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THE WHITMAN TRADITION IN TWENTIETH
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DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By
Jon Elden Marshall, B.A., M.A.

The Ohio State University
1973

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Whitman himself defines the subject of this study:

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians
to come!
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what
I am for,
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before known,
Arouse! for you must justify me.

I myself but write one or two indicative
words for the future,
I but advance a moment only to wheel and
hurry back in the darkness.

I am a man who, sauntering along without
fully stopping, turns a casual look upon
you and then averts his face,
Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
Expecting the main things from you.1

My intention is to examine the "new brood" of poets who
advance and justify the work he began, who try to "prove
and define it." The proofs and the definitions offered
by these poets will be of several kinds, some more stimu-
lating and productive than others. One thing is cer-
tain, however, the immediate response to Whitman's poetry
was a direct but superficial imitation of his form.

Whitman's impact on the American poetry of the late
nineteenth century was negligible; it remained confined
to the disciples of Whitman's circle and a small number of radicals who dissented from the complacent norms of genteel society. These imitators—disciples like Horace Traubel and Edward Carpenter, the Protestant reformer the Reverend William Davenport, and minor poets like Ernest Crosby, Frank Cowan, and J. William Lloyd—preoccupied by his ideas and not by his formal innovations, merely utilized the form as a vehicle for their ideas and did little to justify his work. Those attracted to Whitman, as Gay Wilson Allen has observed,

praised his poetry, but as Scripture, not as literature... [What they celebrated were] the standard ideals of nineteenth century romanticism and democratic liberalism: the sacredness of the individual and the Godhead in every man, the rights of the "common man," more humanitarian laws and government, the beauty of the human body, the need for a democratic esthetics.2

His disciples and followers regarded Whitman's free verse technique as no more than a fixed and useful convention they could oppose to the traditional forms of the day. Once they had taken this step, each was committed to the error of substituting for the specific bodying forth that is the nature of a poetic argument the generalities of his own thought. In other words, poetry for these men was the versification of ideas. But the ideas expressed by Whitman, save with regard to sex, had been proclaimed by the romantics of an earlier time. So long as these
writers affirmed the warmed-over generalities of a progressively moribund romantic idealism, they remained tied to abstractions that no longer had any suasion with the mass audience they desperately wished to reach.

Whitman's disciples and followers succeeded in composing only long untalented pastiches of Whitman's work because they never considered the potentials of the free verse form but saw it as merely a handy convention for disseminating radical social ideas. In this, however, they violated a fundamental responsibility of the poet to his craft. The serious poet does more than merely borrow a technique or consciously imitate one; he stamps it with his personality and talent by transforming it, making discoveries or achieving performances that, however great or small, contribute to the culture of the age and to his own development as a poet. This remains true even in periods when the doctrine of imitation has been dominant. The neoclassical poets, for example, did not borrow or imitate the hexameter of Latin verse; instead, they discovered its equivalent in the heroic couplet. The direct copying of any technique is likely to produce second-rate work, and Whitman himself rejects "the poems distilled from other poems." He characterizes his own efforts in verse as merely "indicative" of the way. Clearly, to copy his work is to subvert his intention,
for necessarily it binds the future to the past. Yet Horace Traubel's *Optimos* and Edward Carpenter's *Towards Democracy*, each containing four hundred pages of Whitmanic doggerel, are nothing more than versified social propaganda and Victorian sentimentality written in slavish imitation of *Leaves of Grass.* The Reverend William Davenport, who saw in Whitman a democratic Spirit whose ideals might be used to further the cause of Protestant reform, produced Whitmanesque verse that was no better and equally imitative. These men were drawn to write Whitmanesque poetry for ends that were largely social or religious; they became poets by accident, not design. Yet when poets adopted Whitman's free verse, they demonstrated no better expertise. Ernest Crosby, in works like *Plain Talk in Psalm and Parable*, Frank Cowan, in his *Poetical Works*, and J. William Lloyd, in volumes like *Wind-Harp Songs*, created Whitmanesque verse or echoed Whitmanesque ideals in poems that ranged from the competent to the trite and sentimental. None achieved the distinction reserved for even good minor poetry.

In their practice, these poetasters demonstrated the frailties of their own talents, but in their attitude toward Whitman's technique they mirrored the governing assumptions of the age. Howard Mumford Jones has defined the genteel tradition as the "operative fusion of idealism
and the instinct for craftsmanship; but in poetry it became true, as it did not in the novel, that the pull toward abstract idealism and "absolute vision" was accompanied by the sacrifice of inner to outer form. The romantic idea of form "as the result of the operation of the plastic and unifying imagination," an organic conception of form unencumbered by the rigor of conventions and bodied forth during this period in the work of Whitman and Emily Dickinson, was replaced by a renewed emphasis of the outward, mechanical conventions of the poetic genres. The sanctioned poetry of the age has about it a stale and exhausted conventionality that is revealingly documented in Edmund Stedman's epoch-making An American Anthology, 1787-1900, published at the close of the century.

Here in a ten year span one may see the whole pageant of a poetic heritage pass before his eyes in recognizable form. . . . The representative poet sought nothing in the way of an original form. Rebellion against traditional methods of expression was out of the question in the volume of verse which wanted, first, a publisher, and, second, an audience. The ordinary poet continued to grind away at the conventional forms and hasten the arrival of the day when he and his like would bore themselves out of acceptance by even an insensitive audience.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the apparently formless fictions and radical ideals of the American romantics, while never discarded completely, took a back
seat to the orderly, the useful, and the morally uplift-
ing. The writers in favor with postwar society were not Melville, Hawthorne, or Whitman, but Longfellow, Emerson, Holmes, and Whittier. This latter group enjoyed the status of lawgivers for a genteel society intent upon affirming lofty ideals and, now that the war was over, reaffirming the illusion of a unified American culture. Exhausted by the recent war, northern society no longer had the energy to cope with the unresolved racial, social, and economic problems that remained. New England, which before the war had been culturally if not politically dominant, provided the only readily available source of high culture, and the aging writers of New England "by their very existence, seemed to provide a beneficent and stable tradition, and thus to compensate for the institutions of church, aristocracy, and ritual that Americans lacked." The increasingly shallow and abstract idealism that came to be the "substance" of poetry during this period indicates the failure of the poets and of the custodians of culture to distinguish principle from reality. Both the progressive erosion of black freedoms and the continued exploitation of the poor, which had been intensified by the industrialization of the war and maintained by the steady tide of immigration, testified to the disparity between the ideals of society and
the realities of the social order.

Whitman was perfectly aware of this himself, as he made clear in poems like "Respondez." But the fact that he suppressed such poems after 1876 indicates that he, too, saw the need for being more positively idealistic. Thus he could say that Longfellow was "certainly the sort of bard and counteractant most needed for our materialistic, self-assertative, money-worshipping, Anglo-Saxon races, and especially for the present age in American," since Longfellow was above all "the poet of melody, courtesy, deference." The quest for a "beneficent and stable tradition" led not only to the championing of the New England writers but also to "a renewed admiration for important aspects of European culture, particularly British literature." English writers were much admired, and Matthew Arnold was regarded as highly in America as he was in England as a spokesman for the civilizing influence of Culture.

The New England Sages gave the Republic Civilization and Culture, but the actual civilization and culture of the period existed in an uneasy truce with it. The idealistic critics of the genteel tradition--John Jay Chapman, W. C. Brownell, Edmund Stedman, George Woodberry, and Charles Dudley Warner, to name a few of the most important--struggled to embody in their criticism the
principles of a national, public, ideal art; but, in the process of domesticating art to its national, civilizing purpose, courtesy, decorum, balance, the perfection of architectonic form—above all, the acceptance of uniform standards—took precedence over inspiration of theme or investigation of form. The serious artists of the age were deeply committed to winning the acceptance of the critics and the public. This desire often put the artist who was seriously committed to his art at odds with his sensibility and integrity. James emerged as a truly modern novelist when he put the desire for public acceptance behind him after a decade of struggling for popularity as a playwright. Twain, an even more divided artist than James, often brought his novels to a close in ways that reflected the contradictions he felt in his relation with his audience. In Huckleberry Finn, he bought off his audience and resolved the story, at least on the level of plot, by manufacturing a happy ending. In A Connecticut Yankee, a fantasy in celebration of Yankee know-how turns into nightmare when the mob turns on the hero. Twain's choice of subject in this novel may at least in part be the result of his own anxieties over the relation of the creative individual to the masses. In poetry, the situation was noticeably different. The artists who were lionized—Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes—had established
their reputations prior to the gilded age, yet for a generation poetic creativity was defined in terms of these hallowed reminders of stability and order, or, what was worse, the sentimental treacle of Victorian verse. The serious poet, even if buoyed up by an optimism as great as Whitman's, should he choose to ignore public opinion found himself in a difficult if not impossible position. Emily Dickinson could create serious poetry in anonymity at Amherst, but the anonymity that she wore like a cloak about her was not available to Whitman. Precisely because he saw poetry as a public art and the poet as a public—indeed prophetic—figure, he sought the public rostrum he saw Longfellow had achieved.

In this quest, Whitman was the victim of the very images of himself that he and his disciples had created. These images were embraced by friend and foe alike, though each offered a different interpretation of what they meant. John Jay Chapman, for example, labeled him a "tramp," a "quack," and saw him as yet another deluded prophet like Brigham Young or Joseph Smith. "By temperament and education Walt Whitman was fitted to be a prophet of this kind. He became a quack poet, and hampered his talents by the imposition of a monstrous parade of rattletrap theories and professions." Woodberry shared this hatred for Whitman, and he and Chapman represent the critical
mainstream that regarded Whitman as nothing more than a "rough," a hay-seed, and self-deluded mystic. The early Whitman, symbolized fittingly in the prefatory picture to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, lent credence to this view, for this portrait is indeed the image of the "rough." Nowhere in the portrait do we find those qualities of decorum or gentlemanliness that the literary establishment had decreed beforehand were to be the ideal. Whitman's disciples, on the other hand, performed (in the style of the day) their own canonization of the bard, offering to the public not the shabby "rough" but the bearded prophet. Beginning with the publication of William Douglas O'Connor's *The Good Gray Poet* in 1866, and aided not a little by the aging Whitman, the picture of Whitman as poet and prophet, as vates, belonging to an honored tradition stretching from Virgil to Blake, was heightened, while the poet qua poet was lost, and only the folksy and false picture of Whitman (enhanced by the portraits of the seventies and eighties) as a Biblical Moses, was paraded before the public. Whitman as Moses was quite as false as Whitman as quack, but the arguments advanced by both sides put emphasis on content and not form, on ideas, attitudes, and beliefs rendered apart from the context in which they appeared.
In principle, of course, both critics and poets championed the importance of form, but usually the operative definition was arrived at not by induction or empirical description but by a prescription rooted broadly in philosophy, e.g. "imaginative form," or narrowly in convention, e.g. the sonnet. Thus, when a critic like Richard Watson Gilder proclaims "I am a stickler for form in literature and one thing I admire in Walt Whitman is his magnificent form," he is appealing to the former; and when Edmund Stedman berates Whitman for the narrowness of his reasoning, his general attitudes, and his metrical theory, his criticism of the poet's metrics is made entirely in terms of his neglect of conventions. Stedman's general theory is fairly typical of those which tried to wed idealism and craftsmanship. He carefully points out to his audience that "Affected conviction, affection [sic] of any kind, and even sincere conviction inartistically set forth, are vices in themselves— are antagonistic to truth." But however fair-mindedly he may have tried to follow this maxim in his practical criticism (and he did see more merit in Whitman's lyrical genius than Chapman or Woodberry would admit), he was handicapped by his theory, in which he distinguished between impersonal poetry, which "appears the more creative as being a statement of things discerned by free and
absolute vision," and personal, or subjective poetry, which is inferior because it springs from a "relative and conditioned imagination." Whittier or Longfellow apparently fit these canons of excellence much more readily than Whitman, but what they achieved, if it indeed be the product of a "free and absolute vision," seems in our own time strangely indistinguishable from mere platitude.

Howard Mumford Jones has aptly remarked that the genteel tradition often has been more "traduced than analyzed." yet the traducers, many of them modern poets, were undoubtedly right in viewing the theory and practice of the genteel tradition as inimical to serious poetry. The enshrining of the New England Sages provided tradition, order, and standards of a sort, but these standards, legitimized if not promulgated as absolutes, became a constraint upon the poets who were to come of age at the end of this period. In contrast, the modern novelist in America never knew a past quite so constraining or moribund. Even at the height of the gilded age, one could see the presence of Henry James and Mark Twain. Fiction, unlike poetry, was more responsive to the frontier and to the regional life of the nation, and Garland, Crane, and Norris were bringing life to the novel while poetry remained lifeless. The values of the
official Culture which poetry upheld proved in the end
too narrow to speak for a nation that remained diverse.
The Myth of National Unity, a necessary myth in its day,
became stultifying and harmful to succeeding generations
of poets.

A desire for "intellectual deliverance," Matthew
Arnold proclaimed, is the special characteristic of those
periods called modern. This is especially true for our
own time, when this deliverance has taken the form not
merely of new ideas and new values but the discovery and
vivification of new forms as well. But genuinely new
ideas or forms are rare, and the forms of this age have
their past, however obscure and remote. The poets who
have gone back to Whitman in their search for an ancestor
and progenitor for their labors have done so in the spirit
of William Carlos Williams:

There is no art of poetry save by grace of other
poetry. So Dante to me can only be another way
of saying Whitman. Yet without a Whitman there
can of course be for me no Dante. Further than
that: there is no way for me to talk of Whitman
but in terms of my own generation—if haply such
a thing may be.

Here we have the perfect gloss on Whitman, who desired
above all else not to deny any part of the past—unless it
be derivative poems, "the poems distilled from other
poems"—but to take it all in, transform it, and prepare
the way for the future. The poet, as Whitman sees him, "drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet... he says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you. He learns the lesson... he places himself where the future becomes present."21

If there is no art of poetry save by grace of other poetry, then the poets who have gone back to Whitman have done so because of the particular nature of the "grace" his work provides. The "grace" that Whitman provides is to be found not alone in his romantic ideas, but in his desire for a national literature, in his break with the forms of English verse, and in his quest for the rhythms of an American language. Whitman almost alone among his contemporaries did not define poetry exclusively from above, in terms of the ideals born aloft on a "free and absolute vision"; he also defined it from below, in terms of that common and unifying element of language which everyone shares and comprehends immediately.

Dante may be only another way of saying Whitman because what Dante did for Italy Whitman does for America. The significant revolution that Dante brought to poetry was not one of ideas—he is, after all, the great ecumenicist of the Middle Ages—but one of language. Other parallels between Dante and Whitman may be found, of
course. Both are prophetic poets, both depict—yet how differently each goes about it—a spiritual odyssey. But essentially Dante changed the style of verse. For the first time a medieval poet composed a serious religious poem in his native tongue, in the vulgar language of the people. Whitman carries one step further this impulse toward exploring the vulgar language of the people for the ends of poetry. For him, the impulse to oneness, to spiritual harmony and union, is not urged alone from above, from the transcendent idea or value toward which one is directed, but from below as well, from the immanence in every man of the divine creative impulse:

Such is Slang, indirection, an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism, and express itself ilimitably, which in highest walks produces poets and poems, and doubtless in pre-historic times gave the start to, and perfected, the whole immense tangle of the old mythologies. For, curious as it may appear, it is strictly the same impulse-source, the same thing.²²

In reading this, we are reminded of the "Preface" to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, in which Whitman expresses his belief that "the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic."²³ So the making of language and poem, the activity of speaker and poet proceed as one, have their origins in the same primal, creative impulse. The activity of each is a denial of
the mechanistic operation of convention.

If the impulse to create in language is neither a unique nor a special talent, but is common to every man, then the germ of the poetic impulse is in every man and art is truly democratic. But from Whitman's argument, even more follows: if the impulse to create is rooted in and defined by the potentials of one's native tongue, then we know why Williams could claim that "Without a Whitman there can of course be for me no Dante." Dante, no matter how great a poet, can never provide, except by analogy, what Whitman provides: the root by which the American poet remains in touch with his native language.

Any poet makes his tradition from the sources most congenial to him. The past is not found ready-made by the poet confronting the question of tradition. Nevertheless, it would be folly to suppose that Whitman's "one or two indicative words" in any way determine the future, since the affinity between poets of the present age and Whitman is an active relation only from the side of the present. The modern poet's discovery of his relation to the past is in the best sense a fitting of his artistic temperament and abilities to the potentials inhering in the materials and forms of his craft. The poet and the past exist in a reciprocal relation: the poet shapes the past with which he is in temperamental agreement and
simultaneously is shaped by it. Bearing this in mind, a fuller recognition of the poet's relation to his own age and a richer and more complete assessment of his achievement may be gained through the exploration of these relations to the past. The present study offers an examination of the affinities between a number of twentieth-century poets and Whitman, giving primary attention to the formal experiments growing out of or achieving definition through the tensions produced by such relations, and secondary attention to questions of subject and theme—i.e., the ways in which each has struggled to write the broadly cultural poems that Whitman (along with many of his contemporaries) had envisioned.

When Williams says that "Dante to me can only be another way of saying Whitman," he speaks by indirection to Pound and Eliot. To go back to Dante, to go back to European or British literature, merely carries forward an attitude prevalent in the late nineteenth century, when "right-minded scholars tended to look upon American writing as an inferior province within the imperium of British literature, its better authors being, so to speak, imitation Victorians."²⁴ Pound and Eliot may have changed the names of the poets and even the periods to be emulated, but the attitude remains the same. All have replaced the native American language and art by something
other. Each has proceeded by imitation or translation. The conservative and reactionary American poets have turned to translation after each of America's three great wars—the Civil War, the First World War, and World War II—each time as a way of both possessing and continuing the past. The translations and allusions in the poetry of Eliot, Pound, and other modern poets have been ways of stressing their relatedness to the European tradition. That very characteristic, however, has been quiet testimony to the extraordinary self-consciousness of these poets and the movements they have fostered, a self-consciousness that is the outward display of that inner anxiety that has so often been labeled the root of much of the modern creative impulse.

This self-consciousness has been viewed at worst as unhealthy and at best as a barrier to the creation of an authentic American poetry by those who have pursued the question from the vantage of their American roots. On this question, Pound occupies a paradoxical position, for he is in both Eliot's camp and Whitman's. But for the most part, the poets we are about to examine began their creative efforts in the belief that they wrote in the shadow of Whitman's achievement and his imperative—"You must justify me."
The poets of this century, more than their nineteenth century predecessors, have been self-conscious about their need for tradition, for a "usable past." The influence of the European tradition upon T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens is well documented. The reaction of Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and others to this "Eliot" tradition is also a matter of record. "I shall never forget the impression created by The Waste Land," Williams wrote in "An Essay on Leaves of Grass."25 "It was as if the bottom had dropped out of everything. I had not known how much the spirit of Whitman animated us until it was withdrawn from us." Critics have focused their attention for the most part on the Eliot tradition, on the quest for a "usable past" in the ruins of Europe. That the Eliot tradition has dominated the poetry and criticism of the first half of this century cannot be denied, but this should not blind us to the very real heritage bequeathed to us by Whitman, which, though seldom dominating the discussions of poets or critics, has had, nonetheless, a recognizable and indeed significant effect on the poetry of this century.
Chapter I: Notes


4. Extended defenses, especially of Traubel, but also of Carpenter, may be found in Mildred Bain's *Horace Traubel* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1913), and David Karsner, *Horace Traubel: His Life and Work* (New York: Egmont Arens, 1919). Neither of these books mounts a successful defense of the poets' technique; instead they focus upon Traubel and Carpenter as prophets.


CHAPTER II
WHITMAN AND THE POETS OF THE
CHICAGO RENAISSANCE

The poets of the Chicago Renaissance—Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, and Carl Sandburg—were as one in their belief that poetry in order to be great must be national and popular. This assumption was not peculiar to them; each drew at least his initial ideas about a national and popular poetry from Whitman, who became a permanent source of inspiration for Masters and Sandburg, and, after his early enthusiasm, a neglected source for Lindsay. These poets were inspired, however, more by the substance of Whitman's poetry and criticism than by the technical innovations of his verse. Lindsay was not an experimental poet, and the rhymed verse of Poe and Lanier suited his temperament and needs better than the free verse of Whitman. Although Masters and Sandburg departed from current conventions and used free verse, they were not as concerned with technique as the imagists, or Pound, or Eliot. The study these poets made of Whitman's technique, like the study of their own, was casual rather than profound. Much more searching was their examination of
Whitman’s ideas and subject matter, because these provided a source for or confirmation of their treatments of the American experience.

The most influential spokesman for a national and popular American poetry, however, was Harriet Monroe, who championed these views in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. In choosing a motto for *Poetry*, Miss Monroe took a quote from Whitman—"To have great poets there must be great audiences too." But holding that great poetry must have a national audience left Miss Monroe with a problem even Whitman had evaded. "How," she asked in May, 1913, "may a man be a popular poet and yet save his soul and his art?" Masters, Lindsay, and Sandburg looked at the problem from approximately the same vantage point as Miss Monroe. None of them would have perceived that the very form of the question created problems that would undermine any serious poetry, and it was this lack of critical awareness more than anything else that would account for the failure of Masters, Lindsay, and Sandburg to create great poetry.

Whitman had evaded the question that obsessed Miss Monroe not by ignoring it but by formulating it in different terms. He usually spoke of himself as a harbinger of the great poets to come. Great poets and great audiences alike would exist at some future date, but not at present.
Indeed, he contemned the audience of his day. In Democratic Vistas he protests that "Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness of heart than at present," and elsewhere he pictures himself "delivering America, and, indeed, all Christian lands everywhere, from the thin, moribund, and watery, but appallingly extensive nuisance of conventional poetry." Whitman recognized that such a deliverance could only be begun by him; its completion must lie somewhere in the future. But by picturing his own efforts as a foreshadowing of what was to come, and by setting his "great audience" in the future, Whitman could picture both poetry and audience in ideal terms. This subtle balance in his own writings between an ideal conception of what his poetry and his audience should be and a realistic analysis of the contemporary situation is missed by his successors, especially Lindsay and Miss Monroe, who often mistake their idealistic hopes for a realistic analysis of events.

Ezra Pound, always ready to prick someone's balloon, objected to Poetry's motto in the October 1914 issue, and specifically to the spirit in which it had come to be interpreted by his American contemporaries. Pound agrees with Whitman in rejecting a contemporary audience, "the vulgo" in his words. Significantly, however, Whitman left his audience in an objective realm pushed into the future,
whereas Pound makes it an ideal conception existing in the poet's mind. The audience, he tells us, is "the spirits of irony and of destiny and of humor, sitting within [the poet]." Harriet Monroe responded to this by arguing that it amounted to a defense of "small audiences," of "coteries." "Art," she says, "is not an isolated phenomenon of genius, but the expression of a reciprocal relation between the artist and his public. Like perfect love, it can be supreme only when the relation is complete." Furthermore,

Already there are many signs of an awakening of spiritual consciousness in the crowd—confused and scattered signs of farblown sympathies, exaltations, ideals. Democracy is becoming awake and aware, is discovering a deeper need than the need of food and raiment. At present this instinct is vague and formless, voiced in dim and clouded questionings, almost world wide political doubt, spiritual unrest. The new democracy must grope and wander, lingering among vast uncharted uncertainties. It must search long for its poet-prophet who shall sing the old era away and usher in the new. And when he comes he must be of spiritual stature great enough to stand fitly on mountain tops and speak for a world more vast than man has ever known. Miss Monroe's defense blurs the distinction between the ideal and the actual that Whitman and Pound in their separate ways had affirmed. By identifying the ideal audience with the present or emerging "spiritual consciousness in the crowd," Miss Monroe runs the risk of confusing the universal and timeless with the parochial and transitory. Moreover, the religious function of the
poet-prophet, the *vates*, to illuminate and instruct his audience is lost amid the accompanying organic conception of an "evolving" audience.

Edgar Lee Masters

In his autobiography, *Across Spoon River*, Masters says, "I thought I could write opinions as a judge and write poems too; but likely I could not have done so." With this comment Masters's reveals the "cultural schizophrenia" that governed his life: the irreconcilable desires for material and artistic success. Masters' life and work provide an endless series of such contradictions: the pull between his sexual desires and his sense of moral obligation; between financial security and artistic success; between a vague Shelleyan empyrean and the hard particulars of midwestern life; between legal briefs and "the vibrations of the soul." This ambivalence and vacillation carried over into his poetry and criticism.

In his autobiography, published in 1936, Masters identified his relationship to Whitman:

What had enthralled me with Whitman from my days with Anne in Lewistown was his conception of America as the field of a new art and music in which the people could be celebrated instead of kings; and the liberty of Jefferson could be sung until it permeated the entire popular heart.
A year later, in 1937, Masters expanded on this in his biography of Whitman, making an extended comparison between Jefferson and Whitman. Whitman's ideas about nationalism, patriotism, farming interests, free trade, science, philosophy, and the American language are seen as identical to Jefferson's. These books, however, merely repeat in more particular form ideas that were present in Masters's work as early as 1898, the year he published his first book of verse, which contained a poem in tribute to Whitman, who had died only a few years earlier.

The eagle eye, which saw  
The spirit's worth, the law  
Of fairer fate  
The Nation's final form  
Through past and future storm  
   The fabric of a safe and gracious state.  
Is closed by envious death, but not in vain  
The vision he projected will remain,  
   To be our life hereafter soon or late.  

With the publication of Spoon River Anthology, Masters was hailed by some as "The natural child of Walt Whitman, . . . the only poet with true Americanism in his bones." Whitman was often invoked in a slipshod manner to confer the legitimacy of democratic art upon a critic's favorite discovery, and in Masters's case the comparison was made so vaguely that an immediate reaction set in. But this reaction only serves to indicate the extent to which Masters's relationship to Whitman was misunderstood by his contemporaries.
Masters was above all a realist; his contemporaries were fond of comparing his vision of humanity to that of Balzac and Strindberg. But Masters never approached these artists in either the integrity or the consistency of his vision. His realism was like an oscillating current, jumping back and forth between a cynicism rooted in his experiences and a sentimentalism rooted in his nostalgia for an America he thought had eluded him but which probably never existed. Masters himself spoke of this dualism in his autobiography. "All through my poems," he says, "there run the two strains of realism and mysticism." Unfortunately, Masters could never recognize that his "mystical" strain, when expressed independent of his ironic realism, produced only sentimental romantic drivel. Harriet Monroe observed that Masters was "The worst self-critic I have ever known," and she supports her charge by showing his inability to distinguish the excellent qualities of Spoon River from the Shelleyan vacuities of his early period. Songs and Satires, a collection of verse from his early period published immediately after Spoon River, "was a disappointment to critics and public, a fact which the author deeply resented and his friends deplored." The result was inevitable, however, because Masters "has never attained critical astuteness to oppose his egoism."
Masters's lack of "critical astuteness" may be seen also in his criticism. In "What is Poetry?" he offers a definition of poetry that reveals his inadequate conception of the importance of form. Although his intention is sound—"to my mind the complete artist must accept whatever forms are necessary to achieve the poetic effect"—the theory by which he supports it is not. At the end of his essay, Masters offers a Romantic definition of poetry:

A poem comes out of the vibrations of the soul—the rhythmical vibration of the soul. For all vibration is rhythmical. And this is the vibration which by its dynamic comes up into words, and effects subtle and inherent cadence even where no definite rhythm is attempted.

Earlier, however, the reader has been told that poetry "is still a question of substance; it is a question of form only so far as form is necessary to convey the idea in its entirety." Each of these definitions undermines the poet's obligation to his craft; the argument from "rhythmical vibration" makes poetry a function of the soul, or the unconscious; the argument from substance subordinates the question of form to one of content. In either case, Masters has accepted a view that curtails any serious consideration of the problems of form and language in poetry. Masters's lack of "critical astuteness" may be found also in Across Spoon River. Throughout
that autobiography there is almost no mention of the formal problems of writing poetry; indeed, Masters emphasizes that his productivity resulted from his having trained himself to compose poetry automatically:

... for many years I had practiced concentration. I learned it by reading books that I did not like, but which I thought I should read; I learned it through the exercise of will, which fastened my mind upon the task in hand whatever it was. I could write, and turn to answer the telephone to talk about a case, and turn back and finish the poem.  

While none of these by itself demonstrates that Masters was an inferior poet, together they illustrate his lack of critical awareness by documenting the superficiality of his approach to the problems of poetic composition.

Masters's one success, Spoon River Anthology, succeeded because for once he discovered a formula that enabled him to deal with human nature in a limited and particular way while at the same time he could incorporate idealistic sentiments and Whitmanesque ideas in a framework rich with dramatic irony. At least one contemporary reviewer noted that the general pessimism and cynicism of the earlier sections of Spoon River are exchanged for a pervasive optimism at the end. This causes him to judiciously praise the work.  

To the modern reader, however, the most striking feature about the material of the poem is its arbitrary arrangement. A graveyard has no such intrinsic arrangement as used in
the poem. The book is arranged to confirm or substantiate a system of beliefs that Masters thought to be true but which organically do not grow out of the material.

"The Hill," which opens *Spoon River*, provides no structural key for the poems, but merely announces the theme. The dead are laid out on the hill before the reader and the tone of the pieces to follow is set:

One passed in a fever,
One was burned in a mine,
One was killed in a brawl,
One died in a jail,
One fell from a bridge toiling for children and wife—
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.18

The poems occupying the first two-thirds of the book—"Hod Putt," "Trainor, the Druggist," and "Zenas Witt" are characteristic examples—document Masters's cynicism and pessimism. Other poems, like "Theodore, the Poet," give us concealed biography of Masters as a young man, or, like "Petit, the Poet," criticize the poetaster mired in convention, whose "little iambics" are contrasted with the poetry of Homer and Whitman, who "roared in the pines."19

Two-thirds of the way through *Spoon River* a series of poems—"Archibald Higbie," "Father Molloy," and "Calvin Campbell"—offers an historical debate over the merits of the small town. Archibald Higbie, who "loathes" and "despises" *Spoon River*, charges that
There was no culture, you know, in Spoon River,
And I burned with shame and held my peace.
And what could I do, all covered over
And weighted down with western soil.
Except aspire, and pray for another
Birth in the world, with all of Spoon River
Rooted out of my soul?20

Such bitterness and cynicism about his heritage and about the possibilities of life in a small town are undercut in three different ways by the poems that follow. In "Elmer Karr," the protagonist is forgiven his crimes by the town in true Christian spirit. In "Father Molloy," the priest is not like "Us of wavering faith, and clouded vision/
And drifting hope, and unforgiven sin," but instead one who "faced life as it is,/ And as it changes" in perfect faith. Finally, Calvin Campbell shifts the burden of responsibility from the town to the individual:

You may blame Spoon River for what it is,
But whom do you blame for the will in you
That feeds itself and makes you dock-weed,
Jimpson, dandelion or mullen
And which can never use any soil or air
So as to make you jessamine or wistaria?21

This series of poems (pp. 171-179) communicates a significant shift in Masters's attitude and feeling toward his material. From here on in, the characters who speak from the grave are generally more optimistic about humanity. Tennessee Claflin Shope, who "asserted the sovereignty of [his] own soul," may be immediately undercut in later editions by the materialism advocated in the next poem, "Plymouth Rock Joe,"22 but the tendency in this last
section of the first edition is to use such dramatic undercutting sparingly.

In the last third of *Spoon River*, the poems are more transparently autobiographical. Masters offers us portraits of himself, his grandmother, and his grandfather in "Webster Ford" (235), "Lucinda Matlock" (202), and "Davis Matlock" (203). Before drawing these portraits, however, Masters draws a number of portraits of historical figures belonging to an earlier America. These figures are drawn from the Illinois of Lincoln's time—"Anne Rutledge" (194), a portrait of Lincoln's first love; "William A. Herndon" (198), a portrait of his law partner—and from the still earlier period of the Revolution—"John Wasson" (187), his great-great-grandfather. In their heroism, vitality, and devotion to duty, these figures are perfect representatives of that Spirit of America which Masters believes no longer exists, and which throughout *Spoon River* is tacitly identified with Jefferson, Lincoln, and Whitman. These figures are presented at this point in *Spoon River* to provide an historical context for the poems which follow. In later editions, this democratic national spirit is reinforced by the inclusion of poems like "Rebecca Wasson," in which the speaker declares "O beautiful young republic for whom my John and I/ Gave all of our strength and love!"23 It is from
this point in time that Lucinda Matlock looks at the present age and delivers her indictment of it—"Degenerate sons and daughters,/ Life is too strong for you—/ It takes life to love Life." Many of the poems which follow—"Samuel Gardner"(209), "William Jones"(211), "William Goode"(212), "Faith Matheny"(214), "Willie Pennington"(216), "The Village Atheist"(217)—utilize the metaphors of organic growth or of the romantic quest which reflect Masters's general indebtedness to the romantics, and to Shelley and Whitman in particular. The general movement in these last poems is to isolate the soul, while emphasizing its loneliness and the saving grace of one's vision. This movement is announced in "Lydia Humphrey" (223), the portrait of a woman who is "disdained" or alone, but who in her isolation realizes that "if the high air was sweet to them, sweet was the church to me./ It was the vision, vision, vision of the poets/ Democratized!" Her vision is followed by others: Gustav Richter's(225), Arlo Will's(226), Joseph Dixon's(228). This movement culminates in the prophetic visions of Isaiah Beethoven and Elijah Browning. In "Isaiah Beethoven"(231), the speaker is vouchsafed a vision of the New Jerusalem at the moment of his death; and, in "Elijah Browning"(233), Elijah penetrates the veil and enters into Heaven.

The individual poems of Spoon River vary greatly in their merits, but the best of them achieve an authenticity
that commands the reader's respect. However, the larger order of the book, the pattern of the whole work, while effective in terms of Masters's contemporaneous audience, is decidedly mechanical and unconvincing, for it does not create an order that is a necessary result of the poem's material. When Masters answered his critics in "The Genesis of Spoon River," he argued:

What critics overlook when they call the Anthology Zolaesque, and by doing so mean to degrade it, is the fact that when the book was put together in its definitive order, which was not the order of publication in the Mirror, the fools, the drunkards, and the failures came first, the people of one-birth minds got second place, and the heroes and the enlightened spirits came last, a sort of Divine Comedy, which some critics were acute enough to point out at once.  

Despite these claims, Masters' argument is specious. The critics who see Spoon River as "a sort of Divine Comedy," are, like Masters himself, mistaking an analogy for truth.

Unlike Dante and Whitman, Masters is not a philosophic poet; Spoon River reveals no systematic view of life, but rather a deeply contradictory view that illustrates the dualism of Masters's own mind. On the one hand, his poetry is harsh, ironic, and cynical; on the other, national, romantic, and sentimental. The popular success of Spoon River results from the dramatic texture—and dramatic ironies—achieved through the juxtaposition of characters speaking for sharply differing beliefs or
attitudes. But that dramatic texture, although interesting, is superficial, for it grows out of characters who are themselves without depth (indeed, all too many of them speak in Masters's voice). Masters himself never investigates the resources of poetic form or language for the purpose of exploring the thoughts or the life of his characters as they develop or change. The reader is never privy to the struggle by which a character comes to embrace doubt or faith, although it is that struggle which the serious artist must explore.

Vachel Lindsay

Nicholas Vachel Lindsay achieved immediate fame in the early issues of *Poetry*. "General William Booth Enters into Heaven" won second prize in *Poetry's* contest for 1913, and "The Chinese Nightingale" won a first prize in 1915. Even *The Dial*, generally hostile to the new verse featured in its Chicago rival, welcomed him, while within the *Poetry* circle Masters believed him to be "America's greatest lyric poet," and only Pound was critical of Lindsay's performance and fame.25 Today Lindsay's fame seems inexplicable; his poetry is dreadful and his philosophy inchoate. Lindsay's work, however, provides a clear example of the problems that beset any poet who attempts to embrace
cosmic and universal themes and yet addresses his audience in terms that are parochial and jejune.

Writing in December, 1902, and trying to map out a course of action for himself, Lindsay remarked that "Through Whitman to Lincoln may be a path to artistic rest"; but that path he would increasingly neglect. Lindsay drew from Whitman support for his own ideas about the relation between a democratic society and the arts. In 1906, while in Europe, he recorded a sentence from Whitman in his notebooks that perfectly expresses this: "Democracy can never prove itself beyond cavil until it founds and luxuriantly grows its own form of art, poems, schools, theology, etc." Whitman understood, as Lindsay never did, that the artist must create the forms of a democratic art. Democracy, that deceptive personification, could never act unaided. But Lindsay was driven, more than anyone else in his day, by a belief in the crowd's "spiritual consciousness," and his need to speak to that crowd was greater than his need to be an artist. Years later he would say: "There is more poetry in the distribution of verse than in the writing of it." 26

One of his recent critics has argued that "He tried to convince himself that the subjugation of his literary instincts to the diffusion of his ideas through popular forms was 'a perfectly natural relation to society', as
far as I am concerned." But surely the point to be made is that the relation was "perfectly natural" only because Lindsay had almost no literary instincts to subjugate. This is supported by his own argument from "What it Means to be a Poet in America." In this essay for *The Saturday Evening Post*, Lindsay defines poetry as follows:

Mr. Utopia asks: "Do you find that the public reacts to good verse?"

The answer is: Yes; so long as they do not know it is poetry.

... Some of them would even stare if you told them that their favorite play of Shakespeare is poetry, because they hate poetry and love the play.28

Great poetry, Lindsay goes on to tell the reader, may be found in any quotation by a statesman of the Republic, any passage from the Bible, or any quotation from a Broadway play. Going by these criteria, poetry is what the mass audience likes but does not understand.

Lindsay broke with Whitman precisely because Whitman's highly individual and idiosyncratic style, his lofty brand of romantic idealism, struck Lindsay as being too pretentious to arouse a mass audience. Poe's style, because of its strong reliance on rhyme, assonance, and onomatopoeia, came to dominate Lindsay's poetry. A quiet, serious poem like "Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight" never achieved the popularity of "General William Booth Enters into Heaven," "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan," "The Chinese Nightingale," or "The Congo," poems which utilized
the techniques of Poe and Lanier to overwhelm the listener with sound and not sense. These poems lack a considered poetic argument, a serious diction, and a subtle rhyme scheme.

As Lindsay reached for a mass audience, he dropped Whitman from his pantheon of heroes. In "Litany of the Heroes," Whitman is given a minor position:

...let us seek out shining Emerson
Teacher of Whitman, and better priest of man,
The self-reliant granite American.29

The importance of Emerson in this passage does not indicate his general importance for Lindsay. Though Emerson is a "better priest to man" than Whitman, he is like Whitman an advocate of ideas and not a doer of deeds. Lindsay replaces Whitman in his pantheon not with Emerson but with Johnny Appleseed. He rejects Emerson, like Whitman, because he is too intellectual; the people could neither understand nor identify with him. In The Golden Book of Springfield, he tells us that to Johnny Appleseed "belongs nearly every worth-while crown of Whitman."30 Johnny Appleseed is one of the people; Whitman is the great pretender.

[Johnny Appleseed] wore for a shirt and sole article of clothing an old gunny-sack with holes cut for arms and legs, and winter or summer slept in the hollow tree on the pile of old leaves and weathered it past seventy years, while the great Whitman lived in houses, and Thoreau was on Walden but a season or two. These men left behind them certain writings, but Johnny Appleseed left behind
him apples, orchards heavy with fruit, beauty from the very black earth, and a tradition whose wonder shall yet ring through all the palaces of mankind. . . Like Christ or Socrates he wrote only in the soil.31

Such misplaced literalism makes the naive response superior to the thoughtful one, and it reduces poetry to the level of versified reportage—the chronicling of authentic folk heroes in rhyme. Still, Lindsay's avowed purpose was to create a popular folk culture:

he sought to evolve a poetry whose form and content, while retaining beauty, would make the medium meaningful and pleasurable to the mass of Americans habitually ignored by poets. It seemed to him that America could not be fully realized without such a folk culture.32

Unfortunately, Lindsay's hope was doomed from the beginning. A folk culture is an organic expression of a homogeneous community. Such communities—local, insular, sharing a well-defined system of values and beliefs—existed in Lindsay's day, but Lindsay's desire to reach the mass of men—an agglomeration in which any sense of community is lost—reveals his fatal confusion of folk culture, an authentic expression of community, with popular culture, a debased expression of high culture. In the modern world, moreover, symbols often must be created by the artist. Consequently, the artist must do more than use symbols, he must be aware that he is also creating and legitimizing them. Lindsay's most successful poems are usually those about folk heroes—historical
figures like Johnny Appleseed, or William Jennings Bryan, who had already been granted symbolic status in the popular mind. He could neither create nor legitimize symbols of his own making that would capture the popular audience he so craved, nor could he capture that audience with his ideas, which reveal his immaturity, his dependence on analogy (usually false and oversimplified), and his parochial values.

Lindsay's idea of poetry was in direct opposition to true folk art. Whereas folk art discovers the universal in the local, Lindsay argues that one should "Always start out with a vision, a beautiful idealization of the thing you see." But in choosing the subjects for his "beautiful idealizations," Lindsay typically ignores historical context, received opinion, or any other indicator of the appropriateness of his choice. For example, in the facile "A Rhyme About an Electrical Advertising Sign" he ignores completely the long established association of advertising with human exploitation and greed and sophomorically envisions that such signs will become advertisements "guiding the wise" to salvation. This tendency in his writing is apparent whenever he departs from historical persons or real events. It receives reinforcement from the general lack of maturity and depth in Lindsay's thought.
This immaturity and lack of depth is revealed in many ways. It finds expression in his vacillating enthusiasms for many arts—poetry, prose, drawing, film—in place of a serious commitment to the development of his abilities in one. It is nowhere more apparent than in the absurd, jerry-built structure of his regional theory, which substitutes an adolescent fantasy world of ideal kingdoms for a considered view of the future. Each region in America becomes identified (falsely) with a particular essential of national life: the Old South with character; New England with unity; New Italy (the Far West) with culture; and New Arabia (the Rocky Mountain and Great Basin states) with urban beauty. This represents an even more juvenile scheme than his attempt to define the spiritual future of America in terms of the parochial sectarianism of the Campbellite movement in *The Golden Book of Springfield.*

Whitman had recognized that poetry can edify only indirectly, and Lindsay, at least indirectly, came to acknowledge that fact. During the twenties, his poetry became less ideological and more lyrical. He still wrote ideological poetry—"So Much the Worse for Boston" (*Going-to-the-Sun*, 1923), "Virginia," "Old Old Old Andrew Jackson" (*Going-to-the-Stars*, 1926), "The Babbitt Jamboree" (*The Candle in the Cabin*, 1926)—, but the poems were fewer in number. His most important book of his later
period, *The Golden Book of Springfield*, was in prose, and his plans in 1931 to shift his efforts from poetry to prose and drawing indicate his dissatisfaction with verse.36

Lindsay's failure as an artist owes nothing to his abandonment of Whitman, but the alternatives that he chooses or makes do reveal his limitations as a thinker and as an artist. Furthermore, his career forcibly documents the dangers of taking Whitman's ideas literally. In taking the "spiritual consciousness in the crowd" to be fact and not romantic myth, Lindsay adopts precisely that posture toward his audience that makes artistic integrity and spiritual growth impossible, for it places the audience and not the artist in control of his art. Pound clearly saw this danger when he made the audience an ideal conception of the poet's mind. Lindsay's willingness to accept this myth—indeed, to embrace it—demonstrates that his anxiety over being accepted as a spokesman for the crowd was a stronger passion than his commitment to the art of poetry.

Carl Sandburg

Of the poets identified with the Chicago Renaissance, Carl Sandburg wrote poetry closest in style to Whitman's. During his youth, Sandburg studied Whitman carefully. As
early as 1903, he writes to Philip Wright that his "two late efforts" at poetry are "haunted" by "Whitman, Shakespeare, Joaquin Miller, and Kipling."37 By 1904 he was preparing a lecture, "The Poet of Democracy: Walt Whitman," and during 1908 he always had a volume of Whitman with him on his travels.38 His poetry shows the influence of Whitman in his reliance on free verse, his use of Whitman's catalogue technique, his use of parallel words or phrases, and his emphasis on natural facts. Although Sandburg clearly saw Whitman as a pioneer who had broken the ground and planted the seed for his own verse, he judged Whitman's poetry "too transcendental."39

Sandburg avoided such transcendentalism in his poetry, even though his constant theme was the American Dream.40 He learned to appreciate the particulars of democratic life not in conjunction with a romantic or idealistic philosophy, but through his early interest in folk ways and folk culture and through his youthful commitment to the Populist movement. A folk culture emphasizes the indigenous, authentic, and local; it gives expression to real things and not "beautiful idealizations." The Populist movement, despite its propagandism, also brought into his life a new awareness of the present conditions of humanity. Unlike Masters, Sandburg is not tempted to sentimentalism over a departed golden age; unlike Lindsay,
he is not tempted to use abstractions he cannot control.

Sandburg's belief in the people, which runs throughout his poetry, informs poems like "I am the People, the Mob," in which the reader is told that the Mob will "arrive" on the day it "learn[s] to Remember" the "lessons of yesterday." However, in moving from his earlier to his later poetry, Sandburg seemingly abandons the idea that the people will arrive. In "The people is a myth, an abstraction," a section from The People, Yes (1936), Sandburg's stance is still affirmative, but the myth of the people is now viewed as a necessary abstraction, a supreme fiction, designed to give life, hope, and meaning in the face of the adversity of the depression.

As a spokesman for the people, Sandburg attempted to create powerful and moving indictments of contemporary evils--child labor in "They Will Say," the rich in "A Fence," the lack of safety regulations in "Anne Imroth," Billy Sunday in "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter." The sense of moral outrage that Sandburg achieves is these poems is limited, for it is not produced through the use of charged language or through a particular formal solution dramatizing the injustice, but rather it is achieved by the topicality of the crime or injustice he is examining. These are occasional poems; once the occasion has passed, the errors in these poems--the overworked
slang, prosy syntax, and absence of profound thought—become easily apparent. The reader's willingness to commit himself to Sandburg's poetry is even more sorely tested by other poems. For every poem like the ones above, which succeed at least as topical poems, there are others that violate tone or do violence to one's sense of the real nature of things—the sentimentalism of "A Teamster's Farewell," or the speaker's identification with the assassin in "Dynamiter." In the latter, Sandburg concludes "I always remember him as lover of life, a lover of children, a lover of all free, reckless laughter everywhere—lover of red hearts and red blood the world over"—but the irony of "red hearts" and "red blood" seems unintentional and therefore inexplicable except as a failure of tone or attitude toward his subject.

Such an entering into the life of the downtrodden and the criminal, of course, was an integral part of Whitman's treatment of reality. Whitman undertook such a sympathetic adhesion in order to discover his own relation to the life about him. But such adhesion also is designed to break the hold of stereotypes upon the mind of his audience and to bring them to a fuller recognition of what humanity is. Whitman himself becomes an agent in this drama, for he tries to imaginatively reveal
the changes wrought in him by such identification with the sufferers of the world.

In Sandburg's treatment of the downtrodden and criminal, however, there is no attempt to make either the audience or himself a participant in the drama. The audience is induced to make no changes in its perceptions, nor is it made privy to any change in Sandburg comparable to the changes it can see in Whitman when he treats a like subject. Sandburg's egalitarianism differs from Whitman's. Whitman believed that a sense of democratic equality could be achieved through a spiritual struggle in which men would awaken to a sense of the divine within themselves, but Sandburg believes all men are equal because they are a part of the crowd, the Mob. This allows him to uncritically accept each member of the Mob at his own face value. The success of a poetry raised on such premises is controlled more by the poet's initial choice of subject than by his later act of artistically shaping it.

In learning his trade as a poet, Sandburg benefitted from his work on various Populist and Socialist newspapers, which taught him the need for clarity and precision of expression as well as for facts. More perceptive than Lindsay, Sandburg recognized that free verse was a better vehicle for the transmission of his social message than
rhyme. Once, quoting from that old rhymester, Oliver Wendell Holmes, he remarked:

A proficient and sometimes exquisite performer in rhymed verse goes out of his way to register the point that the more rhyme there is in poetry the more danger of its tricking the writer into something other than the urge in the beginning.\(^{42}\)

Rhyme is dangerous to the extent that it seduces the writer to follow sound and not sense, whereas a cadenced free verse will be at once forceful and direct.

Sandburg was aware, in a way that Masters and Lindsay never were, that in pursuing his social message, in being forceful and direct, he was not adequately considering the formal demands of his poetry:

I have thought about how curiously it has been ordered that I should over and again put into a verse form (of a sort) what could also be employed in fiction or drama. The latter pay, when they get by, in dollars, a thousandfold over poetry but whenever it occurs to me to shape characters and action thru which the theme would be delivered I balk and hesitate and go back to the first scheme that came, the medium of free verse.\(^{43}\)

This was written in 1935, but as early as 1919, in a letter to Louis Untermeyer, Sandburg wrote:

—The whole theory and practice of criticism is a hard business. I go in on it in politics, the labor movement; and I like to call a crook a crook; and drink beer or near-beer with pals. But in literature and matters that have to do with the intellectual, spiritual and artistic honesty of other people, I'm a good deal of a fliv.\(^{44}\)

Sandburg's confession that he is a "fliv," a lightweight, is underscored by his poetry, which, at least in his social
protest poems, is little more than good journalism set in free verse. His short—some have called them imagistic—poems, like "Lost," "Fog," and "Who am I?" now seem mawkish and without the inner tension associated with poetic excellence. Sandburg's acknowledgment of his dependence upon free verse even when prose fiction or drama might have proven a more appropriate form is more than a candid admission of his limits as an artist: it suggests that the courage he demonstrated in fighting for social causes was not matched by an equal courage in his artistry. In his poetry, Sandburg played it safe.

Conclusion

In 1894, Edwin Arlington Robinson wrote two poems about the problems of the poet writing in the emerging modern era. In "Sonnet"("Oh for a Poet") Robinson made a plea for a genuine poet to rout the formalists and their routine sonnets. In "Walt Whitman" he lamented the passing of Whitman, whom he saw as a composer of "master-songs," but he also saw that Whitman's "piercing and eternal cadence rings/ Too pure for us--too powerfully pure,/ Too lovingly triumphant, and too large." The poets who came after Whitman, should they break with the formalists and utilize his ideas and techniques, must
inevitably run the risk of being measured against him. Robinson recognized that he could never compose songs like Whitman's, songs that were "powerfully pure," "lovingly triumphant"; but the poets of the Chicago Renaissance did make such an attempt.

They did not achieve the success that they hoped for. In their hearts, Lindsay and Masters were always troubled and confused by their failure. Only Sandburg continued to enjoy a popular audience, and he did so not on the basis of his poetry alone, but with the help of his folk songs and his Lincoln biography.7 The reasons that their poetry failed to achieve continuing success are many, but fundamentally their failures were inevitable once they confused Whitman's affirmation of the need for a popular audience with the desire to go in quest of it. Once they made that choice, they pursued a will-o’-the-wisp. Whitman had clearly seen that the modern poet must be an experimentalist, a discoverer of new forms, who would reveal the hidden truths of mankind's divinity to a slumbering audience. The poets of the Chicago Renaissance ignored that insight and paid the penalty for it in their poetry.
Chapter II: Notes


14. Ibid., 308.

15. Ibid., 307.


19. Ibid., p. 78.

20. Ibid., p. 170.

21. Ibid., p. 179.


23. Ibid., p. 225.


31. Ibid., pp. 7-8.


33. Masters, *Vachel Lindsay*, p. 113.


35. Massa, ch. 8; *The Golden Book of Springfield*, passim.

36. Massa, pp. 244-246.


40. Crowder, p. 29.


47. Crowder, p. 7.
CHAPTER III
EZRA POUND AND WALT WHITMAN

Tradition and Authority

In chapter one we heard William Charles Williams state that an American poetry and poetic must derive from Whitman and not Dante. Williams drew his own conclusion, but the terms in which he stated it were drawn from Pound. From Williams' point of view, Pound was anti-Whitman. But historically, in spite of Pound's complex, often contradictory views on Whitman, in spite of his profoundly different goals, he has been viewed by a number of poets who followed in his shadow as being in the direct line of a tradition fathered by Whitman.

Robert Duncan and Charles Olson—despite reservations about the excellence of Pound's achievement—have stated this view of tradition clearly. In his poem "I, Mencius, Pupil of the Master...", Charles Olson depicts Pound as the master "who taught us all/ that no line must sleep,/ that as the line goes so goes/ the Nation!" But since Pound's "great 'ear/ can no longer heart"¹ Olson argues (in terms drawn from Pound's poem, "A Pact,")
addressed to Whitman) that poets must again take up commerce with Whitman directly:

"Whitman,
let us keep our trade with you when
the Distributor [Pound]
who couldn't go beyond wood,
apparently,
has gone out of business"^2

According to Duncan, Pound's poetry is pervaded by the concerns of Dante and Whitman, poets central to his own development. In Duncan's view, "Pound contributed a link in the succession from Whitman to us as followers of Pound discovering ourselves in Whitman."^3

Both Olson and Duncan emphasize Pound's historical importance as a "link" to Whitman. Duncan, however, examines what this means for him in some detail, noting a number of parallels between Dante and Whitman, parallels that by extension also may be found in Pound.

Whitman, like Dante, projected a poem central to his civilization and his vision of the ground of ultimate reality—Leaves of Grass, like the Divina Commedia, being not an epic narrative but the spiritual testament of a self-realization. . .

Whitman, as Dante did in De Vulgari Eloquentia, wrote, in the Preface of the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass—to which I would add the essay "Slang in America," written in 1885—a poetics grounded in a science of the language of the common people. . .

Whitman in Democratic Vistas, like Dante in De Monarchia, had written a definitive—even the definitive—politics of his time ("his time" being the time created in his poetic vision).^4
Pound set out to achieve the same ends. Pound meant The Cantos to be "a poem central to his civilization and his vision of the ground of ultimate reality" as well as "the spiritual testament of a self-realization." In his quest for a poetic diction that emphasized the concrete and specific word and in his development of the principles of Imagism, Pound sought to go beyond Victorian clutter and cliché and discover a "true" language of poetry. Finally, in his Cantos, Pound’s concerns about usury and about the nature of a just government reveal his attempt to diagnose society's ills and to prescribe the cure. In short, to provide a morality and a politics for his age.

Pound has always emphasized the importance that Dante had for him, and Dante's presence in his work is far more obvious and plentiful than Whitman's. Pound had the same reservation about Whitman that Robert Duncan would state so effectively a half-century later: "Whitman nowhere presents the architectural ordering of universe and spirit that Dante presents. . . He is the grand proposer of questions not to be settled, the poet of unsettling propositions." As we shall see, Pound is above all the poet who intends to settle questions. Dante parallels so many of Whitman's concerns, and he immediately provides so much stronger a link with poetic tradition and cultural
authority, that it would be surprising had Pound not chosen to follow him. Pound's deepening involvement in the poetry and thought of Dante represented a creative extension of the concerns of Whitman's poetry on grounds more immediately fruitful for his needs. The necessary prerequisite for his poetry was a tradition having the authority of a culture and a history behind it.

Pound could not rest content with the America he knew—an America in which the language of poetry had been undermined by the "Tennysonianisms" of Victorian poetic diction and in which civilization was in a state of regressive infantilism.² Pound believed that America was culturally bankrupt. This was the conviction that he held when he set sail for Europe in 1907. Two years later, Pound again would state his conviction in a letter to his mother. The West, he argued in that letter, is as unlikely a source of great poetry as the South Pole. The American writer who has any expectations of writing serious poetry should turn his attention to Europe's past. Only there would the struggling writer find the beauty and ideals that he sought.⁷

Pound's idealistic view of the past pervades this argument, which is, above all, a pointed rejection of the West, the "frontier," as a means or end for poetry. The West cannot offer the means for achieving great poetry, because it cannot provide the tradition out of
which great poetry is born; it cannot be the subject, or end, of great poetry either, because it is as barren of history and significance as Antarctica.

Although Pound regarded the frontier in particular and America in general as an unfit place in which to develop his talents as a poet and as an unfit subject for poetry, he nevertheless championed his American roots. In the words of his biographer, Charles Norman, "Pound was, and has remained, American to the core."⁸ Pound himself has backed this claim many times. In 1913, after five years in Europe, he wrote in *Patria Mia*:

> If a man's work require him to live in exile, let him suffer, or enjoy, his exile gladly. But it would be about as easy for an American to become a Chinaman or a Hindoo as for him to acquire an Englishness, or a Frenchness, or a Europeanness, that is more than half a skin deep.

In 1917, he would make much the same comment in a letter to William Carlos Williams: "I... have the virus, the bacillus of the land in my blood."¹⁰ But Pound's Americaness seems to be largely a means of asserting his personal authority over his audience. Whether he is speaking to the European audience he addresses in *Patria Mia* or to a friend, as in his letter to Williams, he appeals to an innate or undefinable quality (a "virus" or "bacillus"). Beyond this, the only quality one might deem American is the desire, expressed in his letter to
his mother, to be independent and self-sufficient (to go his own way by himself). In this light, Pound's desire to make himself into a Renaissance man may be seen as going hand-in-hand with a belief in the self-sufficient American bred from a frontier spirit of rugged individualism and Yankee know-how. The need to go it alone and to go to Europe in order to make a modern poetry are not necessarily incompatible, but the poet who would do so must provide some means of constantly evaluating his objectivity.

As Pound discovered and shaped his view of tradition, he also shaped his view of culture. The interaction between Pound's view of himself as a Renaissance man and his view of tradition as a source of authority and value becomes in this context circular. Each reinforces the other: the values of the Renaissance man enable him to arrive at a proper view of tradition, denied to those men who are less complete, while the authority of tradition confers upon the man an assurance that his values are truly those of a "renaissance" culture. Of course, this is an oversimplified view of a complex process, but it identifies the source of Pound's failures as an artist by accounting for the differences one can observe between Pound's theory and his practice. These differences in part illuminate Pound's tension and ambivalence about
his relation to Whitman, just as they in part illuminate the reasons why Duncan could speak of Pound unconditionally as a "link" to Whitman.

Pound's belief in the cultural bankruptcy of America took on specific definition and development once Pound had begun his search for the elusive *forma*, the forms and techniques of a modern verse. The poetry of his age failed, so he thought, because the poets understood tradition and language in terms that were either decadent or primitive. Writing for *The New Age* in 1912, Pound criticized the hackneyed technique of the conventional poetry of the day in these terms:

As far as the "living art" goes, I should like to break up cliché, to disintegrate those magnetized groups that stand between the readers of poetry and the drive of it, to escape from lines composed of two very nearly equal sections, each containing a noun and each noun decorously attended by a carefully selected epithet gleaned, apparently, from Shakespeare, Pope, or Horace.

Pound interpreted correctly, at least on this issue, the nature of the serious poet's response to tradition. The requirement that the poet make it new meant that he should not imitate, should not copy the past directly. It was a belief he claimed to follow in his own poetry, a criticism leveled against the conventional poets of his own day, and a charge he leveled specifically at the post-Whitmanians.
There are under similar banner the post-Whitmanians. Now Whitman was not an artist but a reflex, the first honest reflex, in an age of papier-mache letters. He was the time and the people (of 1860-1880); that is, perhaps, as offensive as anything we can say of either. His "followers" go no further than to copy the defects of his style. They take no count of the issue that an honest reflex of 1912 will result in something utterly different from the reflex of 1865.12

This view of the American artist as imitative and guided by untrained reflex is supported by the specific judgments he made on the poets we examined in chapter two.

By 1916 he could say of Carl Sandburg that his work "will stay imperfect through lack of culture. Sandburg is a lumberjack who has taught himself all that he knows. He is on his way toward simplicity. His energy may for all one knows waste itself in an imperfect and imperfectible argot."13 His view of Edgar Lee Masters was no kinder: "Masters is too old and instead of rewriting Spoon River he has gone off into gas."14 In 1913 he could still wish Vachel Lindsay "all possible luck" because we "both pull against entrenched senility."15 But he did not want him in "anything which I stand sponsor for as a healthy tendency," because he was all "Jingles and Bret Harte. The easy thing."16 The parochialism and sentimentality of these poets were a consequence of the absence of their ignorance of culture and tradition. When Pound did praise an American poet, Robert Frost, he did so in
these terms: "I have recently reviewed his second book, with perhaps a discretion that will do him more good than pretending he is greater than Whitman."17

Pound's criticism is directed at the parochial and imitative poetics practiced by his contemporaries. Though Whitman was an energetic, even healthy reflex for his time, Pound identified himself strongly with expatriate artists like Henry James and James Whistler. Of the latter he wrote:

You had your searches, your uncertainties,  
And this is good to know--for us, I mean,  
Who bear the brunt of our America  
And try to wrench her impulse into art. 18

Whistler's "message"--true of James also--"was in substance, that being born an American is no excuse for being content with a parochial standard."19 In this respect, Whistler provided a standard and a defense against the infantilism now possessing American culture that Whitman could not. Pound had learned that "It is not enough that the artist have impulse, he must be in a position to know what has been done and what is yet to do."20 The substance of this "message" provides the ground for Pound's judgment and condemnation of most of American poetry; it is the ground justifying his rejection of Whitman, who, without the impulse to art, remained a reflex.

However, though Pound became an expatriate artist, he could never reject America or Whitman completely. His
attitude toward both remained a source of tension, even ambivalence, in the shaping of his thought. In evaluating the "details" of Whitman's poetic, Pound initially took Whitman at face value and saw him as the "rough," the noble primitive, he pictured himself to be. But if Whitman's work needed to be examined from the perspective of Europe's greater tradition, if by itself it was an insufficient model for the modern poet, Pound's conviction was not arrived at solely on the basis of how feebly the post-Whitmanians had imitated his style. He was influenced also by his belief in the deleterious effects of Whitman's views about the "great audience" for poets. Whitman's followers had extended the consequences of his thought in ways Pound found especially reprehensible. In particular, Whitman's argument that "great poets need great audiences too" received Pound's criticism because it made the popular audience the judge of what criteria would prevail in serious poetry, and it led some of his contemporaries to attempt to reify an idealistic statement into a statement of fact. So long as Poetry's circle believed that the great audience already existed and need only be tapped, then serious poetry (and the serious criticism of poetry) was undermined.

According to Pound, the distinguishing feature of Whitman's work is his capturing of the essential America,
an America his audience so took for granted they could not recognize it when it was presented to them. Though "Whitman established the national timbre."

One reason why Whitman's reception in America has been so tardy is that he says so many things which we are accustomed, almost unconsciously, to take for granted. He was so near the national colour that the nation hardly perceived him against that background. He came at a time when America was proud of a few deeds and of a few principles. He came before the nation was self-conscious or introspective or subjective; before the nation was interested in being itself.21

Despite Pound's claims, the facts are quite otherwise. Throughout the nineteenth century, the ongoing debate dominating literary discussion was about what American literature was to be. At no time had the nation not been "interested in being itself." Only in the period of Pound's youth and early manhood, and perhaps not even then, could the literary establishment be charged with complacency. Pound ascribes to all of America's past a condition true—if at all—only of his contemporaries. Pound's reasoning is impressionistic instead of historical, and he is generalizing without evidence.

Writing to Floyd Dell in January, 1914, Pound provides, if not a justification, at least an explanation of his view in Patria Mia.

Whitman? I have never owned a copy of Whitman, I have to all purposes never read him. What you & everyone else take for Whitman is America. The feel of the air the geomorphic rythm [sic] force.
Whitman is the only American poet of his day who matters. He was sincere in his rhythmic interpretation of his land & time. He was too lazy to learn his trade i.e., the arranging of his rhythmic interpretations into harmony. He was no artist, or a bad one.—but he matters. The rest tried to be American hard enough but they never lay naked on the earth.22

This letter reiterates ideas and attitudes we have seen elsewhere in Pound's essays and correspondence. Pound praises Whitman for his sincerity and courage as an "honest reflex," but he still believes him to be "no artist, or a bad one." This view of Whitman changed little over the years. By 1934 he was still saying: "The 'whole of the 18th century' was a cliche which the Romantics broke up, in disorderly and amateur manner. The distressing Rousseau etc. . . . ending with Whitman."23 Pound's view of Whitman remains that of the disorderly, undisciplined amateur. These comments illustrate, however, more than Pound's criticism of Whitman's artistic abilities; for it remains true, though little noted, that, for all the pungent vitality of Pound's epistolary and essay style, that style is characteristically nineteenth century in its dogmatic assertiveness, its impressionistic historicism, and its reliance on the ad hominem attack (this last named quality most apparent in Pound's causal explanation of Whitman's inadequacies as an artist, i.e. his laziness).

But Pound is misleading when he tells Dell that "I have to all purposes never read him." He obviously had
considered his relationship to Whitman more deeply than a merely casual reading of him would permit, especially when we consider that he took time to compose an essay and letter in which he attempts to define more precisely than in Patria Mia his relation to Whitman.

In his unpublished 1909 essay, "What I Feel About Walt Whitman," Pound concluded that "The vital part of my message, taken from the sap and fiber of America, is the same as [Whitman's]." In addition to his message, Pound considers Whitman's technique: "I think we have not yet paid enough attention to the deliberate artistry of the man, not in details but in the large ... Like Dante he wrote in the 'vulgar tongue' in a new metric. The first great man to write in the language of his people." Pound even was stimulated to say: "It seems to me I should like to drive Whitman into the old world."24

Critics have often interpreted this essay backwards, arguing about it in light of Pound's immediate activities during this period. This would lead one to conclude along with Charles B. Willard that "Within a few years ... Pound's interest in Whitman waned, and his appraisal of the poet of Leaves of Grass was tempered by his growing repugnance for America."25 Willard thought that Whitman's influence on Pound was confined to the early years of his career and appeared in his formulation of the ideal of a
concrete and precise poetic diction, and in incidental poems like "Commission," "Salutation," and "Salutation the Second." Aside from the fact that Pound seems ignorant of Whitman's precise views on poetic language or style and appears to have been directly influenced by Flaubert's example and not Whitman's, the overview Willard offers might appear to have merit. Pound's commitment to Imagism and then Vorticism, his immersion in the literatures of Provence and China, these seem to indicate that he has discharged Whitman from any role greater than that of spiritual godfather.

However, if this essay is interpreted not in light of Pound's immediate activities but in light of his impulse toward an epic long poem, a quite different interpretation may be justified. If Pound thinks that "we have not yet paid enough attention to the deliberate artistry of the man, not in details but in the large," then perhaps it is in the larger patterns of Whitman's work that we can observe a basis for Pound's link with him. By 1919, Pound had again taken up Whitman, apparently more studiously than before. In a letter dated March 25, 1919, Pound wrote to his father that he should not send him a new copy of Whitman, that he already had one. The letter is significant, however, because in it pound concedes that Whitman finally achieved a technique (and had something to say) and he singles out for special
praise the "Memories of President Lincoln" section of *Leaves of Grass.* For the first time we have Pound speaking in specifics about Whitman, and we should notice the differences between this letter and the one to Floyd Dell six years earlier. Apparent factual inconsistencies between the two letters (does his admission here that he does not need a new copy indicate he has owned more than one?) are not as important as the content of this letter. Up to this point, Pound had not admitted that Whitman had any knowledge of technique or that there was any substance to what he said. Equally important, in his earlier letters Pound's judgment of what one should read in Whitman's poetry was far different. In June, 1913, in a letter also written to his father, Pound said:

The *Leaves of Grass* is the book. It is impossible to read it without swearing at the author almost continuously. Begin on the "Songs of Parting"—perhaps on the last one which is called "So Long!", that has I suppose nearly all of him in it.

By 1919 Pound no longer believed that the "Songs of Parting" contained nearly all of Whitman. Pound's reading of Whitman had deepened, as his progression from "Songs of Parting" to "Memories of President Lincoln" testifies.

Ten years earlier, Pound had talked about looking at Whitman "not in details but in the large," and, characteristically, he discusses Whitman's poetry not in terms of individual poems so much as the thematic groupings of
the poems. Admittedly, Whitman's thematic clusters are defined by the broadest and most inclusive of thematic ideals, as in "Children of Adam," "Calamus," and "Songs of Parting," or the loosest of historical frameworks, as in "Drum-Taps." But Whitman is not merely the first American poet to achieve a new rhythm and language, he is also the first to create an open ended form embodying and unifying a life's work through the thematic grouping of elements rather than through traditional linear narrative. *Leaves of Grass*, whatever the weakness of its details, is in this respect a modernist work. Yet Pound has obscured the relation between Dante's *cantica*, Whitman's chants, and his own cantos, first, by suggesting that he clearly chose to follow Dante instead of Whitman, and second, by appealing to more immediate models.

Pound has defined the structural form of *The Cantos* in two widely differing ways. First, he has compared the structure of *The Cantos* to the tripartite organization of the *Divina Commedia*, suggesting that *The Cantos* in its final form will have three parts comparable to the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*.²⁹ He has also suggested, in a letter to his father dated April 11, 1927, an organization of three fugal components:

A. Live man goes down into the world of the Dead
C. B. The "repeat in history"
B. C. The "magic moment" or moment of metamorphosis, bust through from quotidien into "divine or permanent world." Gods, etc.³⁰
Critics have taken these sketchy assertions as a guide in erecting ever more elaborate descriptions of the structure of *The Cantos*. For example, Forrest Read has claimed that in *The Cantos*' final form

Homer became Pound's guide, Aphrodite his muse, and Odysseus his central figure; instead of being merely evocations of past literature, past persons, and past places, reflected in the mind, the poem was motivated by the fictional pattern of a voyage, by encounters with the living and the dead, and by a traditional epic idea, the *nostos* (the return home).31

From a study of the genesis of the poem, however, one is hard pressed to discover any such firm hold upon structure in *The Cantos*, either in its *ur*-form or in its final version. Pound does explore a number of possible forms in his attempt to create a large epic poem. "He wanted—had always wanted—to write a long poem." So Hugh Kenner, the most faithful chronicler of Pound's many lives, tells us. "Memory in later years traced the eventual direction of that impulse to a conversation—say circa 1904-5—with Professor Ibbotson who was teaching him his Anglo-Saxon."32 This impulse can already be seen at work in his choice of Dante over Whitman. In the same year he wrote his essay "What I Feel About Walt Whitman," he also wrote to his mother arguing in the same vein as that essay that Whitman's role in American poetry was the same as Dante's in medieval poetry.33 Whitman, like Dante, wrote an epic poem, which meant for Pound that he had let the nation,
the national culture, speak through the poem. But Pound saw the result as a shocking disappointment, because he thought of the United States as a frontier community without any true culture or civilization. Pound wished that Whitman, like himself, would adopt a more openly critical stance toward America, and he contrasted Whitman's passivity toward his subject with this view of America's current needs. The poet, if he truly gave voice to the modern condition and specifically the spiritual life of America, would be a Biblical prophet of doom. But neither Pound's wish for such a prophet, nor his criticism of the frontier, nor his championing of Whitman as the epic poet America had ignored, produces the clarification made by his argument about the proper foundation of the epic. The traditional epic, according to Pound, must satisfy four requirements: it must have a tradition; the tradition must have historical unity; there should be a suitable hero; and the story should be sufficiently old that it is no longer historically verifiable. Pound argues that Dante alone is not bound by these requirements. Dante borrows from all traditions, transcending the parochialism that befalls the lesser artists of his day. Moreover, Dante unifies these many traditions by his own work and not by any dependence upon the official culture of the day. More than
that, Dante, like Arnaut Daniel and the other Provencal poets, provides examples of craftsmanship that go beyond Whitman's rhythmic achievements (or so Pound claims). Yet Pound did not begin by following Dante as a direct model.

Up to 1909, Pound's impulse toward the long poem remained no more than an impulse. When he did mention the subject in print, he disguised his interests in it behind a mask as in "Scriptor Ignotus" (1908):

... I see my greater soul-self bending Sibylwise with that great forty-year epic That you know of, yet unwrit But as some child's toy 'tween my fingers, ... 36

After Imagism, Vorticism, and his studies in the Noh drama, he wondered about the potentials of these forms for the long poem and expressed his view that "I see nothing wrong with a long vorticist poem." 37 Indeed, he felt Noh drama proved "an answer to a question that has several times been put to me: 'Could one do a long Imagiste poem, or even a long poem in vers libre?'" 38

Pound's first attempt at a long poem bore no resemblance to an imagist or vers libre poem, perhaps because he had as yet not digested the lessons of Noh drama and Imagism, but probably because at the moment he was interested in writing topical satire. "L'Homme Moyen Sensuel," originally intended for H. L. Mensken's Smart Set in 1915 (but not published until 1917 in The Little Review), was supposedly the first installment of a long satire modeled on the meter and rhyme of Byron's English Bards and Scots
Reviewers and the form of Don Juan. In terms of form, this is a step backward for Pound. In its substance, as one might expect, Pound attacks the sacred cows of the age:

Still I'd respect you more if you could bury
Mabie, and Lyman Scott and George Woodberry,
For minds so wholly founded upon quotations
Are not the best of pulse for infant nations. 39

Against these sacred cows, Pound set down a number of heroes that America should more properly follow:

From these he learnt, Poe, Whitman, Whistler,
men, their recognition
Was got abroad, what better luck do you wish 'em,
When writing well has not yet been forgiven
In Boston, to Henry James, the greatest whom we've seen living. 40

The satire of "L'Homme Moyen Sensuel" is directed at obvious and often superficial targets. The original intention to compose a number of installments was soon abandoned, and by the time it saw publication in The Little Review in 1917 Pound prefaced it with a note in which he labeled it a "diversion." 41 By this time also, he was two years into the writing of the first drafts of The Cantos.

In moving from "L'Homme Moyen Sensuel" to The Cantos, Pound, in the words of Myles Slatin, "had exchanged Byron for Browning as a guide." 42 Slatin, who has examined closely the evolution of the poem during this period, offers this description of Pound's development:

...one could almost say that he had moved from the structural principle of narrative cum digression of Don Juan to the structural principle of narrative qua digression on which Sordello is built.
At the same time—perhaps because of his own difficulties with his long poem—Pound had moved for his model to a poem directly concerned with the relationship between poetry, society, and social power, directly concerned with the poet's role in history, directly concerned with the nature of poetry itself. A poet struggling to create a new language and a new form, Sordello is torn between his power over language and his power over men, and dies as a result of his inability to resolve the dichotomy between language and action.43

Pound wrote, however, only a few cantos in this digressive form before he stopped. Browning had the unity of Sordello's life about which to structure his poem, but how could the cantos, built as they were about the still evolving life of the poet, be unified? The poem as digression proved as much a dead end as the poem as imitation. Pound by now recognized the failures of both, but he as yet had not integrated his many studies into a functioning aesthetic for the long poem. He was soon to abandon any direct copying of European literary models for the overall form of The Cantos.

Writing about the form of The Cantos in 1937, he remarked: "When I get to the end, pattern ought to be discoverable. Stage set a la Dante is not modern truth. It may be O.K. but not as modern man's."44 But other models as well came in for his criticism. In a letter to Iris Barry in 1916, he dismissed his model for "L'Homme Moyen Sensuel," claiming "Byron's technique is rotten." Further along in the same letter he would say of Browning
"The hell is that one catches Browning's manner and mannerisms. At least I've suffered the disease. There is no reason why you should." The timing of this remark suggests a veiled allusion to the agonies he was currently suffering in composing the early drafts of *The Cantos*.

In terms of the form he initially chose for *The Cantos*, Pound had written himself into a corner. Between 1917 and 1922, Pound failed to extricate himself from this conceptual dead end. In 1919 he was reading Whitman, who he confessed had in the end achieved a form, but he saw no principle at work in Whitman's thematic groupings or motif structures that he could utilize in *The Cantos*. Illumination came to Pound, ironically, from the present and not the past. At the end of 1921, T. S. Eliot brought to Pound the rough draft of *The Waste Land*. By January, 1922, Pound had examined the manuscript and delivered a masterful evaluation to Eliot. For our purposes, however, the significant event was not Pound's criticism of *The Waste Land*, but the discoveries he made in examining it that he could apply to a restructuring of *The Cantos*. His examination of *The Waste Land* seems to have stimulated his own creative energies, for he resumed work on *The Cantos* in the spring of that year and in the space of a few short months had composed—or reworked—the first
eleven cantos.

The manuscript of *The Waste Land* reveals that Eliot's draft of the poem bears at least a structural resemblance to Pound's published versions of the first three cantos. The first page of *The Waste Land* in the manuscript version is a talkative and reflective opening much like the opening of canto I in Pound's 1917 version. That page has been cancelled, and the poem now opens dramatically with the famous line: "April is the cruellest month." In a comparable way, Pound shifted "The Seafarer" section from canto II to the beginning and proceeded to adapt the rest to the mythic, fragmented, and contrapuntal methods he found at work in *The Waste Land*.

"About enough, Eliot's poem, to make the rest of us shut up shop," Pound remarked to Quinn in February, 1922. Pound's creativity was stimulated by the challenge of Eliot's success in handling the formal elements of *The Waste Land*, and his remark wryly hints that Pound felt *The Waste Land* had preempted his intention to write the poem that would make the central statement of his time. In his own work on the cantos, Pound proceeded to incorporate the advances in Eliot's work without ever taking into account the formal differences between *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land*. The patterns he is always working with in *The Cantos* are imitative or analogical—i.e., he
imitates Browning's *Sordello*, or "The Seafarer," or *The Odyssey*, or he draws analogies between his work and Dante's. These are not descriptions of the structure of *The Cantos*, but assertions of a relatedness between that structure (never defined) and something else canonized in a tradition. Even when he invokes an abstract principle, for example, the "repeat in history" he is really arguing by implicit analogy: he assumes that history does repeat and that a comparison of past and present is direct because each is equally objective. However, in a poem that purports to go beyond fiction and offer historical truth, the question of such a "repeat in history" becomes not a structuring principle unifying the work but a philosophical issue dividing it. Does history repeat in any meaningful way? Is the movement from past to present or present to past through such a "repeat" valid? To this extent, those who claim an emergent order in *The Cantos* are not discovering the order in the poem but are instead laboriously graphing a subjective ordering of these elements from myth and history to be found, if at all, in the history of Pound's mind.

But Pound's mind—brilliant, intuitive, energetic—gifted at practical criticism of his friends' poems and at the art of polemic, was either interested in theoretical abstractions or in the achievement of a constant
theory. The same patterns (with the same weaknesses) are to be found in all the structures wrought by his mind—in the disparity between his claims about structure in The Cantos and what is actually present; in the disparity between his theory of poetry (and his theory of style in poetry) and his practice; and in the disparity, finally, between his claims about the nature of authoritarian politics and the visible scars of their reality in our time. Paradoxically, this very failing in him justifies his importance in the Whitman tradition, for the ambivalence he had toward Whitman was symptomatic of the ambivalence to be found in all his creative activity. Poets like Duncan and Olson could not rest content with Pound's work; thus, despite his excellence as a teacher and guide, these poets were driven beyond him to a consideration of their roots, of the final ground of their historical being.

Pound evolved a set of pragmatic critical practices designed to give him maximum exposure to tradition. In these efforts he rejected critical discussion as a final or reliable tool. His characteristic attitude may be found in this passage from Guide to Kulchur: "I am, in these paragraphs, doing no better than any other Damned writer of general statements. I am too far from concrete and particular objects to write any better than Bertie Russell or any other flat-chested highbrow."48 Or in
this: "The Duce and Kung Fu Tseu equally perceive that their people need poetry; that prose is NOT education but the outer courts of the same." In ascending order of importance, Pound's critical procedures were:

1. Criticism by discussion
2. Criticism by translation
3. Criticism by exercise in the style of a given period
4. Criticism via music—specifically, the setting of the poet's words to music
5. Criticism in new composition

These are the critical procedures of a practicing poet. Pound formulates the general principle behind it all in his view of culture: "THE CULTURE OF AN AGE is what you pick up and/or get in touch with, by talk with the most intelligent men of the period." The only problem with this view of culture is that it ignores the crucial issue: how do you talk with men of the past? Taken literally, this would make them our contemporaries. But we know how to confirm the talk of our contemporaries. Unfortunately, we can only comprehend the "talk" of historical personages by an appeal to a particular conceptual framework about the historical context in which they existed, and this requires us to have a philosophy of history—i.e., the abstractions and generalizations Pound would prohibit.

The paucity of Pound's theoretical views can be observed in his statement about style: "STYLE, the attainment of a style consists in so knowing words that one will
communicate the various parts of what one says with the various degrees of importance which one wishes." While the historical importance of Pound's Imagist Credo and his emphasis there on the concrete and specific word is undeniable, this statement, written twenty years later, means nothing more than: use the appropriate word. Pound's other definition of culture provides a basis for understanding why he had no interest in embodying his thoughts in a coherent system. "The history of culture is the history of ideas going into action." In a strict sense, this is a statement of the obvious. Culture is always ideas going into action. But Pound looked upon it as a moral imperative: put your ideas into action. Without rigorously and systematically testing and defining one's ideas, how can he be certain of what he is putting into action? In terms of The Cantos, this imperative to action directs their composition, for Pound is always claiming that as the cantos near their end the pattern ought to become perceivable.

Pound found confirmation for a similar duty toward language in his examination of Chinese culture. The key may be found in this ideogram in The Great Digest: The meaning is "Fidelity to the given word. The man here standing by his word." This conception of fidelity, sincerity, and integrity is elaborated in The Unwobbling
"He who defines his words with precision will perfect himself and the process of this perfecting is in the process." This definition is circular, for the gauge of truth rests in the disciplined act of defining words. This is not a circular truth in Confucian China, for the truth of the word is determined by the culture that is larger than the individual. But for Pound, what check is there on "the process of this perfecting is in the process"? Pound is attracted to this because it suggests that the purely aesthetic ends of the poet's education have moral results; the poet "will perfect himself" not alone in his art but in his character.

This sustaining moral virtue of language is clearly argued in the early drafts of *The Cantos*. The importance of Ovid and Andreas Divas—of the Latin tongue in general—for Pound's aesthetic is to be found in Pound's opinion that "the Roman poets are the only ones we know of who had approximately the same problems as we have." By contrast, Greek poetry is handicapped because it is more difficult to translate into English and because "The Greeks had no world outside, no empire, metropolis, etc. etc." When Pound revised *The Cantos*, he emphasized the importance of the Latin tongue indirectly, through quotation, allusion, translation, and symbol. But in his early drafts, he spoke directly to the reader about its
importance: "Know then the Roman speech 'a sacrament'/ Spread for the nations, eucharist of wisdom,/ Bread of the liberal arts."^57 And this:

'More than the Roman city the Roman speech'
Holds fast its part among the ever living.
'Not by the eagles only was Rome measured.'
'Wherever the Roman speech was, there was Rome.'
Wherever the speech crept, there was mastery,
Spoke with the law's voice, while your greek
logicians. . .^58

Roman speech is law: authority: culture: so too, the
speech of China, the dolce stylo of Dante. The Cantos,
and the language in which they are expressed, are meant
also to embody that authority. But here again, the re¬
tion of this quality in the Roman speech to the language
of The Cantos is analogical. There was mastery where the
Roman speech "crept" because Roman military might got
there first. Typically, Pound reverses cause and effect,
arguing that the Roman speech brought "mastery," brought
the "law's voice." This might be tolerable as a poetic
conceit, but Pound is reaching for much more: he is con¬
vinced that language embodies and brings with it the truth
and authority of a culture--hence, in part, the reason
for the quotations in The Cantos: the truth is integral
and inseparable from the original language of its expres¬
sion, so that it provides as much of the historical con¬
text as we have need of. Just as Roman speech brings us
the "law's voice," so The Cantos through its many styles
and tongues brings us the true and right relations of man to history. Surely, however, there is a serious fallacy in operation here. The historical role of the Latin tongue ("eucharist of wisdom,/ Bread of the liberal arts") derives from considerations that have nothing at all to do with Roman culture and everything to do with particular historical phenomena quite outside the culture—e.g., the rise of Christianity, the later use of Latin as a lingua franca in Europe, etc. In other words, Pound refuses to distinguish Latin's cultural from its historical role. He is talking about two very different kinds of authority, yet he is lumping them together under one rubric.

Pound's attempts at defining an objective, concrete language of poetry actually reinforced this tendency in his thought. His doctrine of the image—"An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."—and his theory of the ideogramic method drove him further and further from any consideration of the philosophical issues inherent in the conflict between substance and form in *The Cantos*.

The ideogramic method consists of presenting one facet and then another until at some point one gets off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader's mind, onto a part that will register. The 'new' angle being new to the reader who cannot always be the same reader. The newness of the angle being relative and the writer's aim, at least this writer's aim being revelation, a just revelation irrespective of newness and oldness.
The ideogramic method, Pound further argues, is an instrument at the service of the "active, instant and present awareness," a domain in which "the individual will remain, individualism will remain, without any theoretical and ideological bulwarks."^61

Pound's views on language, and specifically his ideas about the image and the ideogramic method, are pushed too far in The Cantos. Imagism was an effective but limited movement, and its most effective achievements were poems focusing on simple natural objects or the relation of an image to a particular temporal moment or spacial condition. By invoking the ideogramic method, more complex arrangements were held to be possible. The Cantos could only be attempted in its present structural form by Pound's assuming that the ideogramic method provided a realistic equivalent of the Platonic theory of forms. Plato posited an ideal world of perfect forms, of which the real objects and ideas of this world were but copies, in order to reconcile the imperfections of this world with the spirit's quest for a logically perfect, aesthetically pure, incorruptible universe. Unless such a world existed, what could be the warrant for justifying our ideals? Pound's use of image and ideogram derives from the same demand being placed on the spirit, only his solution—since, unlike Plato, he is interested only in the
universality of its application and not in its inner philosop­histic consistency—is confined to poetry. For Pound image and ideogram are means for confirming absolutely the truth of the poet's vision. However, if truth is the product of the relations between events, and therefore depends upon the interpretation of those events from a particular point of view deliberating over a particular context, then all truths must be partial and incomplete, none can lay claim to being absolute, or to existing apart from a full consideration of that historical context.

Yet this is Pound's claim in The Cantos, where consider­ations of context are usually minimal and often non-existent. This error is present in his thought from the very first, however, and therefore should scarcely surprise us. As early as 1909, he speaks of his attraction to Dante in terms of Dante's ability to draw upon all the traditions of his age and fuse them in his poetry by his will alone. He sees himself undertaking a similar role in his own time, for he sees that in this way he, like Dante, can escape the necessity of laying the foundation that the epic of a traditional culture requires. But of the four require­ments he sets down—a well-defined tradition, an inherent pattern or plot to it, a hero from myth or history, a wall of lies surrounding it—Dante meets them all. Dante can draw upon other traditions because his story is
rigidly defined by the Christian culture of his day, and specifically by his reading of Aquinas.

Dante can work in a number of traditions and unify them in his own work precisely because the self struggling on its journey to paradise in the Commedia is not Dante the artist but Dante the man. The self unifying these many traditions is the artist; the persona whom we call Dante in the story experiences his journey in terms of a single unified Christian afterworld. The distinction between artist and persona is maintained throughout, and for this very reason the transformation of Dante (the persona) because of his journey is a fact that we clearly perceive and therefore can interpret.

Pound, however, cannot achieve such a unity in The Cantos because, as we have already seen, this unity places him in a circular trap. The Cantos does not exhibit a character against a backdrop or as a part of the scene engaged in an action that leads to the definition or discovery of value; instead it exhibits a tendency to mistake the assertion of values in his work for the dramatic enactment or witnessing of those values. The test, after all, is not how good a fiction The Cantos is, but how good a history. Pound himself claimed that the Adams cantos and the Chinese cantos offered true history, that they were an account of "ideas in action" and of the proper
order to be followed in a just society. Quite apart from the circumstances in which they were written and the cause to which they gave support, they reflect Pound's overwhelming pride in his ability alone to determine the truth about history and they reveal any number of historical inaccuracies—e.g., his distortions in his treatment of the Bank War in Jackson's Presidency—62—and historical prejudices—his fascination for and support of authoritarian governments. The integrity of The Cantos as a work of art is destroyed by this. A purely fictional account could survive any number of historical inaccuracies, but the poem Pound wrote cannot survive once its accuracy is impugned.

The aesthetic failure of The Cantos has contributed to its success as an historical link in the Whitman tradition, because it has served to dramatize for our time the larger concerns of Whitman without providing an ultimately satisfactory means for the poets who would follow in Pound's steps. The Cantos have challenged rather than solved the question of what a modernist long poem should be. By loosely borrowing the structural principles of The Waste Land, though carrying them beyond reasonable limits, Pound dramatized the limits of open form and set these poets in quest of more viable alternatives to The Cantos. Moreover, though Pound's own diction may be
faulted for the recurrence of the very nineteenth century
diction he fought—"Thee," "Thy," "Hath," "Saith," to cite
only a few—Pound's role as a spokesman for new movements
(Imagism, Vorticism), new poets (Hilda Doolittle, Robert
Frost, T. S. Eliot), and new attitudes about the poet's
relation to his craft and to his audience did not merely
herald but initiated one of those periodic renewals of
interest in language and form that brought vigor and life
to the poetry of this century. Because of his role as
spokesman, and because of the very real assistance he
gave to other poets by his advice and criticism, The Cantos
was judged in terms of its realization of these ideals,
and its failure to fulfill them only drove those poets
who came after him and would follow in his footsteps back
to that poet who also composed "a testament of a self-
realization" embracing a language and politics for his
time. This is the very argument that we saw Charles Olson
propound in "I, Mencius, Pupil of the Master..." Olson
regards Pound as his master, but his mastery is more in
his teaching, in his precepts (he "taught us all/ that no
line must sleep,/ that as the line goes so goes/ the
Nation!") than in his practice, since he tells us his
"great 'ear/ can no longer hear!" Pound had said that
"It was [Whitman] that broke the new wood,/ Now is the
time for carving." Olson turned Pound's statement
against him, ironically hinting that Pound's carving was inadequate and that for his generation the task was to begin carving anew at the unshaped blocks of new wood.

o Whitman,
let us keep our trade with you when
the Distributor [Pound]
who couldn't go beyond wood,
apparently,
has gone out of business
Chapter III: Notes


2. Ibid.


4. Ibid., pp. 73-74.

5. Ibid., p. 75.


7. Yale Collection of American Literature, *Letters of Ezra Pound*, No. 130, p. 2. This letter is part of a collection of carbon copies, photostats, and films of more than two thousand letters written by Pound and assembled by Mr. Paige for his edition of *The Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941*. Much of this collection, hereinafter referred to as YC, remains unpublished. Because of long delays in granting permissions of the Pound estate and the deadlines for this dissertation, I have decided to paraphrase the unpublished letters included in this chapter.


14. Ibid.
15. L, p. 49.
16. L, p. 55.
17. L, p. 62.
19. FM, p. 47.
20. FM, p. 53.
21. FM, p. 46.
27. YG, No. 520, p. 1.

33. YC, No. 130, p. 1.

34. YC, No. 130, p. 2.

35. YC, No. 130, p. 1.


39. *Personae*, p. 239.


42. Slatin, p. 185.

43. Slatin, p. 186.

44. *L*, p. 293.


49. *GK*, p. 144.

55. Ibid., p. 177.
56. L, p. 90.
58. Ibid., p. 197.
59. Literary Essays, p. 4.
60. GK, p. 51.
61. GK, p. 52.
63. Personae, p. 89.
Seldom has a poet stated the basis for his art as directly as Hart Crane: "I take Eliot as a point of departure toward an almost complete reverse of direction." Crane wrote this on January 5, 1923, at the end of two years during which he had been "more influenced by Eliot than any other modern." Two months earlier he had been "rather disappointed" by _The Waste Land_, which he felt to be "so damned dead," and which he thought did not "add anything important to Eliot's achievement." The new direction that Crane intended to follow led to Whitman. By March 2, 1923, Crane's reading of Gorham Munson and Waldo Frank had led him "to feel [himself] directly connected with Whitman." In this mood, he felt himself caught up "in currents that are positively awesome in their extent and possibilities." However, seven years would fall between this feeling and the poem that grew out of it, _The Bridge_ (1930).

Crane's link to Whitman is clearly seen in _The Bridge_ (as it is openly acknowledged in his letters), but the question still remains: were the "currents" that Crane
felt given effective form in his poetry? The question was complicated in Crane's own life-time by the perspective from which his critics saw The Bridge. The details of Crane's life--his troubled childhood, his temperament, his drunkenness, his homosexuality--obscured the poet behind a gaudy window dressing of decadent romanticism. If this were not enough, the critical reception of White Buildings (1926), his first volume, pigeon-holed Crane in a category that The Bridge, when it appeared, could only violate. White Buildings revealed a romantic sensibility working in a modern idiom derived from Pound, Eliot (more and more), and the Jacobeans. Critics such as Yvor Winters or Allen Tate could look favorably on this volume not only because of the beauty of some of the individual lyrics but also because it seemed to offer proof of a romantic poet who was reaching beyond romanticism. Winters, for example, could write enthusiastically to Crane: "'I withdraw all minor objections I have ever made to your work--I have never read anything greater and have read very little as great.'" (Quoted by Crane, January 27, 1927.)

But Crane's interest in Whitman was seen by these critics as a step backward into the visionary formlessness of romanticism, a step that Tate felt was regrettable and that Winters viewed as reprehensible. Tate disclosed his views to Crane in a letter on June 10, 1930.
I too felt that your tribute to Whitman was, while not excessive, certainly sentimental in places, particularly at the end of Cape Hatteras. But more than this I could not say except that in some larger and vaguer sense your vision of American life comes from Whitman, or from the same sources in the American consciousness as his. I am unsympathetic to this tradition, and it seems to me you should be too. The equivalent of Whitmanism in the economic and moral aspect of America in the last sixty years is the high-powered industrialism that you, no less than I, feel is a menace to the spiritual life in this country. In the end, this is all I can see in him; through he did write some great poetry.5

After Crane's death, Tate criticized the poem more openly, arguing that it represented an attempt at the romantic assertion of the will, that it was "finally incoherent," and that Crane's "whole career is a vindication of Eliot's major premise—that the integrity of the individual consciousness has broken down." Crane's "world had no center, and the thrust into sensation is responsible for the fragmentary quality of his most ambitious work."6 Since for Winters all romanticism--Crane's, Whitman's, Emerson's, and so on--is a plea for a gluttonous life in the senses, so that anything can be justified on principle (the point being, of course, that romanticism has no principles), Crane's poetry is a priori consigned to the formless and chaotic by-products of the unrestrained will.7 Winters does find a few good patches--the last fifty-five lines of "The River" section of The Bridge, "Voyages, II," and "Repose of Rivers"--but beyond this he finds nothing to praise.
At bottom these criticisms rest upon an overly simple dichotomy between reason and emotion. Tate provides the key for understanding this in his assertion that Crane's "world had no center." Indeed, it does not. But his error is in assigning this to Crane as a sign of his aberration rather than in considering that Crane might be projecting it because he saw it as symptomatic of the modern condition. For Tate and Winters the values of the world are to be found in reason and order communicated through the authority of a tradition. Crane saw Tate more clearly than Tate saw him: "Tate has a whole lot to offer when he finds his way out of the Eliot idiom, which as you know, is natural to him, and was before he ever heard of Eliot." Tate is linked to Eliot by more than idiom, however, his mind is attracted to the same idea of a tradition of stable ideas and values, just as he is opposed to the chaos and flux that, for him at least, seem inevitable once tradition is abandoned. Tate reveals his bias in yet another way when he tells the reader that "An epic is a judgment of human action, an implied evaluation of a civilization, a way of life." Tate's emphasis on judgment and evaluation appears to be directed at our age from some olympian distance granted by tradition. But the great epics—The Iliad, the Commedia, The Aeneid—implicitly accepted the values
of their age. But Tate is not using judgment in this sense; he is employing it as an ironist would. In arguing that the primary value of an epic is its embodiment of "a judgment of human action," he is looking at the problem precisely in terms of a self-conscious, intellectual world-view in which the epic form is no longer possible. Crane, however, refused to accept this view of the world as a premise for his own endeavors.

He attributed the "divergent prejudices" of Tate and himself to the fact that "you, like so many others, never seem to have read [Whitman's] Democratic Vistas and other of his statements sharply decrying the materialism, industrialism, etc., of which you name him the guilty and hysterical spokesman."\(^\text{10}\) Crane, in contrast to Tate, thought that "The most typical and valid expression of the American psychosis [read: spirit]\(^\text{11}\) seems to me still to be found in Whitman . . . . He, better than any other, was able to coordinate those forces in America which seem most intractable, fusing them into a universal vision."\(^\text{12}\)

This "universal vision" was not the only value that drew Crane to Whitman. Harvey Gross, who has examined Crane's meter in some detail, argues that "Crane's gift, like Whitman's was ceremonious and rhetorical; his true poetic métier was the apostrophe, the classic form of
lyric celebration."\textsuperscript{13} Crane, however, did not borrow Whitman's style or idiom, because

Crane's true metrical idiom was the unashamedly rhetorical line of the Elizabethans. If Eliot at a crucial point in his career found the relaxed blank verse of Jacobean dramatists suited to his moods, so Crane discovered in Marlowe and Jonson rhythms consonant with his exuberance and awe.\textsuperscript{14}

Crane differed from Eliot precisely in this capacity for feeling and expressing exuberance and awe. Yet Crane persisted in viewing his work as an outgrowth from Eliot's: "I flatter myself a little lately that I have discovered a safe tangent to strike which, if I can possibly explain the position,--goes through him toward a different goal."\textsuperscript{15}

At this point, the reader's acceptance of Crane's argument depends upon his belief that Crane has indeed absorbed Eliot "enough."\textsuperscript{16} Gross, however, demonstrates that Crane's assimilation of Eliot was incomplete and at odds with his basic temperament. Crane could not really convey ennui, despair, or the conversational rhythms of everyday speech.

When Crane reaches for a mood of ennui or despair, the lines often move with a disturbing vitality:

\begin{verbatim}
Behind
My father's cannery works I used to see
Rail-squatters ranged in nomad raillery,
The ancient man--wifeless or runaway
Hobo-trekkers that forever search
An empire wilderness of freight and rails.
Each seemed a child, like me, on a loose perch,
Holding to childhood like some termless play.
\end{verbatim}
John, Jake or Charley, hopping the low freight—Memphis to Tallahassee—riding the rods, Blind fists of nothing, humpty-dumpty clogs. ("The River," The Bridge, 52-52)"

When his characters gave it expression, it sounds like this:

"what do you want? getting weak on the links? fandaddle daddy don't ask for change--IS THIS FOURTEENTH? its half past six she said--if you don't like my gate why did you swing on it, why didja swing on it anyhow--" ("The Tunnel," 11. 50-56)

All that this captures is the whining sound of the speaker: beyond that plaintive tone, the passage is dated (the slang of "fandaddle"), possesses no emotional or psychological unity that embodies the condition of modern despair, and, finally, achieves no sense of the rhythm of individual speech.

Crane saw the differences between himself and Eliot, even though the necessities of his theme and his own exuberance occasionally drove him to traverse ground that artistically he could not adequately embody. Here the success of the finished work mirrors the attitudes of the writer. Eliot could depict the despair of the modern condition in his poems because he could embrace or surrender himself to that vision; but Crane, though he could attest to despair in his present life, looked to the future. If the present was a source of exacerbating
tension, the future—remote and unsure though it was—was still a realm of hope.

Like Whitman, Crane was "concerned with the future of America," and he did not "think that America has any so-called par value as a state or as a group of people." His response to America was shaped and qualified by an acute sensitivity to the modern condition and to the poet's relation to it.

It is a terrific problem that faces the poet today—a world that is so in transition from a decayed culture toward a reorganization of human evaluations that there are few common terms, general denominators of speech that are solid enough or that ring with any vibration of spiritual conviction. The great mythologies of the past (including the Church) are deprived of enough facade to even launch good raillery against. Yet much of their traditions are operative still—in millions of chance combinations of related and unrelated detail, psychological reference, figures of speech, precepts, etc.\(^\text{19}\)

When Crane was in the process of composing *The Bridge*, he believed intensely that he was writing "an epic of the modern consciousness," (September 12, 1927) a poem "aiming as it does to enunciate a new cultural synthesis of values in terms of our America."\(^\text{20}\) (December 3, 1925) He occasionally had doubts about fulfilling these hopes, as he expressed to Waldo Frank—"emotionally I should like to write *The Bridge*; intellectually judged the whole theme and project seem more and more absurd." Part of the problem had to do with the opportunities which the
modern age offered the poet. In a moment of exasperation brought on by these thoughts, he would exclaim:

If only America were half as worthy today to be spoken of as Whitman spoke of it fifty years ago there might be something for me to say—not that Whitman received or required any tangible proof of his intimations, but that time has shown how increasingly lonely and ineffectual his confidence stands.21 (June 20, 1926)

In this state of doubt, Crane would express a peculiar double vision about the relation of his symbols to the poem and about himself in relation to the poem.

These 'materials' [of The Bridge] were valid to me to the extent that I presumed them to be (articulate or not) at least organic and active factors in the experience and perceptions of our common race, time, and belief. The very idea of a bridge, of course, is a form peculiarly dependent on such spiritual conviction. It is an act of faith besides being a communication. The symbols of reality necessary to articulate the span—may not exist where you expected them, however. By which I mean that however great their subjective significance to me is concerned—these forms, materials, dynamics are simply non-existent in the world. I may amuse and delight and flatter myself as much as I please—but I am only evading a recognition and playing Don Quixote in an immorally conscious way.22

If this "act of faith" should be betrayed and the project prove "absurd," then the bridge as a symbol would have "no significance beyond an economic approach to shorter hours, quicker lunches, behaviorism and toothpicks."23

The clarity and certitude with which Crane defines these antinomies in his symbolism, in his analysis of the modern condition, and in his understanding of Whitman...
discloses a realistic assessment of the difficulties and the dangers inherent in his task.

Such an analysis should preclude us from too readily endorsing the kind of optimistic view of Whitman's role in *The Bridge* which Bernice Slote advances.

To think of the structure of 'Cape Hatteras' as showing, first, the human condition; second, the human failure; and third, the rise to infinity through the way set down by Whitman, will give it a consistent form. As a miscellaneous praise of geology, or of science, or of Whitman, it will be a fumbling, sentimental effort. But Crane's two years on it as a synthesis are justified when it is seen as the diagram, the visualization, of a kind of modern *Commedia.*

But this comparison of *The Bridge* to the *Commedia* is misleading. Ms. Slote's contention that Whitman is Virgil, conducting "the soul upon the search for infinity" (which, off-hand, would appear difficult to locate), or her belief that "Cape Hatteras" and "Passage to India" parallel each other in any precise manner establishes by analogy what cannot be established from the text—that *The Bridge* is indeed a "testament of self-realization," and that that realization is an attainment of the infinite.

*The Bridge* is not about a journey completed but about a journey begun. This is born out by the treatment accorded the poem's major symbol, the Brooklyn Bridge, by the particular role given to Whitman in the "Cape
Hatteras" section, and, not least of all, by the conclusion to the poem bodied forth in the "Atlantis" section.

The bridge as a symbol embodies the fundamental antinomies that Crane finds in the modern world; it is, on the one hand, the supreme embodiment of the creative impulse in America, and, on the other hand, an enslavement of that impulse for mundane economic utility. The bridge sustains both sets of antinomies. Crane's poem does not record merely the choice of the spiritual over the material. In the end, the poem offers no avenue to the infinite but simply the "Pledge" of such an avenue. This is born out in a number of ways through Crane's development of theme and symbol, but for our purposes here it can be seen most readily in the changes he made in Whitman's role in the poem between his outline, penned in March, 1926, and the final version, completed in late 1929.

I  Columbus--Conquest of space, chaos
II  Pokahantus--The natural body of America--fertility, etc.
III  Whitman--The spiritual body of America
    (A dialogue between Whitman and a dying soldier in a Washington hospital; the infraction of physical death, disunity, on the concept of immortality)
IV  John Brown
    (Negro porter on Calgary Express making up berths and singing to himself [a jazz form for this] of his sweetheart and the death of John Brown, alternately)
V Subway—the encroachment of machinery on humanity; a kind of purgatory in relation to the open sky of last section

VI The Bridge—a sweeping dithyramb in which the Bridge becomes the symbol of consciousness spanning time and space.26 (March 18, 1926)

In the final version of The Bridge, the section on John Brown was dropped and three sections—"Cutty Sark," "Three Songs," and "Quaker Hill"—added. Of those sections which he retained, Whitman's—finally named "Cape Hatteras"—caused him the most effort. By September 17, 1929, he was writing to Caresse Crosby: "I can't help saying that I'm highly pleased with the way I've been able to marshal the notes and agonies of the last two years' effort into a rather arresting synthesis."27 In this "arresting synthesis," Whitman no longer carries on a dialogue with a dying soldier but instead becomes a symbolic presence which Crane juxtaposes against his own age.

The action of the "Cape Hatteras" section is no longer set in the past but is instead dramatized through the poet's consciousness, which, though rooted in the present, moved freely back into the past or forward into the future. Because the action so largely takes place in the mind of the poet, the only act which results from it is one of recognition: he comes to recognize Whitman's role in the eventual development of man's spirit, and his qualified role as an instrument of that realization.
in Crane's own time. Furthermore, because the role Whitman will fulfill is entirely spiritual, this section of *The Bridge* dramatizes an act of faith which runs counter to historical realities that are omnipresent.

Whitman's spiritual role in *The Bridge* is clearly defined near the conclusion of "Cape Hatteras." Not only does Crane's persona feel that "Ascensions of thee hover in me now" (144), but he is convinced that Whitman is in control, for he "dost wield the rebound seed" (146). Whitman's fructifying powers bring a renewed confidence to the speaker: "—-travail/ Of tides awash the pedestal of Everest, fail/ Not less than thou in pure impulse inbred/ To answer deepest soundings!" (147-150) This confidence in Whitman's "pure impulse inbred" enables Crane's persona to believe in the untainted nature of Whitman's message—"Thou bringest tally, and a pact, new bound,/ Of living brotherhood!" (151-152)

But Crane's persona accepts Whitman's pact of "living brotherhood" not because Whitman is now a hallowed spirit with "pure impulse inbred"; but because he affirms the historical experience through which Whitman had his convictions tested. Crane looks beyond Whitman's song to the spiritual testament of his life.
—thy wand

Has beaten a song, O Walt,—there and beyond!
And this, thine other hand, upon my heart
Is plummet ushered of those tears that start
What memories of vigils, bloody, by that Cape,--
Ghoul-mound of man's perversity at balk
And fraternal massacre! Thou, pallid there as
chalk,
Hast kept of wounds, O Mourner, all that sum
That then from Appomattox stretched to Somme!
(157-165)

If Walt Whitman stands at the gates of heaven and testifies to the reality of the "universal brotherhood" of all mankind, he also stands at the gates of hell and universal discord. As a wound-dresser during the Civil War he literally attempted to heal those injured in the war (a war that symbolized the universal discord underneath America's myth of national unity). Appropriately, then, Whitman's life and actions in addition to his words make his a natural spiritual guide to the path from discord (war, chaos) to harmony (brotherhood, love). It is in this sense that Crane can proclaim him a keeper and mourner of wounds not merely at Appomattox but also at Somme. As Whitman experiences and recalls the horrors of the Civil War, only to transcend the agony and contradictions of that suffering in his poetic vision, so, too, he is called up in the poem to dramatize and make visible the possibility and hope that Crane's persona can transcend the present and its agonies and contradictions.
But Whitman does not dominate "Cape Hatteras" from the first; his presence is only gradually revealed. At the opening of "Cape Hatteras," the persona is relatively passive, looking toward Whitman but looking, even more, toward the primal soil of America.

[We]--return home to our own
Hearths, there to eat an apple and recall
The songs that gypsies dealt us at Marseille
Or how the priests walked--slowly through Bombay--
Or to read you, Walt,--knowing us in thrall

To the deep wonderment, our native clay
Whose depth of red, eternal flesh of Pocahontas--
Those continental folded aeons, surcharged
With sweetness below derricks, chimneys, tunnels--
Is veined by all that time has really pledged us . . .
("Cape Hatteras," 8-17)

In this passage, the most important line is the last.
The earth, the "flesh of Pocahontas," is not only a source of "deep wonderment" but the only thing that time "has really pledged us." But the earth may cease to be a source of the divine once we are lost in the "labyrinth . . . of canyoned traffic." (50, 53) Consequently, Whitman's first lengthy appearance in this section finds the persona addressing him directly about his own doubts:

Walt, tell me, Walt Whitman, if infinity
Be still the same as when you walked the beach
Near Paumanok--your lone patrol--and heard the wraith
Through surf, its bird note there a long time falling . . . (43-46)

Not only must he take Whitman's word for what infinity is, but he is so cast into doubt that he wishes Whitman's
assurances that it has not changed substantially. This state of doubt is intensified in the lines which follow by the speaker's dwelling upon the tension which exists between Whitman's vision and the nature of the modern age.

O Saunterer on free ways still ahead!
Not this our empire yet, but labyrinth
Wherein your eyes, like the Great Navigator's without ship,
Gleam from the great stones of each prison crypt
Of canyoned traffic . . . (49-53)

Despite what Whitman sees, the speaker asserts that his eyes remain "undenying, bright with myth" (57).

But in our modern age "power whips a new universe" (58), and this power drives

Towards what? The forked crash of split thunder parts
Our hearing momentwise, but fast in whirling armatures,
As bright as frogs' eyes, giggling in the girth
Of steely gizzards—axle-bound, confined
In coiled precision, bunched in mutual glee
The bearing glint,—0 murmurless and shined
In oilrinsed circles of blind ecstasy! (67-73)

This "blind ecstasy" of industrial power is the greatest threat to the "free ways still ahead" because it is undirected. This dramatization of the destructive impulse in the modern is intensified through the movement from industry to war itself:

While Iliads glimmer through eyes raised in pride
Hell's belt springs wider into heaven's plumed side,
0 bright circumferences, heights employed to fly
War's fiery kennel masked in downy offings,—
This tournament of space, the threshold and chiselled height,
Is baited by marauding circles, bludgeon flail
Of rancorous grenades whose screaming petals carve us
Wounds that we wrap with theorems sharp as hail!

Whitman's presence in this section evokes—Crane
never introduces them explicitly—a number of highly
charged parallels. Whitman himself knew the experience
of war closely, had written about it in Specimen Days and
the "Drum-Taps" section of Leaves of Grass; he knew the
evils of industrialism and materialism, and had written
about them in Democratic Vistas and in poems like "Respon-
dez." This particular passage, which focuses on the air-
plane, must be seen (as the preceding passage on indus-
trialism) in the context of the modern world as a "laby-
rinth" and "prison crypt." In its ability to reach towards
heaven, the airplane is a material embodiment of man's
spiritual yearning. As an instrument of war, it is a
source of epic ("Iliads glimmer through eyes raised in
pride," 90), and an example of "high bravery" (140). But
even in the transport of his exuberance, Crane's persona
calls out to the pilot:

Thine eyes bicarbonated white by speed, O Skygak,
see
How from thy path above the levin's lance
Thou sowest doom thou hast nor time nor chance
To reckon—as thy stilly eyes partake
What alcohol of space . . .! Remember, Falcon-Ace,
Thou hast there in thy wrist a Sanskrit charge
To conjugate infinity's dim marge—
Anew . . .! (122-129)
The war-like actions of the plane are at odds with its spiritual role. The plane's fate—to be brought down by gunfire and the inevitable pull of gravity—reveals that Crane is actively undercutting his persona's feelings. The persona is left in the ambiguous world of reality, a world in which feeling and fact cannot be reconciled, in which he cannot achieve a point of balance or rest.

Implicitly, Crane's account of the airplane is a dramatization of the major dilemma of his persona throughout this section of The Bridge; it is Crane's acknowledgment that the modern world provides no symbol adequate to his needs. Our greatest achievements embody ambiguous, often contradictory values. It is in light of this discovery that Crane has his persona return to Whitman. His invocation quietly reminds his readers of the terrors of history and of the need to once again climb to the heights he had attained (so unenlighteningly) in the airplane—"The stars have grooved our eyes with old persuasions/ Of love and hatred, birth,—curcease of nations ... / But who has held the heights more than thou, O Walt!" (141-144) Only by recognizing that Whitman climbed to these heights out of the suffering and doubt of his own life can the reader comprehend his values for Crane and the transformation that overtakes Crane's persona at the end of "Cape Hatteras." At the conclusion
of "Cape Hatteras," Crane designates Whitman Panis Angelicus—holy bread and holy Pan, the vegetation god out of whom the world shall be reborn—and ways of him:

... Eyes tranquil with the blaze
Of love's own diametric gaze, of love's amaze!
Not greatest, thou,—not first, nor last,—but near
And onward yielding past my utmost year.
Familiar, thou, as mendicants in public places;
Evasive—too—as dayspring's spreading arc to trace is:
Our Meistersinger, thou set breath in steel;
And it was thou who on the boldest heel
Stood up and flung the span on even wing
Of that great bridge, our Myth, whereof I sing!

(182-191)

But even as the reader sees Whitman as the bringer of the divine vision, he is reminded of the time—"Years of the modern!"—and the fundamental ambivalence of the age. "Propulsions toward what capes?" (192) the speaker questions, and we are drawn back to contemplating whether the blind, onrushing speed of the present will bring man to the cape of life or the cape of death. In this state, Whitman holds out the promise that we may build a bridge from the nightmare of history (and its continual tensions and contradictions) to the promised land (which is both the "flesh of Pocahontas," the soil of our beginning, and the undefinable which yet awaits us).

O, something green,
Beyond all sesames of science was they choice
Wherewith to bind us throbbing with one voice ... 

(195-197)
This "something green" is the vision which he reclaims. (205) It is analogous to the "rainbow's arch" that stands above the "Cape's ghoul-mound." (207-208) As the rainbow arch is seen in the eye, so the vision of Whitman is seen in the mind by an act of the imagination. The vision will be realized only in the future.

Recorders ages hence, yes, they shall hear
In their own veins uncancelled thy sure tread
And read thee by the aureole 'round thy head
Of pasture—shine, Panis Angelicus! (209-212)

This shift to the future brings past, present, and future into alignment. The future can only be defined by going back to the past, to Whitman's vision. Whitman's poetry is an enactment of his vision for the America of his day; in this sense it embodies the "flesh of Pocahontas."

Crane's vision is at once a similar enactment (hence, the general resemblance to Whitman's "passage to India," his own poem about a voyage to primal lands—"the voyage of the mind's return,/ To reason's early paradise,/ Back, back to wisdom's birth"), and one that differs sharply because of his modernism. It is much more self-conscious about what it is undertaking and about its roots in the past. It is Whitman's vision that he finds in going back to the past, it is Whitman's vision he asks the reader to accept and believe in in the present, and it is Whitman's vision that will be realized in the future.
Whitman's vision, however, is not the subject of *The Bridge*. Crane does not echo another man’s ideas; instead, he offers a testament to his own faith. At least in this respect, the literary analogue for the poem—and for the "Cape Hatteras" section especially—is not "Passage to India" but "A Noiseless, Patient Spider." Like the spider, which "launched forth filament, filament, out of itself," Crane’s persona offers an assertion of faith, first in the airplane and later in Whitman himself. Equally important for an understanding of Crane’s work, the optimism of "Passage to India" does not capture the existential terror of "A Noiseless, Patient Spider." The tentative, hopeful, but unsure explorations of the spider—in which the will to act, to cast a filament, is more important than any goal—is matched in the tentative, hopeful, but unsure explorations by the soul. Will he succeed in taking hold? The *Bridge* offers a similar enactment: the action of the soul as it struggles toward belief, even in the uncertainty and terror of the modern condition, is truly the subject of the poem.

This self-consciousness and this direct dependence upon Whitman emphasizes what I stressed earlier in discussing Tate’s criticisms: Crane is celebrating not
merely an unbridled will opposed to all ideas of order—
for the old traditions, in his eyes at least, no longer
provided ideas that would inspire confidence—but the
fundamental belief that affirmation, however chaotic and
ambivalent the world of experience, was a necessary act.
In this sense, the "Cape Hatteras" section presents a
nodal point about which the rest of the poem turns, for
it reveals Crane not in the act of spreading his own
vision but in the role of Whitman's disciple.

The bridge is evoked in the "Proem" first in terms
of prayer—"O harp and altar, of the fury fused" (29)—
and then in terms of a conditional promise:

O Sleepless as the river under thee,
Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod,
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend
And of the curveship lend a myth to God. (41-44)

Both the "sometime" and the "lend" in this passage sug-
gest the conditional nature of the informing experience.
The Bridge celebrates this conditional nature of belief
in many guises. Columbus' voyage to the east looking
for Cathay is emblematic of the conflict between the
reality of events and the need for steadfast faith.
The deceptive dream of Eldorado ("Indiana") demonstrates
the destructive side of misguided faith. This interplay
of the affirming and negating value of belief merges in
the final section of the poem, "Atlantis," not so much
in a celebration of the vision as in a celebration of the harmony it brings to the believer.

Crane prefaces "Atlantis" with a quote from Plato, "Music is then the knowledge of that which relates to love in harmony and system." The music which the bridge creates and which the poet celebrates—"Make thy love sure--to weave whose song we ply!" (14) engenders love and harmony in him which he returns in his song. But the bridge itself is only "Deity's glittering Pledge" (73), the instrument which "sometimes" "lends a myth to God."

Even at the moment of epiphany, the vision towards which he ascends falls back into the world of experience, and the passion of "--One Song, one Bridge of Fire!" becomes the uncertainty of the everyday world.

Is it Cathay,
Now pity steeps the grass and rainbows ring
The serpent with the eagle in the leaves . . . .
Whispers antiphonal in azure swing. (93-96)

Columbus had a vision of Cathay, but in his quest of it he came upon America: the dream was transformed into the ambivalent world of history. Whitman had a dream, but between his dreaming of it and its realization in some future, the poet must sing his belief in it amidst the "blind ecstasy" of his age. The poet himself reaches toward Atlantis, man's first civilization and also (in mythic terms) his last, but he is brought up short by a moment of somber doubt, held before the reader in the
contrast between the "rainbows" and the earth-bound struggle of "The serpent with the eagle in the leaves." It is against this world of struggle that the "Whispers antiphonal in azure swing."

Crane's position in the Whitman tradition is assured, for he went beyond asserting the importance of Whitman's substance or technique to grapple with the fundamental article of Whitman's experience: how is the poet to affirm his faith in a transcendental order while still fairly depicting the complications and contradictions of the modern experience? The poet who would assert his ideals directly could only reveal his naiveté, but the poet who would assert them indirectly—through symbol and myth—would rob them of immediacy and impact.

In confronting the difficulties inherent in celebrating Whitman's ideals in a fundamentally materialistic age, Crane illustrates the basically shallow understanding that had characterized the thought of Lindsay, Sandburg, and even Masters. Faith and ideals by themselves did not provide an adequate picture of reality, and only the poet who would affirm the complexity and uncertainty of the world could be said to provide a true picture of the reality of modern man. Crane reached for this goal; the weaknesses of The Bridge are not the consequence of his confusion about the goal for which he was headed, but
are the result, as Gross suggests, of the uneven progress he had made toward the discovery of his proper poetic idiom.
Chapter IV: Notes


4. Quoted by Crane in *L.*, p. 284.


11. Crane here employs psychosis in its original sense of "spirit." (Author's note:)


14. Ibid.


16. Ibid.


25. *Start With the Sun*, pp. 139, 140, 143, and 153 especially.


27. L, p. 346.


29. Ibid., p. 450.

CHAPTER V

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

In the development of his thought, William Carlos Williams found Walt Whitman to be "a key man to whom I keep returning." Although he qualified his admiration for Whitman more than once, Williams' criticisms—"His poems fall apart structurally"; "in his later stages [he] showed all the terrifying defects of his own method"; "He is almost a satirist of his own era, when his line itself is taken as the criterion"—do not undermine the essential value that he discovered in Whitman's work. When he spoke to his contemporaries about Whitman's significance, he could bluntly challenge them: "who has seen through [Whitman's] structure to a clear reason for his value and limitations? No one that I have encountered."

He broke through the deadness of copied forms which keep shouting above everything that wants to get said today drowning out one man with the accumulated weight of a thousand voices in the past—re-establishing the tyrannies of the past, the very tyrannies we are seeking to diminish. The structure of the old is active, it says no! To everything in propaganda and poetry that wants to say yes. Whitman broke through that. That was basic and good.
Williams believed that the English verse tradition that shaped the poetry of his expatriate contemporaries, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, could no longer be an effective source of original poetry. Neither the forms nor the diction of English verse would enable an American poet to discover his authentic voice. The poet in Williams' view discovered his thought and the forms for expressing it through his attention to the local world of immediate experience. Yet Williams' belief in the importance of the immediate and direct experience of the senses did not lead him into simple-mindedness or a narrow provincialism, nor to a rejection of man's cultural heritage. Like Whitman, he did not reject the past but accepted it. In making it a part of himself, however, he did not remain governed by it. In this respect he differed from T. S. Eliot, for he could not accept Eliot's belief that the poet must "surrender" himself to the past in order to lay claim to the present. 4

The interest that Eliot and Pound took in tradition Williams saw as misplaced, and he thought their efforts to develop their skill and understanding of poetry through translations from the past defeated the purpose of poetry. Indeed, just as he conceived verse tradition to be a general barrier to original work, so he believed the
translations of Pound and Eliot to be a practical barrier to the discovery of their authentic voices.

Even when such "translators" compose, it is in the forms of the past and even when they deviate from the fixed classic forms it is nevertheless precisely the established and accepted work of the masters from which they constantly deviate, by which they are asserting their greatest originality. But at their best they are breathing thin air, air rebreathed from the past without political interval. Their work is bred androgynetically from the classics which father their every thought.

For Williams poetic form is vital and appropriate only in the time in which it originates. Once that time is past, the form is dead. To attempt to revive a form out of its time is an error, since the form is no longer a vital product of the historical moment. The purpose of poetry being not to sustain the poetic forms nor to preserve a continuity of forms but to sustain "Light, the imagination, and love" against the forces that would pull them down, the poet must discover the forms for his age that will make new the imagination. Tradition may provide a poet with the secure forms he needs to confront the chaos of the world, but the security of such forms is an illusion, since they do not enable him to capture in authentic terms the reality of the present but instead make it conform to a reality, formal and fixed, molded in and by the past. Once having gained this conviction, Williams could look at expatriates like Pound and Eliot and conclude:
being inclined to run off to London and Paris it is inexplicable that in every case they have forgotten or not known that the experience of native local contacts, which they take with them, is the only thing that can give that differentiated quality of presentation to their work which at first enriches their new sphere and later alone might carry them as creative artists in the continental hurly-burly.7

In his own case, Williams answered the question of "How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?" by this discovery of the importance of the local. This quotation, which I have appropriated from "The Wanderer," the poem in which he first addressed himself publicly to this theme, appears hopelessly banal out of context. The question, after all, is an inevitable one for the modern artist. What is important is not Williams' framing of the question but the answer he gave to it. That answer Williams formulated in his early enthusiasm for the poetry of Walt Whitman but the special emphasis and definition he gave to it came from the more potent source of his own experience. The security that Eliot and Pound found in tradition, Williams found through something which occurred once when I was about twenty, a sudden resignation to existence, a despair—if you wish to call it that, but a despair which made everything a unit and at the same time a part of myself. I suppose it might be called a sort of nameless religious experience. I resigned, I gave up. I decided there was nothing else in life for me but to work. I won't follow causes. I can't. The reason is that it seems so much more important to me that I am. Where shall one go? What shall one do? Things have no names for me and places have no
If Williams is correct in assigning this experience to his twentieth year, then more than a decade would intervene between the experience and his integration of it into his poetics. Williams became twenty during his freshman year at the University of Pennsylvania in 1902-1903. At that time, he already had a secret enthusiasm for Walt Whitman's poetry. He was writing Whitmanesque poems and had filled eighteen copybooks with these imitations which he would later describe as "pretty bad." Despite the number of these poems, Williams called this his Keats period, for in addition to his Whitmanesque lyrics he wrote for the public eye a host of Keatsian lyrics, including a long imitation of Endymion. The double life that Williams lived as a poet during this period may be found in his own account of his actions. When he wished to hear a critical opinion about his Keatsian poems, he sought out his brother's English professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Arlo Bates. His Whitmanesque poems, however, were withheld from public eyes, and only after he met Ezra Pound while both were freshmen at Penn and formed a budding friendship with him did he break his reserve and show his Whitmanesque poems to Pound. Later, Williams would
describe his Keatsian and Whitmanesque poetry of this period as immature—a judgment, he implies, invoked not merely against shallow youthfulness but also against the hopelessly derivative nature of the forms he was then employing. If his poetry was nothing more than imitation, then it was open to the same criticisms he would later make against the English verse tradition.

Williams only gradually broke free of this imitative phase in which, by his own admission, he was bound to the overt forms of Whitman and Keats. "The Wanderer," first published in 1914, is his declaration of independence as a poet, although in many ways it, too, is a derivative poem. The formal structure of the poem has affinities with his early Keatsian imitations, and essentially it is a narrative poem embodying forth a romantic quest. The specific theme of the poem, announced in the question "How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?", and answered by the protagonist's immersion in the filthy Passaic river, is Whitmanesque. For Whitman, "America" and "modernity" are synonyms. Obviously, the context of Williams' poem, which is profoundly American and contrasts markedly with the modernity found in Pound, and later Eliot, suggests a similar tie in Williams' thought. This is confirmed by the poem's resolution, for the stress that Williams places on immersion in the local
is to be found likewise in Whitman, although Whitman's idealistic formulation is foreign to Williams. There is, in addition, a direct echo of Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" in the opening to stanza two, for the protagonist of "The Wanderer" begins his voyage by setting out on a ferry. These echoes are of little importance beside the poem's argument: a testament of Williams' recognition of and descent into the local reality about him. This descent is never conceived in parochial or naive terms. Williams does not fall into Vachel Lindsay's error: Paterson is not Springfield, and the importance of the local in Williams' poetics is subtler and more profound than the parochial regionalism that led to The Golden Book of Springfield.

"The Wanderer" is a testament about the nature of the true poet and the path he must follow; it foreshadows the substance but contains none of the forms of the poetry to come. In rejecting his early poetry and going beyond the imitation of Keats and Whitman, Williams evolved an aesthetic that in its focus on the objective, concrete reality beyond the self draws upon important features in the thought of Whitman. This Whitmanic strain in Williams is to be found not only in Whitman's break with the old forms but in his democratic view of language, of the scope and nature of the poet's subject matter, and of the essential quiddity of things.
Williams' own views on language are to be found at least in part in Whitman's "Slang in America." There Whitman argues that the people through the creation of slang manifest the creative principle and the creative activity found in the poet. Therefore, all men are united in their potential ability to create in language, and the poet is distinguished only by his greater success in activating this impulse.\(^{15}\) Whitman's belief in the creativity of slang is especially significant for Williams' thought, because slang is the novel expression of the local and particular in language, and this lends support to Williams' own belief that "The local is the universal."

This belief in the local or the particular is not confined only to language. In the poetry of Whitman, as in the poetry of Williams, there is a renewal of interest in the quiddity of things. (There is a similar renewal in Keats. Part of the attraction of Whitman and Keats for Williams may be that the aesthetics of each are in important aspects more objectivist than that of their immediate contemporaries.)\(^{16}\) This interest is to be found in brief poems like "There Was a Child Went Forth," but is advanced most strongly through Whitman's development of his catalogue technique, which provides an important historical framework in which to comprehend Williams' own emergent technique. As James K. Feibleman has noted:
Some of Whitman's poems celebrate the break-up of the restrictive aspect of all philosophical systems qua restrictive systems. Hence the famous catalogues which Whitman put together;...where he insisted vigorously on the phenomenon of abundance, and so shows how the profusion of completeness, which was violated by philosophical systems in the name of consistency, may be enabled to return with fresh claims and energy.17

For Whitman the essential feature of the catalogues was their power of naming a host of particulars: "They call the catalogues names; but suppose they do? it is names; but what could be more poetic than names?"18 This naming dramatizes the nature of the abundant and the particular in apposition to the drive toward unity at the heart of the poem's argument and the poet's philosophy. But such an act of naming and cataloging only invokes the reality of the particular in the service of poetry; it is concerned not so much with the exploration of the nature of particulars as it is with the relatedness of particulars to the all-encompassing One. This relatedness of the world's particulars to some transcendent or immanent design died with Whitman, died with the nineteenth century, so far as Williams was concerned.

Without the philosophic structure of Whitman's romantic idealism, the catalogue technique becomes superfluous. Once Heaven becomes "frankly impossible" and the poet must proceed without a grand design, he finds himself in a world whose only truths are the realities of
distinct particulars. The transition in Williams' poetry from the imitative phase of the unpublished Whitmanesque poems and the romantic lyrics of Poems (1909) and The Tempers (1913) to his mature poems is a dramatic series of experiments by the poet as he grapples with the problems of shaping and bodying forth this vision. But stating it this way, the nature of Williams' development during this period is at once falsified and clarified—falsified by suggesting too tidily the pattern among groups of poems and the forces guiding the creation of particular poems; clarified by illuminating the extent to which his own efforts were independent of such contemporary movements as Imagism.

The early poems—for example, those in The Tempers—represent an amalgam of old and new. Poems like "First Praise" and "Homage" are set in the nineteenth century medieval diction that one also sees in the early Pound. The first lines of "First Praise"—"Lady of dusk-wood fastnesses,/ Thou art my Lady"—or the opening stanza of "Homage" seem part of that demoded diction that Williams attacks in Spring and All. The poems in this volume also are characterized by a reliance on end-stopped lines, on the over-working of devices like the exclamation, and on a host of classical figures—Apollo, Juno, Venus, Jason, Lesbia, to cite only a few—linked to the old style. On
the other hand, poems like the brief "Ad Infinitum" or
the longer "To Mark Anthony in Heaven," "Le Medecin Malgre
Lui," and "Portrait of a Lady" are more subtle and imagi-
native in their exploration of the local and particular,
and the poet gains this achievement only by ejecting the
artifice of the old style which stands between the reader
and the imaginative reality of the poem.

In _Al Que Quière_, published in 1917, the poems are
substantially different in substance, form, and style
from the poems in _The Tempers_, and especially different
from those which show the influence of Pound. In this
book, we "first hear Williams' individual voice";¹⁹ for
the first time, his poetry embodies the values he pre-
scribed for American verse and which he set down that
same year in "America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry."
American poetry "must be a new verse, in a new conscious
form. But even more than that it must be free in that it
is free to include all temperaments, all phases of our
environment, physical as well as spiritual, mental and
moral."²⁰ _Al Que Quière_ is the beginning of Williams'
exploration of "all phases of our environment."

Williams asserts his voice in the opening poem,
"Sub Terra," in which the speaker expresses his need for
the "grotesque fellows" he wants about him,²¹ and in the
poems which follow he examines the realities of everyday
life with a freshness unmatched in American poetry since Whitman. A later poem in *Al Que Quiere*, "Apology," enables us to see the nature of Williams' advance in technique while simultaneously dramatizing some of the tensions in his thought.

**Why do I write today?**

The beauty of
the terrible faces
of our nonentities
stirs me to it:

colored women
day workers--
old and experienced--
returning home at dusk
faces like
old Florentine oak.

Also

the set pieces
of your faces stir me--
leading citizens--
but not
in the same way.22

The technique of this poem is superbly effective. The conversational rhythm of the language, the precise yet natural diction, and the comedy intentionally generated by the double anti-climax at the end of the poem--first by the "Also" that introduces the "leading citizens" and then by the vague judgment, you "stir me... but not/ in the same way," counterpointed by the interplay of strong verb and weak noun--are each a mark of his development. But the anti-climactic structure of
"Apology" creates an opposition of the "colored women" and the "leading citizens" that masks their deeper identity. The speaker's personal statement, which affirms the beauty of the colored women over and above the set faces of the town's leading citizens, is nonetheless a single insight springing from the more terrifying and inclusive reality that the reader must confront as the speaker does in "the terrible faces/ of our nonentities."

Williams notes that in his poetry it is "From this time on you can see the struggle to get a form without deforming the language." The language of "Apology"—from the mundane though hardly banal opening question ("Why do I write today?") through the commonplace diction to the rhythms of natural speech—confirms his progress toward such an achievement. Moreover, "Apology" is no isolated instance in this volume. From "Sub Terra" on, in poems like "Spring Song," "Winter Sunset," the two poems entitled "Pastoral," and "Danse Russe," Williams' achievement stands out from his earlier verse. The most significant departure from these poems is the public addresses to the townspeople. These poems—"Gulls," "Tract," "Riposte"—, though they too are written in the rhythms of natural speech, are rhetorically awkward, for they presuppose an identification of the poet with his community that was no longer historically valid and hence
could no longer be convincingly exploited by the poet as a convention. This convention was soon abandoned, suggesting that Williams found it neither useful nor effective for his purposes. It had no place in his impulse toward a new form, measure, and language.

This impulse toward a new form and measure cannot, of course, be satisfied by returning to Whitman; he exists as a force by whose example the poet is impelled forward. The immediate liberating force shaping and defining the new forms of Williams' poetry is his conceptual theory of the poem—"the idea that the imagination is a natural force making possible the re-creation of physical objects in a different form—that is, in their names."24 On the one hand, the roots of this are to found in his early experience and in his reading of Whitman, as we have already traced out; on the other hand, the immediate impact upon his imagination during the early twenties of the Precisionist painters, especially Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler, and the cubist Juan Gris,25 confirmed the direction of his thinking and stimulated him to a clearer sense of form. This is especially true in the painting of Juan Gris, for it was Gris' theory of synthetic cubism that bears most directly on Williams' theory of the imagination and his view of the poem:
Whereas in the analytical stage [of cubism] the painter combined simultaneously various different visual impressions of the same object all reduced to a pattern of quasi-geometrical planes, Gris attempted to recreate the object by means of 'emblems' which signified the object represented. Although the emblems are not comprehensible without previous visual experiences, all the details of these experiences are not present in the picture but are combined and fused in the visual memory of the painter into forms which differ from the forms of the real objects we meet in the visible world. The picture becomes a new construction parallel to nature and emblematic of it. The element of distortion is therefore not present in Gris since his forms are analogues but not visual presentations of the forms of reality.

Gris began work toward such a theory at least as early as 1914 when he took up the extensive use of collage techniques in his art. Like Picasso and Braque, who had been working with collage since 1912, he was motivated in part by the desire to "underline the basic realism of [his] pictures and to carry to its logical extreme [his] repudiation of illusionistic devices." Williams' motivations are identical, for he too is rebelling against the "crude symbolism" of imagery tied to an illusionistic conception of reality, while his theory of the imagination resembles Gris' in its belief in the re-creation of the object through its name and in the analogical correspondence between poetic reality and natural reality.

Williams' theory of the imagination is given its first comprehensive treatment in Spring and All, published
in 1923. Indeed, J. Hillis Miller believes that in its original form, this book is "perhaps the most important single work by Williams." Just as Al Que Quiere marked a maturing of Williams' perceptions and an advance in his technique, so Spring and All marks a refinement of Williams' new technique, now set in a book that presents a unified conception of his aesthetic views. The argument of the book rests upon an understanding of Williams' theory of the imagination, the "key" to which is the idea that the imagination is a natural force making possible the re-creation of physical objects in a different form—that is, in their names. The object is a thing; it really exists. The poem is another real, existing thing. The two things echo one another at a distance. In a world where there is no divine center to control the production of meaning out of the juxtapositioning of differences, they create resemblance out of difference.

Spring and All is the first great bodying forth and championing of this theory in Williams' poetry. In it Williams defines the essentially plagiaristic activity of nature, which is confined to repeating itself season after season, so that each spring offers not only a return but an identical duplication of the previous spring. Nature must copy or imitate the pattern of spring. Those who would imitate nature Williams calls "THE TRADITIONALISTS OF PLAGIARISM," for they practice a "crude symbolism," which "is to associate emotions with natural phenomenon such as anger with lightning, flowers with love." "Such
work is empty," Williams insists, because it is superficial, crude, and imitative; it is not an awakening or renewal of light, the imagination, and love, but a submission of the mind to associations already dead and determinate.30

In Spring and All, for example, that first great lyric, "By the road to the contagious hospital," re-creates or re-enacts in different form the advent of spring.

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the

northeast--a cold wind. Beyond, the
waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees

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

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches--

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

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

One by one objects are defined--
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf
But now the stark dignity of entrance—Still, the profound change has come upon them: rooted they grip down and begin to awaken.

This poem is indeed an enactment. From the opening dramatic inrush of our perceptions at the scene by the road, to the slow emergence of the "twiggy stuff" taking form before our eyes, to the emergence--not until halfway through the poem--of an idea forced upon us by the structure of the poem--"sluggish/ dazed spring approaches"-- to the final hold these particulars take on our imagination and on the earth in the poem--"rooted they/ grip down and begin to awaken"-- we are in the grip of a new poetry. Just as the ideas in the poem emerge from the particulars of spring, so that there are indeed "no ideas but in things"; so, too, the reality of this "poetic spring" exists in counterpoint in Spring and All to the prose chapters (XIII and I) which precede and follow it and which describe and attack "THE TRADITIONALISTS OF PLAGIARISM." This is the reality Williams seeks to capture: the power of poetry to embrace the creativity of life through an act of the imagination, and not through the imitation of that life.

I have always had a feeling of identity with nature, but not assertive; I have always believed in keeping myself out of the picture. When I spoke of flowers, I was a flower, with all the perogatives of flowers, especially the right to come alive in the Spring.
This is the reality he continues to explore in all his great lyrics, in each of which the form, instead of being fixed, is fitted subtly to the subject before him, and language and form together achieve a poetry alive to the conditions of our life. In *Della Primavera Transportata Al Morale*, for example, Williams creates a series of poems that capture in poetic form the natural form of his subject—"The Trees," "The Wind Increases," "The Bird's Companion," "Rain," "The Botticellian Trees." In some of these, notably "The Wind Increases" and "Rain," there is an attempt to imitate the pattern of experience being described through the visual pattern on the page. "Rain" attempts this pattern closely:

she rains upon

the world

of spring
drips
so spreads
the words
far apart to let in
her love
And running in between
the drops.

the rain
is a kind physician.
But this spatial arrangement on the page, in which the punctuation and rhythm is conveyed not by the traditional marks but by the break from line to line and the eyes' consequent pause, would not be perceptible in the last poem of this group, "The Botticellian Treets," if we did not have it set against those poems which have gone before; for "The Botticellian Trees" is one of the great triumphs of the new form and brings together in one poem all of the themes we have been talking about:

The alphabet of
the trees

is fading in the
song of the leaves

the crossing
bars of the thin

letters that spelled
winter

and the cold
have been illumined

with
pointed green

by the rain and sun--
The strict simple

principles of
straight branches

are being modified
by pinched-out

ifs of color, devout
conditions

the smiles of love--

... ... ... ...
until the stripped
sentences
move as a woman's
limbs under cloth
and praise from secrecy
quick with desire
love's ascendency
in summer—
In summer the song
sings itself
above the muffled words—

The theme of "The Botticellian Trees," to "praise...
love's ascendency/ in summer," leads to a series of enact­ments that dramatize the constant interpenetration of art
and life. At the primary level of the poem, the sustained
conceit of the alphabet's transformation from letters into
sentences and finally into a song which "sings itself/
above the muffled words" suggests the relation of the
poem's subject to the poetic act of creation itself—for,
finally, what the reader takes from the poem is the song
(read: "feeling") which remains with him after the words
have become "muffled". On another level, perhaps the
primary one for Williams, the poem offers not a "crude
symbolism" about the forest giving rise to song, but a
re-enactment in the different form of the poem of nature's
act of creation. The row of asterisks marks the shift
from spring to summer as well as a change in the viewer's
perceptions. Just as the "alphabet" of bare limbs is lost
through the emergence of the "pinched-out/ ifs of color," so, too, the actuality of the physical structure of the trees is "muffled" by the leaves and by the sound of wind and leaves which draws our attention. On still another level, Williams expects us to see these as "Botticellian Trees." Here the column-like shape of the poem echoes the shape of Botticelli's trees. The Dutch landscape painters rooted their trees in the earth, and the trees we see in a painting by Hobbema or Van Ruisdahl seem to be reaching into the earth and sustained by the earth. The trees in Botticelli's art often extend in a column from top to bottom of his paintings, and they seem more a link between the earth and the sky than a phenomenon rooted in the earth. The title of the poem suggests, then, yet another dimension of the poem: like the Botticellian trees, which link earth and sky, the poem is a link--imaginative, vitalizing, and exact--between the particulars of this world (the alphabet; the bare trees) and our human feelings ("the song/ [which] sings itself/ above the muffled words"). The poet's means for forging such a link are the words of his language, and the language of this poem, like the language in all of Williams' mature work, is simple, vivid, and direct, full of the precise yet unexpected image ("pinched-out/ ifs of color"), and embodying those "stript sentences/ [which]
move as a woman's/limbs under cloth." This, above all else, is Williams' contribution to the poetry of our time.

Williams did not cease, however, to develop as a poet after 1932. Beyond Spring and All, The Descent to Winter, and Della Primavera Transportata Al Morale, which include many of his major achievements in the lyric form, Williams was still to write his long poem, Paterson, and three major volumes of lyrics, The Desert Music (1954), Journey to Love (1955), and Pictures from Brueghel (1963). In these works Williams often goes beyond the goals he set himself earlier. No longer, for example, is he so rigorously objective in his treatment of experience. No longer does he conceive of the brief lyric as an adequate vehicle for all that he would like to do.

On this point, Paterson is the major departure. In Paterson Williams attempts to go beyond his earlier work and to write a long poem upon the constant theme of all his poetry: man's need to embrace and experience the local. Once Williams goes beyond the short lyric, however, he must face and acknowledge problems that radically effect what he can compose and how he can compose it. Some solution to these problems is of crucial importance to the success of Paterson, and yet the evidence of the poem and Williams' commentary upon it indicate that he did not
resolve the deficiencies of his method, perhaps because he could not acknowledge the contradictions inherent in his approach to the long poem. In any event, Paterson is at best only a partial success.

Williams altered the basic pattern of Paterson during his work on the poem, and these changes document his changing interests. Williams originally conceived the poem in four parts:

Part One introduces the elemental character of the place. The Second Part comprises the modern replicas. Three will seek a language— to make them vocal, and Four, the river below the falls, will be reminiscent of episodes—all that any one man may achieve in a lifetime. 35

The last version of Paterson has five complete parts and portions of a sixth, but the central preoccupation of the poem has moved more and more to the poet's search for a language, and Paterson the man-city is dominated more and more by the poet's persona. This shift represents a return to interests that were always primary for Williams; but, while such a shift is to be expected over the course of a poet's life, the effect that it has upon the integrity and unity of Paterson must be acknowledged.

It is not enough to argue, as Joel Conarroe does, that "Paterson is a major work of art by virtue of what it is, and not primarily because of what it says or means." Conarroe appears to mix a philosophical
question ("What is the aesthetic value of the poem?") and an historical question ("What grounds account for its importance to literary history?") for the purpose of deciding the former in terms of the latter. Conarroe's article is significant, nevertheless, because it succinctly develops the major resemblances that Paterson bears to Leaves of Grass, The Bridge, The Cantos, and The Waste Land, resemblances examined at considerably greater length in Gordon K. Grigsby's study of the modern long poem. Conarroe points out that "Song of Myself and Paterson are intensely personal records of an empathic sensibility's confrontation with all living things"; that Paterson, like The Bridge, has "a central image that suggests the remarkable achievement of man"; that Paterson resembles The Waste Land in tone as it contrasts in meaning; and, finally, that Paterson, like The Cantos, is the biography in installments of a romantic mind and is likewise "developed in a loose pattern of counterpoint and repetition." However, a view of the romantic mind conducted on the installment plan is inherently subject to diffusion, irrelevancies, and eventual if not continual obscurantism, because the poet is free to exercise all of the privileges and few of the powers of the gods he would emulate. In Spring and All Williams had discovered an effective balance
between prose and poetry, between counterpoint and repetition, between jumbled chronology and the progress of his argument because the focus of Spring and All is the simultaneous renewal of nature and the imagination in Spring. The larger scope of Paterson brought with it the necessity of providing the means for ordering the poem beyond a simple correspondence between creativity in nature and creativity in the imagination, a necessity which Williams resolved in his invention of the man-city, Paterson.

But Paterson the man-city is more than an image, he is a rhetorical figure for unifying disparate particulars and giving them "profundity." At least, Williams argues this in his autobiography in chapter 58, "The Poem Paterson." Williams distinguishes in this chapter between the thinker, who "Tries to capture the poem for his purpose, using his 'thought' as the net to put his thoughts into," and the poet, who apprehends "no ideas but in things." The thinker is "Absurd," for in the end he can create only "a philosophical solecism," whereas the poet may embrace the local and achieve through that a more intimate knowledge of reality. In writing Paterson, however, Williams sought "to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about me. The longer I lived in my place, among the details of my life, I realized that
these isolated observations and experiences needed pulling together to gain 'profundity.' "But Williams' conclusion—"That a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody—if imaginatively conceived"—creates a justification not for an image but for a metaphor or sustained conceit. As a metaphor, Paterson is imposed upon experience to give it order; it is not an order discovered in experience. In order to escape the tyranny of ideas, Williams fails to consider Paterson the man-city as an idea (and not a distinct particular) which exerts some control over the relations he purports to discover in the local.

Williams' conception of the man-city results indirectly in the creation within the poem of a number of tensions between the particulars he observes and the design in which he places them. These cannot be resolved except by an appeal to ideas; instead of such an exploration, however, the poet turns from the local and his investigation of a sense of place to the personal and his justification of the role of the imagination. Williams chose to develop Paterson by means of thematic and spatial form—by means, in other words, of collage technique and "loose patterns of counterpoint and repetition"—but Paterson, like The Cantos, is too large and open a work
for those techniques alone to sustain and unify the aesthetic design the writer intended or sought for his work. The growing dominance in Paterson, especially in book V, of the poet's persona and of his efforts to justify the role of the imagination embraces more than a return to Williams' abiding interests, it suggests that Williams found the resolution of his tensions, if not the solution to his structural problems, in a return to the familiar and intimate voice of the poet examining his art and his relations to the local. The metamorphosis and impersonation of voices that Williams assumed in the early sections of Paterson (which have their analogues in The Cantos) are foreign to Williams' art, just as the metaphor of the man-city traduces Williams' original conception of the local. In place of a sea of distinct particulars each reclaimed by a poem, this metaphor created a "profundity" that falsifies the local.

Williams' activity during the composition of Paterson suggests a dangerous quest after such "profundity." There is, for example, his sudden interest in economics, which he examines in book IV of Paterson. Even more important for his art, his view of Whitman during the early fifties changes substantially in tone if not in substance. His long standing praise of Whitman for breaking with the forms of the past is now qualified. Whitman "has (for me) only one meaning and that virtually a negative
one" he wrote to Henry Wells [April 12, 1950]. Three years later he would tell Richard Eberhart: "Whitman with his so-called free verse was wrong: there can be no absolute freedom in verse. You must have a measure..." And, in 1955, writing to John Thirlwall, he would continue: "Witlessly, but taking his cue out of the air, Whitman was in his so-called free verse only initiating a new measure."41 Williams, who by this time was himself looking for a new measure (which he would announce to the world in his theory of the variable foot), and who once had welcomed the freedom Whitman had given him, seems almost bitter that Whitman had not provided suitable answers to this problem of measure.

This pursuit of a new measure does, however, represent a return to Williams' primary interest in American speech and a language of particulars. Moreover, it also embodies a shift in his interests away from a social view of art. Writing to Henry Wells in 1950, Williams argued:

The poem to me (until I go broke) is an attempt, an experiment, a failing experiment, toward assertion with broken means but an assertion, always, of a new and total culture, the lifting of an environment to expression. Thus it is social, the poem is a social instrument—accepted or not accepted seems to be of no material importance.42

This letter falls between the publication of book III and book IV of Paterson, and in it we see the tension in Williams' thought between art (the "failing experiment,"
the "broken means") and substance (the need to assert a "new and total culture," to make poetry "social"). The later poems of Williams, collected in Pictures From Brueghel and Other Poems, reinterpret the quest for a "total culture" in terms of "means" that are no longer "broken." In these poems the reader's attention is held not by Williams' use of art as a "social instrument" or by his experiments with the variable foot but by his focus upon the particulars of his life, by his exploration of moods of tranquility, reminiscence, and meditation, and by his subtle use of the rhythms of American speech. Above all, these poems are unified and, in general, highly successful achievements in lyric form.

In Journey to Love (1955), for example, Williams achieves success after success, form "The Ivy Crown," "The Pink Locust," and "Shadows," to "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower." Williams success in these poems is the product not of a new measure but of a new mood. Even when he adopts the persona of a character other than the poet, he is not exploring character at all, but mood and voice. "The Lady Speaks" offers but one example of this:

A storm raged among the live oaks
while my husband and I
sat in the semi-dark
listening!
We watched from the windows,
the lights off,
saw the moss
whipped upright.
by the wind's force.
Two candles we had lit
side by side
before us
so solidly had our house been built
kept their tall flames
unmoved.
May it be so
when a storm sends the moss
whipping
back and forth
upright
above my head
like flames in the final
fury. 

Here the character of the woman is not developed at all, instead the poem fixes upon a particular moment as she meditates. This meditative quality is achieved through the stillness of the scene within the house and through the calm embodied in the sound pattern of sibilant s's, liquid l's and w's, and long o's and a's. Indeed, it is this sound pattern and the subtle rhythms of Williams' line that tame the fury outside.

"Shadows," another poem in Journey to Love, demonstrates even better the progress and complexity of Williams' late poetry. "Shadows" is composed of two roughly equal parts—the first dramatizing a world of particulars, the second dramatizing the world of the imagination. In the first part, the reader encounters the shadow world of night and a kaleidoscope of images depicting the fragmented chaos of the real world. These images are held together by the eye of the poem's persona,
who is himself an inseparable part of the reality he perceives. This is brought out by the moment of recognition these images force upon him:

A man looking out,
seeing the shadows—
it is himself
that can be painlessly amputated
by a mere shifting
of the stars.
A comfort so easily not to be
and to be at once one
with every man. 44

The sense of finitude and isolation communicated by this collage of images in part one of "Shadows" does not occasion feelings of loneliness or despair; instead the knowledge of man's relation to the natural that we find here is the source of a special comfort, a communion with all men.

The second part of "Shadows" dramatizes the world of the imagination, but this section also includes the reality that has gone before, since that reality is a necessary stimulus for the poet's imagination. "Ripped from the concept of our lives/and from all concept," all men nonetheless experience two worlds,

one of which we share with the rose in bloom
and one,
by far the greater,
with the past,
the world of memory,
the silly world of history,
the world
of the imagination. 45
Granted, then, that we walk between these two worlds, we must seek among them for the world that would sustain the imagination. That world is to be found not in concepts or ideas, nor in an accompanying introspection ("the little/ central hole/ of the eye itself/ into which/ we dare not stare too hard/ or we are lost."), but in the particulars of our lives and the moment of their occurrence.

... only the beasts and trees, crystals with their refractive surfaces and rotting things to stir our wonder.

... "The instant

trivial as it is is all we have unless—unless

things the imagination feeds upon, the scent of the rose, startle us anew. 46

"Shadows" offers the reader a coda on Williams' themes and a restatement of Williams' aesthetic; it is not an advance over what he had previously done so much as an integration and harmonizing of it. Moreover, Williams placed this poem immediately before "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" in Journey to Love. "Shadows" offers a broader—a more general statement—of the themes he would develop intimately in "Asphodel." In that poem we have the same pairing of themes: the chaos and destruction contained in the larger world about us, and the
affirming light of the imagination reaching out from within. But Williams' imagination triumphantly turns the primary symbol of disaster, the atom bomb, into an affirmation of man's perennial condition and of the hope he can achieve.

Inseparable from the fire
its light
uses precedence over it.

Then follows
what we have dreaded--
but it can never
overcome what has gone before.
In the hugh gap
between the flash
and the thunderstroke
spring has come in
or a deep snow fallen.

Call it old age.
In that stretch
we have lived to see
a colt kick up its heels.
Do not hasten
laugh and play
in an eternity
the heat will not overtake the light.
That's sure.

That gels the bomb,
permitting
that the mind contain it. 47

But "Asphodel" is not about the bomb, it is about love and the imagination as perceived by the poet approaching death. The imagination, which may rescue the present from the bomb by showing man how he has always lived "between the flash/ and the thunderstroke," so that fear of destruction and death is inevitable unless it is first transformed by the imagination, may also rescue the past by returning the love and harmony to be found in it to
the present, so that the poet recalling his wedding embraces no sentimental conceit when he claims:

after a lifetime,  

it is as if  

a sweet-scented flower  

were poised  

and for me did open.  

Asphodel has no odor  

save to the imagination  

but it too celebrates the light.  

It is late  

but an odor as from our wedding has revived for me  

and begun again to penetrate into all crevices of my world. 48

In his celebration of old age and, within it, of the enduring power of love not merely to persist but to prevail, Williams, more than in his previous poetry, integrated the outer world of distinct particulars and the inner life of the mind and imagination. He did so not by creating a new measure but by opening up the resources of rhythm and sound already to be found in his poems as early as Al_Que_Quiere (1917). But tone and mood are now primarily meditative; the voice that the reader hears in these poems is more intimate, for it is an expression of the poet's own inward turning to the intimate history of his own life. The poems in Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems emerge as a triumph because they represent the only way in which Williams could repair the "broken means" of his art: by returning to the ground on which all his
knowledge rested, the particulars of his life, now no longer confined to a present moment but free to be recalled and revivify those moments received into his memory.

By his uncompromising investigation of the path Whitman had begun, Williams fostered a significant line of post-war poets. Yet of the three major poets we have examined—Pound, Crane, and Williams—Williams pursued what in the abstract must appear the narrower course. He clearly distinguished Whitman's romantic ideas, which he considered outmoded and irrelevant, from his explorations of form. But the rigor of the path he followed in the end proved to be more liberating for his own art and most rewarding for the poets who were later influenced by his work. This concentration upon form, this focus upon the rhythms of American speech as they were embodied in form or aided in the creation of form, set Williams off from his contemporaries.

Without Williams, the focus upon the language of everyday speech that characterizes the work of Robert Creeley, William Everson, Kenneth Patchen, Gary Snyder, and Allen Ginsberg would have been much more difficult. Moreover, in pursuing his conception of language, Williams achieved a particular kind of poetry that celebrated
the objects of this world apart from the moral tropes or *sententia* that had become attached by custom to them. His poems became a celebration of the local, which is the universal. It is this affirmation of the immediate and the local which has brought poetry back from the isolating towers of symbol and myth in which Pound and Eliot strove to cloak it.
Chapter V: Notes


3. SE, p. 218.


7. SE, p. 35.

8. The Collected Earlier Poems (New York: New Directions, 1938), p. 3. Hereinafter referred to as CEP.


11. IWWP, pp. 4-5.

12. See in addition to IWWP on this point, SL, p. 195.

13. The Egoist 1, no. 6 (March 16, 1914), 109-111.


16. This objectivism is to be found in Keats' theory of "negative capability" and in his view of Shakespeare as the ideal artist who abandons his personality in order to render objectively the world of experience. Keats' theory of the impersonal artist is examined in relation to the theories of his contemporaries by Earl K. Wasserman in "The English Romantics: The Grounds of Knowledge," *SR* 4 (Autumn, 1964), 17-34. Williams' theory of the artist parallels Keats' in his emphasis on impersonality--(see p. 4)--and even in his view of Shakespeare--(see *Spring and All* and *The Descent to Winter*, reprinted in *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1970), pp. 121, 258-259.


21. *CEP*, p. 117.

22. *CEP*, p. 131.


24. J. Hillis Miller, "Williams' *Spring and All* and the Progress of Poetry," *Daedalus* (Spring, 1970), 423.


27. Ibid.


29. Ibid., p. 423.


31. Ibid., pp. 95-96.

32. IWWP, p. 21.

33. CEP, p. 75.

34. CEP, pp. 80-81.


38. Conarroe, pp. 50-51.


40. Paterson, p. 3.

41. SL, pp. 287, 321, 332.

42. SL, p. 286.

43. PB, p. 134.

44. PB, pp. 150-151.

45. PB, p. 151.

46. PB, p. 152.

47. PB, pp. 178-179.

48. PB, p. 182.
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