his language – to give him his life back from the mercantile interests that seized it. America may be, as Frank suggested, a "turmoiled giant who cannot speak" (4), but good criticism and imaginative history writing could make her "articulate" through "self-knowledge" (5). What better way to animate America's walking dead and to provoke self-knowledge than by an aesthetic and text that "activates our own faculties" (Iser, "Reading Process" 54).

What Fish says of the reader-response method can equally describe Williams' own aesthetic: "In a peculiar and unsettling (to theorists) way, it is a method which processes its own user, who is also its only instrument. It is self-sharpening and what it sharpens is *you*. In short, it does not organize materials, but transforms minds" (425, emphasis in original). This is critical because we may, in the final analysis, apply to Williams and his contemporaries, as well as to ourselves, what Parrington in Main Currents observes of the "polemics of colonial debate" (1: i). The

subjects with which they dealt are old-fashioned only in manner and dress; at heart they were much the same themes with which we are engaged, and with which our children will be engaged after us. (1: i)

Chapter II: A “Revloution [sic] with Writing as the Fulcrum:” The Progressive Critique, “Economic Democracy,” and the Reversal of Puritan Scarcity

Now our present institutions are not designed to promote the free and joyous development of the individual as a member of society, for ‘all our institutions have their historic basis in Authority,’ and the main purpose of all ancient authority is to hamper the great mass of people and keep them in a safe routine.

- James Harvey Robinson, “The Still Small Voice of the Herd” (313)

The history of thought is one of the most potent means of dissolving the bonds of prejudice and the restraints of routine.

- James Harvey Robinson, The New History (131)

The business of history is to arouse an intelligent discontent, to foster a fruitful radicalism.

- Carl Becker, “Review” (21)

[I]n history, to preserve things of ‘little importance’ may be more valuable – as it is more difficult and more the business of a writer – than to champion a winner.

- William Carlos Williams, In the American Grain (76)

[S]hall we under economic pressure retain the long fought for principles of representative democratic government which we inherit from the past or relinquish them today?

- William Carlos Williams, “Revolutions Revalued” (98)

“In my world, “ William Carlos Williams declared in 1939, “there are no classes but the good guys and the bastards” (Partisan Review 43). Four years earlier, in a review entitled “Pound’s Eleven New Cantos,” Williams referred to the “Damned and the Damnable” (Essays 168). The Cantos, he attested, “should become an Index” of these classes, “the anatomized *Inferno* of our lives today” (168, emphasis in original). The same can be said for Williams’ own cultural critique of the “social distresses which need righting,” which he attributed in a 1936 speech at the Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia, to “a very badly managed, because poorly understood economics” (“Revolutions” 98). In the “Power Age,” Williams alleged, “political democracy” was being “thoroughly subverted by a rival

economic structure which . . . negates much of the democratic intention” (97-99). Thus, he would assert later in his career: “I’m out of sympathy with all our capitalists to this day. Money is the death of America . . . money is a cancer” (Interviews 51-2). Williams’ progressive peers agreed, and it is this theme and their efforts to preserve liberal democracy in an illiberal age that defined Williams’ career in relation to his contemporaries.

This chapter explores how Williams and the progressive historians and critics projected their sense of economic crisis into history and how writing history itself became a radical act. The history they wrote played a seminal role in the continual struggle (at levels personal and cultural) between a progressive, democratic impulse and a vast economic machine. Williams, Beard, Parrington, Van Wyck Brooks, Frank and others subscribed to an economic determinism played out in the contemporary scene and in the historical struggle between the ideals enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the economic interests served by the Constitution. They critiqued the inadequate standard histories that preceded them, as well as the culture’s adherence to outmoded customs and practices. Williams and his progressive peers, in short, sought a history writing based on social activism.

The Social Credit movement, with which Williams was involved in the mid and late 1930s, espoused “economic democracy” through the equitable distribution of financial credit. It was intended to preserve the prerogatives and foster the potential of the individual as the best way to ensure the future

viability of liberal democracy. Williams' own Social Credit activities date at least to 1934 when Gorham Munson (literary critic, editor of New Democracy, and teacher at the New School for Social Research in New York, where Robinson, Beard, and Barnes taught at that time) had Major Douglass' new Social Credit sent to Williams directly from the publisher (Weaver 103). In April of that year, Williams helped to bring Douglas to New York to lecture on Social Credit. Williams joined the General Council of the League for National Dividends in 1936. That same year he traveled to Charlottesville to speak about credit monopoly from a "[c]ultural [v]iewpoint" at the Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia. Here he reminded his audience of the need to preserve individual freedom as an "important agency of government" ("Revolutions" 96, 99). Williams registered at once as a dues-paying member when the American Social Credit Movement was launched by Munson in October 1938. Throughout the early and mid 1930s – three times in 1934, twice in 1935, and once in 1936 – Williams published in New Democracy, the journal of the American Social Credit Movement edited by Gorham Munson. He published periodically – twice in 1932 and once in 1933 – in its London equivalent, New English Weekly. Included in these articles were Williams' review, "Pound's Eleven New Cantos," in 1935, and a 1934 "Commentary on Williams," by Pound.

Williams and Pound elaborated on the cultural critique and economic determinism of the progressive historians and liberal literary critics by their activity in the Social Credit movement. Recognizing Williams' engagement in

Social Credit provides an essential context for understanding his history writing as a form of social activism and reform, and for appreciating his seminal prose works of the 1930s, namely, "The American Background" (1934), "Revolutions Revalued" (1936), and "Against the Weather" (1939), and the evolution of his poetics, especially in Paterson. Beyond the economic critique that infused Williams' history writing project, lay his construction of a "usable past" through the affective economics and participatory aesthetics that I discuss in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, respectively. Before we can reach these latter aspects of Williams' "poem including history," however, we must more fully understand how the economic critique and the idea of writing as a form of social action were both underlying premises in Williams' career-long exploration of a "usable past."

* * * * *

Writing history, Williams responded to the Partisan Review's 1939 questionnaire to "representative" American writers, involved identifying a "usable past," which he defined as a "past as alive in its day as every moment is today alive in me." "The only question of any relevance," the poet contended,

is, Was that work alive to its own day? If so then it is alive every day. If it was a palpable denial of its own day then – if I can discover it as such – out with it. I want to look in a work and see in it a day like my own, of altered shapes, colors, but otherwise the same. (Partisan Review 41-42)

Seeing this, Williams claimed, was something "I can use to reinforce my senses and my intelligence to go on discovering in my own day such things as those old boys had the courage and intelligence to discover in theirs"

(42). History and history writing, then, were ensconced in the present, which critic James Longenbach describes as “existential historicism” in The Modernist Poetics of History. We will see in Chapter Three that a usable past would embody a stance of adaptation and responsiveness to one’s own moment. Williams’ view of history did not enshrine a golden past but required “*great powers of adaptability*” to “*the new conditions*” of life around us (“Background” 134, emphasis in original). It was the temporal analogue of Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis of “perennial rebirth” at each spatial iteration of the frontier. Turner imagined democracy and democratic institutions being reinvented at each new edge of civilization as the frontier moved westward. So, too, Williams imagined engaged citizen-readers always defining anew their relation to their past, and through it, their own contemporary moment.

Attaining a usable past, however, was no simple matter as propertied interests struggled to maintain the status quo and control the historical narrative. In fact, “History,” an early poem published by Williams in Al Que Quiere (1917), illustrated that the past was contested ground. The drama of the poem resides in how it stages a competition between the voice of the dead priest and the living poet. The three interior stanzas comprise tales from the crypt -- “Uresh-Nai, priest to the goddess Mut,/ Mother of All” uses his wealth and power to speak through a co-opted art (Collected Poems 1: 81). The sarcophagus is his message. “The chisel is in your hand, the block/ is before you,” he commands the artisan (1: 82). “[C]ut as I shall

dictate:/ This is the coffin of Uresh-Nai,/ priest to the Sky Goddess,-- built/ to endure forever!" (1: 82). "I arrogant against death!," he adds, "I/ Who have endured! I worn against/ the years!" (1: 84).

But the poet's commands compete with the priest's. "Run your finger against this edge!," the poet urges, "—here went the chisel! — and think/ of an arrogance endured six thousand years/ without a flaw!" (1: 81-2). The poet circumscribes the priest's arrogance, first calling it "love" — an "oil to embalm the body," a "packet of spices, a strong-/ smelling liquid to be squirted into/ the thigh" (1: 82). Ultimately, though, despite his best efforts, the priest ends up no better than "Gnats on dung!" (1: 82). The poet further minimizes the priest's status — "Your death? — water/ spilled upon the ground" — and rebukes him: "water will mount again into rose-leaves --/ but you? — would hold life still,/ even as a memory, when it is over" (1: 82-3).

The poet, in fact, substitutes his own carved message for the one inscribed on the sarcophagus — and adopting a prophetic voice he speaks to the priest and reader simultaneously: "Climb about this sarcophagus, read/ what is writ for you in these figures/ hard as granite that has held them/ with so soft a hand the while/ your own flesh has been fifty times/ through the guts of oxen, -- read!/ 'I who am the one flesh say to you,/ The rose-tree will have its donor/ even though he give stingily" (1: 83). The speaker asserts the primacy of the present, the living, and pointedly integrates the priest into the life cycle. The granite, which represented the priest's arrogant endeavor to "endure" and to outlast death, is now figured as "so soft," almost caressing

and human, and the priest's own flesh is, ironically, recycled through oxen guts. In the key line, "I am the one flesh," the priest's flesh appears to be identified with a god-like being, and is, paradoxically, brought closer to his creator, only by virtue of the very "flesh" the priest would deny.

"History" is a struggle between the common man, those who visit the museum, and the powerful and wealthy, represented by the priest. He would direct the artisan and, across the millennia, the masses that flock through the museum turnstiles. In this scheme, history, far from Williams' notion of a usable past, is a static, imposed entity. The priest attempts to use or control the present, not the other way around. "Each age," Williams asserted in The Embodiment of Knowledge, "wishes to enslave the others" (107). The poet accuses the priest of trying to "hold life still,/ even as a memory, when it is over" (Collected Poems 1: 83).

The fourth section of "History" comprises the priest's desperate attempt to keep the public reading his sarcophagus – "'Lay your hands/ upon the granite as a lover lays his/ hand upon the thigh and upon the/ round breasts of her who is beside/ him'" (1: 83). Desperation even creeps in as the priest declares: "'Here I am with head high and a/ burning heart eagerly awaiting/ your caresses, whoever it may be,/ for granite is not harder than/ my love is open'" (1: 84). But Williams further circumscribes the priest's control, ultimately, by the very aesthetic structure of the poem, which asserts the primacy of the present and the living. Williams curbs the high priest's aspirations by sandwiching his pronouncements between a first and fifth

stanza that depict museum-goers entering, and especially exiting, the museum. "Nobody comes here today," he concludes (1: 81) – and on exiting the speaker observes: "Look! This/ northern scenery is not the Nile" (1: 84). History and cultural authorities of the past are circumscribed by the present, which alone must be served in light of man's contemporary needs and realities.

"History" neatly captured in poetic form the very arguments that Robinson, Beard, Brooks, Frank, and others made about the purpose of writing history. Studying history should disabuse us of our "persistent assumption" that "'the wisdom of the Fathers,' 'the tried wisdom of the ages,' 'the findings of mankind,' and other postulated and rationalized entities are wholly adequate to the needs of the present day" (Barnes 587-88). "The history of thought, Robinson wrote, "is one of the most potent means of dissolving the bonds of prejudice and the restraints of routine" (New History 131). History writing and historical knowledge became for the progressives (poets, historians and critics alike) "rationale[s] for social action" and "instrument[s] for controlling the future" (Hofstadter 185).

Williams was sympathetic to Carl Becker's claim that the "business of history is to arouse an intelligent discontent, to foster a fruitful radicalism" (Becker, "New History" 21). Williams' history writing contained an unmistakable radical intent. "[A]ll men are contemporaries," he declared, in his 1935 review of Pound's Cantos, "in whatever time they live or have lived, whose minds . . . have lifted them above the sordidness of a grabbing world"

(Essays 167). This radical vision both collapsed historical time to make figures like Aaron Burr “contemporaries,” and presented a damning cultural and economic critique. Economic struggle was a given, an essential part of the continuity of history. The “situation is historic,” Williams declared in “Revolutions Revalued.” The usurpation of democratic institutions, and cultural and material resources, by a moneyed elite made us contemporaries with “Presidents Jackson and Van Buren [who] fought the first great battles in the campaign” (“Revolutions” 99). The artist, then, was a “revolutionist” who “attacks, constantly toward a full possession of life by himself as a man” and “is to be understood not as occupying some outlying section of the field of action but the whole field” (“Against” 197-99). Writing was “an attack” (Paterson 3: 113). The artist was in “rebellion against the world” – especially as “certain things, disastrous things, are happening in the world because of man’s stupidity, definite stupidity” (Interviews 12-13). “Nothing less is intended,” Williams told us, “than a revloution [sic] in thought with writing as the fulcrum” (Embodiment 98). The poet as “social regenerator” engaged in “a continual, age long criticism of past times to suit the necessities, the discoveries, the total knowledge, the greater release of the human spirit that each age seeks to add to the last” (“Revolutions” 109).

History writing and the poem, then, were each a “social instrument” (Letters 286). Restoring our past to us, the poem was “an attempt, an experiment, a failing experiment, toward assertion with broken means . . . of a new and total culture” (286). At the simplest level, history writing was part

resistance to and recovery from the hegemony of corporate capital, and other anti-liberal forces of the time. The task of In the American Grain, "The American Background," and Paterson was to recover the history that had been lost under the chaos of borrowed titles. The history of Jackson and Van Buren represented "the sort of history we lack and must have" ("Revolutions" 99). Because of these presidents' defense of the democratic ethos and the mass against property interests in the dispute over the National Bank, "[e]verything possible was done, as pointed out in recent years by Ezra Pound, to keep Van Buren's telltale autobiography from the eyes of the people" (99-100).

* * * * *

Williams did more than simply argue for the restoration of missing passages of our past that spoke to individual liberty and the historical struggle to preserve it. He also incorporated the progressive's economic critique and economic determinism to reveal illiberal forces at work in history that he believed to be at work in his own time. Thus, Williams and his peers essentially historicized the fight between the democratic impulse and corporate capital by means of a compelling economic determinism. The poet's work, Williams declared, was necessarily economics-related, historical, and muckraking, exposing the economic corruption of government, church, and the academy. "Usury," he asserted

– the work of double-crossing intellectual bastards in and out of government and the church – rules the world and hides the simple facts from those it torments for a profit. The poet sees, links together

and discloses in the symmetry of his work this bastardy of all ages.
(Essays 167)

Williams confirmed, not surprisingly, that he “was very conscious of” Pound’s “usura theme,” and acknowledged “I identified myself with him as far as I was able to, to assist him” (Interviews 52). “I was very sympathetic with Pound, in this way,” Williams added, “I always had a sympathetic feeling toward socialism, and when Pound began to talk about it, he interested me in Major Douglas’” work (Interviews 51). “Never worked with [Pound] at all in anything!,” Williams joked, “Never had any task that I know of in common (except to reform the American nation and the world, incidentally— of course that’s a small matter)” (Interviews 10).

Williams and Pound, then, shared a belief that financial manipulation and constriction by credit monopoly was responsible for the misery of millions. They believed that the potential of the individual and of the masses would be released only by the equitable distribution of credit, as advocated by Major Douglas. Williams, like Pound, looked beyond simply predatory credit practices to consider more broadly the effect of money – not only in terms of social inequities but in terms of how economic necessity narrowed men’s’ vision, even making them into, what he called in Paterson, “automatons.” Williams knew that robots do not make good citizens, especially not in a liberal democracy.

What Williams and Pound shared, though, should not blind us to clearly recognizing where their paths very sharply diverged. Williams would identify Pound as “a good thinker in economics, but erratic” (Interviews 16).

He reminded Pound as early as 1935 that “If you can’t tell the difference between yourself and a trained economist, if you don’t know your function as a poet, incidentally dealing with a messy situation re. money, then go sell your papers on some other corner” (Witemyer 171). “What I want out of you is not economics but the poem,” Williams charged nearly twenty years later (qtd. in Mariani, New World 713). Williams was alarmed by Pound’s flirtation with figures like Silvio Gessell, Hugo Frack and Gottfried Feder, “reformers whose political applications were tainted by fascism” (Weaver 109-10). Williams, in fact, accused Pound in 1940 of “slipping badly both in your mentality and the force of your attacks” (Letters 203). “It comes,” Williams alleged

from babying yourself and hiding behind a philosophy you know damned well is contrary to everything you stand for, really. I’ve defended you till I’m sick of it. Why, for instance, try to tell me that your whole initiative hasn’t been anti-semitic of recent years? You know damned well it has been so. Tell somebody else such things but don’t try it on me if you value the least vestige of what we used to treasure between us. (Letters 203)

Williams’ own participation in the American Social Credit Movement, which I discuss at the end of this chapter as an elaboration of the concerns he shared with progressive historians and critics, was consistent with the Movement’s 1938 Manifesto, which attested to its belief in the “liberty and equality of opportunity of the individual irrespective of race, creed or color” (qtd. in Weaver 105). “We abominate anti-Semitism,” the Manifesto asserted, and declared that the “Money Question and the so-called Jewish Question have NOTHING to do with each other and we will let no one confuse

this fact” (qtd. in Weaver 105-06, emphasis in original). Williams admitted to Pound that “I have no use for Jews as Jews, their religion is so much shit” (Letters 203). But so, too, was “T.S. Eliot’s religion or the Catholic Church” – Judaism, the Church were simply “identical – in everything but the stuff they dilute the arsenic with” (203). Both, Williams claimed, are “made for the same purpose, to deceive” (203).

Williams viewed “wealth, by the influence it wields,” as the “chief cause of cultural stagnation” and “primary cultural decay” (“Background” 146-47). This view, which resonated not just with Pound but with his progressive peers, reflected a belief, based on Marxist theory, in the determinative effect of economics on social forms and political relations. It did not mean, though, that Williams or his progressive contemporaries were committed to a Marxist teleology. In fact, Williams embraced Social credit precisely because it stood

on the firm, if endangered, ground between . . . fascism – in this country only definable as Credit Monopoly, in the hands of a select group, seeking control of government . . . on one side and dictatorship by labor . . . on the other, from both of which the abolition of personal liberty must be immediately expected once they succeed in their purposes. (“Revolutions” 115)

The progressive historians often, even reflexively, argued, as E.R.A. Seligman did in his 1902 volume The Economic Interpretation of History, that “the economic life is . . . the fundamental condition of all life” (3). Charles Beard cited Seligman’s thesis approvingly, believing it to be “as nearly axiomatic as any proposition in social science can be” (Hofstadter 198).

“[T]hat the mainspring of the struggle is the economic,” Parrington asserted in "Economics and Criticism," "is plain as the way to parish church" (100).

Parrington and other progressives attested to a hatred of “big business because of its brutal hoggishness” (qtd. in Hofstadter 370) and counted the economic interpretation of history as the “chief luminary” in their “intellectual sky” (qtd. in Hofstadter 374). Underlying even literature, “the fair flower of culture,” argued Parrington, are “deeper strata of philosophy, theology, law, statecraft – of ideology and institutionalism – resting finally upon the subsoil of economics” ("Economics" 98). “We may begin as critics,” Parrington declared,

but we end up as historians He has only to apply the familiar principles of the economic interpretation of history to his literary documents, in order to measure in what degree they reflect the current ideology. He cuts under the feet of the humanist to the property basis of ideas and institutions. In every society, he discovers, property is sovereign. (98, 100)

Parrington argued that the Populists were “fighting the battle of democracy against an insolent plutocracy, defending the traditional American principles against a feudal industrialism” (Hofstadter 370), just as Frederick Jackson Turner traced the “contest between the capitalist and the democratic pioneer from the earliest colonial days” ("Social Forces" 164). Hofstadter nicely encapsulates the intellectual stance of the progressive historians, and, I argue, of Williams and the liberal literary critics. Wholly post-Civil War and post-industrial,” Hofstadter asserts,

the Progressive generation had grown up with American industry, had witnessed the disappearance of the frontier line, the submergence of the farmer, the agrarian revolt, the recruitment of a vast labor force,

the great tides of the new immigration, the fierce labor struggles of the 1890's. Their awareness of the whole complex of industrial America was keener, and their sense of the urgency of its problems had been quickened by the depression of the 1890s. They were disposed to think more directly about the economic issues of society, and to look again at the past to see if economic forces had not been somewhat neglected. They were disposed also to think more critically about the ruling forces, about the powerful plutocracy that had been cast up by the national growth of the past thirty years. (41-42)

Williams and his contemporaries read into the past those economic forces determining the fate of their own time, and this was best illustrated by their assertion of a fundamental disjunction between the ideals of the American Revolution, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, and the property interests secured by the Constitution. Believing that class and property divisions form the basis of modern government, and that politics and constitutional law inevitably reflect these contending interests, Beard traced each founder's economic holdings (including their land interests, public securities, and loans). The "contest over the Constitution," Beard contended in Economic Origins of the Jeffersonian Democracy, "was not primarily a war over abstract political ideals, such as state's rights and centralization, but over concrete economic issues, and the political division which accompanied it was substantially along the lines the interests affected" (qtd. in Skotheim 92). The Constitution should be understood as "essentially an economic document based upon the concept that the fundamental private rights of property are anterior to government and morally beyond the reach of popular majorities" (Beard, Economic Interpretation 324-25). Beard praised James Madison's Federalist #10 as "a masterly statement of the theory of economic

determinism in politics” (15-16). He critiqued the undemocratic method by which the framers convened the Constitutional Convention, defined its scope and authority to act, and secured its adoption. As Beard explains, the Constitution was not

created by the ‘whole people,’ which was a fiction of the jurists; nor by the states, which was a fiction of Southern nullifiers; but was ‘the work of a consolidated group whose interests knew no state boundaries and were truly national in their scope.’ (qtd. in Hofstadter 210)

Beard concluded that members of the Constitutional Convention could not be said to be “disinterested” but rather “knew through their personal experiences in economic affairs the precise results which the new government that they were setting up was designed to attain. . . . [A]s practical men they were able to build the new government upon the only foundations which could be stable: fundamental economic interests” (Economic Interpretation 151). The Constitution, Beard declared, “was an economic document drawn with superb skill by men whose property interests were immediately at stake; and as such it appealed directly and unerringly to identical interests in the country at large” (188).

Beard was not alone of course. President Woodrow Wilson, an academic before he entered politics, likewise asserted in Division and Reunion (1893) that the “federal government was not by intention a democratic government. In plan and structure it had meant to check the sweep and power of popular majorities” (qtd. in Hofstadter 194). “The government had, in fact, been originated and organized upon the initiative and primarily in the interest of the mercantile and wealthy classes,” claimed

Wilson (qtd. in Hofstadter 194). "It had been urged to adoption by a minority," he stated, "under the concerted and aggressive leadership of able men representing a ruling class . . . a strong and intelligent class possessed of unity and informed by a conscious solidarity of material interest" (qtd. in Hofstadter 194).

Historian Henry Jones Ford observed in The Rise and Growth of American Politics (1898) that the "'constitutional history of the United States begins with the establishment of the government of the masses by the classes" (qtd. in Hofstadter 195). Historian A.F. Bentley in The Process of Government (1935) asked: "'[H]ow can one be satisfied with a theory that comes down hard on the federal Constitution as primarily a great national ideal, in the very face of the struggles and quarrels of the constitutional convention for the maintenance of pressing social interests?'" (qtd. in Hofstadter 187). Finally, populist historian J. Allen Smith's The Spirit of American Government (1907) prefigured Beard's dualistic interpretation, describing a "long-running quarrel between aristocracy and democracy" embodied in the Constitution and Declaration, respectively (Hofstadter 192).

Williams employed the same economic determinism, though he adopted his own idiosyncratic labels, in "The American Background," In the American Grain, "Revolutions Revalued," and other works. Local and individual initiative, which Williams designated in "The American Background" as "primary" culture, battled constantly with an imported, monied, "secondary" culture. "Wider and wider the two bands of effort drew

apart," Williams asserted ("Background" 145). Echoing the dualism of Parrington's "liberal rather than conservative, Jeffersonian rather than Federalistic" (Main Currents 1: i) approach, Williams noted that the "division which must inevitably have taken place [was] signaled by the two more or less definite parties in American politics" ("Background" 145). The binary initially explored throughout In the American Grain was even more explicitly related to economic forces in "The American Background." "The secondary split-off from what, but for fear, had been a single impetus, finally focused itself as personal wealth in America" ("Background" 146). The result was "cultural stagnation" and a "culture in effigy" (147).

Williams repeated in his own terms the standard progressive economic gloss on the Revolutionary and Constitutional periods offered by Beard in The Economic Interpretation of the U.S. Constitution (1912). "After the Revolution," Williams declared, there "would be an accelerated dropping back to style and the unrelated importations" ("Background" 145). "The war over, the true situation, raised into relief by patriotic fervor, would flatten out as before into the persistent struggle between the raw new and the graciousness of an imposed cultural design. England eliminated, those very ones who opposed her would fast take the leading place in the scheme from which she had been driven" (138). In short, "[f]inding itself, as a democracy, unable to *take up* the moral and economic implications of its new conditions, which Jefferson lived and proposed, America slumped *back to* fashion on the one, favored, side" (139, emphasis in original). In this critical post-war

period, “wealth took the scene, representative of a sort of squatter spirit, irresponsible because unrelated to the territory it overran” (149).

Williams explored this period in depth, fixing on Burr, particularly, as the exemplar of liberty, “a subversive force where liberty was waning” (Grain 194). Sensitive to a “deeper and a stronger force passing through the moment,” Burr recognized the “defeat of England was the obvious false end” (193). He saw that the real contest was whether America would “remember what in its hour of excitement it had promised, its declarations, its pronouncements, its Patrick Henry speeches. Were these just expedients of war to spur to battle or was it serious?” (193) Williams likened the early Constitutional period, which he characterized as “a living thing, something moving, undecided, swaying,” to his own present condition (192). “Which way will it go?,” he asked of the past, was it “something on the brink of the Unknown, as we are today” (193).

Critically, the poet located in this historical period the subversion of individual liberty and the democratic spirit that he saw in his own time. The “sense of the individual, the basis on which the war was fought,” Williams claimed, “instantly the war was over began to be debauched. Randolph sensed it. Burr sensed it” (Grain 194). Hamilton and the propertied interests would “harness the whole, young, aspiring genius to a treadmill 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” (195, emphasis in original). Burr’s

“spark was not preserved” (197). “Now he saw a somber 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” (197). Williams saw Burr’s drama as an inseminating moment – for “as it is a winter we are now in, and the more ordered the more wintry – dulled values, stereotyped effects of bygone adventures – so it began to be after the Revolution” (196).

According to the progressive schema, Williams identified Andrew Jackson, because of his “basic culture” as the “first to smell out the growing fault and attack the evidence of a wrong tack having been taken, the beginning raid on public moneys by private groups” (“Background” 141). Over time the “culture of immediacy, the active strain, which has left every relic of value which survives today,” and which resided in the “correctly aimed but crude and narrow beginnings” of small communities dried up and died (“Background” 148).

As some of the passages from Williams and his peers suggest, oversimplification was a powerful rhetorical device, conferring clarity and commanding the reader’s attention despite a miasma of historical events and plethora of primary records. Simple binary rhetoric significantly affects the shape and reception of the text. If the reader develops what Wolfgang Iser calls a “configurative meaning” by observing the direction in which different parts of the text “are leading us” and by projecting “onto them the consistency which we, as readers, require” (“Reading Process” 58-59),

simple binary oppositions, by posing more obvious disjunctions and dilemmas, make clear to the reader the necessity of his own active participation. It is part of how Williams activates the reader's imagination, throws the reader into the tussle, and makes him choose between conflicting viewpoints. At the same time, over-simplified dramatic statements about economics and wealth allowed the author to present his message to the reader clearly and directly, and helped, paradoxically, to counteract the text's own disjunctiveness. It may, though, reflect an ambivalence on the poet's part around wanting to animate readers as citizens by stimulating a recreative process that he hopes will lead them to replicate afresh his own imaginative acts, but wanting, as well, a hedge against not being able to control where the reader will end up.

Further, it is important to note that over simplification extended beyond rhetoric to substance. It reflected the habit of thought, the binary thinking of the era, and was a trait that Williams shared at some level with the progressive historians and liberal literary critics. This is so even if Williams was drawn to Social Credit for the very reason that it avoided the extremes of fascism and communism.

Despite his progressive critique, however, Williams was not purely reductionistic, and he was able, at times, to look beyond a simple binary. He recognized that the monied, imported culture was necessary and even beneficial to a point – and lamented mostly that it came to “be taken to be a

virtue itself, a makeshift, really, in constant opposition to the work of those good minds which had the hardihood to do without it" ("Background" 144).

I do not believe that Williams objected so much to property as a basis for civil society. He would have accepted the premise, I believe, that those who own also take care of what they own. But the problem that Williams saw was that those in an ownership position, if unchecked, were prone, eventually, to use the community's resources for their own purposes, and, finally, for their own gain. The property argument – especially when it is rhetorically cast as “usury” – was meant to highlight this very fact, to throw it into dramatic relief.

* * * * *

Envisioning history writing as a form of recovery and social action, Williams and his peers necessarily confronted the inadequacies of standard histories to do what they felt history must do. For Williams writing history was fundamentally informed by his belief that “[h]istory must stay open” (Grain 189). If the poem was to be a social instrument, and if, as Beard asserted in The Rise of American Civilization (1927), the “‘history of civilization, if intelligently conceived, may be an instrument of civilization’” (qtd. in Hofstadter 314), then history could not be frozen like Uresh-Nai's sarcophagus.

The history that the progressive historians and literary critics wrote revealed how our culture had been determined by economic forces and capital interests, how it had been closed to the democratic and the primary.

Williams, then, sought to introduce a space for individual prerogative and liberty, and for contact with the primary, that Burr, Boone and others represented. Williams was intent on breaking the grip or impasse of economics at two levels. First, he presented a kind of hidden or alternative history, consisting of obscured, dispossessed figures that represented the democratic and the primary. This is what Williams meant when he said “that, in history, to preserve things of ‘little importance’ may be more valuable – as it is more difficult and more the business of a writer – than to champion a winner” (Grain 76). Moreover, in the process of constructing a “usable past” out of these dispossessed voluptuaries, Williams articulated what I call an “affective economics” making the secondary and economic dependent on a range of human emotions and affective stances.

Second, what I call Williams’ “participatory aesthetic” opened a space and offered a means of resistance and recovery by crafting a singular historical aesthetic of co-creation. The reader makes his own meaning, writes his own history, as he negotiates primary records, including journals of historical figures experiencing a “torsion in the spirits” induced by the new continent “tearing them between the old and the new” (“Background” 134). This participatory aesthetic makes men fashion, and each age define, its own usable past. This converts readers into citizens, engaging them in civic life, and is critical to a healthy liberal democracy. Both the affective economics and the participatory aesthetics had the effect of making history writing (and,

thereby, history) a living, open entity. I will describe both of these aspects of Williams' history writing in greater detail in Chapters Three and Four.

At this point, we need to consider that Williams' and his progressive peers' alarm about standard histories reflected their sense that history was a resource and that like any resource it could be seized and used against us by propertied and conservative interests. History's potency – what should make us “fear it” – according to Williams, was that it “lives in us practically day by day” (Grain 189). “[I]f it is, as it may be,” Williams contended, “a tyranny over the souls of the dead – and so the imaginations of the living – where lies our greatest well of inspiration, our greatest hope of freedom . . . we should guard it doubly from the interlopers” (189). “I speak of fiercely contested things,” the writer-speaker would tell his interlocutor in “The Virtue of History” in In the American Grain, referring to the struggle between capital interests and democracy that “tortured the souls of the founders” and the struggle to write our own history (194).

History (inside and out, the content and the writing of it) was contested ground, and Williams always relished a good fight. Daniel Boone's biographer was an “asinine chronicler” whose “silly phrases and total disregard for what must have been the rude words of the old hunter serve only, for the most part, to make it a keen disappointment to the interested reader” (Grain 133, 135). An historian's conventional account of Samuel de Champlain and the founding of Quebec prompted Williams' rebuke: “Good Lord, these historians! By that I understand the exact opposite of what is

written" (69). Histories of Thomas Morton exhibited a "nearly universal lack of scale" and "parochialism" (75). They were inadequate "to describe a man living under the circumstances that surrounded Morton" and rely too heavily on "pretty scholar humor [that] can be very annoying" (75). More critically, what Williams said of the history of Morton applied for him across the board - conventional historiography "dulls rather than heightens" Morton's work "as a piece from American History [that] has its savor" (80).

Williams was deeply disappointed, as were his progressive colleagues, by the history writing of the prior generation. History that should reveal the co-optation of a primary culture by wealth and should protect us from interlopers was, instead, bound "up with prejudice" and warped "to suit our fears" (Grain 189). Propertied interests, "extend[ing] their ill will backward, jealous even of a freedom in the past," had maligned Burr and other promising figures (189). "We are deceived by history," claimed Williams (197). This meant that we were likely to miss what was most important. "America," argued Williams, "had a great spirit given to freedom but it was a mean, narrow, provincial place; it was NOT the great liberty-loving country, not at all. Its choice spirits died" (197, emphasis in original). The significance was that a "country is not free, is not what it pretends to be, unless it leave a vantage open (in tradition) for that which Burr possessed in such remarkable degree" (197). "This is my theme," contended Williams (197).

Williams saw “the history we are taught” as maligning or misrepresenting significant portions of our past (Embodiment 64). The result was that history was “particularly blank” and the history we were not taught was “terrifying when one looks back at the years that have been spent solely to keep us ignorant” (64). Consequently, “our most impressionable years [pass] without coming into contact . . . with what has happened and is happening around us” (64). We have become like “fools” who do not believe that we “have sprung from anything: bone, thought and action” (Grain 113). We “will not see that what [we] are is growing on these roots” (113). We have

lost the sense, being made up as we are, that what we are has its origin in what *the nation* in the past has been; that there is a source in America for everything we think or do. (109, emphasis in original)

Williams argued that we must return to our past, to our origins, recognizing that “what has been morally, aesthetically worth while in America has rested upon peculiar and discoverable ground” (109). We must see, Williams felt, that what we have become we have gotten by “word of mouth or from records contained for us in books,” not simply “out of the air or the rivers, or from the Grand Banks or wherever it may be” (109).

Reading history, then, for Williams, was not an academic nicety. Rather, he argued, “lacking intelligent investigation of the changes worked upon the early comers here, to the New World, the books, the records,” we will have no defense against becoming an “unconscious porkyard and oil-hole” (Grain 109). Our ignorance invites further cultural and economic

exploitation. So it is, warned Williams, that “aesthetically, morally we are deformed unless we read” (109).

As an illustration of the need to read, we can cite Williams' portrayal in In the American Grain of Pere Sebastien Rasles, the Jesuit priest who lived 34 years “with his beloved savages” near present-day Quebec (120).

Williams used Rasles' journal to reveal another side to the Indians – “another music than the single horror of his war-whoop terrifying the invader” (124).

Never reading Rasles, we would not realize that “we are used only to the English attitude bred of the Indian raid” which is “FIXED in us without realization of the EFFECT that such a story, such a tradition, entirely the product of the state of mind that it records, has had upon us and our feeling toward the country” (124-25, emphasis in original). The “effect” of this story was precisely to expose the fear, which, as I discuss at length in Chapter Three, has been bred into the bone of successive generations by the dominant historical and cultural narrative.

Williams believed that the usurpation of government and culture by corporate capital – the winter that began in the early federal period – was continuing in his own day and was reflected in his time's art, history writing, and rigid adherence to custom. Williams thus evoked a “culture in effigy” in which false values were enshrined by triumphant wealth and revealed in outmoded customs. Williams lamented a

generation of gross know-nothingism, of blackened churches where hymns groan like chants from stupefied jungles, a generation universally eager to barter permanent values (the hope of an aristocracy) in return for opportunist material advantages. (Grain 68)

There was, Williams contended, a “niggardliness” to our history, a “falseness of our historical notes, the complete missing of the point” (Grain 157).

Williams saw an historical stance of withdrawal from the primary, what he would call the “quality,” the “weight” of the New World (157). This, he believed, was reflected in the “suppression of the superb corn dance of the Chippewas, since it symbolizes the generative processes” (157). This suppression revealed the “tenacity with which fear still inspires laws, customs” (157). Williams argued that his countrymen were like the Puritans who “knew only to keep their eyes blinded, their tongues in orderly manner between their teeth, their ears stopped by the monotony of their hymns and their flesh covered in straight habits” (Grain 112). This persistence of traditional attitudes and suppression of native customs was as much a sexual repression as anything else. In place of the celebration of the generative and sensual, Williams felt that his own time was left only with what he called in Paterson “divorce” and sterility. Williams thus referred to this blind adherence to tradition as an “abortion of the mind” (112).

The progressive historians and critics shared Williams’ scorn for rigid custom. The “past dominates and controls us, for the most part unconsciously and without protest on our part, ” and our youth “are reared with too much respect for the past, too little confidence for the future” (Robinson, New History 256). “Curiously enough,” Robinson contends in The New History,

our habits of thought change much more slowly than our environment and are usually far in arrears. Our respect for a given institution or social convention may be purely traditional and have little relation to its value, as judged by existing conditions. We are, therefore, in constant danger of viewing present problems with obsolete emotions and of attempting to settle them by obsolete reasoning. This is one of the chief reasons why we are never by any means perfectly adjusted to our environment. (22)

“Man’s zeal for antiques as furnishing and equipment for his sitting-room,” attested Harry Elmer Barnes, “seems excelled only by his lust for them to serve as the lining of his cerebral space” (587). “When he desires to have a tooth pulled or a spark plug replaced,” Barnes claimed, man “feels it necessary to have recourse at once to an expert along these lines of endeavor, but he is prepared to regard as wholly adequate the opinions on economic and political matters of the ‘man on the street’ which date from the period of the ox-cart and the practice of knocking out decayed teeth with a stone hammer” (587).

Out of this view of stale custom and inhibiting adherence to the past, came Williams’ rant in “Spring & All” (1923) against the “TRADITIONALISTS OF PLAGIARISM” who “ask us to return to the proven truths of tradition” (“Spring” 97-98, emphasis in original). “These men who have had the governing of the mob through all the repetitious years resent the new order Those who led yesterday wish to hold their sway a while longer” (97-98). Williams invoked the artistic initiatives of peers fighting this “hard battle” – those like “Demuth and a few others do[ing] their best to point out the error” (98). Williams evoked in personal terms the wider battle against entrenched social and economic powers by calling attention to his own difficulties getting

published due to a “virtual dictatorship through economic forces centered in Credit Monopoly, which . . . subsidizes bad writing, and places the cultural stress on false values” (“Revolutions” 114). Pound made the same point in Canto 51, describing usura stifling individual initiative – “Duccio was not by usura/ Nor was ‘La Calunnia’ painted./ Neither Ambrogio Praedis nor Angelico/ had their skill by usura/ Nor St. Trophime its cloisters;/ Nor St. Hilaire its proportions” (51: 250). Williams’ lament that the “sole criterion today as to a book’s value is this, ‘Will it sell and pay a dividend?’” (“Revolutions” 108), was echoed in Pound’s assertion in Canto 45 that “no picture is made to endure nor to live with/ but it is made to sell and sell quickly” (45: 229). The distinction Williams and Pound made was between usura that commodifies art and seeks to exploit its transactional value, and its opposite, which is the creative and generative act of “making” something that holds intrinsic value.

The same blunting of individual initiative that Williams and Pound felt corporate capital effected in the arts they saw in the academy. Though the universities “should be devising means/ to leap the gap[,]/ . . . They block the release/ that should cleanse and assume/ prerogatives as a private recompense” (Paterson 1: 34). “Witness . . . the extraordinary dullness and sloth of the official preceptors as represented [by] . . . the English Departments in the lead, in the American universities,” charged Williams (“Background” 159). Williams characterized their “gallivanting back and forth upon the trodden-out tracks of past initiative” as nothing less than

“subserviency” to wealthy trustees (159). “[F]or the power of wealth,” alleged Williams,

which by endowments makes the university and its faculty possible, at the same time keeps that power, by control of salaries and trustees’ votes, in order to dictate what those who teach must and must not say. (159)

Most galling was that “the teachers submit to it” and “thus the higher is suborned by the lower branch of the cultural split off, another evidence of how the coercion is applied” (159). In Paterson, Williams referred to “the knowledgeable idiots, the university,” as “the non-purveyors[.]/ . . . [t]he outward/ masks of the special interests/ that perpetuate stasis and make it/ profitable” (Paterson 1: 34). Pound shared this view, referring in a 1940 letter to Williams to the “stinking lack of ANY intellectual life in our goddam onivurstities [sic]” (Letters 204, emphasis in original).

Pound's and Williams' academic critique could not have come as a surprise to Beard, Brooks, Robinson, and Parrington. Beard resigned from Columbia University in protest at the Board of Trustees limiting academic freedom in advance of America's entry into World War I. “I have been driven to the conclusion,” he asserted, “that the University is really under the control of a small and active group of trustees who have no standing in the world of education, who are reactionary and visionless in politics, narrow and medieval in religion” (qtd. in Hofstadter 286). In the same 1918 issue of The Dial in which Van Wyck Brooks published “On Creating a Usable Past,” Beard accused “[t]hose who lead and teach” as working less under “the eye of eternity” and more “under the eye of the trustees’ committee on salaries,

pensions, and promotions” (335). Brooks, too, assaulted in that issue the “professors who accommodate themselves without effort to an academic world based like ours upon the exigencies of the commercial mind” (“Usable Past” 338). Parrington lost his teaching position at the University of Oklahoma in a purge of 14 faculty members and the president as part of a political, cultural crusade by conservative religious reformers (Hofstadter 373). Waldo Frank lauded Robinson and Beard for their “[c]onstructive reaction against . . . the impossibly illiberal conditions” at the established universities, which compelled them to found the New School for Social Research (210).

* * * * *

Williams’ and Pound’s interest in the 1930s in the Social Credit movement represented, in the context of the Great Depression, a critical elaboration by the poets of the progressives’ economic determinism and economic critique. It is essential to understanding the context in which Williams’ prose essays on American history in the 1930s and his poetry, especially Paterson, would develop. Moving beyond their shared sense that writing (history, poetry, the poem in history) was a form of social activism, and that culture rests on the “subsoil of economics,” Williams and Pound embraced in Social Credit a particular program of economic reform based on the equitable distribution of credit.

Though founded by the English engineer Major C.H. Douglas in the late 1910s and early 1920s, Social Credit gained currency in America in the

1930s as a particular response to the crisis of the Great Depression. Social Credit was argued to be a form of "Economic Democracy" (Williams, "Social Credit as Anti-Communism" 1) that would "extend our present form of government to include the credit situation, making it more and more democratic" ("Revolutions" 98). This was critical because the "root of our economic distress," claimed the 1938 Social Credit Manifesto, was an "automatic shortage of purchasing power maintained by the Monopoly of Credit" (qtd. in Weaver 105). Where fascism, argued Williams, is "founded on the destruction of civil liberties and the control of credit by the same old gang," and where communism "propose[s] to centralize ownership; Economic Democrats propose to decentralize credit" ("Social Credit as Anti-Communism" 1-2). In the "Power Age," explained Williams, borrowing a turn of phrase from other contributors to New Democracy, the American Social Credit journal, "purchasing power" or credit "has not been socialized to keep pace with present-day requirements" ("Revolutions" 97). Thus even as production had surged, due to technological innovations, the wealth that had been generated, Social Credit advocates argued, had not been distributed to the working masses: "[P]urchasing power, as represented by wages or their equivalent, though it should have been expanded . . . has remained relatively stationary" (97). The result was that credit "remains in the hands of a few individuals and institutions" (97). Major C.H. Douglas "located the economic flaws of modern industrial society not in production but in distribution," namely the "discrepancy between prices and purchasing power brought

about by excessive bank interest charges, or usury” (Witemeyer 123). The resulting imbalance created poverty and “through competition for overseas markets, . . . international war” (123).

Social Credit, then, made three specific proposals to correct distribution – to unlock what Williams in Paterson called the tight-packed seed. First, credit banking would be nationalized in a federal agency operated in the interest of the public, not a commercial oligarchy: “[G]overnmental administration of a national credit account” would restore the “control of currency and credit to the people” (“Outline” 169). Second, price controls or a “Compensated Price System” would be imposed on certain goods and services; this was a “national discount or credit to meet fluctuating prices” (Weaver 105-06). Third, the government would distribute “National Dividends, . . . or direct consumer subsidies from the national treasury” (Witemeyer 123).

By these measures, the ASCM Manifesto asserted, “the Two Principles of Economic Democracy” would be effected – first, the “power of the individual over his material environment” would match “advances in production;” and second, the “choice of the individual in joining or declining productive enterprises should increase [and] opportunity and leisure should be enlarged” (qtd. in Weaver 105). The argument that Social Credit would increase individual economic “opportunity and leisure” is where, I believe, Williams’ and his colleagues’ anti-Puritanism met economics. “The Outline for a Course in Social Credit” named the “change from the economy of

scarcity to economy of *abundance*" as the very first point an instructor should cover ("Outline" 169, emphasis added). Social Credit proponents "consciously opposed the Puritan ethic in which virtue lay in scarcity and men were more or less virtuous to the degree that they submitted to onerous labour to reap a small reward" (Weaver 108). Economic democracy, then, would finally trump the "more regressive American tradition . . . , the tradition of economic Puritanism" (108).

Social Credit was not merely a fanciful argument, not simply a matter of poets dabbling in economics. It is well documented by historians that the international competition in the late 1920s to build gold reserves, especially after America returned to the gold standard in that time period, had the effect of tightening credit (Rees 216). When gold reserves were "reduced by \$715 million" in 1931, the "result was to promote credit restriction and severe deflation, followed by a renewed crop of bank failures" (216). Historian Michael Bernstein notes that with a "massive deficit spending effort, perhaps on the scale of spending undertaken during World War II, consumption could have led the way out of depression" (170).

But such a strategy was not only politically impossible, it was also hampered by "two major short-run shocks to consumer spending that enervated the U.S. economy after the panic of 1929: the impact of the downturn on incomes, and the stress placed on consumer credit markets" (Rees 216-17). Social Credit sought to ameliorate the credit squeeze and power economic recovery with expansionary fiscal policies. The fatal flaw, I

believe, is that this may not have been especially realistic. Bernstein notes that it "appears by the mid-thirties, consumers were so concerned with liquidating the relatively large debt incurred at the start of the decade, and so wary given the experience of the crash, that the aggregate marginal propensity to consume fell" (Bernstein 172). It is not clear, ultimately, that expanded credit would have been effective.

Nevertheless, Social Credit was appealing for how it fit with American democracy. It consciously positioned itself against the "implied dangers to individual liberty inherent in the trend of modern thought," namely fascism and communism ("Social Credit as Anti-Communism" 2). It was "a halfway house between capitalism and socialism" (Witemeyer 123). "We are unalterably opposed," the American Social Credit Movement had asserted in its 1938 founding manifesto, "to totalitarianism and collectivism, social systems in which the individual exists only for the group" (qtd. in Weaver 105).

The appeal of Social Credit "for middle-class professionals" like Williams "who wanted a non-socialist welfare state" was likely how it "proposed a greater degree of socialisation [sic] without socialism; it was radical without being revolutionary" (Weaver 107). Williams declared that while it "may appear little more than a currency measure," Social Credit was "the bayonet into the bowels of the problem" ("Revolutions" 115). Even if it lacks the "basic emotional instinctive and summative power of a clenched fist, it yet remains the heart of any real advance which by bloody fights or

less drastic realization must come about" (117). Battling the destruction of individual freedom, which is the aim of fascism, and resisting the "narrowing of the attack to a fanatical and static fixation on a class war" promised by communism, Social Credit, Williams declared, would preserve "all liberty of thought so characteristically American" (115).

It was fitting that Williams concluded "Revolutions Revalued" by evoking the "battles fought about the figure of George Washington [that were] more important to our condition today than Yorktown or Monmouth" ("Revolutions" 117). He believed that Social Credit could win back for us "the dearest fruits of the first Revolution" – those fruits were lost to us in the "memorable engagement centering about the new Constitution," Williams argued, "when Hamilton and Jefferson split the Cabinet of the first President" (117). The "subtle tyranny" of credit monopoly could have been "foreseen and forestalled at the beginning by some such philosophy as Social Credit now proposes," Williams claimed (117). The "basis could have been grasped[,] . . . the social demands Jackson later realized and fought for" could have been attained (117). Yet, it was not too late – Social Credit and the history Williams wrote, he hoped, would clarify and assert the prerogative of the individual that underpins liberal democracy. "[I]ndividual genius is the basis of all social excellence," he claimed, but the individual is presently "beset . . . by a virtual dictatorship through economic forces centered in Credit monopoly" ("Revolutions" 104, 114). "[S]hall we under economic pressure," he asked, "retain the long fought for principles of representative democratic

government which we inherit from the past or relinquish them today?" ("Revolutions" 98).

Social Credit, in Williams' view, as stated in "Revolutions Revalued," was the only approach that was "consistent with the history of the artist's world, since it only respects individual liberty as the basis of the state" ("Revolutions" 111). "Except for the individual," Williams attested

society is a body without a head. But it is the head that is of the chiefest value Society as an organism is on a far lower biologic plane than one man. In fact, unless appended to the individual, it has a mere vegetative function. (112)

As all constructive initiative remains with the individual, Williams argued, "it behooves society to preserve, as its very life, the individual," to work towards "liberating that individual from other burdens" and to free him "to do his exclusive originating" ("Revolutions" 111). A society that limits or destroys individual initiative and self-determination, Williams contended, would discard "the seed of its own possible regeneration" ("Revolutions" 106). The artist, of course, as the conscious individual par excellence, was uniquely qualified to lead this renewal – he was thus characterized as the "passionate *regenerative force*" and "social regenerator" ("Revolutions" 106, 109, emphasis in original).

FDR's New Deal, of course, did seek to redress some of the same economic concerns that Williams identified. Williams would refer to Roosevelt as "the good President" and weep at his death (Mariani, New World 505). While Williams may have wanted Roosevelt to adopt Social Credit policies and proposals, the poet's own declining activity in the Social

Credit Movement in the late 1930s may have reflected some satisfaction with the priorities and initiatives of the New Deal. Two things mitigate against drawing such a neat conclusion, however. First, Williams included a prominent discussion of credit politics in Book IV of Paterson, published in 1961. Second, Williams' declining engagement in Social Credit activities may have as readily reflected his discomfort with the increasing presence of pro or proto-fascist elements trying to infiltrate the Social Credit movement in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

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Williams' concern with the fate of individual liberty and prerogative in an illiberal age explains his participation in the larger movement of the time toward imaginative or subjective history-writing. Waldo Frank and Van Wyck Brooks envisioned a kind of personal encounter with the past that reflected a personal renaissance of spirit consistent with liberal democracy. "Now that the republic -- the *res publicata* -- has been settled, it is time to look after the *res privata*," Frank asserted, citing Thoreau with approval (153). The "only serious approach to society is the personal approach (33)," argued Brooks in America's Coming of Age, adding,

How can one speak of progress in a people like our own that so sends up to heaven the stench of atrophied personality? How can one speak of progress in a people whose main object is to climb, peg by peg, up a ladder to the impersonal ideal of private wealth? (176)

Williams lamented that "[s]teadily the individual loses caste" (Grain 128), and Parrington declared that the "passion for liberty is lessening and the

individual . . . is being dwarfed; the drift of centralization is shaping its inevitable tyrannies to bind us with” (Main Currents 3: xx).

Fittingly, then, Williams and his progressive contemporaries wrote history as a form of social action, as a social instrument, to preserve individual liberty and prerogative, and the roots of democratic liberalism. For the poets (Williams, Pound, Lawrence, and even, Eliot), in particular, this meant privileging an imaginative or subjective encounter with the past. Williams’ imaginative history, or his poem (and prose) including history, informed by Social Credit’s promise of economic democracy and the progressive historians’ and critics’ search for a “usable past,” sought a kind of rebirth of America. The coming chapters will explore how Williams structures his history writing and his poem including history to achieve this aim.

Chapter III: “Men intact – with all their senses waking:” Affective Economics, Fear, and Representative New World Voluptuaries

The leaders of a to-morrow forced to spiritual discovery are men of letters.

- Waldo Frank, Our America (8)

[T]he nation was the offspring of the desire to huddle, to protect – of terror – superadded to a new world of great beauty.

- William Carlos Williams, In the American Grain (155)

The good which history should have preserved it tortures. A country is not free, is not what it pretends to be, unless it leave a vantage open (in tradition) for that which Burr possessed in such remarkable degree.

- William Carlos Williams, In the American Grain (197)

[M]oney is like a bell that keeps the dance from terrifying, as it would if it were silent and we could hear the grunt, -- thud – swish. It is small, hard; it keeps the attention fixed so that the eyes shall not see.

- William Carlos Williams, In the American Grain (156)

This chapter will examine how Williams developed what I call an affective economics by variously moving beneath and beyond theories of economic determinism in two specific ways. First, Williams contextualized the war by corporate capital on democratic culture and institutions in the broader contest of primary versus secondary cultural thrusts, with specific emphasis on the human drama of fear in the face of the unknown. Second, Williams explored our encounter with the New World along lines that are putatively economic, but transformed these economic axes into emotional stances toward the world. Thus he deployed a series of representative figures to illuminate polarities of giving versus grabbing, sharing versus withholding.

In response to illiberal forces of the 1920s and 1930s, including corporate capital, fascism, and communism, Williams and his progressive

peers espoused values of liberal democracy, represented in their lexicon of “*res persona*,” “personality,” and “inner cultivation,” as well as in their interest in representative figures generally, and artists in particular. Williams did not simply employ an anti-capitalist polemic like his peers. His peculiar genius in espousing liberal democracy resided in how he structured an aesthetic that, first, re-oriented readers to the human drama beneath the economics, and second, activated their participation, and, thereby, inner cultivation. We can thus identify in Williams what the poet himself saw in Boone – that his “genius was to recognize the difficulty as neither material nor political but one purely moral and aesthetic” (Grain 136).

Williams’s affective economics worked a significant inversion of power at several levels. First, he did not reject but inverted Parrington’s dicta, which reflected the thinking of most of Williams’ progressive contemporaries, that all cultural forms rest on the “subsoil of economics” (“Economics” 98). Economics were now exposed as resting on human, emotional reactions and considerations. Second, Williams’ thesis necessarily implied that if we could understand how human fear drives the economic machine then we could somehow remedy our plight. Williams thus moved past a deterministic view of behavior to one in which the human actor could discover the power to change things.

“Burr knew what a democracy must liberate Men intact – with all their senses waking,” Williams had asserted in In the American Grain (206). For Williams, men could not be “waking” or awakened unless they had

contact with the primary. Poetry – and writing in general– was a mechanism for awareness, for awakening readers to a critical engagement with their world. Consistent with the assertion of liberal democratic principles, Williams made the experience of the individual, be it the reader, the poet, or the historical visionary loner, the critical element in awaking his countrymen. While Brooks, Franks and others spoke of “atrophied personality” (Brooks, Coming 176) and *res persona*, Williams actually structured an aesthetic that made seminal the reader’s affective experience. He facilitated the reader’s engagement with the primary, both in historical terms as a “usable past” and in the present by what he modeled. “Not one” of America’s prominent writers, “not all of them,” lamented Brooks, “have had the power to move the soul of America from the accumulation of dollars” (44). “Personality” for Williams’ peers referred to a greater “density, weight, and richness, a certain poignancy” that would foster the reader’s spiritual and intellectual development (40). Williams thus answered, in his poem (and prose) including history, the call of Brooks and Frank for writers who had the “shaking impact of personality” (39).

Williams agreed that individual development was critical as he based his “argument on a single point: the . . . necessity for individual freedom under the law” (“Revolutions” 99). “[I]ndividual genius is the basis of all social excellence,” he argued (104). Individual genius may not be easy to cultivate or identify in a culture driven by capital priorities, but Williams believed that the individual’s “essential freedom” was a “*social* asset of the

highest sort without which society itself will perish” (104, emphasis added). Williams clearly understood that “waking” citizens engaged with the primary and thus having an affective experience of their own moment, were essential to a democratic society. What was good for the individual was necessary for a democracy: “[S]ociety, *to be served*, must generate individuals to serve it, and cannot do otherwise than to give such individuals full play – *until* or unless their activities prove anti-social” (103, emphasis in original).

Williams’ own obsession with the primary, then, represented a democratic imperative to engage one’s own “moment” independent of “all intermediate authority” or “unrelated authority” (“Background” 143). This was, as he termed it in The Embodiment of Knowledge, “the characteristic American *position* of the intelligence – the pioneer turn of mind – the individual superior to authority. No external to it” (9, emphasis in original). Williams’ history writing models, but does not impose, a particular stance towards history and a “usable past.” Brooks made the same argument on behalf of individual initiative and liberal democracy: “[S]elf-fulfillment . . . the working out of one’s own personality, one’s own inventiveness through forms of activity that are directly social, . . . gives a man . . . a life-interest apart from his rewards” (Coming 32). “And just as this principle,” asserted Brooks,

becomes generally diffused and understood the incentive is withdrawn from economic self-assertion, a relative competence being notoriously satisfying to the man whose prime end is the fulfilling of his own creative instincts; and the wealth of the world is already socialized. (32)

For Brooks, Williams, and others, then, the primary and the democratic were integrally connected, and the latter relied on its citizens to be actively engaged with the former. Direct contact with the social and natural landscape of one's own time, which James Longenbach defines to include the past in his conception of "existential historicism," and which Williams called a true "usable past," was a premise of democracy. It was the individual seeing for himself, deciding for himself. A failure to make contact with one's own moment – with the "situation as it exist[s]" (144), of a "realization of the actual" ("Background" 146), of "attachment to an essential reality" (148), -- a lack of "relation to the immediate conditions of the matter in hand" (143) – had dire political and social implications for democracy.

Williams and his peers already feared for democracy in the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s. D.H. Lawrence lamented that Americans "dodge their own very selves" (1). Frank called America a tongue-tied, "turmoiled giant" whom he hoped to make "articulate" (4-5). His enterprise was the "effort of self-knowledge" (Frank 5). Brooks conceived of the present as a "void" and attested in his seminal 1918 Dial essay, "On Creating a Usable Past," that "the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value" (339). In clearly resonant terms, Williams declared seven years later in In the American Grain that we "float without question, . . . [our] history . . . an enigma" (113).

The resolution of this personal and cultural crisis, Williams and Pound suggested, depended on "the men who can think with some clarity"

(Contact). “[M]en are driven to their fates by the quality of their beliefs,” Williams attested. “[T]hat in America,” he argued, “has been the success of the unrelated, borrowed . . . culture” – it has been the money cancer and the “wealth [that] took the scene” (“Background” 149). To descend to something real and meaningful in their own time, and in our history, then, required political and social engagement. In 1921, Williams published, as editor of Contact, Pound’s declaration that the “symbolist position, artistic aloofness from world affairs, is no good *now*. It may have assisted several people to write and work in the 80’s, but it is not, in 1921, opportune or apposite” (Contact, emphasis in original). “Don’t imagine that I think economics interesting,” Pound added,

-- not as Botticelli or Picasso is interesting. But at present they, as the reality under political camouflage, are interesting as a gun muzzle aimed at one’s own head is ‘interesting,’ when one can hardly see the face of the gun holder and is wholly uncertain as to his temperament and intentions. (Contact)

The men best able to “think with some clarity” were the artists. The figure of the artist was that of “the whole man, . . . [who] belongs to his world and time, sensually, realistically” (“Against” 197). It was the artist who “attacks, constantly toward a full possession of life by himself as a man” (199). He alone could “give new currency to the sensual world at our feet” (215). As the “most down on the ground, most sensual, most real” (198), only “[h]e is the most effective of all men, by test of time, in proving himself able to resist circumstances and bring the load through” (197). Those “circumstances” that the poet must “resist,” of course, were undoubtedly the

economic and cultural exploitation and oppression wrought by corporate capital. It is not surprising to learn, then, that In the American Grain was originally planned as the third in a series of cultural pamphlets to be published by Stanley Charles Nott, founder and manager of the Social Credit publication New England Weekly and subsequently of a Social Credit publishing house in the mid-1930s.

Williams was not alone in looking to the artists to “rouse” or regenerate his fellow country-men. Waldo Frank asserted that from “the time of Lincoln, the drama of American life has shifted: has become the struggle for the assertion of life itself” (8). As the “utterance of life is art,” Frank concluded, “the leaders of a to-morrow forced to spiritual discovery are men of letters” (8). Brooks, in his 1918 essay, called for an approach to “our literature from the point of view not of the successful fact but of the creative impulse” (“Usable Past” 340). The “more personally we answer” what, “out of all the multifarious achievements and impulses and desires of the American literary mind” we “elect to remember . . . the more likely we are to get a vital order out of the anarchy of the present” (340). Brooks called the past “an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals” (339), and Williams, in large measure, applied Brooks’ approach not simply to our literary heritage but to the entire tableau of American history. Williams idiosyncratically answered what ideals, “impulses and desires” of the American mind, more generally, should be remembered (339-40). Williams’ genius was to make the open stance of the “creative impulse” itself the focus

of his history. He identified not simply one “adaptable ideal” but adaptability itself as the telling point of American history – and thus of our relation to our past and our own present moment. Williams offered a model of what each of us does, and of necessity, must do.

For Williams, then, finding a usable past was not simply a question of uncovering alternative traditions of openness, tolerance, or even individual action against corporate powers and other illiberal forces. It was, rather, a matter of finding figures in the past who adapted to and spoke to their own present moment as Williams felt his readers must do to their own. These figures from the past, Williams believed, could teach his contemporaries, and perhaps subsequent generations of readers, how to live in and touch their own present. History did not enshrine and convey conventions to which future ages should adhere or conform, but instead demanded a stance of responsiveness and adaptation. He necessarily recalled Frederick Jackson Turner’s reference to “perennial rebirth,” in his description of the formation of democratic culture at each iteration of the frontier. Williams, in short, historicized adaptation and insisted on responsiveness to the moment. This stance towards the past and the present, of course, drove Williams’ affective economics. We must understand, he felt, the emotive forces that actually drive the economic engine and must see the economic stances exposed for the truly emotive positions that they are. Only this will enable men to meet the moment, and possibly to influence its movement.

Williams' aim, then, through all of his work was to awaken readers to contact with conditions as they exist, permeating that barrier between ourselves and our world, whether he wrote of the "moment" or a "usable past." It is in this way that Williams took up Brooks' call to create a "usable past." Williams effectively awakened readers to focus critically on the secondary cultural thrust, the hegemony of the corporate capital elite, through his affective economics in "The American Background" and In the American Grain. By contextualizing the drive for personal wealth in the human drama of fear before the primary, by transforming economic stances into emotive ones, and through his unique aesthetics, Williams exposed the demands for adaptation and contact that were no different in his day than they were for our forebearers. Thus the "old boys" who were alive to their own time, or those few settlers who could look the New World in the face without clinging to familiar English landscapes – who could avoid mistaking and misnaming the New World thrush for the English robin – illustrated what is needed. If the poet can give us a "usable past" – alive to his own moment, showing us how to be alive to our own – then he will have fulfilled his role as the "passionate *regenerative force*" for his time, and, more critically, he will have awakened us to play the same role so necessary in a liberal democratic state ("Revolutions" 106, emphasis in original).

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I have stated initially that Williams contextualized the war by corporate capital on democratic culture and institutions in the broader contest of

primary versus secondary cultural thrusts, and specifically focused on the human drama of fear in the face of the unknown. As described in Chapter 2, Williams' essential economic critique was consistent with the economic determinism of Beard, Parrington, Frank and others. Better to understand how this is so, we must first appreciate Williams' explicit frame in "The American Background" of the contest between primary and secondary culture. Then I will define how Williams, by his conception of fear, went beyond the economic determinism of his peers.

At the start of this 1934 essay, Williams informed readers that "the terms native and borrowed, related and unrelated, primary and secondary, will be used interchangeably to designate these two opposed split-offs from the full cultural force, and occasionally, in the same vein, true and false" ("Background" 135). What Williams did not say immediately but what became swiftly evident was that the former term in each pairing referred to non-economic values while the latter term referred to economic values. What did Williams mean by primary? It is what In the American Grain referred to as "contact" and "touch," with its suggestion of the sexual, sensual and generative. No less than a dozen times, Williams referred in "The American Background" to the primary as a vital contact with reality, with the facts and harsh realities of life in the New World. Thus, the primary encompasses "men working toward the center" of the New World "inventing their new tools of thought, welding their minds to new conformations with the situation as it existed," while "men of the opposing force were in closer and

closer touch with the Old World" ("Background" 144). Men seeking to touch the New World sought a "realization of the actual" (146); exhibited an "attachment to an essential reality" (148); desired a "relation to the immediate conditions of the matter in hand" (143); sought a "direct relation to actuality but remained heavily opposed by a more fashionable choice" (142). Men like Boone and Rasles were significant for how they "abandoned touch with those along the coast, and their established references, and made contact with the intrinsic elements of an as yet unrealized material of which the new country was made" (140). These men make strenuous "effort to appraise the real" through direct contact where their countrymen do so only "through the maze of a cut-off and imposed culture from Europe" (143). Washington, Boone and others stand out because they "stuck fast to the facts," "clove to the actual conditions of [their] position, . . . [and exhibited] the strength of a cultural adjustment of the first sort" (142).

The challenge of the primary, the harsh facts as they existed in establishing life in the New World, are first set out by Williams in their psychic dimension in the italicized parable about the misnaming of the native American Thrush that commences "The American Background." The thrushes that the settlers called robins induced a "Blur. Confusion" – for the settlers chose to name the new species by what was familiar and close to home, even as a closer look would have clearly shown the difference in form and flight between the two birds ("Background" 134). This "slight" example, a misnaming based on sloppy attention, was "enough," Williams claimed, to

reveal how “from the start, an America of which they could have had no inkling drove the first settlers upon their past” (134). They sought to make the New World adhere to their European experience: “Strange and difficult, the new continent induced a torsion in the spirits of the first settlers, tearing them between the old and the new” (134). “They found,” Williams explained,

that they had not only left England but that they had arrived somewhere else: at a place whose pressing reality demanded not only a tremendous bodily devotion but as well, and more importunately, great powers of adaptability, a complete reconstruction of their most intimate cultural make-up, to accord with the new conditions. (“Background” 134)

The settlers described in the parable could not adapt to their new environment, -- “[t]he most hesitated and turned back in their hearts at the first glance” (134). Because the “land was from the first antagonistic,” and the settlers’ “purpose must have been in major part not to be bound to it but to push back its obstructions before invading amenities,” our ancestors “were at the same time pushing back a very necessary immediate knowledge of the land” that ultimately was “all that they possessed and should henceforth be able to call their own” (137). This was the “cost” that Williams referred to in the opening parable of “retreat[ing] for warmth and reassurance to something previously familiar” (134).

To understand better Williams’ conception of the primary, we must first explore the historical triumph of what he terms the secondary cultural thrust. That is, the imposition and importation of an unrelated, European culture, “false” because it was not founded in the conditions of life in the New World.

"The American Background" was essentially an economics essay – one that traced the usurpation of the democratic experiment by a propertied elite. The contest between primary and secondary culture became a narrative of the triumph of an unrelated, money-focused culture. According to Williams, this secondary culture quickly assumed economic, cultural and political hegemony in the settlements and colonies. In "poverty and danger," Williams claimed, "America borrowed, where it could, a culture from Europe – or at least the warmth of it *ad interim* [sic]" ("Background" 146). What was *ad interim* and "valuable for the moment and later as an attribute of fashion and wealth, fixed itself upon the mind until . . . the realization of the actual" was lost (146). This borrowed "culture of purchase, a culture in effigy" became predominant (147). "Wealth went on" and the "primary cultural influence . . . came to a stop," Williams contended, and the American Revolution represented the only time that primary American character was "to be given a general sanction" (136, 147).

The contest was uneven from the start, for the culture of purchase would keep "drawing inhabitants back to the accustomed with its appeals to loyalty and the love of comfort" where the primary could only prod the people to "face very often the tortures of the damned, working a new way into a doubtful future" (138). It was not a surprise, then, that the "graciousness of an imposed cultural design" would triumph over the "raw new" (138). Thus, Jefferson's agrarian democratic vision was "sadly snowed under" and Benjamin Franklin's "necessitous technical side," which would underwrite

industrial and commercial development, triumphed (139). “Finding itself, as a democracy,” Williams declared, “unable to *take up* the moral and economic implications of its new conditions, which Jefferson lived and proposed, America slumped *back to* fashion on the one, favored, side, and . . . slighted the difficult real” (139, emphasis in original).

Thus, Boone, Houston and others who worked toward the center, the primary, become “strangers” and “foreigners – in their own country” (140-1). Williams identified Andrew Jackson as the only one of these figures who “carried the crudeness of his origins successfully up to the top by the luck of battle,” but recognized that it was “for a short time only” (141). Williams focused on the seventh president and Tennessee backwoodsman in particular because of his attack against the Second National Bank of the United States in the 1830s. Jackson was able, “as Ezra Pound has recently pointed out,” claimed Williams, given his “basic culture,” to “smell out the growing fault and attack the evidence of a wrong tack having been taken, the beginning raid on public moneys by private groups” (141). Ultimately, though, Jackson failed like the others to alter the oligarchic trajectory of things to come. In time, “the acquisition of a borrowed European culture” was “taken to be virtue itself” and wealth ensured a “primary cultural decay,” including the destruction of the small community (144, 147). “Wealth took the scene” and “[a]gainst an overwhelming mass superiority of wealth the struggles of a related culture grew still less and less” (148-49).

The broad strokes of Williams' economic critique did not particularly distinguish him from his progressive contemporaries. Even while his peers did not refer to the democratic and capitalist impulses in terms of "primary" or "secondary" culture, Brooks and Frank identified how capital had high-jacked American democracy. The historians argued as well that the very design of American constitutionalism was itself meant to serve and preserve capital interests. Recall how E.R.A. Seligman called economics the fundamental condition of all life and how Parrington argued that property is sovereign and lauded the Populists for defending democracy against an arrogant plutocracy (Hofstadter 198-99).

Williams, though, distinguished his approach from that of his peers by his more psychological take on American culture. In particular, he contextualized and subsumed economic impulses and class realities in the human drama of man's reaction to the primary. Williams would undergird the hegemonic economics, the secondary cultural thrust, with a simple human factor – fear. As New World wealth was made to emanate from deeper human forces, from Montezuma himself, in "The Destruction of Tenochtitlan" chapter of In the American Grain, so too Williams defined the culture of corporate capital as emanating from human, emotive forces. Montezuma re-oriented the Spanish from his empire's riches – his "houses with walls of gold" and the "many beautiful and curious artifacts" on which "no price could be set" – to his own humanity (Grain 31): "'You see that I am composed of flesh and born like yourselves and that I am mortal and palpable to the

touch,” the Aztec king tells Cortez (31). Montezuma’s humanity and “the earthward thrust” of his people, “the realization of their primal and continuous identity with the ground itself,” contextualized and provided meaning for their great wealth (33-34).

Williams identified in his affective economics, beyond simple greed or avarice, a deeper, human – even primitive (fitting with primary) – foundation of fear. Fear of absorption, obliteration, of loss of self, were what Williams identified in his existential historicism. Williams populated his history with Spanish conquerors who emerged from New World jungles transformed in likeness and dress into Indians and Puritans who feared being kidnapped or killed in Indian raids. De Soto sunk to the bed of a stream as he inseminated the female body of the New World. But for each of these fearful losses of self, Williams sought to guide the readers’ contact with the New World, to make it less obliterating and terrifying. He offered the touch and contact of Rasles, Boone, and Champlain, who were absorbed into the New World willingly, even passionately. They illustrated the stance of adaptation, not fear, a sensual relationship of contact and touch, descent and marriage.

Williams’ contemporaries did occasionally make passing references to fear, but it did not comprise a major aspect of their investigations of the American character. Only Williams developed it as critical to the American experience. His emphasis on fear as driving the economic engine, in particular, truly set him apart. In Canto 62 Pound quoted John Adams’ observation in his own personal papers characterizing Calvinism as a

"Passion of orthodoxy in fear" (62: 341). Waldo Frank also noted of the Puritans that "[d]iscipline among them was whetted by fear into ferocity" as they "lived in an unending beat of danger" with a "hostile people, a savage continent enclos[ing] them" (19). Van Wyck Brooks did not use the word fear but described something quite like it, arguing of Puritans and American writers generally that "Nothing is more marked than their disinclination to take a plunge, reckless and complete . . . into the rudest and grossest actualities" (Coming 110- 11). American writers, Brooks contended, were "able to make nothing of a life so rude in its actuality" (112-13) – "This is the whole story of American literature: in a more than usually difficult and sordid world it has applied its principal energies to being uncontaminated itself" (111). D.H. Lawrence noted the fear of "a real new experience" because of how it "displaces so many old experiences" to explain why "a new voice in the old American classics" had thus far been obscured and ignored (1).

Williams developed fear as an aspect of the American character by detailing in "The American Background" and In the American Grain the tragic feedback loop of American history that ensured the triumph of corporate capital and Alexander Hamilton's mercantilist vision for the fledging country. Fear of the primary drove the growth of wealth, which in turn destroyed primary culture and corrupted law, government, culture and art. The fear factor is not difficult to find in In the American Grain, but Williams most clearly described this human and cultural dynamic in "The American Background." "The secondary split off from what, but for fear," Williams declared

had been a single impetus, finally focused itself as personal wealth in America, important since it is wealth that controls the mobility of a nation. But dangerous since by its control it can isolate and so render real values, in effect, impotent. ("Background" 146)

Here, then, were both sides of the tragic loop – fear of the primary, or, more accurately, fear of absorption or obliteration by the primary, fueled the drive for personal wealth, which in turn destroyed the real, the primary which inspired the fear. “Incredible, fairy-tale-like, even offensively perverse as it may seem” Williams asserted in similar fashion, “it is fear, the cowardice, the inability [to function] before the new, which in America whipped the destructive false current on like a forest fire” ("Background" 152).

In the American Grain provided a virtual American history of fear. “It is necessary in appraising our history,” Williams reminded us, “to realize that the nation was the offspring of the desire to huddle, to protect – of terror – superadded to a new world of great beauty and ripest bloom that well-nigh no man of distinction saw save Boone” (Grain 155). Williams’ most fully developed his emotive thesis in his description of Boone and Franklin. Boone made contact with the real, the primary – he descended to the “ground of his desire” (136). But for most of Boone’s contemporaries the “problem of the New World was, as every new comer soon found out, an awkward one” (136). How, in short, could they “replace from the wild land that which, at home, they had scarcely known the Old World meant to them; through difficulty and even brutal hardship to find a ground to take the place of England” (136). “They could not do it,” claimed Williams, so “They clung, one way or another, to the old” (136). The settlers and colonists could see in

the “raw new” only economic resources, and Williams thus described them “striving the while to pull off pieces to themselves from the fat of the new bounty” (136). The spirit of Boone’s contemporaries was “insecurity calling upon thrift and self-denial” even in the shadow of “the forbidden wealth of the Unknown,” namely the primary, the land itself (131). “Clinging narrowly to their new foothold,” Williams noted somewhat sympathetically, “dependent still on sailing vessels for a contact none too swift or certain with ‘home,’ the colonists looked with fear to the west” (130).

Williams critiqued Franklin as the “full development” of this kind of “timidity, the strength that denies itself” (Grain 155). “He sensed the power” of the New World “and knew only enough to want to run an engine with it” (155). It is on this basis that Williams named Franklin “the dike keeper, keeping out the wilderness with his wits,” even as he would seek to harness its raw power to scientific, technical uses (155). “His mighty answer to the New World’s offer of a great embrace was THRIFT” (156, emphasis in original). Evoking the corresponding, underlying fear, Williams added: “Work day and night, build up, penny by penny, a wall against that which is threatening, the terror of life, poverty. Make a fort to be secure in Poor Richard: Save, be rich – and do as you please – might have been his motto, with an addendum: provided your house has strong walls and thick shutters” (156). As we might expect, Williams concluded that it was not greed but fear that drove Franklin’s curiosity (155).

D.H. Lawrence had spoken in remarkably similar terms only two years earlier, in 1923, in Studies in Classic American Literature. He accused Franklin of “tak[ing] away my wholeness,” and putting the author in a moral “corral” (14, 18-9). “I’m really not,” he added, “just an automatic piano with a moral Benjamin getting tunes out of me” (16). Williams, in fact, read Lawrence’s book sometime between its publication in 1923 and May 1925, and complimented the Englishman “on his un-English breadth of spirit” after Lawrence gave In the American Grain a positive review (Mariani, New World 246, 331). Lawrence never acknowledged or responded to Williams’ letter (331).

Williams further elucidated the driving fear that characterized “our pioneer statesmen,” arguing that the “character they had . . . was that of giving their fine energy . . . to the smaller, narrower, protective thing and not to the great New World” (Grain 157). Williams fairly recognized that in their huddled, besieged state of eking out new lives in a new world, the settlers and colonists did “as they must have done,” but notes that “it can be no offense that their quality should be *named*” (157, emphasis in original). “The sweep of the force was too horrible to them,” Williams concluded – “The terrific energy of the new breed is its first character; the second is its terror before the NEW” (156-57, emphasis in original).

Fear’s direct relevance to his own time may well have inclined Williams to make it a seminal facet of his history writing. He saw in the adaptability and responsiveness that his own world demanded a

correspondence with what the raw new demanded of our ancestors. Indeed, Williams' contemporaries were quite articulate about the fearfully vast changes sweeping the American landscape in the early twentieth century. Henry Adams noted that in 1900 "a new avalanche of unknown forces had fallen on" the mind "which required new mental powers to control" (461). Frederick Jackson Turner referred to "the birth of a new nation in America" ("Social Forces" 154), and Frank argued that a "[n]ew multitude of fact and of detail deluged man's mind; shut him away from the eternal contemplations" (224). The result was that America had multiplied the "clutter" of modern life and found itself in "crisis" (224, 231).

Williams revealed that juxtaposed with all of this change in the first decades of the new century, and perhaps fed by a fear of it, was the maddening adherence to custom and tradition, what Williams termed the "unrelated, crazy rigidities and imbecilities of formal pattern" ("Background" 139) that represented the "frightened grip" of the Puritan "upon the throat of the world" (Grain 68). With "tenacity," he concluded, "fear still inspires laws, customs" (Grain 157). As Harry Elmer Barnes noted in 1925, "Man's zeal for antiques" with which to furnish his "cerebral space" was tenacious and disturbing (587).

Williams exposed America's greatest custom, namely, business, based on "the inevitable Coolidge platform" of "goodness and industry," as a manifestation of the fear that "forces us upon science and invention – away from touch" (Grain 175, 179). We are much like modern-day Ben Franklins,

Williams alleged. "American men are the greatest business men in the world," Williams declared, adding,

To me, it is because we fear to wake up that we play so well. Imagine stopping money making. Our whole conception of reality would have to be altered. But to keep a just balance between business and another object is to spoil the intoxication, the illusion, the unity even. (179-80)

Powerfully capturing the fear that drives our custom of economic enterprise, Williams contended:

Do something, anything, to keep the fingers busy – not to realize – the lightning. Be industrious, let money and comfort increase; money is like a bell that keeps the dance from terrifying, as it would if it were silent and we could hear the grunt, -- thud – swish. It is small, hard; it keeps the attention fixed so that the eyes shall not see. (Grain 156)

A critical aspect of fear, Williams felt, was how it blinds us. It blinded the Puritans to the Indians' humanity. It blinded men in his own time to how wealth had co-opted all aspects of the American cultural scene. The poem, and writing generally, as a social instrument set out to expose this vast corruption, even self-consciously invoking the name of Lincoln Steffens, the muckraking journalist who uncovered police and other municipal corruption at the turn of the nineteenth century. Thus, law was shown to be "the agent serving this colossal appetite for wealth" and was the "index of the moral corruption of the time" ("Background" 151). Government, too, was impugned as "those, at the top, possessing cash, and so retaining their enviable mobility, relied on the lawyer-politician-officeholder or professional intermediary as the means to keep them there" (152). "The organization of

the underworld,” Williams added, “would be exactly the replica, the true picture, of the national government – until finally they fused actually into one in the early years of the century, unabashed” (152). Artistic culture was co-opted as well. “Wealth established museums” for respectability and credibility “but it could not tell, it had to be told, what was good in them” (153). Opera “boxholders” slept “through the music . . . wondering what the hell it was all about, while the American composer, Ives, remained unknown” (153-54). The academy displayed “extraordinary dullness and sloth” and “for writers, the official magazines have been a positive plague” (159).

Williams’ depiction of a “generation universally eager to barter permanent values (the hope of an aristocracy) in return for opportunist material advantages” echoed Waldo Frank’s argument of America’s crippling extroversion in which the development of our souls and psyches had been sadly neglected (Grain 68). Williams recognized that something must be done and that the old forms would not suffice. So it was that in “Spring and All” he lamented the “greatness of life’s inanity; the formality of its boredom; the orthodoxy of its stupidity” (90). “Kill! kill!,” he declared, “let there be fresh meat” (90). The fresh meat Williams sought he found in an exposé of fear, in revealing the fear that had always driven economics and cultural corruption. Williams’ affective economics, including his aesthetics, were intended to assist readers to make contact with the primary, to “rediscover or replace demoded meanings,” to work through the “layers of demoded words and shapes” (100). Williams made clear in “Spring and All” that the “practical

corrective” for this cultural situation was contact with the primary. Thus he offered the figure of the “farmer or the fisherman who read their own lives” in the sky as much more than “an association, . . . [a] function of accessory to vague words whose meaning it is impossible to recover” (100). Whether farmer or reader – the same was true. Only individual contact with the primary could serve as the corrective for fear and be the engine for social regeneration.

Williams offered an historical analogue to his own time’s corrupted and fearful state: the Boston minister who recoiled from French Indians who, falling to their knees, began kissing his hands as he disabused them of Catholic dogma. “He would not,” Williams described, “suffer the contrite Indians to lay their hands upon him, as the Catholic fathers in the north had done, but drew back and told them to address themselves to God alone” (Grain 119). The scene for Williams was an ugly historical corollary of that “which has persisted,” namely our being “afraid to touch!” – “But being forced to every day,” Williams added, “by passion, by necessity– a devil of duplicity has taken possession of us” (119). Williams’ affective economics sought to awaken readers by exposing the human emotions beneath and beyond the economics and by structuring a primary experience for the reader.

* * * * *

As part of advancing an affective economics to rewrite capital values along human dimensions and to recast the triumph of corporate capital as the triumph of human fear, Williams explored our putatively economic

encounter with the New World for its peculiar emotional resonance. A series of representative figures illuminated much more than simply a debate between federal and state power, or mercantile and agrarian values. The stance that Williams explored towards experience in general, and the New World in particular, was the economic one of giving versus exploitive taking, sharing versus miserly withholding. He organized our thinking along these fundamentally economic axes, but they gained their power from their essential emotional core – the way in which one’s stance was as much an emotional reflection on a person, or a people – as an economic one. Williams turned to a series of visionary loners from the past because, as he noted of the perennial economic conflict in his review of Pound’s new cantos, the situation is historic (Essays 167). Men who, “in whatever time they live or have lived, whose minds . . . have lifted them above the sordidness of a grabbing world” are thus made “contemporaries” (167). Alive to their own time, these visionary loners, through their stance of receptivity and responsiveness to the primary, what Williams called “touch” and “contact,” offered us a usable past and a contemporary model. Along with the masses that Williams depicted in Paterson, these visionary figures were the foot soldiers in the historic battle between the primary and secondary cultural thrusts, between the democratic spirit and the forces of corporate capital.

Williams’ visionary loners come in the context of the period’s interest in representative figures and representative types. Williams and his peers especially featured the Puritan as the figure most responsible for shaping

American economic and social structures, thus making it a convenient foil to these authors' preferred cultural types and figures. Williams, Brooks, Frank, Lawrence, and Parrington all sought to drive Puritan "terror" from the land. Williams saw our fearful withdrawal from contact with reality originating in the Puritans. While Brooks and Frank did not develop their analyses around fear, reference withholding, or posit the same broader emotive and economic stances that Williams did, they did attribute a profound contemporary relevance to the emblematic type of the Puritan and identify an inherent stance of withdrawal in the Puritan legacy. For all of these writers, including Williams, the Puritan was the origin of a culture of corporate capital, responsible for a society fixated on the money-chase.

For Brooks, the Puritans "have always divided American life" between "the current of Transcendentalism, originating in the piety of the Puritans, . . . [and] the current of catchpenny opportunism, originating in the practical shifts of Puritan life" (Coming 8-9). The result was an "impersonal" and "[d]essicated culture at one end and stark utility at the other," that "created a deadlock in the American mind (14). Brooks would resolve this dilemma in America's Coming of Age by substituting a pro-social "self-fulfillment" for mere "economic self-assertion" to find some "middle plane between vaporous idealism and self-interested practicality" (32-4).

Frank, too, developed a Puritan thesis. Frank shared Williams' sense that the "early colonies lived in an unending beat of danger," enclosed by a "hostile people, a savage continent" (19). But where Williams used the

pioneer type in figures like Boone and Houston to illustrate “contact,” Frank positioned the pioneer as an extension of the Puritan. The harshness of the land necessitated of both an almost masochistic withholding from themselves. The “ferocity of the Puritan,” he argued, “prepares the Pioneer,” teaching the “sweets of austerity” and revealing how a “self-denying life” can alone enable the energy needed to confront a “virgin and hostile continent” (Frank 63). Here was the fear, the withdrawal and withholding, that Williams drew out of the Puritan past. Frank saw, too, the broader emotive, economic stance of taking. “Every narrowing instinct of self-preservation and acquisition,” Frank claimed, “tended to make them intolerant, materialistic, unaesthetic” (19). With Puritan moralism as a basis for commerce, the Puritan became obsessed with “material and practical exertion,” a man “innerly locked up, outwardly released,” with “no immediate need to consult either his social or spiritual senses” (20). “He was conscious,” Frank asserted, using Jack London as a contemporary analogue, “of the external world merely as a fact to be traversed, as material to be exploited” (36). “The culture of Puritanism,” Frank declared, drawing the lineage from Puritan, to pioneer, to industrialist,

for all its rigidity and dogma, had been a living thing. It met the resources of America and American Industrialism was the issue. The Puritan ways of life and thought and measure were taken over. They fitted the new, more vigorous, more realistic pioneering form. American Industrialism is the new Puritanism, the true Puritanism of our day. (98)

Frank was not the only one to focus on the type of the pioneer. Brooks lamented the “sheer impetus and groundswell of an antiquated pioneering spirit” which left Americans “with no means of personal outlet except a continued economic self-assertion” (Coming 31).

Where D.H. Lawrence called “a pillar of dollars . . . all the God the grandsons of the Pilgrim Fathers have left” (10), V.L.Parrington envisioned capitalism not as the degraded remnant of, but as the seed inherent in, the Puritan movement. He defined the English Puritan revolution as “primarily a rebellion of the capable middle class,” that produced “the system of capitalism and the system of parliamentary government” (Main Currents 1:7). The Puritans, Parrington argued, were responsible, finally, for transplanting a mercantilist vision to the New World, even if it was initially part of a larger egalitarian struggle for the “natural rights” of man over the divine right of monarchs.

Williams, using a slightly different tack from Parrington, Brooks, Frank and the others, examined the Puritans mostly through their Indian-consorting counterparts, Thomas Morton and Pere Sebastian Rasles. The former alienated the Plymouth Colony by his trade of guns, alcohol and beaver pelts with the natives. The latter, a French Jesuit missionary, lived with the Indians for over thirty years. Williams described him as “to the north, another force, equal to the Puritans but of opposite character” (Grain 116). Aside from his analysis of Franklin as a sort of secularized Puritan, Williams devoted only one chapter of In the American Grain to a Puritan authority,

Cotton Mather. Interestingly, Williams contained Mather by sandwiching him between the chapters on Morton and Rasles. The Mather chapter represents the only segment of In the American Grain comprised entirely of primary text, suggesting the complete, and more significantly, the completely closed, world view of this famous Puritan elder.

For Williams, the Puritans exhibited foremost an “inhuman clarity” (Grain 112). They offset visionary figures’ “apprehension of detail” by how they were “blind to every contingency, mashing Indian, child and matron into one *safe* mold” (112, emphasis in original). Finding only “emptiness” in this world, they were “precluded from SEEING the Indian” as anything other than “an unformed PURITAN” (113, emphasis in original). Williams evoked the tremendous “cost” of such emptiness – “the *immorality* of such a concept, the inhumanity, the brutalizing effect upon their own minds, on their SPIRITS – they never suspected” (113, emphasis in original). Ultimately, Williams condemned the Puritans by explicitly linking blindness and immorality, which are the exact opposite of the detailed eye and superior moral position of the visionaries. “Blind seeds,” the poet declared, “filled with the baleful beauty of their religion: an IMMORAL source” (113, emphasis in original). Just as Boone’s and Rasles’ contact with the Indians best revealed their embrace of the New World, so the Puritan’s intolerant recoil from the Indians best exemplified their blindness and inhumanity. “Never could they have comprehended,” declared Williams,

that it would be, that it WAS, black deceit for them to condemn Indian sins, while *they* cut the ground from under the Indian’s feet without

acknowledging so much as his existence. The immorality, I say, of such an attitude never becomes apparent to them To them it was as nothing to desecrate the chief's mother's grave, in the name of sanctity pulling up the stakes, to shock the spirit of native reverence. (113-14)

"[T]hey knew only to keep their eyes blinded," Williams added (112). "They must have closed all the world out," he explained – "the enormity of their task . . . enforced it" (112).

The Puritans, "encitadeled" in their habits and hymns, then, represented miserly withdrawal and blindness; their stance was one of inhumanity and immorality. Williams called this their "colossal restraint," their poverty and miserliness amidst New World riches. They could find "no ground to build on, with a ground all blossoming about them – under their noses" (Grain 114). "Clipped in mind," they would not permit, even perhaps "could not afford to allow their senses to wander any more than they could allow a member of their company to wander from the precinct of the church" (111). Williams acknowledged a certain "beauty" in their "firmness," (111), but he lamented that "[t]heir religious zeal, mistaken for a thrust up toward the sun, was a stroke in, in, in – not toward germination but the confinements of a tomb" (Grain 66).

Williams characterized the Puritans in economic terms, calling their approach to making a life in the New World, paradoxically, "a possession of the incomplete" (Grain 114). He meant that their miserly withholding from this world in general, and the New World in particular, made them impoverished despite the riches that surrounded them. For all that they

achieved, settling the New World under the harshest and most adverse conditions, Williams noted their eventual bankruptcy – “instead of growing,” they “looked black at the world and damning its perfections praised a zero in themselves” (Grain 65).

Williams believed that the Puritans’ blindness and withdrawal persisted in the powerful hold of custom and tradition for many people in his own time. The poor were treated as “cockroaches, and not human beings who may want what we have in such abundance,” he claimed, recalling the Puritans’ recoil from the Indian (Grain 176). Fear of contact made, he believed, for class, racial, and religious intolerance. It made his countrymen eschew what Williams called “a harder personal devotion” – “[d]o not serve another,” he warned us, “for you might have to TOUCH him and he might be a JEW or a NIGGER” (177, emphasis in original). Sexual mores, of course, also appeared to Williams to derive from Puritan fear. American girls were schooled to believe that their sexuality was “fundamentally *wrong*” (183, emphasis in original). Where “a woman from Adrianople might be taught not that it is *wrong* to give herself but that murder will follow it, or that it is a dangerous gift to be given *rarely*” the American girl is made to feel a “low thing” and the “*color* of her deed” is made “unprofitable, it scrapes off the *bloom* of the gift” (183, emphasis in original).

“If the Puritans have damned us with their abstinence, removal from the world, denial,” declared Williams,

slowly we are forced within ourselves upon an emptiness which cannot be supplied, -- this IS the soul, according to their tenets. Lost

in this (and its environments) as in a forest, I do believe the average American to be an Indian, but an Indian robbed of his world. (Grain 128)

Not surprising, Williams felt that Puritan withdrawal, driven by fear, tragically co-opted and bankrupted an entire culture. The “zero” was now within ourselves, and ironically, his fellow citizens compensated through the “accumulation of great staying wealth” (Grain 128). Withdrawal and fear, then, for Williams were integral to, and enabled, a stance of taking, of exploitation. Thus, even George Washington “[e]ncitadeled, . . . keeper of the stillness” and “wild paths” “within himself,” contained the primary within himself and exhibited “a profound spirit of resignation before life’s rich proposals which disarmed him” (140). He was “curiously alive to the need of dainty waistcoats, lace and kid gloves, in which to cover that dangerous rudeness” (140-41). Moreover, Ben Franklin, the “dike keeper” against contact with the primary, “adaged [men] into a kind of pride in possession” (154-55).

The Puritans’ stance of miserly withdrawal from the New World was absorbed by the generations that followed. “The dreadful and curious thing” was how the Puritans would “deceive themselves and all the despoiled of the world into their sorry beliefs” (Grain 65). They were the great cultural homogenizers of the New World – they were like cultural real-estate developers, and, sadly, they “would succeed in making everything like themselves” (63). It was “sordid that a rich world should follow apathetically

after,” making the Puritan’s “misfortune . . . a malfeasant ghost that dominates us all” (65-66).

Puritans were not the only category of New World types. Williams, in fact, was unique among his contemporaries for employing a broader range of representative figures, particularly by occupation and nationality. He filled his historical narrative with Red Eric and Spanish explorers like Columbus, Cortez, Ponce de Leon, and DeSoto. Included, too, were the French explorer Champlain, and the French missionary Rasles. Pioneers Daniel Boone and Sam Houston had a role as did politicians Aaron Burr, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. In the American Grain even included a fictional Indian squaw, Jacataqua, and the Naval hero John Paul Jones.

Williams’ unique focus was a natural corollary of his aesthetic, the way in which he viewed history as a choir of voices and visions in the New World. His focus on explorers, moreover, was a necessary outgrowth of his interest in contact, touch – that first moment of encounter and the “torsion of spirit” that it imposed. Williams’ choice of such varied types and figures enabled his unique aesthetic affects and will be explored further in the next chapter.

By contrast, Lawrence devoted only a single chapter of Studies in Classic American Literature to a non-Englishman, Hector St. John Crèvecoeur. Parrington, too, omitted French, Spanish, and Indian explorers and missionaries, focusing instead on a wide range of English and American religious, political, and artistic leaders in his three-volume work, Main Currents in American Thought. In addition, Frank and Brooks, being writers

and, particularly, critics, often made artists their representative figures while Williams included E.A. Poe as the only literary figure of In the American Grain. While Williams identified the poet as a social regenerator in "Revolutions Revalued," he did not harbor illusions that the artist was the primary historical visionary or mover. A clue as to the difference between Williams and his contemporaries may be found as well in Book Three of Paterson, where the poet desperately seeks to escape the library. The greatest value resided not in the shelved literary and other works but in the drama of the mind's adaptation to reality in the present moment and in shaping an aesthetic to facilitate that adaptation and contact.

* * * * *

Let us turn, then, to Williams' and his progressive peers' visionaries. These were the men who, alive to their own moment, rose above the "sordidness of a grabbing world" (Essays 167). For Williams, these figures' unusual receptivity and their capacity to "touch," to "marry," to make "contact" with the primary comprised the counter-weight to the Puritans' emotive and economic stance of taking and withholding. Williams' visionaries are found primarily in In the American Grain. They are statesmen like Burr and Lincoln; backwoodsmen like Boone and Houston; explorers like Champlain, de Soto, Ponce de Leon, Cortez and Columbus; a Jesuit missionary, Rasles; a wayward Puritan, Thomas Morton, and even, by virtue of their barely contained primal energy, colonists like Washington and Franklin. All of these men were seminal figures in the ongoing struggle between the primary,

democratic spirit and the secondary culture, and Williams would have us recognize them as parts of a usable past and a contemporary model.

Like Parrington, Frank, and others, Williams' representative figures, in contrast to the acquisitive, miserly culture around them, were notable for their lack of economic motivation and their opposition to monopoly. They were, in short, voluptuaries who possessed the artist's tender eye for detail, truth-telling and moral directness. Cut from a mold different from the vast majority of their countrymen and the powers that manipulated the masses for their own gain, these representative figures typically ended up dispossessed, tragically lonely and lost figures in the American tableau. Frank, Brooks and others shared and were even inspired by Williams' identification of the economic, emotive stances of giving and taking, sharing and withholding even if they did not highlight "touch" and contact in the same way. But the significance accorded to their own emblematic figures tended to be either more political (e.g., in the case of Parrington) or more overtly spiritual (e.g., in the case of Frank's depiction of Thoreau and Lincoln).

Williams raised Columbus' lack of economic motivation almost immediately. "Weep for me," Columbus asserted,

whoever has charity, truth, justice. I did not come out on this voyage to gain myself honor and wealth; . . . I went to your Highnesses with honest purpose of heart and sincere zeal in your cause. I humbly beseech your Highnesses, that if it please God to rescue me from this place, you will graciously sanction my pilgrimage to Rome and other holy places. (Grain 16)

At the heart of the colonial expedition, then, resided the pure heart of the discoverer, at least as Williams would have it. In contrast, Columbus'

adversaries were “closer to that curious *self-interest* of natural things than he” (Grain 10, emphasis added). Columbus had obtained a promise to be named “Chief Admiral of the Ocean Sea, perpetual Viceroy and Governor of all the islands and continents” that he should discover (9). But, according to Williams, Columbus’ cut of “all and every kind of merchandise” was but a “tenth part of the whole” (10). Furthermore, Columbus would “for the balance of his whole life, follo[w] his fortune, whose flower, unknown to him, was past,” and, in the end, he would retain nothing of the vast riches he found (9).

In similar fashion, Champlain, “asks one favor only of the king, a monopoly of the fur trade for three years” (Grain 70). Again, this claim was somewhat modest considering both the extreme hazards brooked and the exorbitant riches tapped for future generations. Neither did Thomas Morton, the wayward Puritan who broke with the Puritan elders over his consorting with the Indians at Merry Mount, seek great riches. Williams, rather, construed Morton as counteracting the hypocrisy by which the white settlers monopolized arms and liquor and Williams asked why, in light of the white monopoly, it “was . . . in the eyes of history *wrong* for Morton to use them for his trade” (76, emphasis in original). Morton was the first trust-buster – who, for his efforts, got captured and sent back to England. Williams argued that the “fantastic violence” and “duplicity” with which the Puritans disassembled Merry Mount related less to their moral objections to Morton consorting with the Indians and more to their having another monopoly, “the trade in beaver skins[,] in view” (80).

Other visionaries or voluptuaries were also not economically motivated. Thus, Boone, driven by the

mountains . . . to be crossed and a new and unexplored country, invested with every beauty, every danger, every incident that could amuse the imagination or quicken action, . . . learned even better than before that neither roof, nor house, nor bed was necessary to existence. (Grain 132)

Where others would “pull off pieces to themselves from the fat of the new bounty,” Boone, “[p]assionate and thoroughly *given*” to the New World, “avoided the half logic of stealing from the immense profusion” (136, emphasis added). This stance was the moral and aesthetic counter-weight to the acquisitive, exploitive stance of his countrymen. Poe, too, given to the New World, “abhorred the ‘excessively opportune,’” and opposed the “mood as ever dominant among us[,] [t]ake what you can get” (Grain 227, 220).

This resonates with Parrington’s description of Poe as coming to “shipwreck on the reef of American materialisms” (2: 58). It recalls as well Frank’s evocation of Thoreau as detecting “the deep hostility between the American’s faith of ‘business’ and life” and of uncovering “the false passions of possessiveness” (155). Frank’s depiction of Lincoln as a “mystic” and “saint” (51) who “prophesies the break from the materialistic culture of pioneer America: personifies the emergence from it of a poetic and religious experience” is written in the same vein (56). Pound also evoked in Canto 34 Andrew Jackson’s voluntary divestiture of stock to avoid a conflict of interest:

I called upon Nicholas Biddle . . . and recd. two dividends
of my bank stock as I might be called to take part in
public measures I wished to divest myself
of all personal interest Nov. 9. '31. (34:169)

The quest for wealth did not drive men like Red Eric, Rasles, Boone, Burr, Champlain and Morton because they were voluptuaries who were impassioned to “touch” the primary, and did not regard the New World as a commodity to be exploited. Thus, In the American Grain commences with Red Eric’s immersion in primary pleasures. “Eric loves his friends, loves bed, loves food, loves the hunt, loves his sons,” we are told.

He is a man than can throw a spear, take a girl, steer a ship, till the soil, plant, care for cattle, skin a fox, sing, dance, run, wrestle, climb, swim like a seal. A man to plan an expedition and pay for it, kill an enemy, take his way through fog, a snowstorm, read a reckoning by the stars, live in a stench, drink foul water, withstand the fierce cold, the black of winter and come to a new country with a hundred men and found them there. (Grain 2)

Boone was likewise immersed in the primary and removed from the mannered, monied classes on the seaboard. “There was, thank God,” Williams declared,

a great voluptuary born to the American settlements against the niggardliness of the damming puritanical tradition; one who by the single logic of his passion, which he rested on the savage life about him, destroyed at its spring that spiritually withering plague. (Grain 130)

Boone’s unity of purpose, his wholeness of being, the way in which “logic” and “passion” become one in him, was expressed in his solitary ecstatic immersion in the wilderness for three months. It was what Williams calls the “great ecstatic moment of his life’s affirmation” (136). Boone was “possessed . . . wholly” by the “beauty of a lavish, primitive embrace in savage, wild beast

and forest rising above the cramped life about him" (136). "Filled," Williams declared of Boone,

with the wild beauty of the New World to over-brimming so long as he had what he desired, to bathe in, to explore always more deeply, to see, to feel, to touch – his instincts were contented. Sensing a limitless fortune which daring could make his own, he sought only with primitive lust to grow close to it, to understand it and to be part of its mysterious movements – like an Indian. And among all the colonists, like an Indian, the ecstasy of complete possession of the new country was his alone. In Kentucky he would stand, a lineal descendent of Columbus on the beach at Santo Domingo, walking up and down with eager eyes. (137)

Boone was a case study in the visionary's nature. In sharp contrast to the Puritans' abstinence and withdrawal, which was a fearful reaction to absorption and obliteration by the New World, Boone gave himself voluptuously to it. He plunged in like the Spanish explorers who, Williams says, in contrast to the "parsimoniou[s] . . . slender Puritan fashion, . . . gave magnificently, with a generous sweep" (108). In attaining a "new wedding" with the new land, Boone, "because of a descent to the ground of his desire," remained "loaded with power . . . to strengthen every form of energy that would be *voluptuous*, passionate, possessive in that place which he opened" (Grain 136, emphasis added). Part of Boone's passionate immersion was revealed in his appreciation of the Indian as "a natural expression of the place, the Indian himself as 'right,' the flower of his world" (138).

Boone's apprehension of the appropriate centrality of the Indian reprised Pere Sebastian Rasles' similar sense in the prior chapter and established their joint superior moral position in Williams' New World schema. Frank made the same argument about Thoreau, noting that he

“almost alone among the cultured citizens of New England, prized the spiritual riches of the Indians” and “spent long months” with them at a time (154-55). Williams depicted Rasles, who lived with the Indians from 1689 to 1723, and described him in the same voluptuary terms as he characterized Boone. Rasles and the New World he saw were a “living flame compared to [the Puritans’] dead ash” (Grain 120). Rasles was “a spirit, rich, blossoming, generous, able to give and receive, . . . a new spirit in the New World” (120). Just as Boone’s contact with the “raw new” (“Background” 138) held a “moral and aesthetic” dimension, so too did Rasles’ contact (Grain 136). “Already the flower is turning up its petals,” Williams added, suggesting the reciprocity between Rasles and the New World – “It is *this* to be *moral*; to be *positive*, to be peculiar, to be sure, generous, brave – To MARRY, to *touch* – to *give* because one HAS, not because one has nothing” (Grain 121, emphasis in original). Alluding to Rasles’ life with the Indians, Williams added: “And to give to him who HAS, who will join, who will make, who will fertilize, who will be like you yourself: to create, to hybridize, to crosspollenize, -- not to sterilize, to draw back, to fear, to dry up, to rot” (Grain 121, emphasis in original). This was the counterweight to the “tight tied littleness” (110) of the Puritans and their “very ugly,” even inhuman and immoral, recoil from contact with the New World (119).

Williams likened Rasles and other visionaries to artists for their capacity to attain a reciprocity with the New World, to share and to give rather than take or withhold. This is not surprising given Williams’ vision of

the artist's regenerative function. If we recall Pound's insistence, published by Williams in Contact, on finding "men who can think with some clarity," the imagery around artistic sight and insight resonates further. We have already seen how Williams lauded Boone's "voluptuous," "passionate" embrace of the land, and his recognition of the "aesthetic" dimensions of the "difficulty" of grappling with the New World (Grain 136). But Williams went further, evoking Boone's "clear eye" and "symmetrical and instinctive . . . understanding" (137). Rasles, too, "could open [his] eyes and heart to the New World," contended Williams (120). "Contrasted with the Protestant *acts* [original emphasis], dry and splitting," he added, "those of Pere Rasles were striking in their tenderness, devotion, insight and *detail of apprehension*" (121, emphasis). "For everything his fine sense, blossoming, thriving, opening, reviving – not shutting out – was tuned" (121). Providing an account of artistic receptivity to our environment, Williams continued:

Nothing shall be ignored. All shall be included. The world is parcel of the Church so that every leaf, every vein in every leaf, the throbbing of the temples is of that mysterious flower. Here is *richness*, here is *color*, here is *form* . . . – his passion held him a slave to the New World, he strove to sound its mettle. (Grain 121, emphasis added)

Williams evoked Champlain in similar terms. "To me there is a world of pleasure," he declared,

in *watching* just that Frenchman, just Champlain, like no one else about him, *watching*, keeping the whole thing within him with amost [sic] a woman's tenderness – but such an energy for detail – a love of the *exact detail* – *watching* that little boat drawing nearer on that icy bay. (Grain 70, emphasis added)

When Champlain and his men later “arrive at the selected place” for where “Quebec shall stand,” Williams noted again Champlain’s eye for detail:

how carefully he has noted every island, every tree almost upon the way and how his imagination has run west and south and north with the stories of the Indians, surmising peoples, mountains, lakes, some day to be discovered, with the greatest accuracy He knew our North Atlantic coast from end to end . . . [a]nd in addition, had left charts, maps, colored drawings . . . that are priceless now. (Grain 71-72)

The voluptuaries’ “detail of apprehension” was revealed as well in Williams’ account of De Soto. “She,” the speaking persona that Williams has given to the New World, tells the conquistador that “[n]one but you” “will recognize” the “native villages, swamps, . . . outlandish names” that the Spaniards will encounter on their trek. “To the rest without definition,” “She” explained, “but to you each a thing in itself, delicate, pregnant with sudden meanings” (Grain 46). This it is, then, to be giving, sharing – it is as much or more an emotional than an economic stance.

Williams’ contemporaries frequently attributed qualities of vision and even an eye for detail to passionate representative figures. The figures’ passion was usually political and occasionally spiritual. Parrington commented on Thomas Paine’s “keen eye for realities” (1: 331) and Frank lauded Lincoln’s “penetrating mind” and “his grasp of material details” (52). Lincoln, Frank declared, “had become full of a great vision” (53) and he rescued a practical world of reason by moving “at the behest of impulse, motive, vision beyond its domain” (51). Vision was what Brooks contended that Whitman brought to America – giving to the “nation a certain focal centre

[sic] in the consciousness of its own character" (119). Parrington, too, invoked passionate vision as a key characteristic of his sympathetic representative figures. Roger Williams, who broke with the Plymouth Colony and founded Rhode Island as a haven for tolerance, was a "transcendental mystic" and "forerunner of Emerson" who "lived in the realm of ideas" (1: 62, 64).

Critically, the most notable fact of Williams' and his peers' schema was that the visionaries he highlighted were necessarily, tragically, loners. They were at odds with what Williams called, in his 1935 review of "Pound's *Eleven New Cantos*," the mainstream culture's "murderous business" of usury. It is clear that this did not comprise merely an economic position. Williams exposed, as well, the visionaries' emotional reality, characterizing them as very much "alone" (Essays 167). Part of the isolation of the visionaries was found in how they were betrayed, dispossessed, deceived, exploited, and finally obscured, lost, and buried. They were ultimately thoroughly besieged, disowned, "done in," by commercial powers and the mass of men the economic engine manipulated. Parrington, for instance, saw Poe finding "few congenial spirits in a world of more substantial things" (2: 58). "Homogenous America," Frank declared, "had no thirst for [Thoreau's] simple statement" (153). Lincoln "moved through a doubting, wrangling world and he alone kept the faith. His greatest trial was his own people" (Frank 53). Parrington depicted John Adams as a loner who was rewarded with "personal unpopularity beyond any other" (1: 307). And

Pound in Canto 62 echoed Parrington, reproducing what appears to be Adams' own lament, recorded in his diary, of the sacrifices he incurred in serving in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia: "Integrity rewarded with obloquy" (62: 348).

In the American Grain illustrated on nearly every page the dispossession of Williams' representative figures, which constituted a betrayal of the primary and democratic ethos that they represented through their "contact" and "touch." On the book's very first page, in fact, Red Eric opposed his "single strength" to the "crookedness of their law" (Grain 1). The cultural authorities "in effect have the power, by hook or by crook" and the bishops "lie and falsify the records, make me out to be what I am not – for their own ends" (1). As Red Eric runs from Norway to Iceland to Greenland, the thought that "it only should be mine, cuts deep[,] . . . [a]nd it takes it out of my taste that the choice is theirs" (3). "I have the rough of it," added Eric, "not because I will it, but because it is all that is left, a remnant from their coatcloth. This is the gall on the meat" (3). Boone similarly resented the "chicanery of the law" by which, in his old age, "every last acre of the then prosperous homestead he had at last won for himself after years of battle in the new country" was taken (139). "Boone's lands would be stolen away from him by aid of unscrupulous land speculators with influence in Congress," Williams added in "The American Background" (145). In similar fashion, Columbus ended up with nothing, lacking even a roof over his head, and Sir Walter Raleigh saw the Queen desert him (61).

The visionary loners regularly were betrayed for money, power, or both. Thus, we often find a specific property dispute at the center of the visionary's life story. "Fate," in the form of those greedy mutineers "dogged" Champlain (Grain 72). Champlain was not the only visionary to so suffer. Red Eric recognized himself as "a marked man" – "from that man one steals at will" (2). Eric knew that when he killed Thorgest's two sons in a struggle to reclaim his own property that they would brand him. They have "separated murder into two parts and fastened the worse on me" (2-3). Columbus' story may be less bloody but the betrayal stings just the same – "Again and again he calls before his mind their agreements" (9). "[H]is fellows turned against him like wild beasts," Williams declared of Columbus (11). When a local rebellion broke out in Puerto Rico, then governor Bobadilla helped himself to Columbus' Santo Domingo home, "appropriated everything to himself" and, despite Columbus' welcome imprisoned him and sent him back to Spain in this pathetic state (12). All of this, of course, had the imprimatur of power – "I restrained myself when I learned for certain from the friars that your Highnesses had sent him" (12).

But it was not only the monied and powerful who disowned Williams' visionaries. Red Eric's own family converted to Christianity, deserting their father's pagan, primary Gods to join the power structure of his enemies. "Why not?" he asked – "Promise the weak strength and have the strength of a thousand weak at your bidding. Thorhild bars me, godless, from her bed. Both sons she wins to it. Lief and Thorstein both Christians. And this is what

they say: Eric, son of evil, come and be forgiven. – Let her build a church and sleep in it” (Grain 4). Being a “marked man” like Red Eric, Columbus lamented that “there is no one so vile but thinks he may insult me” (11). This was almost “natural” and “as much a part of the scheme,” Williams declared (11).

Like Columbus, Washington, Jefferson, and Poe suffered the fate of tragic loners – they felt their fellow men, the populace, turn on them. The first two felt how the “whole crawling mass gnaws on them – hates them” and they were “the typical sacrifice to the mob” (Grain 143). For more obvious reasons, Poe and the masses eyed each other suspiciously – “Gape at him they did, and he at them in amazement. Afterward with mutual hatred; he in disgust, they in mistrust” (Grain 226). Refracting this conflict through its aesthetic dimensions, Williams evoked in contrast to the masses’ words “hung by usage with associations,” Poe’s own constant

labo[r] to detach SOMETHING [original emphasis] from the inchoate mass He sought by stress upon construction to hold the loose-strung mass off even at the cost of an icy coldness of appearance, . . . to get from sentiment to *form*, a backstroke from the swarming ‘population.’ (221, emphasis added)

In a nation co-opted by capital and a secondary culture, visionaries could not help but be estranged, obscured loners. The visionary’s distance from his public – in Poe’s case the distance from their words which he recognized as “the pleasing wraiths of former masteries” – speaks to this deeper cultural dilemma. “Americans have never recognized themselves” and for that reason Poe is “unrecognized” (Grain 226). The distance

between Poe and his fellow countrymen, or between other visionaries and their own contemporaries, then, directly reflected how “we recognize no ground our own” and float on the “unstudied character of our beginnings” (109). Visionaries, with their unique ability to touch and make contact, inspired – or at the very least, have carried the weight of – their contemporaries’ and even subsequent generations’ fear of the primary. It was on this fundamental basis, Williams felt, that our visionaries comprised an almost secret history, that they were “now lost in chaos of borrowed titles, many of them inappropriate, . . . nameless under an old misappellation” (Grain Preface). Thus, “Poe must suffer by his originality” (Grain 226).

“Invent that which is new,” Williams declared,

even if it be made of pine from your own yard, and there’s none to know what you have done. It is because there’s no *name*. This is the cause of Poe’s lack of recognition. He was American. He was the astounding, inconceivable growth of his locality . . . As with all else in America, the value of Poe’s genius to OURSELVES must be *uncovered* from our droppings. (226, 219, emphasis in original)

In similar fashion, Sir Walter Raleigh, “alone with genius (Grain 62),” was identified as “this undersong” (59). Whitman, Poe, Houston – they all know that they “must sink first” and then “[a]ll have to come from under and through a dead layer” of an “unrelated culture stuccoed upon” and obscuring the “primitive destiny of the land” (212-13). “[W]hat Burr stood for – and . . . this is typical of us – is lost sight of in the calumny that surrounds his name; through which the truth is not so easily to be discovered. Let us dig and . . . see what is turned up – and name it if we can” (196).

"The American Background" traced the trajectory of the visionaries in a condensed, even starker manner. "It is the actuality of their lives, and its tragic effect on them, which is illuminating," Williams claimed:

The significance of Boone and of the others of his time and trade was that they abandoned touch with those along the coast, and their established references, . . . All of them, when they did come back to the settlements, found themselves strangers. Houston, as late as at Lincoln's time, lived apart from his neighbors, wearing a catskin vest, whittling a stick and thinking. But the reason underlying this similarity of action . . . is not that they were outmoded but rather defeated in a curious way which baffled them Such men, right thinking, but prey to isolation by the forces surrounding them, became themselves foreigners – in their own country They themselves became part of the antagonistic wilderness against which the coastal settlements were battling. Their sadness alone survives. ("Background" 140-41)

Ultimately, "disarmed by the success of their softer-living neighbors," visionaries like Boone and Houston end up "oddly cut . . . off from the others" by virtue of their own "adjustment to the conditions about them" ("Background" 141).

The visionaries' fate recalls Paul Mariani's observation that "it was true from the start [that] the new consciousness" of Columbus and others "was subjected to the shock of misinformation, lies, myths incapable of sustaining the mind" (New World 283). It was for this reason that Williams cherished the "importance of naming things correctly, of seeing what was there and of possessing one's birthright" – and here's the critical part, "with as little interference as possible from the special interest groups – the law, the church, the school, the economic structures" (283). So it was that Williams warned us that our secret history must not be buried. "History must stay open, . . . we should guard it doubly from the interlopers," he contended

(Grain 189). To bury Burr and the others of the visionary company under stones of economic self-interest may be to erase “our one hope for the future,” he claimed (190). Looking beyond corporate capital, then, Williams urged us to preserve the liberty that Burr and others embody. “The good which history should have preserved,” Williams declared of Burr, “it tortures. A country is not free, is not what it pretends to be, unless it leave a vantage open (in tradition) for that which Burr possessed in such remarkable degree” (197).

Williams’ warning recalls his earlier assertion, in reference to Thomas Morton, that “in history, to preserve things of ‘little importance’ may be more valuable – as it is more difficult and more the business of a writer – than to champion a winner” (Grain 76). That is, valuing just those things that have been dispossessed and buried may be the most significant thing we can do and the most critical part of our cultural and historical selves that we can recover. Re-possessing our birthright from the corporate capital elite required this kind of adjustment in our history writing, in what we preserve and bring to the forefront. Thus, we must show how “the cultural place” that Boone and others “occupy is the significant one” (“Background” 140). As both emotive and economic models, Boone’s and other voluptuaries’ stance toward the New World of giving and sharing, of receptivity and reciprocal contact, would, Williams hoped, offer us much greater rewards than the Puritans’ stance of taking and withholding.

Chapter IV: Without “intermediate authority:” the Primary, the Democratic and Williams’ Participatory Aesthetics

Somehow when we put a book down, we forget that while we were reading, *it* was moving (pages turning, lines receding into the past) and forget too that *we* were moving with it.
- Stanley Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts (401)

Of mixed ancestry, I felt from earliest childhood that America was the only home I could ever possibly call my own . . . expressly founded for me, personally, and that it must be my first business in life to possess it; that only by making it my own from the beginning to my own day, in detail, should I ever have a basis for knowing where I stood.
- William Carlos Williams, Selected Letters (185)

Never before has the historical writer been in position so favorable as now for bringing the past into such intimate relations with the present that they shall seem one, and shall flow and merge into our own personal history.
- James Harvey Robinson, "The Newer Ways of Historians" (255)

‘They say, they say, they say. Ah, my child, how long are you going to continue to use those dreadful words? Those two little words have done more harm than all others. Never use them, my dear, never use them.’
- William Carlos Williams, In the American Grain (207)

In the previous chapter, I have examined how Williams reverses power relations to make economic enterprise the reflection of powerful underlying humanistic and emotive forces. We turn now to consider the often idiosyncratic aesthetic techniques that Williams employed to make his affective economics resonate with readers in new and powerful ways even as he wrote history based on many of the same economic and historical premises that informed the polemics of the progressive historians and liberal literary critics.

My central thesis in this chapter is that Williams crafted an inherently democratic, participatory aesthetic in which the reader is constantly called upon to choose between democratic versus capitalist impulses, touch versus withdrawal, and primary versus secondary culture. Williams’ aesthetic

encoded a democratic stance by how he manipulated primary source material, first continuously to confront us with this essential conflict, and second, to compel us to stake a claim in this ongoing economic, political and cultural battle. As we are exposed to a diverse range of historical figures and contexts arrayed around these binaries, we have to evaluate the competing players and cultures that people the New World, decide between classic economic versus humanistic valuations as cultures collide in the Americas, and identify the history in us and ourselves in the history. The complex and skillful aesthetic by which Williams manipulated primary texts to ensure our participation in history or history writing reveals that the drama of reading, itself, forms the heart of Williams' concern.

This participatory aesthetic was no accident, but rather perfectly complemented and underwrote the poet's affective economics. Williams' affective economics revealed how the capitalist machine that's co-opted America through secondary culture and money-madness in fact relied on a deeper human and emotive drama of fear and withdrawal. The implication is that, if we can see this, we can correct for it and alter our course. The active role implicit in Williams' affective economics is called forth and made explicit by the very reading process that Williams structures. As he develops his affective economics Williams simultaneously immerses us in a participatory aesthetic that seeks to awaken us, to make us now suddenly active in the reading, and by the decisions and judgments that we must make for ourselves, in the writing, of our history and our culture.

If culture has been co-opted as Williams detailed in "The American Background" and In the American Grain, if there had been a loss of individual liberty and initiative as he described in "Revolutions Revalued," Williams hands initiative and control back to us. The participatory aesthetic can only be described as the stylistic corollary of his focus on primary culture and the democratic impulse. Writing history becomes a humanistic enterprise that privileges writer and reader, now, in their own contemporary moment. Williams' history, then, places the writer – and the reader – at the center of the history, at the center of the history that gets written. It thereby enables us to write the self and culture into clarity. History is transformed from the province of the academic or elitist historian into a democratic enterprise that the reader must navigate and judge for himself. Individual initiative of writer and reader shape and re-shape the historical narrative. Nothing could be more inclusive, more anti-monopolistic, than to awaken the sodden mass to the poet's now shared, now democratized, responsibility to act as a "social regenerator."

Williams achieves all of this by means of a far-reaching and multi-faceted kineticism, reflected in three particular aspects of his aesthetic. This chapter will consider each in turn. First, the kineticism resides in the aesthetic construction of the work itself. Williams' aesthetic enacts an anti-monopolistic view of art that undercuts stasis and accumulation by use of multiple characters and perspectives. It also manipulates primary source material to structure the reader's experience, specifically by making the New

World speak, offering invented dialogue between actual historical figures, staging debates and cleverly playing off of large verbatim passages.

Second, the kineticism is found in the very terminology of valuation used to capture the wealth and promise of the New World. Williams' aesthetic effects a series of economic redistributions based on, for instance, using economic language for non-economic purposes, and contextualizing wealth. Third, the kineticism inheres in how Williams' aesthetic would have us place ourselves in the history – and the history in ourselves. A series of revelatory encounters with our past and ourselves model a stance of responsiveness and adaptation for Williams' readers that replicates the visionaries' own determination to assert their relation to immediate conditions.

In each of these aspects, Williams' aesthetic is characterized by the use of language as a tool of primary experience that shifts us away from secondary culture, and from a reliance on cultural authorities. Rather than lecturing or trying to inspire readers, Williams uses language to create vision and experience at multiple levels simultaneously. His writing enacts the calls of his progressive peers for a "new history" and a "usable past." He thus extends the potential of language itself to begin the process of effecting the renewal, at the level of the *res publica* and *res privata*, that he and other progressives seek. Williams' aesthetic thus compels us to engage our world and ourselves in new ways, and, ultimately, makes us co-creators in fashioning our past and our future. Williams moves beyond polemic or object argument to create an affective aesthetic experience that commands our

participation in a double process of reading and, as we read, writing history. The reading process itself becomes the key.

The kinetic quality of Williams' style holds economic implications as well. It threatens to undercut stasis or the status quo, and it is the opposite of huddling, erecting walls, and of careful thrifty accumulation of wealth and resources. Cultural hegemony, of course, requires stasis, continuity – the illusion that the well-ordered past fits with the naturally sensible order of the present. Williams recognizes that most belief systems tied to the status quo, including religions, “tend . . . to be monopolies . . . to bring . . . man under an economic yoke of one sort or another for the perpetuation of a priesthood – largely predatory in character” (“Against” 216). In this context, the democratic, participatory and kinetic stance of Williams' aesthetic not only returns initiative and meaning-making to the individual, it also substitutes “action on the plane of the whole man” for cultural co-optation and economic monopolization (“Against” 210). Commercial monopoly is displaced by a democratic, humanistic wholeness.

In this way, Williams' participatory aesthetic reflects his broader conception of art and the artist, articulated with specific reference to the war of corporate capital on democratic culture. “We live under attack by various parties against the whole Parties exist,” Williams argues, “to impose such governments. The result is inevitably to cut off and discard that part of the whole which does not come within the order they affect” (“Against” 210-11). But art battles this cultural co-optation and monopolization. It is an

analogue of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: "government of the people, by the people, for the people." "The responsibility of the artist in face of the world is toward inclusion when others sell out to a party," Williams declares (211).

The monopolist seeks to control the whole or that part of greatest economic worth, discarding the rest, but the artist seeks a different kind of possession, a possession of the whole that is for everyone – for it is only the artist who "preserves him in his full sensuality, the man himself" (200). "What does the artist do?," asks Williams (199). "He attacks, constantly toward a full possession of life by himself as a man" (199). Here, then, Williams accomplishes a reversal in power position: "Those who possess the world will have it their way but in the conceit of the artist, generous enough, the actual and necessary government occupies only an incomplete segment of that which is just, in the full sense, and possible" (199).

This recalls, of course, the Puritans' "possession of the incomplete" (Grain 114) contrasted with Boone's "complete possession" (137). It is in this sense, then, that the "artist is to be understood not as occupying some outlying section of the field of action but the whole field, at a different level howbeit from that possessed by grosser modes" ("Against" 197). As a seeker of "sensual 'reality,'" uniquely attuned to the whole of the actual, he is necessarily inclusive (197). This is what Williams means by "liberty" when he speaks of America's independence from England– the drama was not simply one of breaking away, of freedom, but it was a drama of "liberty to partake of, to be included in" (208). "Liberty, in this sense," Williams declares, "has the

significance of inclusion rather than a breaking away, . . . to maintain oneself under adverse weather conditions as still part of the whole" (208-9).

One final introductory word is necessary. The democratic is predicated for Williams on the primary. Williams reminds us in "The American Background" that democracy requires citizens actively engaged with the primary, with their own moment, independent of "all intermediate authority" or "unrelated authority." Williams' kinetic, participatory aesthetic encodes this democratic ethos of deciding for ourselves, be it competing characters, terms of valuation, or identifications; but, this does not happen in a vacuum. Williams arranges and manipulates primary material as any author must do. Bryce Conrad notes that Williams edits and plays with his sources in often peculiar and startling ways. There are strategic compressions and expansions, omissions, intercalations of imagined dialogue, staged debates, and even invented dialogue (including with the land itself). The point is that Williams is, himself, an intermediate authority who fundamentally shapes our reading experience. He manipulates primary source material to create this experience of original texts, all the while interweaving his own commentary on the conflict of the democratic and the capitalist, the primary and the secondary, which he believes to comprise the substance of our past. So even as Williams wants us to judge for ourselves, he is not beyond trying to guide us to corroborate his view of history and of what is at stake. Nevertheless, I think it fair to say that, in contrast to his peers, the very kinetic and participatory nature of Williams' stylistics are open

enough to enable us not simply to accept his formulations but to make our own. The under-determined aesthetic, and this is especially clear in Paterson, requires the reader actively to write the history, to make the connections. In "The American Background" and In the American Grain, for instance, the reader must decide what is significant, must settle debates, must judge which culture's stance toward New World experience to embrace. Williams, then, does not act as an intermediate authority to box the reader in; quite to the contrary, he forces the reader to listen, judge, participate, and decide. Initiative and control are returned to the reader – through the writer, and an inclusive, democratic, anti-monopolistic construction of history and historical meaning is crafted in relation to the readers' own moment. History and legacy are not handed down or received; they are constantly made anew at what critic Bryce Conrad calls the "loci" of each and every reader.

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The first element of Williams' participatory aesthetic involves the aesthetic construction of the work itself. Williams skillfully manipulates primary source material to examine multiple characters and perspectives characterizing American history and to compel readers to consider carefully various historical debates and contrasting stances toward New World experience. Through careful manipulation of primary source material, Williams writes a history that subverts stasis. "[H]e eschews," argues Bryce Conrad in Refiguring America: A Study of William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain*, "the standard practices by which historians create the

illusion of a well-ordered past” (8). Contending that history must stay open, Williams “often plainly reveals the fictive and imaginative character of his construction of the past” and writes a history that is not simply “open to the language of the past, but one that is conscious of itself as language” (8). This sounds a lot like Stanley Fish’s expressed preference for “an acknowledged and controlled subjectivity rather than an objectivity which is finally an illusion” (407). Critic Paul Giles similarly observes that Hart Crane and Williams shared the beliefs of philosopher Alfred North Whitehead and others of their time that reality consists of parts that have “a relative and constantly altering relationship to each other, and each of which modifies the other” (22). In a world in which “‘concrete fact is process,’ all objects become insubstantial and dependent for their existence upon the standpoint of the observer,” who provides a “provisional realism” (22).

Williams, of course, provides us his own provisional realism; his own view of historical themes and events is not difficult to identify. But, more critically, he pushes us to define our own view. His participatory aesthetic requires an ability to adapt and adjust. It calls for extreme responsiveness. This is what Williams privileges – it is what he selects from history in the visionary loners and it is what he demands from readers. When we consider Williams’ aesthetic in this light, it cannot but recall Stanley Fish’s view, expressed in Self-Consuming Artifacts, of texts as kinetic. “Literature is a kinetic art, but the physical form it assumes prevents us from seeing its

essential nature, even though we so experience it. The availability of a book to the hand,” Fish argues,

its presence on a shelf, its listing in a library catalogue – all of these encourage us to think of it as a stationary object. Somehow when we put a book down, we forget that while we were reading, *it was* moving (pages turning, lines receding into the past) and forget too that we were moving with it. (401, emphasis in original)

As we constantly adapt to new cultures, new people, and changing styles, our reading career necessarily recapitulates the drama of past visionary figures. Williams implicitly acknowledges this kineticism – “all I am doing,” he attests, “is making notes, confused accuracies” – all the while knowing that “intestinal toxemia and mastoiditis are more important to a prosperous community than impalpable directions and invisible (but damned important) pitfalls” (Letters 92).

Williams uses primary documents in peculiar ways to place the reader directly in the drama of adaptation at several levels. While Williams exhibits a thematic cohesion, if not unity, around the drama of adaptation as captured in the opposition of those who touch versus withdraw from the New World, so, too, does he use an aesthetic that can only be described as multi-perspectival. Thus, consistent metaphors, such as facing inland, and conceptual elements, such as approaching American history through representative visionary loners, are balanced against a series of shifts in perspective, voice, and method that complicate any neat reading of American history.

Shifting perspectives and voices are found immediately in the simple fact of whom Williams includes in the history. He commences In the American Grain with Red Eric and four Spanish conquistadors in the chapters that immediately follow. Already, the New World is being drowned in a plethora of voices and cultures – and, following immediately on their heels, are English explorers like Sir Walter Raleigh, persecuted Puritans seeking asylum in a new land, French explorers, French Jesuit missionaries, backwoodsmen, colonial aristocrats, slaves, and literary men. Not only is there a multiple cast of characters, but the variously faceted conflicts augment our sense of multiplicity and complexity. Indians battle with English, Spanish, and French – all of whom are at odds with one another; English even dispute with one another as witches are burned at Salem and Morton is deported.

The conflicts, however, are not limited to these kinds of ethnic, externalized, strife. A series of complex textual manipulations (and, later, a series of identifications that Williams explores as revelatory encounters with our past and ourselves) mean that competing voices and perspectives play out psychically or internally as well. Williams' participatory aesthetic places us right in the conflict, and it places the conflict right in us; we are compelled to listen, question, judge, and finally decide. Williams invokes several aesthetic techniques and manipulates primary texts in a variety of ways to ensure our participation as readers, and this explains the repeatedly shifting perspective and voice in the narratives.

Let us start with the chapter on Christopher Columbus. He commences with a third-person narrative description of how in “those times” the New World existed

beyond the sphere of all things known to history . . . as the middle of the desert or the sea lies now and must lie forever, marked with its own dark life which goes on to an immaculate fulfillment in which we have no part. (Grain 7)

But Williams quickly turns to first-person excerpts from Columbus’ journal of his voyages, and, in fact, the remainder of the chapter shifts back and forth several times between first-person and third-person narrative. These shifts and the fact that Williams crafts the chapter so that the explorer’s first encounter with the New World comes only after his account of the deprivations and betrayals he subsequently endures, has several critical effects. First, it erects a tension between Columbus’ knowledge and our own. His valiant, necessarily ill-fated, efforts only make us appreciate more poignantly the tragic nature of his fate. Second, it simultaneously suggests how the discovery, the beauty, remains the most important thing despite all the hardship he suffers. For the felt impact of the New World’s beauty remains undiminished despite the hell Columbus endures in discovering it and in bringing back to Spain word of its discovery. Third, in shuttling between Columbus’ own journal and Williams’ critique of the Spaniard’s experience, the reader must weigh the costs of what Columbus incurred in Spanish society and the Court against the worth, and particularly the emotional resonance, of what he discovered.

More radically, Williams uses invented dialogue to give voice to the imagined fears of his crew, and the reader must decide here whether Peter Gutierrez, an actual crew member, or Columbus gets the better of an argument. In answer to the crew member's inquiry as to whether he has "staked" his life and that of his "companions, upon the foundation of a mere speculative opinion," Columbus replies that this may be so but in turns asks "in what other condition of life we should pass . . . [our] days" (Grain 22-23). Columbus argues that the voyage preserves them all from "tedium" and "makes life dear to us, makes valuable to us many things that otherwise we should not have in consideration" (22-23). This imagined dialogue enables Williams to give actual voice to both the crew and their leader – he lets us hear their homesickness and apprehension, and he dramatizes this in relation to Columbus' vision. The opposition of Columbus' visionary stance with his men's fear is a small illustration of how Williams repeatedly stages conflict between contact and withdrawal throughout In the American Grain.

Using another device in *De Soto and the New World*, Williams intersperses the voices of the conquistadors with the voice of the land itself. Interposing speaking parts for the New World ("She") with occasional journal entries from one of De Soto's men, Williams presents history as inclusive dialogue. The "field" of the whole, in this case, the neglected New World, is literally empowered to speak. And "She" speaks quite forcefully -- "You will not dare to cease following me," she tells DeSoto, "but you, Hernando de Soto . . . you are mine, Black Jasmine, mine" (Grain 45). Williams uses

shifting voice and perspective throughout the chapter to add force and momentum – both voices, for instance, invoke the river repeatedly in the last third of the chapter, setting the stage for de Soto's being committed "down into the liquid, the formless, the insatiable belly of sleep" (Grain 58). The land comes to seek the joining; the conqueror seeks to be merged. The sexual consummation of conqueror and conquered makes it difficult, if not impossible, to identify who possesses whom. And its consensual nature may render the question moot. The main implication of personifying the land is to raise the reader's appreciation of the primary as an active, living, participating entity. Land, like the reader in Williams' aesthetic, is transformed from a passive to an active stance. Both are "quickenened" like a fetus first showing signs of life or like the "roots" in the poem "By the road to the contagious hospital" that "grip down and begin to *awaken*" ("Spring" 96, emphasis added).

In two instances, Cotton Mather and Ben Franklin, Williams uses an aesthetic of the verbatim to place us in history. Critic Bryce Conrad characterizes In the American Grain as "a book of the library," and notes that "[s]ome of the book's most striking chapters . . . are those in which Williams makes the purely bibliographical thrust of his enterprise starkly apparent" (156-57). The Cotton Mather chapter nicely illustrates this by how Williams selectively "cuts and pastes" into In the American Grain a combined twenty pages from Mather's two-hundred-page volume Wonders of the Invisible World, "on the evidence and occurrences of witchcraft" (Conrad 157).

"Williams structures his library," Conrad generally claims, "to initiate us as readers of early American texts, asking us to begin our own studies in the verbal grain of America" (158). Conrad aptly contends that the "task of reading the documents – the act of making history *mean* – is left to us alone" in these verbatim passages (158, emphasis in original). I agree, and this is consistent with the participatory aesthetics that Williams structures.

But the aesthetic approach of the verbatim is peculiarly well-suited to the Puritan thinkers, beyond simply initiating us as readers of primary texts. Here Williams' text is remarkable for how it suddenly offers no shift in perspective or multiplication of voice and vantage point. Conrad suggests that Williams uses the "lengthy excerpts from Cotton Mather's record of the witchcraft trials," to "document the devastatingly violent effects of Puritan dogma" (44). The Puritans' inability to open themselves to the land or even to "see" the Indian as anything other than an unformed Puritan, I believe, is best captured by such a single focus in aesthetic technique. But I would argue that the verbatim exposes the internal violence as much as anything else, the psychic pressure of the Puritan stance toward the New World. This makes the reader experience first-hand how, as Williams argued, the Puritans praised a zero in themselves and how their beliefs comprised a strike inward toward the "confinements of a tomb" (Grain 66).

Conrad observes that "[o]ther than establishing a context in which the documents might take on particular resonances, Williams offers virtually nothing in the way of explicit interpretive comment or directive" (158). But,

context is "directive" as how Williams carefully frames Cotton Mather's self-contained world speaks volumes. Chapters on Samuel de Champlain and Thomas Morton, in fact, precede Mather, and chapters on Pere Sebastien Rasles and Daniel Boone follow Mather. Morton, Rasles, and Boone are especially notable for how they forge unique relationships with the Indians, and Champlain is portrayed as the romantic gardener of the New World, a fact in which Williams takes great pleasure -- "I was in a garden that I was having prepared,' he writes. In a garden! That's wonderful to me" (Grain 72). Thus, even where an individual chapter (like Mather) does not reflect the shifting perspectives typical of so many other parts of the book, the self-referential world of the Puritans is buffeted by a variety of opposed forces in the surrounding chapters and by an array of counter impulses as other chapters expand out in each direction toward the start and end of the volume.

In the chapter on Ben Franklin, Williams takes a slightly different aesthetic approach even as he continues to use a large block of primary source material, verbatim and unexcerpted. Here, he first sets out the entirety of Franklin's essay to those considering migrating to the New World, alerting them to the middle class industry and morality of life in the colonies. But Franklin gets less territorial integrity than Mather as Williams tacks on an additional five pages to expose Franklin's "motion without direction," charging that "[h]is energy never attained to a penetrant gist" (Grain 153). The reader, then, finds himself on the far side of Franklin's uninterrupted essay, suddenly

thrust into an argument. After Williams' initial sally, "'He's sort of proud of his commonness, isn't he?,'" the reader must sort out Franklin's contribution and the virtue of the middle class vision that he personified (153). Ultimately, readers must choose whether to accept Williams' thesis that "Franklin is the full development of the timidity, the strength that denies itself" (155). Will they exchange the standard view of Franklin as the progenitor of American virtues and an authority on life in the New World for the poet's trenchant critique of Franklin as mustering only "THRIFT" as his "mighty answer to the New World's offer of a great embrace" (Grain 156)?

Staged debates offer perhaps the most obvious method for Williams to draw readers in, to awaken them and make them participate in history. In the chapter on Rasles, Williams transformed his own personal history into the raw material for a debate on American history. "Le desert" on his 1925 European tour was his introduction, by friend Adrienne Monnier, to Valery Larbaud, a Frenchman who possessed a deep passion for American literature. Williams is recalled to himself and brought back on his continental sabbatical, by this conversation, to the "resistant core" of his New World self (Grain 105).

At the outset, Williams and Larbaud contrast the superior Spanish embrace of the New World with their parsimonious English counterparts. Williams feels thrilled to find one of "this world" "not wishing so much to understand as to taste" New World "freshness" (Grain 108). So Williams is brought up short when Larbaud asserts that Mather's work is "very strong,

very real” and that “[t]here is vigor there – and by that, a beauty” (110). What follows is a full-fledged debate over the place and merit of the Puritan typology – in history and in contemporary America. As critical as the debate is, and Williams records closely for readers what Larbaud says and how he replies, Williams repeatedly conveys his palpable near-ecstatic response to the fact of the debate itself. This excitement draws readers in, gets us to follow the arguments and to consider what is at stake. When Larbaud mentions Cotton Mather’s Magnalia as a great American book, for instance, Williams self-consciously records his own intense reaction – “What! Startled but thrilling with pleasure, I found that he had read the Magnalia. No. He had read it . . . THIS in Paris” (Grain 109-10, emphasis in original). Williams adds: “My French became inspired . . . I laughed to myself in my intense pleasure” (110).

Larbaud lauds how the Puritans’ by the “strength of religion alone . . . surmounted all difficulties” and explained all things (Grain 110). “[L]ike science at its best,” he declares, the Puritan’s thinking “is firm, it is solid, it holds the understanding in its true position” (110). Williams responds by characterizing the Puritans’ “sureness which you praise” as “their tight tied littleness” (110). When Larbaud designates the Puritans as “giants,” Williams objects that “they had their magnificent logic but it was microscopic in dimensions” (113). Williams reverses Larbaud’s argument, recasting the Puritans from offering “clarity and distinction” in the “clear air” (110) to being “dwarfed” and, eventually “microscopic” (113). Williams re-draws their

alleged “vigor” as “rigid clarity, . . . *inhuman* clarity,” and he eventually silences Larbaud for the second half of the chapter (111)(emphasis in original).

Perhaps most interesting is how Williams augments the debate by pulling in the Puritans’ contemporary, Pere Sebastian Rasles. Williams characterizes Rasles and Puritans in dialogic or binary fashion, noting that “[t]here was, to the north, another force, equal to the Puritans but of opposite character, the French Jesuits; two parties with the Indians between them, two sources opposite” (Grain 116). In his eloquent evocation of Rasles that follows, Williams contrasts for Larbaud, and readers “the Protestant *acts*, dry and splitting,” to Rasles’ “luscious fruit,” “humanity,” and “passion” (Grain 121, emphasis in original). Williams pulls readers in not only by offering a scathing critique of the Puritans but by offering an eloquent elegy for Rasles. Rhetorically this is significant – for he offers a positive alternative to, rather than simply an attack on, the Puritans. The chapter that started with Williams feeling himself “with ardors not released but beaten back, in this center of old-world culture” thus ends by touching again that New World “freshness,” and the point of presenting his argument with Larbaud has been to get the reader to do the same (Grain 105).

The drama of reading is the focus again of Williams’ democratic, participatory aesthetic in “The Virtue of History,” where the poet engages an unnamed interlocutor in an argument over the value and fate of Aaron Burr. Personifying the other side of the argument in this chapter, as he did with

Larbaud, Williams moves from a bookish critique of deceased historians into a tense debate. The contemporary necessity of reconsidering our history and how we write thus becomes increasingly clear, even pressing.

Williams' first premise, to suspect any unanimous "verdict" of history, is manifest throughout the chapter as a second speaker regularly quotes such "verdicts" for Williams to shoot down. The first verdict offered is Alexander Hamilton's characterization of Burr as a "dangerous man, one who ought not to be trusted with the reins of government" (Grain 190). Complicating such conventional notions, Williams asks: "How dangerous, and to whom? To usurpers? Why did the Senate weep so uncontrollably at his farewell address? Perhaps he had somebody's number . . . they wept at a vital loss" (Grain 190). This type of exchange is continuously replicated as Williams' interlocutor, quoting passages drawn from conventional histories, repeats over and over again, "it says" (190-91) or "they say" (198). The interesting question that emerges, then, is what we read and what we do with our reading – and the reader begins to suspect that the drama of reading is really what forms the heart of Williams' concern. For the interlocutor's relatively uncritical acceptance of standard histories of Burr and his times eventually runs smack into Burr's own death-bed admonition at the chapter's conclusion:

'They say, they say, they say. Ah, my child, how long are you going to continue to use those dreadful words? Those two little words have done more harm than all others. Never use them, my dear, never use them.' (Grain 207)

In this sense, then, what Williams says of Burr, that he “knew what a democracy must liberate,” namely, “[m]en intact – with all their senses waking,” is what Williams himself seeks by way of his readers (206). For he, too, seeks to awaken the reader to participate in this dialogic exchange. We are called upon to make a decision, to choose between conflicting histories. Reading conflicting voices and perspectives becomes a matter of possessing the whole and withstanding the status quo, stasis, and cultural authorities asserting their own narrow self-interest. Seeing the binary of Burr and his conniving contemporaries exposes the underlying economic versus democratic interests at stake and makes us decide which vision of America we will embrace. Thus Hamilton is called “a balloon of malice” (190). His desire to harness the great natural resources of the land to forge an economic and political empire, assisted by an accommodating, oligarchic political structure, is opposed to Burr’s vision of “America, as a promise of delight” (Grain 197).

Moreover, in what is standard fare in In the American Grain, we must “dig” through our history and “see what is turned up – and name it if we can” (196). Thus, in response to the quoted rebuke of Burr as a “great man in little things” and a “really small” man in “great ones,” Williams answers “That’s Jeffersonian rhetoric: a well turned phrase, but what does it mean?” (191). The message is that we cannot and should not accept pat explanations of historical events and figures. Our past and our relation to it are kinetic, not static. Where things went and could have gone have not

necessarily always been clear, and it is up to us where things go today. As readers we play an integral part in judging our past. What we choose to value and bring to the fore reflects our present and defines our future. We act in this way to create or co-create, in a sense, our past and our future. “Which way will it go?,” Williams asks – implying equally the past and the future (192-93). Williams urges us to take a look at “the whole period . . . not as history, that lie! but as a living thing, something moving, undecided, swaying” (192). Consistent with critic James Longenbach’s conception of existential historicism, this constructs history-writing as an empathic encounter between the reader in the present and our past. It also makes the past a contemporary phenomenon. In this way, history must stay open – it is not decided by cultural authorities but is “something on the brink of the Unknown, as we are today” (Grain 193).

The participatory drama of reading and choosing is also at the center of Williams’ chapter on Poe. Williams’ aesthetic works here at two levels. First, Poe (like Burr and others) models the independent stance he hopes to have readers adopt. Second, Williams compels readers to decide a historical debate between Poe and Lowell, based on his use of contending primary documents at the start of the chapter. An exchange between Poe and Lowell in essays and poems sets the stage, and Williams encourages the reader to replicate Poe’s own “conviction that he *can* judge within himself” (Grain 216, emphasis in original).

Williams' primary thesis is that Poe's value resides in his ability to give expression to America in a "re-awakened genius of *place*" (Grain 216, original emphasis). This transcends simply replicating European modes in a New World atmosphere, such as Hawthorne did. Thus, rendering Indians and an American landscape is not the point – what is needed is a genuine expression of deeper New World forces. This resides in Poe's "scrupulous originality," in his "legitimate sense of solidity which goes back to the ground" (216). Williams immediately pulls the reader into the debate by emphasizing Poe's peculiar provincialism. He foregrounds Poe's belief in "the necessity for a fresh beginning, backed by a native vigor of extraordinary proportions," and "corollary" conviction that "'colonial imitation' must be swept aside" (219). This "strong sense of a beginning" that "is *in no one* else before him" in American literature makes Poe resemble Christopher Columbus and de Soto (222, original emphasis). It also enables Williams to position Poe as pre-Modernist. "With Poe, words were not hung by usage with associations," Williams contends,

the pleasing wraiths of former masteries, this is the sentimental trap-door to beginnings. With Poe words were figures; an old language truly, but one from which he carried over only the most elemental qualities to his new purpose; which was, to find a way to tell his soul. Sometimes he used words so playfully his sentences seem to fly away from sense, the destructive! with the conserving abandon, foreshadowed, of a Gertrude Stein. The particles of language must be clear as sand. (Grain 221)

The debate starts in earnest when Williams quotes Lowell's caustic broadside against Poe:

Here comes Poe with his Raven, like Barnaby Rudge –

Three fifths of him genius, and two fifths sheer fudge;
Who talks like a book of iambs and pentameters
In a way to make all men of common sense damn meters
Who has written some things far the best of their kind;
But somehow the heart seems squeezed out by the mind. (Grain
217)

Poe responds that “*profound* ignorance on any particular topic is always sure to manifest itself by some allusion to ‘common sense’ as an ‘all-sufficient instructor’” (Grain 217, original emphasis). He lambasts Lowell for having “meddled with the anapestic rhythm” which is “exceedingly awkward in the hands of one who knows nothing about it and *will* persist in fancying that he can write it by ear” (217, original emphasis). Poe asserts that Lowell would be well served to “leave prose, with satiric verse, to those who are better able to manage them; while he contents himself with that class of poetry for which, and for which alone, he seems to have an especial vocation – the poetry of *sentiment*” (217, original emphasis).

But Williams does more than simply replicate Poe’s and Lowell’s arguments. His own role in the argument, in fact, becomes clear at multiple levels. We see him providing a sort of running commentary on the Poe-Lowell debate. Williams relishes how, for instance, that Poe “tears L’s versification to pieces” (Grain 217). Further, Williams strategically augments Poe’s argument, even going so far as to reach beyond the immediate controversy to pull in other arguments and texts by Poe. “But Poe might have added finally, in his own defense” Williams asserts, “what he says elsewhere” (Grain 217). In this way, Williams simultaneously manipulates and comments on several primary texts. By pulling in additional Poe texts

beyond the immediate compass of his feud with Lowell, Williams cleverly expands Poe's argument. So it is that he quotes Poe's assertion that "[o]ur necessities have been taken for our propensities" (218). "Having been forced to make railroads," Poe asserts,

it has been deemed impossible that we should make verse. Because it suited us to construct an engine in the first instance, it has been denied that we could compose an epic in the second. Because we are not all Homers in the beginning, it has been somewhat rashly taken for granted that we shall be all Jeremy Bentham's to the end. (218)

Ultimately, Williams skillfully presents the Lowell-Poe debate to achieve two ends. First, he would have the reader join the argument, see what is at stake and "judge within himself" (216). Second, Williams uses Poe to underscore his own argument of the primacy of the "*local*" (218, emphasis in original). In either case, the reader does not just get a synopsis of an argument but rather gets an argument that has been carefully presented through skillful manipulation of primary texts and insertion of Williams' own voice to achieve his two ends. There exists, as always, the tension between Williams' manipulation of texts to provide a primary experience for readers, to have us judge for ourselves, and his interest in guiding us to corroborate his own values and vision.

* * * * *

The second element of Williams' democratic, anti-capitalist aesthetic involves an economic redistribution of values. Using language as a tool of primary experience, creating vision, Williams shifts us away from secondary culture and corresponding cultural authorities. We are directed away from

economic to larger human, emotive valuations at several levels. The same participatory ethic is at play here as well. Williams would have readers recognize the different modes – economic and human – of valuation and he would have them, even as they judge for themselves, embrace the latter.

The wealth of the New World, for instance, is contextualized in the humanity of Montezuma, who is the fullest expression of a culture of this continent. ““You see that I am composed of flesh and bone like yourselves and that I am mortal and palpable to the touch,”” the chieftain tells Cortez (Grain 31). ““They have told you that I possess houses with walls of gold and many other such things and that I am a god or make myself one. The houses you see are of stone and lime and earth”” (31). The wealth that obsessed Cortez is displaced by Williams’ sense of Montezuma as the embodiment of the New World – “rooted there, sensitive to its richest beauty” (32). And Montezuma is the embodiment of 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 stars. He was the very person of their ornate dream, so delicate, so prismatically colorful, so full of tinkling sounds and rhythms. (35)

The redistribution of values also entails an emphasis on craftsmanship over economic worth. The entire chapter reads like an inventory of New World craft, and objects of Aztec art are notable for how they “imitat[e] in gold, silver, precious stones and feathers . . . every object in his domain” (Grain 35). Aztec art is an expression of its climate in the fullest sense and economic valuation becomes impossible, even meaningless: “The houses

were so excellently put together, so well decorated with cloths and carven wood, so embellished with metalwork and other marks of a beautiful civilization” (Grain 30). The “many beautiful and curious artifices ‘of so costly and unusual workmanship . . . considering their novelty and wonderful beauty’” make it such that “no price could be set on them” (31). For a moment, the New World seems nearly to elide translation into economic terms, to escape its corresponding debasement and exploitation.

Williams’ redistribution of value is expressed as well in certain strategic compressions and expansions. “The Destruction of Tenochtitlan” offers an expansive inventory of New World artistry and craftsmanship; nearly two pages are given over to describe the gifts Montezuma sends Cortez to discourage the Spaniard’s journey “into the back country” (Grain 28). By this inventory Williams attests to the wonderful strangeness of the encounter for the newcomers, and he establishes the complex voice of the New World – how Montezuma speaks in a richly complex yet simultaneously simple voice through these gifts. New World behavior is both naïve and ironic for Montezuma seems not to recognize that such gifts will not dissuade but only hasten the Spanish incursion. It suggests, as well, that the Aztec leader may view the elaborate crafts and gifts that he sends in an entirely less acquisitive and more human light than the Spaniards. Indeed, his gift may reflect a miscalculation based on an inability to imagine how Cortez would view and react to such a gift.

The poet also minimizes the economic in an analogous way. It is noteworthy that next to his lengthy testament to Aztec skill and ingenuity Williams offers a strategically reduced account of acquisitive, exploitive enterprises. Williams minimizes Cortez, noting that he “was one among the rest” (Grain 27) and the “advance” of Cortez’s army on Tenochtitlan “was like any similar military enterprise” (29). In a related vein, Williams considers the fate of Cortez and Tenochtitlan with a brief notation – “And then the end” (36). Contrasting passages such as these suggest the relative spiritual, cultural poverty of the Spanish imperialist design next to the deep native richness of the Aztecs.

Williams effects a redistribution of value, too, by usurping economic language for non-economic purposes – that is for non-economic subjects and usages. Thus, Williams refers to the “*richest*” beauty of Aztec civilization and, lamenting how the Aztec world “sank back into the ground to be reenkindled, never,” he describes its “spirit mysterious, constructive, independent, puissant with natural *wealth*” (Grain 32, emphasis added). Similarly, “She,” the New World voice in the DeSoto chapter, invokes a language tinged with economic resonances as she enacts a drama of taking and giving. At the start of the chapter, “She” tells the explorer: “I am beautiful – as ‘a cane box, called petaca, full of unbored pearls.’ I am beautiful: a city greater than Cuzco; rocks loaded with gold as a comb with honey. Believe it” (45).

There is a similar inversion or play with economic terms in “The Founding of Quebec.” Here, Williams calls Champlain’s annoyance at a Basque uprising “a treasure,” and the Frenchman’s lenience toward the Basque, “a thing priceless,” even as he recognizes “these things are costly” (Grain 71). Columbus also appropriates several terms from the economic lexicon to justify the point of his voyage to Peter Gutierrez – “Should no other fruit come from this navigation,” Columbus declares,

to me it appears most *profitable* inasmuch as for a time it preserves us *free* from tedium, makes life dear to us, makes *valuable* to us many things that otherwise we should not have in *consideration*. (Grain 23, emphasis added)

Williams turns to language tinged with economics as well to evoke the spiritual poverty of the Puritans. “[P]rais[ing] a zero in themselves,” the poet characterizes them as “particles stripped of wealth” (Grain 63, 65). This fits with their “possession of the incomplete” that Williams contrasts with Boone’s own “complete possession” (114, 137). The Puritan’s enduring legacy of poverty is found in how American girls are alienated from their own sexuality – by instilling fear, the culture makes “unprofitable” any expression of desire (183).

* * * * *

The third element of Williams’ kinetic and participatory aesthetic involves a series of revelatory encounters with our past and ourselves. Language works as a tool of primary experience at several levels. In the American Grain presents primary textual documentation of representative figures’ encounter with the raw new. It is, simultaneously, meta-encounter as

Williams gives the account of his encounter of these representative figures' encounters with the primary. The reader, moreover, enters the picture at one remove, one further concentric ring out, as Williams shapes our encounter of his encounter of the historical figures' encounter. It is worth noting, of course, that to the extent that we encounter and identify with primary texts, they have been manipulated and mediated by Williams, as critic James Breslin notes, to make history tell itself right. At the center of Williams' and our own encounters is the question of what identifications are made. In the course of this aesthetic journey, two democratic elements get played out. In other words, In the American Grain may be said to comprise a deeply democratic, individualistic endeavor at two levels.

First, In the American Grain comprises the story of one man, here the poet, simultaneously writing himself and his culture into existence along more vital lines, based on the identifications he makes. At one level, then, Williams shapes his own history – and himself – engaging in polemics, heaping ridicule on the Puritans and their legacy, and lauding Rasles and others who can make “contact.” Second, the reader is asked, even compelled, to do the same. Williams in his meta-encounter, and readers in our meta-meta-encounter, must wade through the same conflict that Williams describes “newcomers” having to confront – that is the “conflict between present reliance on the prevalent conditions of place and the over-riding of an unrelated authority” (“Background” 143). We must find a usable past consisting of those figures as alive to their own moment as we must be to our

own. The visionaries Williams identifies with, and would have us identify with, assert such an unmediated relation to the conditions at hand, apart from the dominant interests of mercantilists, federalists, puritans, land speculators and so forth. Williams' aesthetic technique requires us to enter the historical debates and decide for ourselves what both our history and present moment are and should be, based on the identifications we choose to make. We may say of In the American Grain, then, what Williams identifies in "The American Background" as the "American addition to world culture" ("Background" 143): "What it is actually is something much deeper: a relation to the immediate conditions of the matter in hand, and a determination to assert them in opposition to all intermediate authority" (143). The irony, of course, is that Williams is the mediating authority for his readers, and even his presentation of primary documents encodes the poet's values and implies the positions he would have us adopt. Williams, needless to say, has some interest in seeing our meta-meta encounter mirror or confirm the findings of his own meta encounter.

Through a series of revelatory identifications, Williams models a stance of responsiveness and adaptation for his readers that replicates the visionaries' own determination to assert a relation to immediate conditions. Williams seeks to reconcile American culture to its visionary loners, to reconstitute our culture on that basis. The artist would be, then, at the center, after what Williams calls his "brutalizing battle of twenty years to hear myself above the boilermakers in and about New York" (Grain 105). As

social regenerator, the poet would be relieved of the Hobson's choice either to "scream like a locomotive or to speak not at all" (108). Ultimately, Williams' revelatory identifications and encounters mean that what Stanley Fish describes of a reader-response critical method is true as well of Williams' aesthetic, for both Williams and his readers: "it is a method which processes its own user, who is also its only instrument. It is self-sharpening and what it sharpens is *you*. In short, it does not organize materials, but transforms minds" (Fish 425, original emphasis).

The exigencies of Williams' own position as an American and as an artist shape his revelatory identifications with past visionaries and peoples. Regarding the former, Williams inserts Ezra Pound's rebuke in the prologue to Kora in Hell – "And America? . . . what the h—I do you a blooming foreigner know about the place" (11). America only interests Williams, Pound charges, "as something damned but exotic" (Witemyer 76). Williams describes his strikingly deliberate efforts to domesticate the place— or himself to the place – noting:

Of mixed ancestry, I felt from earliest childhood that America was the only home I could ever possibly call my own . . . expressly founded for me, personally, and that it must be my first business in life to possess it; that only by making it my own from the beginning to my own day, in detail, should I ever have a basis for knowing where I stood.
(Letters 185)

Elsewhere, Williams writes that "Nothing in school histories interested me, so I . . . [went back to] source material [and tried] to *establish myself* from my own reading, in my own way, in the locality which by birthright had become my own" (Letters 185, emphasis added). Establishing oneself by

one's own reading – and writing – is the epistemology that Williams developed in The Embodiment of Knowledge. We “are at the center of the writing, each man for himself but at the same time each man for his own age first,” he declared (Embodiment 107). In writing, we are “attempting to strike straight to the core of [our] inner self” (105). Recognizing that “[t]o live cannot be learned from the writings of others (106),” Williams lauded the “characteristic American *position* of the intelligence – the pioneer turn of mind – the individual superior to authority. No external to it” (9). In his epistemology, the self is the locus of knowledge – both as recipient and generator - and a “useful body of knowledge” is “made to serve the individual who is *primary*” (Embodiment 9, emphasis in original). Williams’ subjective, impressionist history, then, makes sense; defining one’s place means defining the historical ground and to forge this path for oneself is necessarily the democratic, pioneer legacy. Encountering primary texts, and locating in them the raw materials to stimulate revelatory identifications, Williams places himself and the culture on firmer, more vital ground. Until he does this, both remain an enigma to themselves. He comes to recognize that which was alive to its moment, and how he must be similarly alive to his own. If Williams feels himself and the culture to be lost, adrift, lacking a sense that who we are has a relation to what we have been in the past, he can establish both by his reading and writing. It is in this sense that Mariani calls Williams’ epistemology “another version of Adamic myth” (283).

But I noted above that the exigencies of Williams' situation as an artist also drive his revelatory encounters and identifications with past visionaries. For just as Burr, Boone, Poe, Rasles, Red Eric and others were loners and outcasts, so, too, Williams views himself. Pound calls Williams "the keeper of the lonely lighthouse," and Williams would not dispute that characterization (Witemyer 77). Williams calls himself a "stick in the sides of the populace here" (74). In his 1936 speech at the University of Virginia, "Revolutions Revalued," the poet shared his frustration and isolation with his audience. "For the past thirty years," he confessed,

I have never been able to get one first-rate poem published in a commercial magazine. I have never been able to get a single book of poems, no matter how small, published except by paying or partly paying for it myself or having it published by a friend or group of friends. ("Revolutions" 107-8)

Williams acknowledged that

[t]hey did not sell, they were not bought, because the market for them did not exist [as they] are different in character from the volumes upon volumes of verse commercially published in that . . . the intention has been to make them accurate to the day, in form as well as content. ("Revolutions" 108)

As such, Williams recognized, they do not meet the "sole criterion today as to a book's value 'Will it sell and pay a dividend?'" ("Revolutions" 108). "Romantic starvation . . . does not appeal to me," Williams noted with similar frustration in a letter to Pound (Witemyer 57-58). "My hysteria," he confessed, "is just a matter of cash. I can't live without my trade, can't continue at my trade and find time for writing" (73-74). This is precisely the

kind of “rigid limiting of . . . incentives” for the poet that Williams lamented in “Revolutions Revalued” (108).

In the context, then, of Williams’ own position as an American and as an artist, his revelatory identifications with past visionaries and peoples enable him to locate himself in the American past and the past in himself. But, too, they enable him to re-define the culture. He will bring the culture to him if he cannot meet it on its own economic, secondary terms. Williams would surely embrace James Harvey Robinson’s observation that “Never before has the historical writer been in position so favorable as now for bringing the past into such intimate relations with the present that they shall seem one, and shall flow and merge into our own personal history” (“Newer Ways” 255). Reconstituting the culture to reconcile it to its visionary loners offers Williams an opportunity to leave the lonely lighthouse for a position at the center. A newly vital culture, constituted along the lines of contact with the primary, makes the poet a critical player. This is necessarily a democratic impulse, for reconstituting culture along the lines of the poet means re-orienting it along the lines of the “pro-social” individualism of the artist, who alone can withstand the pull of the age toward fascism on the one hand or communism on the other (“Revolutions” 101). Perhaps it was this Williams had in mind when he told an FBI agent who was questioning him during or just after World War II about his friendship with Pound that he had “spent my whole life, generally speaking, for my country, trying to serve it in every way I know how” (Autobiography 317-19).

Identification is part of this reading drama from the start. "The plan was to try to get inside the heads of some American founders or 'heroes,'" Williams notes of In the American Grain, "by examining their original records. I wanted nothing to get between me and what they themselves had recorded" (Autobiography 178). More revealing still is Williams' acknowledgement –

I want to give the impression, an inclusive definition, of what these men of whom I am writing have come to be for us. That they have made themselves part of us and that is what we are. I want to make it clear that they are us, the American make-up, that we are what they have made us by their deeds. (236)

In getting inside the heads of the explorers, certain visionaries, and even the Puritans, Williams works to counteract how he and the primary culture have been obscured and buried. In a culture of corporate capital, the artist, perhaps any individual, will be dispossessed, or lost in some measure to himself. As Williams seeks to claim a ground that is his own, he seeks, too, to have us do the same. As he shares his revelatory identifications, we must recall that what Williams says in "Spring and All" applies to the identifications, the meta-meta encounter that he structures for us throughout In the American Grain: "In the imagination, we are henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one. Whenever I say, 'I' I mean also, 'you'" (89).

The poet's discoveries in his meta-encounter with past records replicate the vistas that open before (and the contact that is attained by) the historical figures whom he reads and about whom he writes. In the revelation, of course, is the sudden recognition of contact between self and

other. Williams, for instance, evokes Champlain's "watching, keeping the whole thing within him, . . . such an energy for detail – a love of the exact detail" (Grain 70). "This is the interest I see. It is *this man. This – me,*" declares the poet (Grain 70, emphasis added). "Here *is* a man after my own heart," Williams earlier attests, "Here at least I find the thing I love (Grain 69, emphasis in original). Recalling his definition of a usable past as one that is as alive to its time as we should be to our own, Williams asserts of Champlain: "I mean here *is* the thing, accurately, my own world, the world in which I myself breathe and walk and live – against that which you present" (Grain 69, emphasis in original). Williams identifies with Burr in similar fashion – "He's in myself and so I dig through lies to resurrect him" (Grain 197). We can speculate that Burr's "clarity" (like Champlain's) and his "disrespect for the applause of the world" is part of the basis for Williams' identification (Grain 200). The way in which Burr "loved and [went] straight to the mark," recalls Williams' own description of writing as "attempting to strike straight to the core" (Embodiment 105).

Other identifications are not so much a matter of obvious choice or a desire to connect his own work to that of visionaries with similarly gifted sight. Williams' identifications, then, can also reflect how the primary (and the secondary) necessarily resides in each of us, even if only as a matter of obscured and unrecognized cultural heritage. This heritage is decidedly mixed – we are, each of us, part conquistador, Indian, and Puritan. In "The Fountain of Eternal Youth," Williams identifies us with the Indians who rush to

meet Ponce's men wading ashore – "It is we who ran to the shore naked, we who cried, 'Heavenly Man!'" (Grain 39). "No, we are not Indians," Williams explains, "but we are men of their world" (39). In other words, sharing their land, their continent, even after generations upon generations, "the ghost of the land moves in the blood, moves the blood" (39). The result – "[t]hese are the inhabitants of our souls" (39). But, Williams adds, "our murdered souls that lie . . . ahg. Listen!" (39). What would Williams have us attend to? The fact that our cultural legacy is expressed as a deep conflict within our very own blood. For our murdered souls do not tell the full story – because "[w]e are, too, the others We are the slaughterers" (41).

The soul of the New World, our souls, then, are "tortured" (41). Even as we are the bloody conquerors, we are, ourselves, the conquered. "Fierce and implacable," Williams explains, "we kill them but their souls dominate us. Our men, our blood, but their spirit is master. It enters us, it defeats us, it imposes itself" (40). "In the heart," Williams explains, "are living Indians once slaughtered and defrauded – Indians that live also in subtler ways" (Grain 42). Our "murdered souls" that "lie" with the truth of our brutal slaughter of the Indians are also occupied by resurrected, or "living" Indians.

But, pulled between the murdering Spaniards and the Indian spirit-master of our souls, Williams does present an act of volition. Detailing how the Spanish interrupted their full retreat to rescue "the precious Berrescien," Ponce's "damned bloodhound," Williams describes how the dog was gaining

on his Indian victim in the water (40). “But, O Soul of the New World,”

Williams declares,

the man had his bow and arrow with him as he swam He stopped, turned, raised his body half out of the water, treading it, and put a bolt into the damned hound’s throat – whom sharks swallowed. Then to shore, not forgetting – leaping to safety – to turn and spit back the swallowed chainshot, a derisive yell at the Christians. (41)

“If men inherit souls,” Williams concludes, “this is the color of mine” (41).

In the Rasles chapter, Williams similarly explores several complex identifications. Reflecting his nervous state before the learned Frenchman, Larbaud, Williams likens himself to “the brutal thing itself” (Grain 107). “The lump in my breast hardened and became like the Aztec calendar of stone which the priests buried because they couldn’t smash it easily,” though “it was dug up intact later” (107). And in strange fashion, Larbaud actually proposes to Williams that the American poet carries within himself at least three strains of New World life. “This interests me greatly,” he tells Williams,

because I see you brimming – you, yourself – with those three things of which you speak: a puritanical sense of order, a practical mysticism as of the Jesuits, and the sum of all those qualities defeated in the savage men of your country by the first two. These three things I see still battling in your heart. (116)

Larbaud may simply possess the greater insight of a disinterested outside observer. Or Williams, desperately seeking to place himself in the American grain, may place this somewhat ambitious identification in Larbaud’s mouth as an indication that he cannot quite buy it or make it fully fly.

I noted above that Williams’ identifications also reflect the Puritan legacy. The Puritan still “keeps his frightened grip upon the throat of the

world" (Grain 68). This is exhibited in the "niggardliness of our history, our stupidity, sluggishness of spirit, the falseness of our historical notes" (157). Aside from the conspicuous Puritan presence in our predominant economic culture, the Puritan keeps his grip internally as well. This identification of our soul with the Puritan need not be voluntary; it is, in some measure, inescapable. The Puritan's "misfortune has become a malfeasant ghost that dominates us all" (66). Clearly echoing Waldo Frank's extroversion thesis, Williams attests that the "agonized spirit . . . has followed like an idiot with undeveloped brain, govern[ed] with its great muscles, babbling in a text of the dead years" (68).

The identifications that Williams discovers in his meta-encounter with past figures and texts seek to redress the effect of the Puritan legacy and the triumph of capital. "[D]amned" by Puritan "abstinence, removal from the world, denial," we are "forced within ourselves upon an emptiness which cannot be supplied," which is the "soul, according to their tenets" (Grain 128). It is for this reason that Williams describes us as "[l]ost in this (and its environments) as in a forest" and characterizes "the average American" as "an Indian robbed of his world" (128). Williams' own revelatory identifications, and those he structures for us as readers, aim to restore to the common man his land and his soul.

* * * * *

In this and the prior chapter we have seen how contact with and recovery of the primary, the non-economic, characterizes Williams' entire program in "The American Background," In the American Grain, and other works. Williams worked in a variety of complex ways to move beneath and beyond economics. His affective economics and participatory aesthetics are intended to make us examine "the quality of [our] beliefs" ("Background" 149), and to help us attain a "complete possession" of our own world as Boone did when he "descended to the ground of his desire" (Grain 136-37). In the chapter that follows I will examine how Williams developed these themes in Paterson in the final phase of his career.

Chapter V: "[L]ove/ bitterly contesting:" Dissonance, Identification, and Paterson's Women

The writing is nothing, the being/ in a position to write (that's/ where they get you) is nine tenths/ of the difficulty: seduction/ or strong arm stuff.

- William Carlos Williams, Paterson (3:113)

[W]e do not know (in time)/ where the stasis lodges.

- William Carlos Williams, Paterson (1:34)

'I'll die before I've said my fill about women.'

- William Carlos Williams (Nay 45)

A dissonance/ in the valence of Uranium/ led to the discovery/ Dissonance/ (if you are interested)/ leads to discovery.

- William Carlos Williams, Paterson (4:175)

"Intelligence always has to give way to the masses," Williams declared late in his career. "Get on with your fellowmen," he continued, "the characteristics of the age help your writing when you go along with them; . . . the age should govern what you write" (Interviews 79). This was more than a simple statement of democratic sympathy; Williams defined the poet as a "social regenerator" ("Revolutions" 109) and "passionate *regenerative force*" ("Revolutions" 106, emphasis in original) whose poem is "a social instrument" (Letters 286) or "active agent, sometimes of a basic attack" (Autobiography 341)(emphasis in original). It is the fire meant to animate the leaden mass of men Williams depicts in "Sunday in the Park" in Book II of Paterson: "Minds beaten thin/ by waste," for he claims that "among/ the working classes SOME sort/ of breakdown/ has occurred" (2: 51, emphasis in original). Paterson explores this breakdown in detail, revealing a democratization of the dispossession that characterized the most isolated of the representative

voluptuaries of In the American Grain. In the way that these glorious but tragic figures were lost to the culture, so the mass of men are lost to themselves in Paterson. “They may look at the torrent in/ their minds/ and it is foreign to them” the poet notes, alluding to the falls of the Passaic (1:12). “The language, the language,/” he explains, “fails them/ They do not know the words/ or have not/ the courage to use them/ . . . they die also/ incommunicado” (1:11). The masses are desperately in need of what the poet as social regenerator can offer – words of, words to effect, “release” and “relief.” Williams thus declares in Book III: “The writing/ should be a relief,/ relief from the conditions/ which as we advance become – a fire,/ a destroying fire. For the writing/ is also an attack” (3: 113). For this reason, defenders of the secondary culture and the status quo, according to Williams, will try to find the “means . . . /to scotch it – at the root/ if possible” (3:113). This explains Williams’ declaration: “The writing is nothing, the being/ in a position to write (that’s/ where they get you) is nine tenths/ of the difficulty: seduction/ or strong arm stuff” (3: 113). Paterson, then, comprises both diagnosis and treatment, recognition and counter-attack. The poet explores and defines the local conditions as he simultaneously seeks a cure.

Part of the complexity of Paterson resides in the question of who is “the poet.” The poem is both Paterson’s “autobiography, schematized and translated into symbolic terms, and a poem about itself” (Sankey 2). It is the story of Paterson’s “struggle with himself to accept his present world, . . . [by] giv[ing] meaning to it, [by] discover[ing] a language appropriate to it” (2). It is

in this vein that I refer to the “poet” or “the figure of the poet” in Paterson. Even as the doctor-poet closely resembles Williams himself, I believe that Williams has created a fictive figure, and that it would be a mistake to read “the poet” as being Williams himself. Projecting from himself the character of Paterson as a fictive alter-ego enabled Williams simultaneously to dramatize and gain distance from his own search for a writing of release and relief, of personal and social regeneration.

As with the speaker of In the American Grain, Paterson seeks contact or touch, and opposes these ideals, which he calls “love,” to the “divorce” that he identifies through all five books of the poem. “Let the words/ fall any way at all,” declares the poet, “that they may/ hit love aslant” (3: 142). This genuine contact or “love” requires a release from old forms. “[U]nless there is/ a new mind there cannot be a be a new/ line,” Paterson argues, “the old will go on/ repeating itself with recurring/ deadliness” (2:50). “The words will have to be rebricked up” and must “break loose,” he attests (3:143). The point is that the poet must effect a release through his writing and he is less interested in the “finished product” than in the “bloody loam” – what is organic, of the moment, and of his age (1: 37). Thus, Paterson asserts that he must write “carelessly so that nothing that is not/ green will survive” (3:129).

The vitality of the progressive vision of the historians and literary critics is not simply retained in Paterson, but is rendered in ways more deeply personal to Williams and the character of the poet, in the figure of Paterson.

Many of Williams' peers had mostly completed their active careers when Books One through Four of Paterson were published from 1946 through 1951, and Book Five was published in 1958. The vision of Williams' progressive peers of writing a usable past, however, continued to animate Williams' poetic. His history-writing project in Paterson is to defend individual liberty and initiative against a culture of corporate capital, here by placing the fictive poet as common man at the conspicuous center of a meaning-making drama. Paterson is of a piece with In the American Grain, and we can see Williams' major poetic work come into relation to his earlier prose around his exploration of democracy and a usable past. Writing is a matter of civic engagement, even rescue by the poet-regenerator (Williams and Paterson) as he, himself, and his mass of fellow men must find relief and release from the stasis imposed by the present and the past, what critic John Beck calls, "atrophied lives, brutalized environments, and corrupted beginnings" (155).

Earlier critics of Paterson and Williams' poetics, such as Randall Jarrell, lamented the introduction of material on Credit and Usury, "those enemies of man, God, and contemporary long poems" (qtd. in Conarroe 117). Conarroe notes as well how Vivienne Koch described the "explicit pseudoscientific diagnosis of our present economic ills" as a "serious weakness . . . got like a contagion from Pound's Cantos" (qtd. in Conarroe 117). Critic John Ulrich observes in "Giving Williams Some Credit: Money and Language in Paterson, Book Four, Part II," that "literary critics have regarded Williams' interest in economic theory with disdain, attributing that

interest solely to the influence of Ezra Pound” (122). Even a critic such as Joel Conroroe, who admits that Paterson would be incomplete without the economic motif because it “reveals the man and his world so thoroughly,” characterizes the poem’s economic motif as a “frayed green thread . . . peculiarly unsuited to poetry, even for a writer with the habit of finding poems in the most unlikely places” (130).

By contrast, more recent critics like Beck, Ulrich, Brian Bremen, and Alec Marsh recognize the progressive, civic and economic character, and the reformist impulse, of Williams’ poetics, and my own study is broadly consistent with their critical approach. The point for more recent critics is not the rigor of Williams’ (and Pound’s) economic analysis, how trenchant or even accurate it is, but rather what purpose and intent the economic critique reflects, and what animating concerns it addresses. Williams’ purpose or intent is to assert the democratic, to preserve individual liberty and prerogative in an age of corporatism, whether in the form of fascism, communism, or capitalism. We should view Williams in the same way that he tells Pound to view himself: “as a poet, incidentally dealing with a messy situation re. money” (Witemeyer 171). Williams knew that he was not, and was not attempting to be, a “trained economist” (171). “What I want out of you is not economics,” Williams cautioned Pound, “but the poem” (Mariani, New World 713).

Marsh notes that the “populist critique of ‘finance capitalism’ is never far away in Williams’s work,” and, quoting John Dewey, calls Williams’

undertaking “an epic of the local” that explores the “fundamental defect of our civilization,” namely the development and products of a “money culture” (qtd. in Marsh, Money 195, 203). Marsh explores Williams’ economic motif in the larger context of Jeffersonian agrarianism and reveals how the economic theme fits with Williams’ view of the “role of the modern poet” to “restore true aesthetic, ethical and moral values” (Money 5). Thus, Marsh concludes that the Social Credit critique of industrial capitalism was “sound as far as it goes” (5), and that both Pound and Williams “used Jeffersonianism to interpret modernity” and “modern capitalism” (9).

John Beck likewise notes that Williams’ economic motif – what he calls Williams’ and John Dewey’s “socialism” – is “more rooted in Jeffersonian virtue than Marxian dialectics” (109). Beck disavows “presenting Williams as a systematic political or philosophical writer who uses poetry merely as a platform for socioeconomic arguments” (2). The point of the economic analysis contained in Williams’ and Dewey’s “social progressivism,” Beck asserts, is, “in the face of growing social fragmentation and alienation,” to find a “stability and security” to “anchor society and protect individual liberty from growing capitalist incorporation” (3). Beck characterizes Pateron’s ambitions as being “in large part, the agonized and unfulfilled ambitions of American progressivism” (137), and broadly asserts that to “write an epic is to deliberately engage in the affairs of society, to tell the tale of the tribe” (136). “Williams’s avant-garde critique of modern

America,” Beck claims, “depends on individual agency in an age in which such agency is thwarted at every turn” (155).

My study builds on the recent work of Beck, Marsh, and others by how I set Williams’ economic motif in the broader context of his assertion of democratic values and imperatives. In particular, I believe that I can complement their excellent studies by considering how Williams reveals the human conditions and emotions, especially fear, that drive our culture of capital. Recognizing what I have called Williams’ “affective economics” enables us to apprehend how Williams structures an aesthetic that returns to us as readers the ability to shape our culture and our future.

This chapter will explore how, like In the American Grain, Paterson articulates an affective economics through a participatory aesthetic. Williams transposes in Paterson the themes that preoccupied him in "The American Background," "Against the Weather," "Revolutions Revalued," and In the American Grain. Fear of the primary, which played so central a role in In the American Grain, gets further compounded in Paterson with fear of the secondary. Economic stances towards New World experience are imbued with a deeper emotional resonance through a series of representative figures – just as in In the American Grain. But, in Paterson, the poet’s own experience is more personally rendered as the representative figures become radically gendered as female. The revelatory “empathic identification[s],” as Bremen calls them, characterizing the aesthetic of In the American Grain, that were so emblematic of how that earlier work sought

contact through locating likenesses with dispossessed voluptuaries of the past, is transfigured in Paterson (160). Identifications are resisted and haltingly reached only incident to, and after, much dissonance and conflict. As in In the American Grain, the poet still acts as a regenerative force defending individual liberty and initiative against a capital culture, but in Paterson he figures both women and writing itself as the "primary," to borrow the terms he uses in "The American Background." Critics have long been interested in Williams' construction of gender in Paterson and throughout his career. I want to develop this aspect of Williams criticism by further exploring how his fearful, dissonant encounters with women as representatives of the primary orient the poet back to an affective economics. Contemporary female figures make us connect with the primary and represent the affective values beneath or beyond the economics. This has everything to do with how the fear of the primary and how the deeper emotional stances get played out.

In truth, women have always been linked to the primary in Williams' history-writing, and what difference we find in Paterson from earlier works is best understood as a shift in emphasis from past to present, from the somewhat easy and ecstatic identifications with various representative men of In the American Grain to the disconnects and conflicts with women in the latter work. In both In the American Grain and Paterson, Williams depicts male incursion into, and conquest of, a feminized land. Jacataqua, whom Burr encountered, was the female embodiment of the New World; so, too,

was “She,” who wooed DeSoto to his resting place on the river’s bed. Not surprisingly, representative loners like Rasles and Champlain who make contact with the land become, themselves, feminized. Williams depicts this by their tenderness, their attention to detail and beauty.

But in Paterson we find a subtle shift in emphasis. In the American Grain offered us a panoply of male figures – Puritans and visionary loners who, respectively, failed or succeeded in making contact. The land was, for the most part, a singular presence. “She” spoke to DeSoto but Jacataqua was silent. The feminine primary made itself felt by how it insinuated itself into the sensibilities of men like Rasles and Champlain. The poet experienced a variety of complex and contradictory identifications, seeing himself in the slaughtering Spaniards and the slaughtered Indians who ran to shore to greet them. The land thus seemed to speak mostly indirectly, through the loners it touched and who touched it.

In Paterson, by contrast, the female primary is multiplied as the figure of the poet encounters Cress, “She,” Beautiful Thing, Curie, Bessie Smith, and the lady who disappears as soon as she is glimpsed in Book Five. This multiplication of the feminine is complemented by a reduction to one of the major masculine incursive figures, namely Paterson. The shifts in the male-female presence in the poem are fitting because Paterson is the story of the poet’s encounter with his world in the present moment. History offers positive examples (e.g., Andrew Jackson) and cautionary notes (e.g., Sam Patch and Sarah Cummings), but the drama consists of the poet navigating

his own world now. The representative figure of the poet, which was implicit and occasionally made explicit in In the American Grain, is altogether the center of the action in Paterson. The multiplication of the feminine as primary in Paterson enables Williams to convey the challenges his fictive poet faces in making contact. The drama of making contact in the past – which constitutes the usable past – has been more consciously crafted as a drama of making contact in the present. Gendering the drama as “marriage” between a male poet and his variously voiced female primary world is critical; it invites all of the nuance of courtship, marriage, and sex. It makes the drama more emotionally rich, nuanced, and real – there is attraction, the desire of courtship and wooing, fear of closeness, fear of losing oneself in the other, even loathing and repulsion.

Moreover, Paterson’s interactions with the various aspects of the female primary are dissonant and conflictual affairs. In some ways they echo the stylistic disjunctions, the ragged edges and conflicting signals of the text itself, including its dialogic moves from prose to verse and discontinuous narrative juxtapositions. I will examine, in particular, the dissonant encounters of Paterson with Cress, “She,” and Beautiful Thing. His experience of Curie offers a different kind of dissonance – she serves as a model of discovery based on recognizing differences or dissonances, the kind of attention to detail represented by Rasles or Champlain in In the American Grain. Paterson’s experience of the glimpsed lady in Book Five

also offers less a “dissonance” than a disconnect that suggests again the challenge and mystery of the primary.

Paterson offers a continuity with Williams’ earlier works insofar as it enacts an aesthetic of participatory discovery. Williams’ aesthetic makes us read the poem including history in an historical manner as tropes and figures resonate and reappear. But as the threads are less than obvious in a narrative that is radically discontinuous, if not purposely under-determined, the reader is faced with apparent discontinuities all the time. Bremen effectively argues that in “order to break up the staleness, destroy these old customs and habits, Williams needs to use violence if he is to begin to *change* history” (36). We are thus always seeing new things and things anew – having to relate what is now before us in a constantly altering present to what’s come before. There is a sense, then, that it is the reader who, repeatedly called on to adapt and to relate the now to the then, is truly constructing the (or at least a) narrative. This comprises a challenge not simply for the reader – “That God damned Paterson,” Williams admitted to his publisher, James Laughlin, “It’s all shaped up in outline and intent, the body of the thinking is finished but the technique, the manner and the method are unresolvable to date. I flounder and flunk” (MacGowen xi).

Williams’ participatory aesthetic, based on his conception of writing not as a representation of reality but as primary, as a creation coterminous with reality, fundamentally underwrites his economic vision and his assertion of individual initiative and liberty in the face of corporate capital. The radical

discontinuity or disjunction, felt even in the individual psyche of Paterson himself and, by extension perhaps, in the reader, makes the writer's and the reader's enterprise "primary." The reader is compelled by the poet into an act of narrative creation. Self-consciousness and self-examination replace absorption into some kind of authoritative text. The reader necessarily finds himself joining the poet in regularly wondering how to "move the mind" (4:198) and in always facing the task of "pulling the disparate together to clarify/ and compress" (1:19). The reader experiences in Paterson's radical aesthetic dissonance the same "torsion of the spirit" that the first Puritan settlers of the New World find in confronting the "raw new." The primary materials that the poet marshals (e.g., verbatim transcription of Ben Franklin's advice to prospective European settlers, extracts from Columbus' journals, excerpts from Cotton Mather's Magnalia) engage the reader in the same hard work that these early settlers faced in confronting the primary. The primary materials, then, represent the local that Williams is so fond of asserting.

There is a corresponding phenomenon of the local in the reader as the text throws him or her back on his or her own local resources, own past and present self, to make sense of it all. The aesthetics make the reader make meaning and make the reader aware that he or she is making meaning. The reader is struggling always to navigate abrupt changes in tone and vantage point and shifts from prose to verse, as well as to identify at any given point in whose company he or she is and what voices are being heard. The result

is that anti-monopolistic principles inhere in the very aesthetic structure of the work itself. In many ways Williams is less authorial, and monopolizes less the construction of meaning than what we might expect in a more conventional, less experimental text. Paterson brings hierarchical structures into question, critic Elizabeth Gregory aptly asserts in "Figures of Williams's Modernist Ambivalence: Poetic Lineage and Lesbians in Paterson."

Paterson questions "any and all structures that assign value on exclusionary principles;" at the "structural level" this is expressed in his juxtapositions between poetry and prose (39). Meaning resides with individual initiative – both the poet's and the reader's own narrative creation. Meaning is not a commodity, is not commodified, but is forged anew each time, with each reading, and for each person.

This is important because Paterson struggles with contact with the primary in the context of writing the poem. Williams believed that writing enabled the writer to "strike straight to the core of his inner self, by words" and that "WE are at the center of the writing, each man for himself" (Embodiment 105, 107). Paterson demonstrates a fictional poet's efforts to do just this. But aside from how Paterson may have been primary for Williams in the writing of it, and how it illustrates a poet's, Paterson's, writing as being part of the experience of the primary, Paterson also equally takes up the drama of the reader. Because Williams believes that the poem is a "social instrument," part of Paterson's dilemma centers on how to find a meaningful language – "What *common* language to unravel?" (1:

7)(emphasis added). If writing is primary and is intended as a “social instrument,” then the real challenge a poet faces is to write so the reading of the poem remains as primary as the writing of it, to write so as to not lock in the reader. Here is where Paterson’s own anxiety of stasis and capture in the library in Book Three has to be factored in and countered by the aesthetic structure and principles of the poem. How to write for the ages, for subsequent eras without enslaving them, is a severe challenge, and one that makes Paterson, at times, lose heart. An oracular voice in Book Three tells him to “Give it up. Quit it. Stop writing/ . . . Give up/ the poem. Give up the shilly-/ shally of art” (3: 108-9). But the poem continues to chronicle Paterson’s, and to facilitate, in its aesthetics, the reader’s own, contact with the primary. Paterson’s incorporation of prior primary texts captures earlier authors’ experiences of the “raw new.” The poem is thereby always making itself new, approaching the past as a series of present moments of touch (or withdrawal), and assuming the ever current or fresh stance of the daily newspaper, which Marsh argues John Dewey understood as a metaphor for our culture (Money 194). Truth, ultimately, may reside somewhere between “She’s” intonation to “Go home, Write, Compose” and the voice in Book Three that compels Paterson to seek from the “river for/ an answer/ for relief from ‘meaning.’” (3: 111-12). That Paterson perseveres suggests that writing and reading the poem are both primary, as matters of making “contact” and wielding art as a “social instrument.” To give up the poem would mean to

give up meaning-making or to give up structuring a meaning-making process for readers in generations to come.

In this chapter, I will first consider Paterson's dialectic of fear. There exists the poet's fearful reaction to the primary as well as to the stasis represented by the secondary, the latter of which simultaneously affects the mass of men and is embodied in historical texts and traditions. The essential question for Paterson is how to be in his age but not of it, or how in the American landscape to avoid being silenced like past figures and the present mass of men. Then I will look at how Paterson's fear of the primary is played out in conflict with a series of representative female figures. I will explore how these dissonant encounters, which are often specifically economic in nature, enact an affective economics and move Paterson, and hopefully the reader, beyond the culture of corporate capital. In all of these aspects, and critically, in the aesthetics, Paterson enacts a release and relief consistent with the poet's regenerative function; he does this for himself and his fellow men. Aside from being the representative common man, the poet as regenerator must do more than, and more for, most men. Thus, he defines the problem of achieving "contact" in the modern world as falling within his domain of language and seeks to make the substance of the history he writes and how he writes it elemental and transforming.

* * * * *

We know from the affective economics of In the American Grain that fear in the face of the primary drives the secondary money culture. Corporate capital and the economic engine are thereby made dependent on

the affective, and brought within our potential control. In Paterson, fear is not simply a thread abstractly considered to run through the course of American culture and history but is more personally located in the figure of the poet, in Paterson, in two specific ways. Paterson thus enacts what has been previously theorized. First, the fear of the primary, exhibited and explored in others in In the American Grain, comes to reside now in Paterson himself and is exhibited by his fearful reaction to the streets, the falls and a series of women who represent the primary. Second, Paterson fears the sterility and stasis of the secondary, which he identifies with the present mass of men and the texts and figures of the past. Thus, the poet is associated from the first page of Book I with the “automatons” of the city who “walk outside their bodies . . . unroused” (1: 6). Paterson frets over being “ice-bound” like the dramatic eighteenth century figure of Sam Patch and the more mundane figure of Sarah Cummings, who leaped and slipped, respectively, into the maw of the primary. In an image that neatly combines the poet’s fear of the primary, in the form of the elemental force of the Passaic falls, with his fear of the secondary, in the form of the falls whose power can be harnessed for economic ends, Paterson considers the historical figure of an unknown man “lodged between two logs” visible in the “chasm near the wheel house of the water works” and perched “over the precipice” (1:35). The combined effect of Paterson’s twin fears reveals how much more difficult is the struggle for the poet than what seemed the case in Williams’ earlier work. Paterson becomes a self-reflexive chronicle, the narrative of its character’s own

struggle to survive and to write his chronicle, in the face of these twin fears, these twin forces. Putting the twin aspects of the poet's fear together in the poem generates a dissonant dialectic – the poet bounces back and forth in suggestive ways between fear of the primary and fear of the secondary. This is a continuation and more deeply personal elaboration of "The American Background's" articulation of primary and secondary culture.

Better to understand how Paterson's fearful encounters with a series of women representing the primary articulate an affective economics, it is critical first to examine how this dialectic between fear of the primary and fear of stasis forms the essential drama of the entire poem. The five books of Paterson offer dramatic illustrations of this dialectic of fear, even apart from the poet's encounters with the representative primary females.

Book I, section three, for instance, illustrates how even in a single passage the poem simultaneously evokes potential and movement as well as deadening stasis and sterility. In this part of the poem, Paterson has contrasted several instances of primary and secondary culture by using language itself as a metaphor. Thus, he compares the automatons of the modern city who have "no words" to the perpetual renewals "bespoke" by the picture of the "9 women/ of some African chief" (1: 13). "Divorce" and the "green bud fallen upon the pavement its/ sweet breath suppressed" is contrasted with Paterson's hopeful acknowledgement that he has "[o]nly of late, late! begun to know/ . . . whence/ I draw my breath or how to employ it" (1: 20-1). At this early point – only 25 pages or so into the poem – Paterson

seems betwixt and between, unable to embrace either the primary or the secondary. He is paralyzed by fear of the falls and fear of stasis such that he proclaims, “we do not know (in time)/ where the stasis lodges” (1: 34).

Paterson commences the third section of Book One by asserting the supremacy of the “green, livid/ green” rose over the red rose of literature and the imagination (1: 29). The poet thus exposes his own false “idiot” “mastery” and concludes “My whole life/ has hung too long upon a partial victory” (1: 29). The reader is thus led to examine his own desire for the commodity of literary imagination, the secondary, in the form of the “red rose.” This recognition suggests movement – the green rose, livid with the sap of life, is given priority over the “partial victory,” the “idiot” and the elusive “mastery” of literature’s red rose.

The suggestion of movement and potential in the ironically characterized “livid” green rose is implied in two subsequent broadsides against the academy. “Idiot” is now used to refer to the universities, which Paterson accuses of being “spitted on fixed concepts like/ roasting hogs, sputtering” (1: 32), and whom he characterizes as “knowledgeable idiots” who “perpetuate . . . stasis and make it/ profitable” (1: 34). The opening image of the red rose and the latter portrait of the academy depict stasis and, by their recognition of this, a simultaneous suggestion of release and relief from that stasis. Scenes that follow elaborate on sterility in the form of absent-mindedness (the doctor engaged in a distracted and detached effort to peel a label from an empty mayonnaise jar), absence (a “young colored

woman/ in a small voice standing naked by the bed” who asks “Will you give me a baby?”), and privation (a careful account of deceased Cornelius Doremus’ early eighteenth century estate contrasted with a vague accounting of hand outs to contemporary working folks in this “time of general privation”) (1: 32-33).

Stasis appears to inhere as well in the poet’s personal envy of men like Pound and Eliot, “the men that ran/ and could run off/ toward the peripheries – to other centers, direct – for clarity (if/ they found it)/ loveliness and/ authority in the world” (1: 35). The “springtime/ toward which their minds aspired” he can see “within himself” only as being “ice bound” (1: 35). The textual sequence intensifies the poet’s isolation in his ice-bound state and sterile world by bracketing it, on one side, with a scene of brutal waste and violence in which thousands of eels are clubbed and carted off from a drained lake bed, and, on the other hand, with the image of the man caught in the waterworks. Paterson, then, is surrounded by privation and stasis, which is made all the more painful and ironic by the brutal, economically motivated, destructive waste of the natural bounty.

It is fitting that the movement the poet envies in others but sees only “ice bound” in himself is captured as well in the prose-verse-prose movement of this passage; the two prose paragraphs of loss and waste seemingly block the poet’s egress. Such sequencing reflects what Alec Marsh refers to as Williams’ “aversion to metaphors, and especially similes, because he connects their transformative powers to that of financial manipulation”

("Stevens and Williams" 37). Arguing that Williams believed that "[p]oetry ought to be concerned with actual, unspeculative, even physical relations to material things," Marsh suggests both how the poet's work is made more difficult by the absence of figurative connections, and second, though Marsh does not say it outright, how the sequence of smaller passages and of prose and verse are so critical (42). The way in which the poet's awareness of his own stasis, captured in verse, is sandwiched between the prose of the eels and the "crotch of these logs" in which "the body was caught," also enacts the relationship that critic Brian Bremen posits between "the frozen violence of the prose documents and the violence needed to free the language, to break up those grammars of language that divorce us from our world" (37). The relationship of prose to verse in Paterson, however, cannot be reduced so simply, as elsewhere in the poem movement and release inhere in prose passages, in the form of letters from Cress and Allen Ginsberg.

Near the end of Book I, kineticism, release and relief return fitfully. "What more, to carry the thing through?" Paterson wonders (1: 36). Portions from Williams' correspondence with Pound, who dismisses his friend's "interest . . . in the bloody loam," in favor of the "finished product" are introduced (1: 37). A cryptic rebuttal makes clear Pound's way cannot be Paterson's way: "Leadership passes into empire; empire begets in-/ solence; insolence brings ruin" (1: 37). The section fittingly ends with Paterson's own unsuccessful attempt to escape the "vulgar streets" for the peaceful "dream" of the "convent of the Little Sisters of St. Ann" (1: 37-38). He is finally

confronted, however, with involuntary movement, change – the 1737 earthquake and the chattering and significantly, terrifying, sight of the falls.

In this section, the poet has sought to clarify “where the stasis lodges” (1: 34). Ultimately, the aesthetic construction of the poem itself brilliantly compels the reader to ponder this question with the figure of the poet at several levels. Can the reader construct a narrative out of these different passages of elemental, primary, multifarious experience and dramatic shifts from verse to prose and back again? Or do these component parts remain inert and unrelated? In this sense, the question may be whether the stasis resides in ourselves as well as in the disparate pieces? As poet and reader struggle to find “where the stasis lodges,” individual initiative and liberty are what are really being scripted, or better yet, enabled and compelled. The text is less a commodity and more the “raw new” demanding engagement or surrender, such as the New World demanded of the Puritan and other settlers.

Moreover, it is not even clear where stasis lies in the component parts. The doctor is described as more concerned with “detaching the label from a discarded mayonnaise jar . . . than to examine and treat the twenty and more infants taking their turn from the outer office, their mothers tormented and jabbering” (1: 32). “He’d stand in the alcove,” we learn, “pretending to wash, the jar at the bottom of the sink well out of sight and, as the rod of water came down, work with his fingernail in the splash at the edge of the colored label striving to loose the tightly glued paper” (1: 32). Even in this seemingly

sterile enterprise, however, we find redemptive water – and the effort to remove glued text recalls the poet’s belief that the “words will have to be rebricked up” and must “break loose” to effect a release and relief. The point is that what looks static and sterile may contain the seeds of its own undoing, that release and relief may inhere if we look closer at the mayonnaise label, consider the “livid” rose, or listen more carefully to the “chatterer” in the falls.

In truth, the task of identifying “where the stasis lodges” occupies poet and reader throughout all of Paterson. Just as the jar reveals how release may reside in stasis, we see in the poet’s ambivalence about the return to the sea in Book IV, section 3, that stasis may reside in what we believe to be release. “I warn you, the sea is *not* our home,” Paterson asserts in opposition to another voice enticing us, “You must come to it. Seed / of Venus, . . . / Listen! / Thalassa! Thalassa! / Drink of it, be drunk! / Thalassa / immaculate: our home, our nostalgic / mother” (4: 199-201, emphasis in original). This final debate follows a dissonant dialectic that is played out through the entire section of Book IV and that echoes the similar play between a fear of stasis and a fear of the primary that we have been considering in the first book. Just as in that earlier book, the last section of Book IV requires the reader to discover the relation between disparate parts. Indeed, in the Book IV injunction to “Kill the explicit sentence, . . . expand our meaning – by verbal sequences. Sentences, but not grammatical sentences,” the poem characterizes its own method for dislodging stasis (4: 188). Expanding meaning by “verbal sequences” suggests that the glue of

grammar – which prioritizes meanings and relationships by qualifying and ordering ideas – has been displaced. The function of grammar is replaced by the reader who constructs relations between what Williams called "homologues" – co-equal blocks of verbal sequences – and thus gives meaning to the text he or she reads.

* * * * *

"I'll die before I've said my fill about women," Williams contends (Nay 45). Nothing proves this better than Paterson's detailed account of his fearful encounters with the poetess Cress in Books I and II, "She" in Book II, "Beautiful Thing" in Book III, Madame Curie in Books III and IV, and the lady glimpsed in Book V. The first three women, in particular, take the poet to task in one way or another for his alignment with or co-optation by values of corporate capital. They variously expose his failure to make contact, to connect – they reveal that the "divorce" the poem polemicizes resides in the figure of the poet himself. Paterson's underlying economic stance is revealed – he is lost and is, himself, dispossessed, headed in the wrong direction. Dissonance resides in how the three women confront Paterson, or alternatively considered, how he uses them to confront himself, with his own sorry state. The romantic identifications of In the American Grain give way in Paterson to a series of complicated, conflicted relationships, in which identification is simultaneously assiduously courted and strenuously resisted, and, ultimately, only fitfully achieved. The poet does not want to be "semi-roused" and "inarticulate" like the mass of men in the park in Book II, "ice bound" like historical figures such as Patch and Cummings, or captured by

the texts in the library. It is not difficult, then, to see how, in Paterson, identification is a perilous business.

Paterson's aesthetic composition, and the demands it places on readers, has gendered implications, particularly for a masculine principle of incursion into a primary realm associated with the feminine. Paterson notes, early in Book I, that the challenge is to "interrelate on a new ground, difficultly . . . a mass of detail" (1: 19). Details offer but "an assonance, a homologue/triple piled" compelling the poet and reader actively to pull the "disparate together to clarify/ and compress" (1: 19). Critic Anthony Flinn, in "'Laughing at the Names': The Blunting of Male Incursion in Paterson," aptly characterizes these "homologues" as "radically disparate images and voices linked by common elements abstracted by the reader" (17). Reader's perceptions are the key, Flinn argues, "to a 'subjective animation' which discloses non-hierarchical patterns whose source . . . is things themselves coming from a 'comparative anatomy' of experience" (17). Readers navigate this array of detail – make contact in the "disarray . . . of unmediated experience" and it is this that Flinn contends permits the poem in "argument, structure, and pervasive imagery [to] discredit masculine authority" (15). Paterson's aesthetic composition, then, resonates with the poet's ambivalent and difficult relationships with the series of primary representative females.

As with Williams' earlier work, the regeneration for poet and reader derives from the meta-encounter and the meta-meta-encounter of the poet with his representative figures. So Paterson's narrative is really the story of

his story of his encounters; and it is the story of our story of his story of his encounters. Dissonance is all around as Paterson must re-think himself in relation to the primary, through the various female figures, and would have readers similarly reconstitute themselves by their encounters with his encounters, the poet's text, and themselves. As with In the American Grain, Paterson's meta encounters, and those he structures for the reader, are meant to effect a release from stasis; they seek to reveal the often obscured and dispossessed affective substratum below the culture of corporate capital.

Identification with the female primary, making "contact," requires Paterson first to confront, and be confronted by, a series of primary female figures who reveal his "divorce" for what it is. Contact, realized through eventual identification, then, is predicated on dissonance and difference. Critic Elizabeth Gregory aptly notes that Williams' "[a]ttempt to acknowledge the feminine serves" as a metaphor for seeing "value in what had formerly been dismissed" (40). I think this is right. But it is also true, as critic Carl Eby asserts in "'The Ogre' and the 'Beautiful Thing': Voyeurism, Exhibitionism, and the Image of 'Woman' in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams," that Williams' "genuine respect for, love for, and identification with women . . . were nevertheless tempered by an element of unconscious hostility" (38). Paterson's exploration of the primary through his encounters with "She," Cress, Beautiful Thing, Curie, and the lady of Book V, illustrate both the re-possession of that which has been obscured and the tension that Eby describes.

If In the American Grain was the story of the poet navigating our collective historical past, Paterson is the story of the poet navigating our present. As it is the female that ties us back to the primary and the affective, release and the “radiant gist,” it is fitting that Paterson's representative women resemble the voluptuaries of In the American Grain (4: 185). Cress and Curie possess the artist's eye for detail. Cress, as we will see, exhibits this in her nuanced insights into Paterson's and her own emotional stances and states. Curie's sharp mind and eye for details are obliquely described by the poet in metaphorical terms: “Love is a kitten, a pleasant/ thing, a purr and a/ pounce. Chase a piece of/ string, a scratch and a mew/ a ball batted with a paw/ a sheathed claw” (4: 175). Paterson's representative primary females are, like the voluptuaries of In the American Grain, similarly dispossessed. Beautiful Thing, a beaten, black woman traded between rival gangs, is the very picture of society's margins. Cress feels herself utterly abandoned, and “She” accuses the poet, “You have abandoned me!” (2: 84). Even Curie is described as “upon/ the stage at the Sorbonne/ a half mile across! walking solitary/ as tho' in a forest, the silence/ of a great forest (of ideas)/ before the assembly” (4: 171).

The representative Paterson women also model the same stance of adaptation illustrated by the representative voluptuaries of In the American Grain. Hence, Cress describes having “been forced, as a woman not content with woman's position in the world, to do a lot of pioneer *living*” (2: 90, emphasis in original). Curie makes her discovery by adapting to the

surprises her research brings. Finally, Cress and the other representative women attain reciprocity with the New World and are not driven by economic motives. Cress, in fact, indicts the poet for his economic motives, which contrast sharply with her own extreme aesthetic and personal honesty. “She” urges the poet to embrace his world, to “plunge” and “marry” (2: 82), and Curie labors away, becoming herself a “luminosity of elements” (4: 174).

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I want to turn now to consider how Paterson uses his conflict with Cress to expose his failure to make contact, and to effect a release from his damnable stasis. Section One of Book II weaves together three disparate strands – Paterson, Cress, and the masses – to investigate his stasis. Dissonance works both at the level of the conflict between the two writers and at the level of the aesthetic construction of the poem itself, which shifts back and forth between Paterson's verse and Cress' prose. So marked is this shift, and the interspersed evocations of the mass' violent outbursts, that the reader, compelled to ask what relates these various passages, must apply the mortar between the bricks to construct a narrative that is at least minimally cohesive. This is a difficult task – for while Cress argues for contact with the primary, and Paterson constructs his poem at several levels to enable just this contact, neither figure is easily identified more with release than divorce or visa versa. Rather they are each using writing as the best means, in the real time of the narrative itself, to effect release from his or her own divorce. Thus, Cress writes to the poet and the poet writes to the reader.

Only a few pages into Book II, Cress laments “the complete damming up of all my creative capacities in a particularly disastrous manner such as I have never before experienced” (2: 45). She attributes this to Paterson “ignoring the real contents of my last letters to you,” which she believes has induced a “kind of blockage, exiling one’s self from one’s self” (2: 45). Cress asks with a hint of sarcasm if Paterson has “ever experienced it,” and adds, “I dare say you have, at moments; and if so, you can well understand what a serious psychological injury it amounts to when turned into a permanent day-to-day condition” (2:45). Cress’ inquiry directs our attention back to the poet and we wonder if has he experienced this kind of internal divorce? Before readers get an answer, we are given an illustration of a kind of futile, pointless, violent release -- “an infuriated mob” – “a great beast,” quoting Alexander Hamilton – engaged in an 1880 property dispute (2: 46).

Paterson’s turn does come, comprising the third strand of the narrative interrogation of stasis and release, when he describes a grasshopper alighting from the grass. This sight recalls for him a “red-basalt, boot long” grasshopper of Mexican art (2: 47). Such an experience of the primary, both the poet’s immediate encounter with the grasshopper on his Sunday trek through the park, and his recollection of the Mexican art that captures it, suggests the release, the “livening” of the poet’s mind. But, too, it simultaneously induces fear. For while Paterson experiences a kind of secular annunciation (“No flesh but the caress!/ He is led forward by their announcing wings”), he “is afraid!” and wonders, “What then?” (2: 48).

Paterson is pulled between his simultaneous delight in and fear of the primary.

The quality of the verse as verse, of the poetic line, illustrates Williams' contention that in "verse all can be touched, . . . verse is a release of the actual, of the living sap" ("Spring" 150). The verse enacts the release it describes, consistent with Williams' argument in "Against the Weather" (1939) that "materials and structure have a meaning" (208). In a short passage, Paterson describes the grasshoppers, noting:

They fly away, churring! until
their strength spent they plunge
to the coarse cover again and disappear
-- but leave, livening the mind, a flashing
of wing and a churring song . (2: 47)

Here the enjambments effect release, and the last word of the first three lines simultaneously moves the reader forward by suspending, ever-so-slightly, the action at line's end. The effect is to build the reader's interest and thus compel, or propel, him or her forward in a state of anticipation similar to that felt by Paterson as the grasshoppers whirl before him. In addition, the caesura invokes a pause in the action, but only after we have moved down into the fourth line. The word "flashing" at line's end maintains suspense and the period in the sixth line seems almost to back off a few paces, the better to have a chance to slow things.

Moreover, the narrative sequence, and the relationship of verse to prose, in particular, illustrate how the poem scripts release and stasis in other ways, capturing and even augmenting a dissonance between Paterson and

Cress. Thus, the annunciation of grasshoppers' wings abruptly hits the wall of Cress' block of prose. Paterson's verse runs smack into Cress' paragraph contention that the effect of the "situation with you" was "to destroy the validity for me myself *of myself*" (2: 48, emphasis in original).

But since your ignoring those letters was not 'natural,' it could not but follow that that whole side of life connected with those letters should in consequence take on for my own self that same kind of unreality and inaccessibility which the inner lives of other people often have for us. (2: 48)

Paterson swiftly recovers himself, and resumes his verse, ambiguously likening the poet's mind to the art that renders and retains something of the primary – "his mind a red stone carved to be/ endless flight/ Love that is a stone endlessly in flight" (2:48). Whether the poet is static like stone or in kinetic flight is unclear; but "Love/ combating sleep" (2: 49) suggests Paterson has made contact, in contrast to the "[e]ternally asleep . . . unroused" masses who open Book I (1: 6). The ambiguity surrounding the poet parallels the section's later ambiguity surrounding the working masses. The men and women in the park are characterized as "Minds beaten thin/ by waste" (2: 51). But, too, Paterson observes their "pitiful thoughts" "surrounded / by churring loves!," which recalls the grasshoppers' wings (2: 52). While "their thoughts alight" like the poet's mind and the grasshoppers, ultimately, Paterson constructs his own superiority to the democratic mass – "Gay wings" "bear them (in sleep)" while the poet is awake and "walking" (2: 52).

Cress' epistolary bricks not only indict Paterson for his own stasis, they take him to task for the stasis she claims he has induced in her. There is a strange kind of reciprocal anxiety of influence between the two writers. Cress, for her part, fears Paterson's paradoxical capacity, by his indifference, to dam her up, to make her dispossessed from herself. The "one thing that I still wish more than any other," she claims, "is that I could see you . . . [I]t is the *one* impulse I have that breaks through that film, that crust, which has gathered there so fatally between my true self and that which can make only mechanical gestures of living" (2: 76, emphasis in original). Paterson's indifference can only be seen as a "divorce" from the primary when we consider him in contrast to Cress' own self-characterization. She claims to be "more the woman than the poet" and to be concerned "less with the publishers of poetry than with . . . living" (1: 7). This self-description implicitly casts Paterson in a negative light and explains his fear of, or anxiety around, Cress' epistolary indictments, especially when we factor in Williams' characterization of the letters as "a reply from the female side to many of my male pretensions. It was a strong reply . . . which sought to destroy me; . . . – an attack, a personal attack upon me by a woman" (qtd. in Bremen 177).

The interaction between Paterson and Cress is further complicated by the fact that he seeks her influence. In fact, some critics suggest Williams adapts, even re-writes, Marcia Nardi's letters of 1943 to make himself (in the form of Paterson) look worse. Paterson, then, uses Cress in paradoxical ways, including, according to Flinn, "on behalf of his own textual voice to

recover his own creative impulse, . . . tak[ing] on her knowledge and her power” (23). Critics Gilbert and Gubar note in "Purloined Letters: William Carlos Williams and Cress" that beyond seeking her influence, however, Williams, in the figure of Paterson, “defuses his anxiety over Marcia Nardi by making her into a character he can control” (9). This control is especially striking insofar as Paterson monopolizes the verse, and restricts Cress to biting prose only.

Here, then, is the difficulty in clearly identifying contact or divorce with either Cress or the poet. Cress ironically articulates contact by expressing her own divorce. She speaks for the primary in her evocation of living and in her economic critique of Paterson at the end of Book III, which I will consider shortly. Paterson approaches contact in his own verse sequences. But in the way that he uses Cress’ letters to expose and thus interrogate his own divorce, the poet’s identification with the primary and release may be said to derive from Cress, even to comprise an identification with her through appropriation of her words and insights. More interesting, still, is how all of this happens in an aesthetic of dissonance and dialectic. The poet includes prose blocks that contravene his own verse sequences of release, written by a poetess, who, herself, seems to require the poet’s assistance to effect a release. The poetess and the poet, then, need each other.

A tense dialogue with the New World “She” and a harsh five-page epistolary indictment by Cress conclude Book II, in what feels to Paterson like a personal ordeal by fire. “A man is under the crassest necessity/,”

Paterson declares half way through section three, “to break down the pinnacle of his moods/ fearlessly --/ to the bases; base! To the screaming dregs” (2: 85). Indeed, the entire section details Paterson’s dramatic and painful descent, at the bottom of which he encounters the female primary, and is confronted with the implications of his economic and affective stance.

A void opens and closes section three of Book II – it starts with the “nul” “that’s past all/ seeing/ the death of all/ that’s past/ all being,” and closes with Cress’ indictment of Paterson’s distance from life (2: 77, 87-91). The initial evocation of the “nul” is complemented by an aphoristic gallows humor – “But Spring shall come and flowers will bloom/ and man must chatter of his doom” (2: 77). The mood lifts only temporarily – “The descent beckons/ as the ascent beckoned,” we are told (2: 78). The poet identifies the mind, specifically “memory,” as “a kind/ of accomplishment/ a sort of renewal/ even/ an initiation,” and declares that the “descent/ made up of despairs/ and without accomplishment/ realizes a new awakening : / which is a reversal/ of despair” (2: 78-9). Palpable despair, nevertheless, soon settles upon Paterson once more and the generative, let alone the regenerative, faith of the “descent” passage is long fled. The dogs, representing procreation, “and trees/ [that] conspire to invent/ a world” are “gone!/ Bow, wow! A/ departing car scatters gravel as it/ picks up speed!” (2: 79). “[F]lowers uprooted, . . . dogwoods in full flower,/ the trees dismembered; its women/ shallow, its men steadfastly refusing – at/ the best” – the poet’s mood is as bleak as it has ever been (2: 81).

The “descent” that we were earlier told “beckons” is theoretical and abstracted next to the scenes that close out Book II. This is because the explicitly dialogic aspects of Paterson’s encounters with the New World “She” and Cress at the nadir make the poet’s fate more deeply personal, disturbing, and real. While “She” offers a New World embrace that recalls In the American Grain, particularly the DeSoto chapter, Cress intensifies and expands her own critique of Paterson. In either case, though, Paterson confronts failure – or is confronted with failure by the female primary – based on what he cannot give. The female representative figures of Paterson are dispossessed – and, here, they expose the poet as personally responsible for that dispossession. They seek from the poet the affective sharing and giving stance of the voluptuaries of In the American Grain. The drama, then, and the stasis, is lodged in the poet, in his stance, and in each of us.

The exchange with “She” follows a repetitive pattern that highlights Paterson’s difficulty and impresses that the descent must be a right, a real, descent. Notably, the poet starts off lost in himself – “[c]aught (in mind)/ beside the water he looks down, listens!/ But discovers, still, no syllable in the confused/ uproar: missing the sense” (2: 82). In this last apostrophe Paterson renders his own divorce from the primary. He is not utterly indifferent, however; indeed, he “shakes with the intensity/ of his listening” (2: 82). Paterson is simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by the primary of the falls – “Only the thought of the stream comforts him,/ its terrifying plunge, inviting marriage” (2: 82). Through a series of iterations, “She” invites

Paterson to marry, to touch the primary: "Poet, poet! sing your song, quickly! or/ not insects but pulpy weeds will blot out/ your kind" (2: 83). "Marry us! Marry us!/ Or! be dragged down, dragged/ under and lost," she implores (2: 83). Again: "Go home. Write. Compose/ . . . Be reconciled, poet, with your world, it is/ the only truth!" (2: 84). Ultimately, though, she loses hope, and, recalling the voluptuaries' dispossession in In the American Grain, "She" declares: "You have abandoned me!" (2: 84). As a final "pitiful gesture," "She" will throw herself upon the bed and implore Paterson: "Invent (if you can) discover or/ nothing is clear – will surmount/ the drumming in your head. There will be/ nothing clear, nothing clear" (2: 84-5).

The poet's response is remarkably like that of the Puritans' withdrawal before the unknown. For a response the poet musters only what we might call a false descent. When "She" urges on his song, "He all *but* falls" and when she intones to marry or be lost, we learn that "She was married with empty words:/ better to/ stumble at/ the edge/ to fall/ fall/ and be/," and now we see the result, "-- divorced/ from the insistence of place --/ from knowledge/,/ from learning" (2: 83-4)(emphasis added). Fittingly, the poet's reply yields nothing of the primary – "the terms/ foreign, conveying no immediacy, pouring down" (2: 84). Paterson offers only a cliché rationalization – "the language [is] worn out" – before fleeing to the "cool of books" of the Library in Book III (2: 84). His response to "She's" "pitiful gesture" of offering herself prone on the marriage bed is to flee, "pursued by the roar" of the falls, of the primary (2: 84-5). "She's" initial faith, then, in

Paterson's work – telling him to “Go home. Write. Compose” – is not rewarded, and, appears entirely unwarranted. The divorce is captured in a kind of sexual parody:

He Me with my pants, coat and vest still on!

She And me still in my galoshes! (2: 85).

“[U]nabashed, to regain/ the sun kissed summits of love!,” from the base, the “screaming dregs,” seems only an improbable hope. Paterson closes out his encounter with “She” with a cryptic and tepid invocation of writing's regenerative capacity:

-- obscurely
in to scribble . and a war won!
-- saying over to himself a song written
previously . inclines to believe
he sees, in the structure, something
 of interest: (2: 86).

If “She” laments Paterson's withdrawal and refusal, Cress indicts the poet in more direct economic terms for what he takes from, and how he exploits, her. Where Paterson's encounter with “She” has been dissonant in the sense that they could never quite get together, his relationship with Cress is outright conflictual. Cress' epistolary charges identify Paterson's economic stance and the affective cost it has on her. Cress' earlier statements have given us hints of what to expect, especially her first passage in Book I, when she seeks the return of her property, namely her poems. Cress implicitly compares herself to Paterson, noting “it was the human situation and not the literary one that motivated my phone call and visit” (1: 7). Readers may well

ask what motivates the letter's recipient. Is Paterson unwilling to return the letters, is he more concerned with publishers and publishing than "living?" Indeed, the Cress-Paterson exchange is nothing less than a clash of two standards of valuation. Or, more accurately, that is how Cress characterizes her differences with Paterson, and, most critically, what Paterson uses her letters to expose about himself. Cress conveys the notion of giving as conferring value; this is a rare commodity and at odds with a predominant ethos of taking. Thus, she confesses:

There are people – especially among women– who can speak only to one person. And I am one of those women. I do not come easily to confidences I could not possibly convey to any one of those people who have crossed my path in these few months, those particular phases of my life which I made the subject of my letters to you. (2: 64)

Cress recognizes all too well that her sense of value has consequences and costs as she expects to be "entirely misunderstood and misjudged in all my economic and social maladjustments" (2: 64). She prefers to suffer such costs rather than betray her own standard of value (in both senses), noting that she would rather accept this than "ever attempt to communicate to anyone else what I wrote to you about" (2: 64).

By contrast, Cress identifies in Paterson a taking, exploitative standard of valuation; and, critically, consistent with Williams' broader affective economics, she makes Paterson's standard of valuation dependent on his underlying fear and inability to "touch" or give. Paterson, then, continues the affective economics of In the American Grain, revealing a dependence of the economic stance on underlying human dimensions.

“[W]riters like yourself,” Cress charges, “are so sheltered from life in the raw by the glass-walled condition of their own safe lives” (2: 87). “You’ve never had to live, Dr. P,” Cress claims, “not in any of the by-ways and dark underground passages where life so often has to be tested. The very circumstances of your birth and social background provided you with an escape from life in the raw” (2: 90).

From this fearful divorce, Cress alleges, come two phenomena. First, Paterson confuses protection from raw life with an “*inability* to live” (2: 90, emphasis in original). This amounts to accusing the poet of an ironic sort of suburban prejudice of romanticizing poverty, and mistaking that for a cure for an erroneous belief in his own incapacity. Cress exposes the poet’s premises as false. “I’ve been looking at some of your autobiographical works, as this indicates,” she acknowledges, and concludes that he mistakenly and rather selfishly regards “literature as nothing more than a desperate last extremity resulting from that illusory inability to live” (2: 90). Cress, then, reveals that Paterson shares her condition, that he is alienated from his own self as she has described herself to be. Diagnosing the poet, and ascribing to writing a larger diagnostic and prescriptive function, Cress indicts Paterson as well for his social failure. Literature has a social function, she notes, as it is “more and more tied up with the social problems and social progress” and, thereby, offers the writer a means to make a contribution to the “welfare of humanity” (2: 89). Such means Paterson sacrifices for his own economic motives.

Thus the second phenomenon to come from Paterson's divorce is his exploitative economic stance. "My attitude towards woman's wretched position in society," Cress asserts, developing this theme further, "and my ideas about all the changes necessary there, ~~were~~ interesting to you, weren't they, in so far as they made for *literature* (2: 87, emphasis in original). Cress charges that Paterson is interested in her only to the extent that he can obtain from her thoughts and ideas "that too could be turned by you into literature, as something disconnected from life" (2: 87). The poet, then, "withheld" what she really needed – i.e., some answer for her crushing loneliness and "some ways and means of leading a *writer's* life, either by securing some sort of writer's job . . . or else through some kind of literary journalism such as book reviews" (2: 88, emphasis in original). But Paterson, holding an acquisitive view, saw in her only what Cress calls "the *publication* of my poetry with your name lent to it" (2: 88). "That literary man's ego," she later adds, "wanted to help me in such a way, I think, that my own achievements might serve as a flower in his buttonhole, if that kind of help had been enough to make me bloom" (2: 90). Paterson has utterly failed to ameliorate her suffering, Cress charges, or to contribute to social progress, even though his training and experience as a doctor and poet, presumably, should enable him to do so.

Cress, we see at the end of Book II, has tried, like "She," to get the poet to engage the primary and the affective. Cress repeatedly avows that she needs Paterson. But, perhaps more to the point, is that he needs her.

Paterson privileges her standard of affective valuation by using her letters to try to effect his own release from stasis. In this sense, Paterson is self-diagnosing, even arguably, falsely self-diagnosing, insofar as the diagnosis is based on his appropriation of Cress' words and sentiments. He retains the letters because Cress' analysis of the nature of his divorce and her expose of how he places literature over life contain some truths. As Gale Schricker notes in "The Case of Cress: Implications of Allusion in Paterson," Cress' letter of "righteous indignation" moves beyond the anger of "a woman scorned" to a "thematically appropriate" focus on the difficulty Paterson has "joining himself to the concrete female element" (22). Anthony Flinn argues that Cress' letters further his "anti-masculinist design" and his persona remains indicted for separating life from literature, the very divorce he rails against, making himself "part of the problem rather than a means of solving it" (25). But Flinn notes that while Cress' charge that Paterson is disconnected from life seems validated by his drawing on her letters for his poem, Paterson also permits Cress' letters to take over Book II, her "life overwhelm[ing] [his] art" (24). I think that this is right; Paterson's incorporation of Cress' letters – what Gilbert and Gubar call his digestion of Cress' "political attitude" – are both an appropriation of her knowledge and power as well as a strategy of effecting his own release (9). In accepting and, ultimately, appropriating her indictment, Paterson simultaneously seeks to acknowledge its acuity and use it to alter the circumstances of his own stance that account for that acuity. If he can do the latter, this might just

render her critique obsolete and resolve the poet's anxiety over Cress' influence.

* * * * *

If "She" and Cress explicitly confront Paterson with pleas and charges, the poet's encounters with Beautiful Thing in Book III play out almost entirely as an internal "torsion of the spirit" involving the human drama of fear. The poet starts Book III seeking the "cool of books" in the library as a way to "lead the mind away" from the primary of the "streets" and the primary in his own mind. His mind is, like the Passaic River, "a falls unseen" that "tumbles and rights itself/ and refalls – and does not cease, falling/ and refalling with a roar, a reverberation/ not of the falls but of its rumor/ unabated" (3: 97). Ironically, Paterson is internalizing the primary, even as he continues to run from it. His mind is like the water, the primary, but, too, it is "taken up" by another element, "the books' wind," suggesting here the secondary (3: 96). It is in the context of this "torsion," then, that the poet meets "Beautiful Thing." Fittingly, Paterson characterizes Beautiful Thing from the first in terms, like himself at times, of the primary elements of water, wind, and fire. "Beautiful Thing, / my dove," Paterson observes, "unable and all who are windblown,/ touched by fire,/ and unable,/ a roar that (soundless) drowns the sense/ with its reiteration" (3: 97). The elemental imagery reinforces the poet's own identification with and fear of the primary, and recalls his own dim apprehension of the "springtime/ . . . which he saw,/ within himself – icebound" (1: 35).

Ambivalence, captured in the figures of Paterson and Beautiful Thing, is represented in the narrative structure itself. The poem in section one of Book III proceeds by its dialectic swerves from a fear of the primary, including Beautiful Thing, to contemplations of risk, to marriage, and back again, exposing Paterson's own torsions of the spirit. The poet must decide whether he will marry the primary of the falls or comfortably join his mind with the minds and books of the past. The library is reassuring – “[b]ooks will give rest sometimes against/ the uproar of water falling/ and righting itself to refall filling/ the mind with its reverberation/ shaking stone” (3: 97). But this respite exacts a cost, which the poet dimly and incrementally recognizes. Even the description of the library as “sanctuary to our fears” cuts both ways – suggesting it relieves our fears and yet simultaneously embodies and houses them (3: 98). The “stagnation and death” of the library emerge more fully as the section progresses; a “roar of books, /from the wadded library oppresses” the poet (3: 98, 100). The “spirit languishes” from the press of the books which invite the poet to “loa[n] blood/ to the past, . . . risking life” and “enfeeble the mind’s intent” (3: 100-2). Yet, at each instance in which the poet is captivated by his reading, his immersion in the past is abruptly interrupted by the ambiguous or cryptic – and as yet unembodied – appellation, Beautiful Thing. When the poet finds the “freshness” of a mind in touch with its own day or some detail in his reading that enables him to touch that earlier time, Paterson's “mind/ reels, starts back amazed from the

reading,” and his reading – only at times and with some risk - thus awakens to his own time (3: 98, 100).

Critically, Beautiful Thing, then, is vaguely associated with release in Paterson’s own mind. Thus, Beautiful Thing, the primary and elemental, “a dark flame,/ a wind, a flood – counter to all staleness,” appears as Paterson’s “mind begins to drift,” as he considers the “mind’s intent,” or as he evokes the falls of the mind (3: 100). “Springtime” is contained within, this implies, if Paterson can but find some way to release it, recalling the aphorism of the Preface: “we know nothing, pure/ and simple, beyond/ our own complexities” (3).

The difficulty of Paterson’s challenge and the impending sterility of defeat are represented in the violent torture of American Indians, and the image of debased marriage – “Doc, listen – fiftyish, a grimy hand/ pushing back the cap: . . . / I got/ a woman outside I want to marry, will/ you give her a blood test?” (3: 103). The poet’s task is set against a series of historical figures who risked everything to cross the falls, suspended on a tightrope with either a boy or even a “cookstove” on their back (3: 104). The poet seems ready to “[e]mbrace the foulness,” not to flee (3: 103). As he prepares himself, the poet conflates the risk of the tightrope and the poem itself – “reverie gains and/ your joints loosen/ the trick’s done!” (3: 104). Crossing the tightrope suggests that Paterson is taking, or is willing to take, risks. But the tightrope also reinforces his (mis)apprehensions about how to proceed and his fear of the primary. The tightrope walk is not an actual descent but a

false marriage, like Ben Franklin's tinkering in In the American Grain with the new world only enough to run an engine with it, or like Paterson's stumble at the falls that comprises a "divorce" at the end of Book II.

The ambivalence that characterizes Paterson's view of the library and crossing the falls is repeated in his encounters with Beautiful Thing as finally embodied in the figure of the young black woman. Sergio Rizzo asserts in "The Other Girls of Paterson – Old and New" that "Williams would learn to associate black femininity . . . with rebellion, disinheritance, and resilience" (42), and it is easy to see all three aspects on display in Paterson's encounters with Beautiful Thing. The politics of Beautiful Thing's embodiment as a young black woman ("drunk and bedraggled to release/ the strictness of beauty/ under a sky full of stars") [3: 104], recall Alec Marsh's contention that "Williams' muse" is typically a "[r]ecurrent female figure, . . . a working-class, usually non-white woman, culturally indigenous, the sublimely vulgar, untutored product of the purely local environment" (Money 185). Beautiful Thing's marginalized position impresses on the reader the dispossession of the primary that formed the center of In the American Grain. Paterson's fearful reaction is the same which the earlier volume typically catalogues in the face of the "raw new." Thus, sandwiched between the similar commands first to "embrace" the primary and later to "Stop writing" and to "Quit this place," Paterson fearfully and angrily confronts Beautiful Thing with outright hostility. Dissonance, as opposed to the identification found in In the American Grain, characterizes Paterson's first encounter with

Beautiful Thing. His stance is like that of the Puritans' toward the New World – seeking to control what they cannot understand. Paterson orders her to remove her clothing, and demeans her by telling that “You smell as though you need/ a bath” (3: 105). In a clouded fury, he yells: “”TAKE OFF YOUR/ CLOTHES! I didn’t ask you/ to take off your skin” (3: 105-06, emphasis in original). But Paterson recognizes his own furious confusion and is remarkably self-conscious, noting: “I said. Then in a fury for which I am/ ashamed” and “Then, my anger rising” (3: 105). Alec Marsh suggests that the poet wants to “strip away her clothes” to “get to the immediate,” consistent with Kenneth Burke’s assertion that “[p]eople try to combat alienation by immediacy” (qtd. in Marsh, Money 201). But Paterson still assumes an authoritarian, fearful stance and, in short, is not ready or able to descend and make contact.

Paterson does, however, spy something significant in his initial encounter with Beautiful Thing – “Haunted, the quietness of your face/ is a quietness, real/ out of no book” (3: 105). The narrative, even as it progresses, assumes an arrested quality in which the poet self-consciously, by repeating “I said,” identifies and slows to a halting pace his own dialogue. Anthony Flinn asserts that the repetition of “I said” in the poet’s first encounter with Beautiful Thing suggests that “[a]ttempts at contact and union are acknowledged failures” (26). But this is not entirely true; in fact, I believe that Sergio Rizzo is correct that the poet’s interaction with Beautiful Thing, “while not a dialogue, is dialogic” in that it allows for “irony, humor, and self-

parody” and has the capacity to “change him” (50). Rizzo identifies a “semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)” (50). Paterson’s dialogue with himself reveals his inner torsion. On one hand, he assumes a Puritan stance of taking or withholding. On the other hand, the poet uses Beautiful Thing, as he does Cress’ letters, to effect a release – in this case from the library’s sterility. He must find a way to assume a different or giving stance in direct relation to Beautiful Thing, as his failure to do this earlier with Cress and “She” formed the heart of their grievances against him.

The implicit openness and simultaneous failure that Rizzo and Flinn respectively identify reflect the poet’s own ambivalence. Paterson’s initial encounter with Beautiful Thing begins quietly to dislodge the blocks of ice that bind the poet even if that is not fully realized, or even apparent, until his subsequent encounter with her in section two. The hint that the ground may be shifting under the poet in this initial encounter comes as Paterson veers between what he says and what he thinks – and they are often two quite different things. Telling her to take off her clothes for an examination, Paterson repeats “Your clothes (I said) quickly, while/ your beauty is attainable” (3: 105). And again: “Take off your clothes and purify/ yourself . . . / And let me purify myself/ -- to look at you,/ to look at you (I said)” (3: 105). Later, playing with the “I said” formulation, the poet continues: “I said your/ clothes, your clothes. You smell/ like a whore. I ask you to bathe in my/ opinions, the astonishing virtue of your/ lost body (I said) . . . / -- that you

might/ send me hurtling to the moon/ . . . let me look at you (I /said, weeping) (3: 106). What, in fact, the poet says or wants us to understand that he has actually said to Beautiful Thing becomes less and less clear. The dialogic structure of the text, then, really captures the poet in conversation with himself. It does seem that something in Paterson is dislodging, and his loss of control may well explain his flashes of rage and temper. Flinn would be mistaken to press the point of a failure of contact too far, for something is happening with the poet, even if he cannot yet fully express it. The poet may best encapsulate his own terror of the primary and contact when he closes out his encounter with Beautiful Thing by observing: “beauty is feared/ more than death” (3: 106). But the poet also moves beyond stagnating fear. The oracular conclusion of section one derives from the powerful subterranean shifts beginning to dislodge Paterson’s stasis. There is difficulty ahead for certain but there is a sense that the introspection that Beautiful Thing has prompted one way or another in the poet has been more effective than “She’s” desperate imploring or Cress’ biting indictment.

Release, then, closes out section one. An unidentified oracular voice intercedes to rebut “She’s” contention from the end of Book II to “Go home. Write. Compose.” Instead, a voice now commands the poet to “Give it up. Quit it. Stop writing . . . Give up/ the poem. Give up the shilly-/ shally of art” (3:108-9). Paterson, however, does not relinquish his art as an enterprise of the secondary but rather continues his poem. He chronicles his own difficult and uncertain descent to the primary, and seeks in his aesthetics to facilitate

for the reader a similar descent. Paterson's perseverance suggests that the poem, in both the writing and reading of it, is primary. Paterson's incorporation of prior primary texts captures earlier writers' experiences of the "raw new." Paterson is thereby always making itself new, approaching the past through a series of present moments of touch and withdrawal. Moreover, Paterson's ruminations on a medieval tapestry in the final section of Book V suggest the poem's status as part of the primary. Referring obliquely to the conception of art as co-equal with creation (as opposed to a mirror or copy of reality), Paterson calls the tapestry a "living fiction" and asks:

— shall we speak of love
 seen only in a mirror
 -- no replica?
reflecting only her impalpable spirit?
 which is she whom I see
 and not touch her flesh? (5: 230)

Again suggesting the primary nature of art, Paterson even enters the tapestry scene, exclaiming: "I, Paterson, the King-self/ saw the lady/ through the rough woods/ outside the palace walls/ among the stench of sweating horses/ and gored hounds" (5: 231).

Paterson, then, adjusts to the oracular voice that commands him in Book III to stop writing, not by ceasing his artistic efforts but by predicating his art on an aesthetic of the primary. He returns to Book I's formulation of "No ideas but in things." Thus, "(ridded) from Paradise," Paterson descends through the "swill-hole of corrupt cities" to the primary (3: 109). He proffers

no direct reply when asked: "What can you, what/ can YOU hope to conclude --/ on a heap of dirty linen?" (3: 109). But Paterson locates the sense in the "inert mass" itself – just as Madame Curie is described at length in Book IV as doing. Paterson invokes the "radiant gist that/ resists the final crystallization/ . . . in the pitch-blend/ the radiant gist" (3: 109).

Book III, then, marks a departure from the pleading and hectoring female stereotypes of "She" and Cress to the compelled introspection and contact offered by Beautiful Thing and Madame Curie, respectively. These two latter representative primary females have assisted Paterson at section's end to quit the library, and have enabled his "mind elsewhere/ looking down/ . . . [s]eeking (3: 112)" to ride the real, elemental wind of the tornado rather than the "ghost of a wind" that resides in "all books echoing . . . life" (3: 96).

Paterson's second encounter with Beautiful Thing further propels his own regeneration, and the tone could not be more different from the earlier sequence. This is one of the few instances in the poem where the poet genuinely descends in ways that he has not, does not, with "She" or Cress or anyone else. Here, in section two, the contact that was hinted at in the earlier encounter with Beautiful Thing becomes palpable and arresting. Paterson's authoritarian, if conflicted, stance of the first section, is exchanged here for a stance of listening; he displays a new found sense of wonder, of openness like Rasles, for whom in In the American Grain all the flowers' petals were upturned. The internal torsion and dissonance of the spirit have passed, and Paterson's anguished first encounter with Beautiful Thing is

transformed into a rich introspection that Beautiful Thing in particular engenders. Paterson moves beyond the explicit if cryptic dialogic structure of the first encounter to a self-reflectiveness about his own relationship to both Beautiful Thing and the writing enterprise.

In section two, Paterson's writing links him to the elemental. Indeed, section two commences with the observation that “[t]hey have/ manoeuvred [sic] it so that to write/ is a fire . . ./ The writing/ should be a relief,/ relief from the conditions” (3: 113). But the creative fire of writing (which may be likened in some manner to the Indian rite of the tepee fire and sacrifice) is at war with the “destroying fire” of present conditions and past traditions, variously figured as the 1902 Paterson fire and the “men in hell” in the library (3: 116). Beautiful Thing, fittingly, is “intertwined with the [creative] fire. An identity/ surmounting the world, its core;” and, Paterson admits, the sight is fearsome: for she is the fire and core “from which/ we shrink squirting little hoses of/ objection – and/ I along with the rest, squirting/ at the fire” (3: 120).

An oracular voice appears, cryptically taking Paterson to task for his fear and summoning him forward: “Poet./ Are you there?” (3: 120). Paterson reprises his reply to “She” in Book II, asserting that “the words are lacking” (3: 121). He may well be right, for traditional means of valuation and articulating worth, namely through signs and language, cannot grapple, at first, with the elemental. Paterson recognizes in “Beautiful Thing, aflame!” that the elemental “is/ a defiance of authority” (3: 119). And, “your/ vulgarity of beauty surpasses all their/ perfections” (3: 120). Paterson, then, defines

language itself, despite calling it a relief and a fire at the section's start, as a neo-classical straightjacket, a meaningless and encumbering set of "perfections" and an "authority" that make it impossible to render the primary and the human.

Ultimately, Paterson has the choice of fleeing from Beautiful Thing as he fled from "She" or engaging the primary. He figures this choice in competing images of a man joining either a destroying fire or a regenerative fire (as represented in the mauled, refigured bottle). The former yields only ash: "and you have/ a nothing, surrounded by/ a surface, an inverted/ bell resounding, a/ white-hot man become/ a book, the emptiness of/ a cavern resounding" (3: 124). But, in descending to the basement where Beautiful Thing lays prone and suffering on the "damp bed, your long/ body stretched out negligently on the dirty sheet," Paterson makes contact and touches the regenerative fire (3: 125). His drama, then, is to overcome his fear, to become the "person/ passed into the flame, becom[e] the flame --/ the flame taking over the person/ The person submerged/ in wonder, the fire become the person" (3: 122). Paterson figures his own contact with Beautiful Thing in terms of this very "wonder" and the fire. Beautiful Thing is "Persephone/ gone to hell," and Paterson confesses himself "overcome/ by amazement, . . . shaken by your beauty/ Shaken by your beauty . . . / Shaken" (3: 126). His awed reaction recalls not only the wonder but also Paterson's exhilaration at achieving a writing that, like the fire it depicts, releases and relieves.

In an especially intense passage, Paterson renders the fire that mauled the bottle and describes how the glass “gets a new glaze, the glass warped/ to a new distinction, reclaiming the/ undefined/ . . . Hottest/ lips lifted till no shape but a vast/ molt of the news flows/ . . . the flame that wrapped the glass/ deflowered, reflowered” (3: 118). The intense accuracy of the description, and its suggestion of contemporary language in the lips flowing with molten news, give way to a palpable and equal exhilaration with the act of the writing itself: “Hell’s fire. Fire. Sit your horny ass/ down. What’s your game, Fire. Outlast you:/ Poet Beats Fire at Its Own Game!”/ The bottle!/ the bottle! the bottle! the bottle! I/ give you the bottle! What’s burning/ now, Fire?” (3: 119). Paterson celebrates the fire almost – but not quite– as much as he does himself. He exhibits an aesthetic self-reflectiveness and new-found confidence. He measures where he is, and assesses how he stacks up against the fire, against the task of writing itself. The self-reflexive, dialogic introspection of Paterson’s first encounter with Beautiful Thing has been exchanged for his now exultant introspection. The former featured the poet in a kind of closed, thus self-reflexive, dialogue with himself as he dictated to Beautiful Thing. The latter features Paterson in silent communion with Beautiful Thing and nearly giddy chatter with himself over the possibilities for his writing and, therein, his release from stasis. The changed focus of the introspection suggests the distance the poet has covered, the progress he has begun to make.

Paterson's descent to the basement somewhat tempers his exhilaration with an awareness of something deeper, a stillness, a quality of listening, a quietness that resonates with Beautiful Thing's own silence. His encounter comprises nothing less than an "embrace" of the "foulness." We know this from the description of Beautiful Thing's surroundings – the "damp bed" and "dirty sheets," the "furnace odor" and the "low bed (waiting)/ under the mud plashed windows among the scabrous/ dirt of the holy sheets" (3: 125-26). But, in this scene Paterson embraces not simply the primary but the affective as well – he relinquishes the supremacy of the knowing physician to embrace the dispossessed. That the poet finally manages to be "shaken" reveals how he has managed to assume genuinely the stance of the representative voluptuaries of In the American Grain. As he begins to dislodge the stasis, there emerges an authentic sense of "wonder:" "I can't be half gentle enough,/ half tender enough/ toward you, toward you,/ inarticulate, not half loving enough" (3: 128). In the compelled introspection of Paterson's first encounter with Beautiful Thing, as revealed in the dialogic narrative structure, we could not be certain what the poet said to himself, and what he said to her. In this second encounter, Paterson and Beautiful Thing share a mutual connection:

for I was overcome
by amazement and could do nothing but admire
and lean to care for you in your quietness –
who looked at me, smiling, and we remained
thus looking, each at the other . . . in silence . . .
You lethargic, waiting upon me, waiting for
the fire and I
attendant upon you, shaken by your beauty. (3: 126)

In this latter encounter, the ambiguity around “inarticulate” seems purposeful, representing the mutual silence that deeper recognition and touch brings.

Beautiful Thing continues to echo through the remainder of Paterson, particularly in the glimpsed lady, the unicorn, and Bessie Smith in Book V. Benjamin Sankey calls the unicorn a "mythic embodiment of 'Beautiful Thing,'" an apt characterization when we recall that the phrase Beautiful Thing is drawn directly from Christopher Columbus' journal description of the New World (215). The unicorn does seem to capture the mythic resonance of this new, virginal land. In addition, Sankey describes the "woman in our town" in Book V whom Paterson sees disappearing "in the crowd" as a "fine restatement of the theme of 'Beautiful Thing'" (216). I think this is true, though I would also identify her as closely linked to "She" in Book II. Indeed, I believe that Paterson's encounter with her reverses his marriage drama with "She." Paterson asks: "What are you doing on the/ streets of Paterson? a/ thousand questions:/ Are you married? Have you any/ children? And, most important,/ your NAME!" (5: 218, emphasis in original). Moreover, Paterson replies to this disappearing old lady by his art, which he was unable to do earlier when "She" implored him to "Go Home. Write. Compose." "[H]ave you read anything that I have written?," Paterson asks the disappearing woman in Book V, "It is all for you" (5: 220).

I believe, too, that Beautiful Thing appears in the form of Blues great Bessie Smith immediately after the old lady for whom the poet has written

everything, disappears. Paterson introduces a brief memoir from a white male musician who plays with a black band and listens spellbound to Bessie Smith. The African-female presence of Beautiful Thing gets thus refigured in Book V and Paterson's mutual pregnant silence with her is here converted into music. "I walked down Madison Street one day," the speaker tells us,

and what I heard made me think my ears were lying. Bessie Smith was shouting the *Downhearted Blues* from a record in a music shop. I flew in and bought up every record they had by the mother of the blues – *Cemetery Blues*, *Bleedin' Hearted*, and *Midnight Blues* – then I ran home and listened to them for hours on the victrola. I was put in a trance by Bessie's mournful stories Every note that woman wailed vibrated on the tight strings of my nervous system: every word she sang answered a question I was asking. (5: 219)

Here, Bessie Smith catches Paterson's attention for how she answers the white musician's questions, as Beautiful Thing, perhaps, answered Paterson's own. The white musician's silence as he listens to what the black soul singer has to tell him is the aural complement to the intense visual experience that closes out Paterson's encounter with Beautiful Thing in Book III. Moreover, insofar as Bessie Smith illustrates a path to descent or touch, she resembles not only Beautiful Thing but also Madame Curie, to whom we will turn next, as an exemplar of the primary.

* * * * *

"What I miss, said your mother, is the poetry," a voice tells Paterson, "the pure poem/ of the first parts" (4: 171). Madame Curie in Book IV more than any other figure returns the poet to his original, animating purpose, the regeneration that he first sought through the poem. Curie represents for Paterson the figure who most successfully achieves the very task he has set

for himself in his writing. Not by imploring the poet, like "She," not by hectoring the poet, like Cress, and not even by spurring the poet's own introspection, like Beautiful Thing, but only by exemplifying the success of the poet's quest does Curie capture Paterson's imagination.

Beautiful Thing inspired the poet in his descent to the basement, where he is "shaken," finally, into listening and silence. This is the first time in the poem where he truly assumes a receptive affective stance towards the primary. Curie builds on this shift in Paterson, and inspires him as an exemplar of contact, and, even, of the primary itself. There is a commonality of interests and ends, then, between Curie and Paterson that is really apart from what he could not share, or shared only after great difficulty, with the other female representative primary figures. Paterson could not give "She," Cress, and, at first, Beautiful Thing, what they needed from, and requested of, him. By contrast, Curie does not need anything from Paterson. Indeed, he does not have an antagonistic, or for that matter, any, relationship with Curie, but only views a film about her and ponders the intersection of her and his own work. The dissonance and conflict, then, that characterizes his interactions with the other Paterson women is transformed and abstracted in Book IV with Curie. She represents a validation of Paterson's poetic method – "Dissonance . . . leads to discovery" (4: 175). His identification with Curie is more intellectual and less emotional than that reached with Beautiful Thing; but it is no less important.

Curie is critical to Paterson and his project for how she illustrates the principle of discovery in dissonance; thus, he uses her in very particular ways to figure the release in economics and writing that he seeks. Paterson applies Curie's discovery of radium to economics; the elemental radiant gist that she reveals assists the poet to reveal the radiant gist of social credit and the writing enterprise. Critics have recognized this economic application and they have noted the trope of discovery that characterizes Book IV. They see that the poet wants to apply the release of radium to economics and writing, and that he "thus align[s] his vision of credit with the . . . liberating aesthetics of discovery and invention" (Ulrich 122). Joel Conorrore also notes how Pound's epistolary inscription of "InVenShun" on the same page as "credit/Curie," links credit/radium with the search for a "redeeming language" (127). Alec Marsh eloquently notes how Williams associates credit with the permanent value of works of art and reminds us that money can be wiped out with the stroke of a pen, that it is "purely textual" (Money 212).

I want to think in this section more specifically about how Curie's scientific discovery gets applied to the economic situation, beyond simply the critics' focus on the working out of the money-uranium, credit-radium analogy with the cancer being usury that the credit-radium cures. In particular, Madame Curie and Klaus Ehrens, the preacher in Book III, section 2, are engaged in what at first blush appear to be non-economic endeavors (science and religion) but which are actually proven to have critical social and economic implications. Curie's science encodes an affective stance of giving

and sharing, while Ehrens' religion represents the affective stance of Puritan withdrawal from the primary and exploitation of the masses. What is scientific gets used to realize an affective shift toward the primary in economic and social relations. By contrast, Ehren's sermon reveals how religion and morality are used by social and economic authorities to effect a shift toward the secondary for economic gain. Religious and economic leaders move away from a stance of contact and actually seek to contain the *demos*, to prevent the application of our democratic principles to economics.

Curie's gift and what makes her so compelling for the poet – and the poet hopes for us – is her descent. Critic Brian Bremen correctly contends that Curie is a “successful fusion of female/mother” and male/scientist, mixing “prose of the intellect with the poetry of invention . . . to release the ‘luminous,’ ‘radiant gist’” (42-43). She is, by her ability to “touch,” to assume an affective stance of heightened receptivity and sensitivity, more like Rasles and the other representative voluptuaries of In the American Grain. As every flower petal opens for Rasles as the result of his extremely fine sensibility, so does the elemental or primary reveal its radiant gist to Curie. But there is a difference too. Curie, the brilliant scientist working in a man's world and a man's discipline, is primarily figured by the poet as “pregnant,” “a furnace, a cavity aching/ toward fission; a hollow,/ a woman waiting to be filled” (4: 174-75). This description recalls Elizabeth Gregory's point that “Williams often stresses the value of the ‘feminine’ within the male . . . but has difficulty . . . acknowledging the ‘masculine’ (or active) within the female” (41). Curie

possesses an hermaphroditic quality – male in touching, female in receiving. In any case, so much does she “touch” that she becomes, herself, “—a luminosity of elements, the/ current leaping!” (4: 174). The way in which she comes to embody the primary explains the poet’s use of the image of “Love” to evoke the process of discovery (4: 175). Yet, this love, this “contact” or “marriage,” is complicated and must, ironically, rely on its opposite. “A dissonance/ in the valence of Uranium/ led to the discovery,” the poet calmly explains (4: 175). Moments later, abstracting his own guiding principle for the poem, Paterson intones: “Dissonance/ (if you are interested)/ leads to discovery” (4: 175). The love, then, is a love of “a purr and a/ pounce,” “the sledge that smashes the atom,” and it is a “love, bitterly contesting” (4: 175-77).

The dissonance that “leads to discovery” is replicated in the dissonance of the poet’s shift from the religious, and particularly, the scientific, to the economic. Critics have debated the “frayed green thread” of economics and lamented its inclusion in the poem. Indeed, Joel Conroroe contends that the passages on usury and Curie “comprise . . . the least successful poetic unit[s]” of Paterson – and are “unconvincing,” “repetitive,” “offensive” in tone and seriously undermine the artistic coherence of the poem (127-28). Yet the point is the discovery that issues from this dissonance. As Curie is “pregnant,” so does the poet offer a re-birth in economic and social relations by releasing the radiant gist of social credit. The social credit proposal for building more planes to win the cold war, for

instance, enables us to “ENFORCE THE CONSITUTION ON MONEY,” regenerating us by returning us to our original revolutionary purposes (4: 180, emphasis in original). The primary gets released in a fashion that is more productive than the fire, wind, and flood that buffeted the poet in Book III:

Money: Uranium (bound to be lead)
throws out the fire
the radium's the credit – the wind in
the trees, the hurricane in the
palm trees, the tornado that lifts
oceans .

And, the poet continues:

Let out the fire, let the wind go!
Release the Gamma rays that cure the cancer
. the cancer, usury. Let credit
out . out from between the bars
before the bank windows

. credit stalled
in money, conceals the generative
that thwarts art or buys it (without
understanding), out of poverty of wit, to
win, vicariously. (4: 181-82)

“THE GIST/ credit : the gist,” the poet’s economic formulation, is tied back to the primary not simply by its relation to radium and Curie’s elemental discovery but also by Pound’s epistolary inquiry on democracy (4: 184). “IN/venshun./ O.KAY/ In venshun,” he asks – “and seeinz as how yu hv/ started. Will you consider/ a remedy of a lot :/ i.e., LOCAL control of local purchasing/ power” (4: 185). Pound’s question recalls the cryptic inquiry in Book III: “Doctor, do you believe in/ ‘the people,’ the Democracy?” (3: 109) Local control, Paterson replies to Pound’s question, represents the “[d]ifference between squalor of spreading slums/ and splendour of

renaissance cities” (4: 185). The poet, then, posits a release of democratic energy – elemental and primary – that rejuvenates the promise of American democracy. Finally, Paterson’s concluding five-line verse in section two links the primary and elemental in one other way – “Credit makes solid/,” he notes, “is related directly to the effort,/ work: value created and received,/ ‘the radiant gist’ against all that/ scants our lives” (4: 185). The primary and the democratic come together now as the poet evokes a future with no “intermediate authorities,” no middle-men; there is only the poet and his aesthetic that compel our own direct participation. The radiant gist of the primary element that Curie discovers finds its social correlate in credit and the artist’s enterprise. Both can regenerate the *demos*, and the latter, in particular, represents a standard of direct valuation in which worth is determined by effort, care and craftsmanship, and not by monetary motive or commercial transaction.

We have examined how Paterson variously applies Curie’s discovery through dissonance to rewrite credit and money affairs along democratic and affective lines. Ehrens’ affective stance of Puritan withdrawal from, and exploitation of, the primary, including the masses, contrasts with Curie’s stance and is rendered at several levels. Williams believed, as captured in manuscript notes scribbled on early drafts of Paterson, that “No church has anything to do with religion; all are institutions for the regulation of men” (qtd. in Connorroe 122). “Billy Sunday evangel/ and ex-rightfielder” in Book IV illustrates Williams’ belief (4: 171-72). Billy Sunday, we are told, is on “the

table now! Both feet, singing/. . . as paid for/ by the United Factory Owners' Ass'n ./. . . to 'break' the strike/ and put those S.O.Bs in their places, be/ Geezus, by calling them to God!" (4: 172).

The poet also has other, more subtle, ways of exposing Ehrens' affective stance and his religious language as complicit in economic interests and injustices. In fact, Ehren's Book II sermon reveals this complicity in the aesthetic construction of the text itself. Playing again on the release effected by repeatedly transitioning between prose and verse, the poet composes an economic dialectic for the reader that sits at the very center of the preacher's supposed sermon. The essential dialectic resides in how the reader is compelled to rationalize the connection between Hamilton's mercantile vision for the new country and Ehrens' vision of working men and women giving away what little wealth they hold. Far from being a "contrast," as Joel Conorroee suggests (121), Hamilton and Ehrens are fundamentally allied and their visions are of a piece.

Critics have had little difficulty in identifying Klaus Ehrens' sermon in the park in Book II, aside from the Curie and credit section in Book IV, as the most sustained treatment of the economic theme in the poem. Critics such as Bremen even allow that Ehrens may be complicit with "forms of power and exploitation" (167). But they also miss, I believe, the essential congruity of Ehrens' and Hamilton's visions. Thus, Bremen proceeds to suggest that Ehrens preaches his own "prosperity of poverty' . . . to empower those who have no identification with the forms of power" of Alexander Hamilton (166).

Ehrens, then, cures “poverty by means of poverty” (166). Marsh calls Ehrens “a sayer of irrelevant Old World truths” (Money 187). While true, such statements do not pursue nearly far enough the ways in which Hamilton and Ehrens reinforce each other. Flinn moves toward such a fuller reading when he observes that while “Ehrens’ vision is on the surface the antithesis of Hamilton’s, in that Ehrens wants to give money away” while Hamilton wants to tax and collect it, both actually espouse “centralized authority and control” (22).

Hamilton and Ehrens’ complicity is exposed by the aesthetic construction of the text, by how it bounces the reader back and forth between sermon passages in which Ehrens essentially devalues wealth to passages depicting Hamilton’s efforts that seem at first to move in the contrary direction, to amass wealth – and found a national bank – for the new republic. On the surface it seems that Ehrens wants us to give away our wealth and Hamilton wants us to give away our debts by having the new Federal government assume them. Both programs appear intended to fulfill larger, even magnanimous, purposes. But on closer inspection the animating forces suggest a deeper – and more disturbing – coherence. Hamilton’s vision reflects the fact that he “never trusted the people, ‘a great beast,’ as he saw them and held Jefferson,” the people’s representative, “to be little better if not worse than any” (2: 67). Fittingly, the very point in the text at which Hamilton’s vision of a “national manufactory” based on exploiting the power of the Passaic Falls gets articulated, is preceded and

followed by the Lord's radical injunction to Ehrens to "get rid of your/ money" (2: 69). The poet, then, links from the very outset the mercantilist vision and people being hoodwinked to give away their money. "Give away your money," Ehrens quotes the Lord, "and I / will make you the richest man in the world!" (2: 70). In the passages that follow, Ehrens parodies the language of economic devaluation or revaluation: "the *riches*" God gives him once he throws away his money "are beyond all *counting* You can throw them / carelessly about you on all sides – and still/ you will have *more*. For God Almighty has/ *boundless resources* There is no/ end to the *treasures* of our Blessed Lord" (2: 73, emphasis added). Ehrens thus ironically converts God to the gold standard, and unwittingly reveals his own economic and social motives by debasing or betraying the very spiritual values he supposedly seeks to inculcate in the masses.

By juxtaposing Ehrens' economic characterization of basking in God's spiritual light with an increasingly discursive and negative critique of the Federal Reserve, Paterson suggests in his textual construction the deceit that links both schemes. The vision of boundless wealth that Ehrens argues will paradoxically belong to the working classes only by giving their money away is abruptly interrupted by the borrowed prose explication that exposes the banking and credit system as a usurious deceit. "The Federal Reserve," we are told,

is a private . . . monopoly . . . given to it by a spineless Congress . . . to issue and regulate our money They create money from nothing and lend it to private business . . . and also to the Government

whenever it needs money in war and peace; for which we, the people . . . must pay interest to the banks in the form of high taxes. (2: 73)

Paterson further radicalizes the argument, informing the reader that “The Federal Reserve Banks constitute a Legalized National Usury System” (2: 74). The impact that this has on American citizens – as individuals and as members, for the most part, of the working class – is profound: “Every one of us is paying tribute to the money racketeers on every dollar we earn through hard work” (2: 74).

The implications of the deceit shown to be inherent in Hamilton’s capitalist vision reverberate beyond the financial system, back to organized religion and Ehrens’ exhortations. That is, the preacher’s vision of giving away our money to realize a greater spiritual recompense and all such idealized visions involving our money seem suspect. This is especially so given the brick wall of cold prose reality regarding credit politics into which Ehrens’ vision, at its very poetic climax, slams. The way in which the broader mercantile vision of Hamilton costs the individual on every dollar he earns corroborates our incipient skepticism about people taking our money. Suddenly Ehrens and others exhorting us to dispense freely of our money seem foolish, if not motivated by the same outright deceitful motives.

Fleeing the individual and the public, then, are exposed as the deeper, more disturbing coherence between Hamilton’s capitalist and Ehrens’ allegedly religious vision. Paterson applies the standard progressive critique of the Constitutional period and of the founding of the national bank that we would expect. But so, too, does the poet reveal the underlying

affective stance of exploitation, fear, greed and withdrawal from the primary—including the democratic – that animates both Hamilton’s explicitly economic vision and Ehrens’ seemingly spiritual vision. The poet, near the conclusion of this section, neatly captures the retreat from the democratic impulse – from the possibility of individual liberty and prerogative embodied in the revolutionary period and from the primary of the vulgar, sensual masses: “The bird, the eagle, made himself/ small -- to creep into the hinged egg/ until therein he disappeared, all/ but one leg upon which a claw opened/ and closed wretchedly gripping/ the air” (2: 73). The credit and banking system stand exposed as usurious. The working classes – like Billy Sunday who, called in to break the strikers’ unity by “calling them to God,” gets “his 27 Grand in the hotel room/ after the last supper (at the *Hamilton*)/ on the eve of quitting town” – can be said to live in the house Hamilton built (4: 172). The working classes, then, are dispossessed, paying on every dollar to live out of Hamilton’s hotel. As Hamilton exploits the power of the Passaic Falls, symbol of New World resources both for commerce and culture or language, he co-opts the language – and thereby the promise of the culture. For the “common language” with which the poet opens Book I and seeks “to unravel . . ./ combed into straight lines/ from that rafter of a rock’s/ lip” stands revealed as anything but common – it is, regrettably, even painfully, exploited by the few at the expense of the many (1: 7). The co-optation of the language and culture by economic interests, however, must be weighed against the entirety of Paterson’s poetic enterprise. Ultimately, Paterson not only chronicles his

discovery of where the stasis lodges, but enacts, through his stylistics, a release and regeneration for the poet and reader at levels both personal and social.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

We adjust our recollection to our needs and aspirations, and ask from it light on the particular problems that face us. History, too, is in this sense not fixed and immutable, but ever changing. Each age has a perfect right to select from the annals of mankind those facts that seem to have a particular bearing on the matters it has at heart.

-- James Harvey Robinson, The New History (134-5)

Without invention nothing is well spaced,/ unless the mind change, unless/ the stars are new measured, according/ to their relative positions, the/ line will not change, the necessity/ will not matriculate: unless there is/ a new mind there cannot be a new/ line, the old will go on/ repeating itself with recurring/ deadliness.

-- William Carlos Williams, Paterson (2: 50)

[I]t is a method which processes its own user, who is also its only instrument. It is self-sharpening and what is sharpens is *you*. In short, it does not organize materials, but transforms minds.

-- Stanley, Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts (425)

William Carlos Williams wrote, with Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and others, the “poem including history.” In Paterson and In the American Grain, Williams placed readers in the contested ground of history, in the dialectic between contact and withdrawal, touch and fear. He named men who fought greed and usury “contemporaries, in whatever age they live or have lived” (Essays 167). Historical terrain was transformed into an omnipresent contemporaneity by what James Longenbach calls the poet’s “imaginative reconstruction” of the past (18). Williams’ poetic, then, comprised an “existential historicism” such as Longenbach identifies in other high modernists. History was not “a deadening influence on the present,” but “a living part of the present that cannot be destroyed” (10). History became, in Paterson and In the American Grain, as in The Waste Land and The Cantos, not “a sequence of events that occurred in the past” but rather a “function of the historian’s effort to understand the past in the present” (14). This was

how Williams and others “discover[ed] a vitalizing attitude toward history” and “forge[d] a life-enhancing attitude toward the past” (11-12). It was how many modernist poets used history, and it was how Williams, in particular, prevented history from becoming “sheer regression or paralysis” – or what he called “stasis” (deMan 151).

Williams knew that democracy required citizens actively engaged with the primary, with their own moment, independent of “all intermediate” or “unrelated authority.” Williams’ poetics, then, sought to animate the automatons he evoked at the start of Paterson by the poetic encounter with the past that he staged for the reader. Reading, Williams hoped, would rouse the “unroused” – it would “leaven” Parrington’s “sodden mass.” Modern man, that Waldo Frank identified as having been “fathered by steel and broken by it” would no longer be “sucked void” (Frank 174, 171). A “people turned debtor to its own affairs” would be released into fuller life (172-73). Recognizing how Williams’ poetics encoded just this democratic imperative, means appreciating what Paul Mariani argued has been so much needed – a sense of “Williams’ sense of American history” and an exploration of his relation to his contemporaries (Critics 243).

Like his progressive contemporaries, Williams repeatedly characterized writing as an important part of his democratic program, comprising an “attack” against social stasis and capitalist inequities. “All my life has been one steady bawling out from this old intimate,” Williams confessed regarding Pound, “over my sluggishness in appreciating the

gravity of the world situation in the terms of his dialectic" (Autobiography 341). "In many cases I can see the justice of his views," Williams acknowledged, "both in that particular, regarding the criminal abuse of the functions of money, as well as the place of the poem in our attack" (341). The poem as it is "[f]ormally" practiced "plays right into the hands of the criminals in charge of government that alone can compel obedience" (341). Williams meant that the conventional poem furthered, rather than challenged, conventional modes of thinking and existing social norms and hierarchies. The economic and social question, then, became an essentially aesthetic one. The poet, using the right stylistic, was the only one who could regenerate society. Williams argued the writers' unique position in "Against the Weather," noting that "the economic imbecilities of the age are reflected in everything save the artist's judgments" (214). The issue was, and must of necessity be, a matter of poetic form. "[W]e do not see," Williams declared, "that in the formalisms of the poem itself the criminal sits secure" (Autobiography 341). "The poem (not 'poetry,' that sop) is the capsule where only, at times in the intelligence, the facts of the case may be made secure. Hence the hatred of the poem, the vicious and violent attempt to suppress it" (341)

The real power of Williams' work, in fact, resided in how the very structure and stylistics of the writing itself enacted a release and relief from existing social and economic conditions, or, more accurately, from the affective stances that were found beneath the economics and that fed those

inequities. "There is a good deal to say about money" (Essays 167), Williams observed, and a man or woman "can't be a poet without knowing about interest and money" (Interviews 51). Williams' poetics addressed these realities, leading a "basic attack" on the "secondary" or money culture.

In particular, Williams animated the subject position of reader and writer. He made the reader write his or her own subjective history, based, paradoxically, on inhabiting the subject position of representative figures of the past and of the poet himself as they confronted the primary and a secondary culture that would suppress it. Williams' aesthetic defended liberal democracy by compelling the reader to locate himself in relation to the conflicts and subjects of the past and, thus, to define his own subject-hood and agency. This comprised the essence of his affective economics and participatory aesthetics. Be it a series of dissonant encounters or romantic identifications with voluptuary representative figures, in Paterson or In the American Grain, respectively, the focus remained always on animating the poet's and reader's consciousness of the primary.

It was for this purpose alone that the text may be said, paradoxically, to stage the reading and, even, the reader. When Paterson inquired how to "move the mind" because there was "a poverty of resource," he spoke as much of, and to, the reader as to himself (4: 198). Williams reflected, worriedly, in Paterson: "A marriage riddle: So much talk of the language—when there are no/ ears" (3: 106). But his poem including history was all about getting us to hear. Williams staged the reader's contact with primary

materials with an awareness that ““meaning is an affair of consciousness,”” as reader-response critic Robert Crossman contends, and “an inference drawn by the construing mind, based upon probabilities” (155). Williams placed and manipulated primary source material in an extremely disjunctive text just to engage maximally the reader’s consciousness, to pull him into “[t]ranslating” the text, making it his own (Crossman 152, emphasis in original).

Williams, then, released "personality" or the "personal" element that other writers of subjective or imaginative histories, such as Waldo Frank, Van Wyck Brooks, V.L. Parrington, and D.H. Lawrence, argued was in serious jeopardy in a distinctly anti-liberal age. Paterson may well represent "the search of the poet for his language," but Williams forced the reader to seek with him in ways that the historians and literary critics simply could not, and made history a matter, ultimately, of experience not explication (MacGowan, Paterson xiii). The reader finds himself in Paterson and In the American Grain – among "texts [that] mount and complicate themselves"– navigating multiple layers of construction, meta-construction, and meta-meta construction. If the famous formulation to "Make it new" characterized Williams' and Pound's vision, it is the reader who faces the “raw new” and the primary, repeatedly, in nearly every instant of reading. In his textual encounters, the reader replicates the figure of the poet and even the historical representative figures that have preceded him. Everything that has come before, both actual experience and text (for the poet and for the

reader), is dished up as raw material for narrative construction. The reader responds – either by displaying the responsiveness of those representative figures the poet lauds, and of the poet himself, or by exhibiting withdrawal and fear.

Williams' repeated invocation of Pound's economic beliefs make clear their shared project, as he jokes, to change America. By contrast, Williams sharply differentiates himself over several decades from T.S. Eliot, calling the publication of The Waste Land nothing short of disastrous. Williams, Pound, and Eliot studies, I believe, would be rewarded by further exploring their existential historicism. How might Williams' affective economics and participatory aesthetic illuminate Pound's and Eliot's *oeuvre*. While Pound's and Eliot's poetics may animate the reader's subject position by his encounter with historical figures and, perhaps, even the figure of the poet himself, it is less clear what the particulars of Williams' affective economics might reveal of these other poets' work. I would not contend that fear of the primary and secondary are found in Pound's and Eliot's work in the same way. While Pound surely sounds the theme of "usura," it may be revealing to consider if he (or Eliot) similarly historicized a stance of responsiveness and adaptation as Williams did through a series of representative figures enacting a binary of giving versus grabbing, sharing versus withholding. Moreover, Pound's and Eliot's poetics may similarly demand that the reader construct a narrative out of extreme disjunctions in the context of a radically underdetermined aesthetic. But it is not clear that their aesthetics are

participatory in some of the other fundamental ways that Williams' work is. It would be worth considering if Pound's and Eliot's poetry compel the same kind of identifications or dissonant encounters that Williams' poetics do. Can we say Pound's or Eliot's "poem including history" stages the reading and reader by taking him through a series of encounters and meta-encounters as Williams does? And, finally, what are these other poets modeling? The figures on which Williams would model himself as poet, and on which he would have the reader do the same, embody a stance of responsiveness and openness to the primary. Pound's and Eliot's historical figures and fragments, by contrast, appear to represent a series of alleged "golden ages." Descent and adaptation, openness and touch, then, may be less the point for them, than a not-so-subtle nostalgia and clarity of outline.

If W.H. Auden concluded in "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" that "poetry makes nothing happen" (Collected Poems 197), Williams decided just the opposite, telling a correspondent in 1950 that the "poem is a social instrument" (Letters 286). Williams' aesthetic is a social instrument in that it processes the reader who is processing the poem. Thus, Fish's characterization of reader-response method as one that "processes its own user, who is also its only instrument" applies to Williams' own aesthetic. "It is self-sharpening and what it sharpens is *you*. In short, it does not organize materials, but transforms minds" (Fish 425, emphasis in original). The matter, then, really was an aesthetic one, and Williams hoped, as he said in Paterson, that "new line[s]" will create "new mind[s]" (2: 50).

With “new lines” and “new minds” come release and regeneration, an almost obstetric role for the poem. The “usable past” becomes, finally, the stance of adaptation and responsiveness that Williams historicized in figures like Rasles, Boone, and, eventually, the poet himself. Here, then, was democracy and renewal: the ability of individuals to respond as they wish, to decide for themselves “without intermediate authority.” The poet illustrated, ultimately, what “descent,” “contact,” “touch,” and “marriage” looked like. The rest, he knew, was up to the reader.

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