

*“Poor Doc, Nobody Wants
His Life or His Verses”*

W. C. Williams and
The New Masses

Writing from London in 1917, T. S. Eliot dismissed a critic’s notion that *Leaves of Grass* might have influenced Ezra Pound, and used the occasion to attack free verse. Although not yet thirty and a resident of England for less than ten years, Eliot was already a parody of the “tory and a high church and state man” that Whitman warned Americans about in an essay on Sir Walter Scott. Eliot’s position was absolute: “*Vers libre* does not exist. . . . [I]t is a battle-cry of freedom, and there is no freedom in art” (32).

Also writing from London, Pound took a more balanced position:

I think one should write *vers libre* only when one “must,” that is to say, only when the “thing” builds up a rhythm more beautiful than that of set metres, or more real, more a part of the emotion of the “thing,” more germane, intimate, interpretative than the measure of regular accentual verse; a rhythm which discontents one with set iambic or set anapaestic. (12)

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fine stuff to read and enjoy” (4), but several lines later changed his mind and accused Eliot of “timorously reverting to popular forms” (4). Though he concedes the point about no art being truly free, even calls free verse a “misnomer,” he suddenly reverses field on that too:

And yet American verse of today must have a certain quality of freedom, must be “free verse” in a sense. It must be 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. It must be truly democratic, truly free for all. (2)

This inclusive democratic faith distinguishes him from most leading poets of his generation, and provides the continuing basis of his antipathy to Eliot in particular. As is clear from this early essay, Williams always paid attention to the publications of Eliot, Stevens, Pound, and especially Marianne Moore. But to consider him in that company limits and distorts our view. Williams chose to stand beside another sort of poet. He expressed it best in 1946, after reading Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s *The Age of Jackson*, and being particularly impressed by Schlesinger’s chapters on Jacksonian democracy as intellectual movement and on its connection to literature. At last he found the words to clarify the difference between his aesthetic and that of his old friend and nemesis Pound. Williams described Pound’s as the “classic attitude,” that the greatness of the past must be translated into present terms by poets in intimate contact with the Great Minds. But Williams insists there is another source of inspiration,

the present, from the hurly-burly of political encounters which determine or may determine it, direct. This is definitely not the academic approach to literature. It is diametrically opposed to the mind to mind fertilization of the classical concept. Whereas the academic approach may speak *about* us always in the forms of

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the past or their present day analogues, the direct approach is the spectacle of our lives today, raised if possible to the quality of great expression by the invention of poetry.

. . . The forms of the past, no matter how cultivated, will inevitably carry over from the past much of the social, political and economic complexion of the past. And I insist that those who cling basically to those forms wish in their hearts for political, social and economic autocracy. They think in terms of the direct descent of great minds, they do not think in terms of genius arising from great movements of the people—or the degeneracy of the people, as known in the past. (“Letter to an Australian Editor,” 10)

For Williams, poetic invention cannot be disentangled from the circumstances of its generation. Like Whitman, he sees its genius “arising from great movements of the people.” Though he insists that the poet is *not* a politician, but an artist, “the poet’s very life but also his forms originate in the political, social and economic maelstrom on which he rides” (11). The difficulty and precision of the distinction he draws between the poet who rides the maelstrom and the poet who becomes a politician may be assessed by the paths of his friends, most of whom either removed themselves to an aestheticism apart from the fray, or succumbed to the brutalities of partisan doxy.

The last half of “America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry” is given entirely to a survey of the poetry magazines of the day. Thirteen are named and assessed by the sorts of poetry they publish. Though his personal fondness for Pound is evident, even in 1917 Williams distances himself from Pound’s proselytizing. As he casts about the poetic landscape, he approves wholly only Marianne Moore and Carl Sandburg. The magazines *Poetry*, *Soil*, *Others*, and *Seven Arts* receive praise, but except for *Others* (to which Williams contributed poems and money) that praise is qualified. He describes *Seven Arts* as “made for middle-aged, semi-brave revolutionists who have fixed their

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canons of taste beyond question” (4), and *Poetry* as “so amiable that it has made amiability almost a virtue” (3). About *The Masses: A Monthly Magazine Devoted to the Interests of the Working People*, he wrote, “*The Masses* cares little for poetry unless it has some beer stanches upon it” (4).

Paul Mariani’s excellent biography of Williams might easily have been subtitled “A career in the little magazines.” Has the publishing history of any other canonized poet of the twentieth century been so widely or intensely involved with novice and ephemeral publishers? In his *Autobiography*, Williams wrote,

The little magazine is something I have always fostered; for without it, I myself would have been early silenced. To me it is one magazine, not several. It is a continuous magazine, the only one I know with an absolute freedom of editorial policy and a succession of proprietorships that follows a democratic rule. There is absolutely no dominating policy permitting anyone to dictate anything. . . . I have wanted to see established some central or sectional agency which would recognize, and where possible, support little magazines. I was wrong. It must be a person who does it, a person, a fallible person, subject to devotions and accidents. (266)

At present “outsider art” is much discussed, but seldom has anyone stated the case for it as lucidly as Williams. In his life, he moved from magazine to magazine, group to group, often publishing simultaneously in magazines at contrary ends of the political and social spectrum. Part of this owed to his irritable restlessness, part to his generous open nature, part to his inability to find sufficient outlets for his copious production. But part must also owe to Williams’s aesthetic faith, which consisted largely of his commitment to the “hurly-burly” of the democratic maelstrom.

During the Jazz Age (and Prohibition), it was relatively easy

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for Williams to maintain the progressive modernist position he attributes to Whitman, Sandburg, and Moore, and remain comfortable among the contributors of almost any magazine that would have him. During that time of individual liberation and relative prosperity, avant-garde art and leftist politics coexisted happily in America’s little magazines, where experiments with poetic line or bohemian gestures were deliciously naughty but unthreatening. As a doctor whose practice tended mostly to working-class and immigrant families, Williams witnessed firsthand the widening gap between the country’s rich and poor, a gap obscured for many writers by the prosperity of the era. But as the events in Communist Russia spurred a repressive domestic backlash, Williams championed the poor and persecuted almost as ardently as he did modernism. Yet he was also a prosperous professional and family man from the suburbs, accustomed to comforts that included extended trips to Europe, where he sent his children to school. It’s not surprising to discover that he worked on behalf of the Democratic Party in his town and served on his local school board. Unlike many of his alienated peers, Williams practiced politics on the level at which most decisions that directly affect the neighborhood are made.

In 1926 he published a story titled “The Five Dollar Guy” in *New Masses*, the revived version of the magazine that was interested only in poetry with “some beer stench upon it.” A woman patient had told him a story about the manager of the local oil business, who so regularly propositioned the neighborhood’s working-class housewives that they referred to him as “the five dollar guy.” When Williams submitted this class-conscious story to *New Masses*, a magazine that called, “Sit down, you bricklayers, miners, dishwashers, clothing workers, harvest hands, cooks, brakemen, and stone-cutters . . . Write us the truth—it is more interesting than most fiction” (Klein, 78), he gave them too much truth. He had forgotten to change the name of the oil business and was sued for fifteen thousand dollars,

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which at that time amounted to three years of his income. For a nerve-wracking few months, Williams worried that the case would go to trial, where an adroit lawyer for the plaintiff might easily sway jurors by exploiting the fact that the story appeared in a Communist magazine! He eagerly settled the suit for five thousand dollars and an agreement never to publish the story again. Fortunately, that was also the year that Marianne Moore obtained for him the Dial Award, a prize of two thousand dollars that helped him to defray his expenses.

Had it not been suppressed by the libel suit, “The Five Dollar Guy” would have fit nicely among the short stories in *The Knife of the Times*, published in 1932. About them, Williams told Edith Heal,

I was impressed by the picture of the times, depression years, the plight of the poor. I felt it very vividly. I felt furious at the country for its lack of progressive ideas. I felt as if I were a radical without being a radical. The plight of the poor in a rich country, I wrote it down as I saw it. The times—that was the knife that was killing them. (*I Wanted to Write a Poem*, 49)

As depression-era politics became increasingly polarized, Williams’s furious radical sympathies inspired him to print often in *New Masses* and other Communist or fellow-traveling magazines, such as Jack Conroy’s *Anvil*, which eventually became the *Partisan Review*. But “without being a radical,” his position in these magazines was tenuous and not entirely welcome. The editors and many other contributors were struggling to define a territory for proletarian art, and as that territory became more contested, the political hard-liners reacted vehemently against avant-garde modernism. Williams was among those caught in the middle, trying to reconcile what he considered a progressive, pragmatic poetics with progressive, pragmatic politics.

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On the first page of the October 1930 “John Reed” issue of *New Masses*, Mike Gold printed a letter addressed to him by Ezra Pound defending Mussolini’s “co-operative state” from the “bawling” of the proletariat and attacking the “damnable features of Xtianity [that] still show their hebrew origins.” After acknowledging Pound as “a writer’s writer; one of those craftsmen and pioneers because of whose restless experiments lesser men often rise to popularity,” Gold went on at length to challenge Pound, Eliot, and the other American literary exiles who had embraced Fascism. Williams liked this issue so much that he responded immediately with a contribution to the magazine and a note that ended, “I’m for you, I’ll help as I can. I’d like to see you [the magazine] live. And here’s to the light, from wherever it may come.” Characteristically, however, Williams also admitted his reservations.

The only thing is, what the hell? I feel in a false position. How can I be a Communist, being what I am. Poetry is the thing which has the hardest hold on me in my daily experiences. But I cannot, without an impossible wrench of my understanding, turn it into a force directed toward one end, Vote the Communist Ticket, or work for the world revolution. There are too many difficulties, unresolved difficulties in my way. I can however see the monumental blockwit of social injustice surrounding me on every side. But why they arise, God only knows. But in any case they are there and I would give my life freely if I could right them. But who the hell wants my life? Nobody as far as I can see. They don’t even want my verse, which is of more importance.

It was a strange chord to strike in a magazine committed to proletarian art. Williams’s letter was printed with others that began, “Cut out those highbrow articles on Humanism and other intellectual junk”; “Cut your book section in half. Give us more on the class struggle”; and “I wish there were more proletarian

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fiction.” The editors published Williams’s letter under the mocking title “Poor Doc, Nobody Wants His Life or His Verses.”

Between 1932 and 1942, in addition to continuing his busy medical practice, Williams published three books of poems, two books of stories, an opera libretto, and the novel *White Mule*. He collaborated with Fred R. Miller on an unfinished novel about an African American jazz musician, and with Nathanael West edited several numbers of the revived magazine *Contact*. He also found time to read and review a revealing succession of younger poets, among them George Oppen, Muriel Rukeyser, Sol Funaroff, Norman MacLeod, Kenneth Patchen, and Marcia Nardi. Though Funaroff, MacLeod, and Nardi no longer are as widely read as Oppen, Rukeyser, and Patchen, there is a coherence about this group of poets and the work they were writing during that decade that illustrates and reinforces persistent thematic and formal concerns in William’s own poems and fiction. Some were Communists, some aggressively working-class. The poetry of all of them shone a hard light on the inequities of American capitalism.

More surprising, however, was the doctor’s enthusiasm for a Missouri farmhand poet named H. H. Lewis, about whom he wrote three essays in two years. The last of these he deemed so important that he was willing to compromise his own principles about freedom of association in order to get it published.

Between 1930 and 1935 Lewis published four “cheaply printed, paper-covered” pamphlets of poetry that sold for ten cents each and were advertised regularly in the *New Masses*. Williams was enamored of the format, claiming that “Given cheap books—if the purveying of them can be solved also—there will be in fact a renaissance” (Breslin, 76). The titles express forcefully the tone and substance of Lewis’s political commitment: *Red Renaissance*, *Thinking of Russia*, *Salvation*, and *Road to*

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Utterly. Williams’s first review of them, published in *Poetry*, concluded:

This isn’t Auden or Spender. This is a Missouri farmhand, first cousin to a mule, at one dollar a day. If Lewis’ subject matter should distress some readers, it’s about time they learned what makes their fruits and vegetables come to ripeness for them—and what kind of thoughts their cultivation breeds in a man of revolutionary inheritance. (*Something to Say*, 69)

Perhaps Williams felt he was not given sufficient space in *Poetry* to finish with Lewis; perhaps he felt that magazine the wrong venue for his review. For he was intent on publishing a longer review of the pamphlets in the *New Masses*. But Williams also published in the *Partisan Review*, and in 1936 the magazines were locked in Trotskyite-Stalinist combat, with neither interested in a united front. The editors at the *New Masses*, supporters of Stalin’s Russia, told Williams that he could no longer publish with them if he continued to publish in the *Partisan Review*. Williams was so eager to publish his essay on Lewis with the former that he didn’t hesitate. He informed the *PR* editors of the ultimatum and admitted he had decided to stick with the *New Masses*.

What did Williams so admire in H. H. Lewis? First there was the dime format, which he considered an innovation in poetry publishing. He was also impressed by the “one positive thing” Lewis had learned from the modernism of the first quarter of the century, his use of dialect. Lewis wrote with the “confidence and the natural ease of a native speaking his own language as he hears it spoken in his own place and day” (*Something to Say*, 80). Williams praised Lewis’s “direct interest” in current politics. “He speaks directly, and so automatically does away with the putrescence of symbolism with which the first quarter of the century was cursed” (81). And he seemed pleased to declare that “there is here no question of high art.” He admitted the deriva-

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tive nature of Lewis's forms, copied from "anything from Gray to Whitman, including the books of limericks, nursery rhymes, popular songs, Poe—anything you please, even back to Shakespeare—he'll borrow the form and turn it to his own purpose" (80). He noted that the "four booklets show little or no progress in form. . . . If anything, I think the earlier ones are better, more forthright, cruder with a more patently outraged conscience. Lewis has let go, seeming to be repeating himself" (82).

This stern judgment of Lewis's formal laxity is characteristic. The other reviews of young poets that Williams wrote during this time (cf. Oppen, Rukeyser, or Funaroff) continually address formal difficulties, which makes Williams's willingness to overlook Lewis's redundant or derivative form the more startling. Suddenly and anomalously, Williams turns from the formal concerns of the contemporary poem to a more pressing poetic (and political) matter.

Without saying that Lewis is important as a poet, which is a point that will have to be very carefully considered before a proper opinion can be arrived at, I will say that he is tremendously important in the United States as an instigator to thought about what poetry can and cannot do to us today. He speaks in no uncertain terms. He speaks with fervor, a revolutionary singleness and intensity of purpose, a clearly expressed content. He knows what he wants to say; he is convinced of its importance to a fanatical degree. . . . There is a lock, stock, and barrel identity between Lewis today, fighting to free himself from a class enslavement which torments his body with lice and cow dung, and the persecuted colonist of early American tradition. (77)

Lewis's poems were "pure American revolutionary stuff. . . . There is no one that as directly expresses the mind of the United States as Lewis does now." But when it came to supporting these claims with evidence, this is what Williams offers as a

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moment when “the charge [of Lewis’s poems] is so great that it lifts the commonplace to lyric achievement”:

Russia, Russia, righting wrong
Russia, Russia, Russia!
That unified one sovereign throng,
That hundred and sixty million strong,—
Russia!
America’s loud EXAMPLE-SONG,
Russia, Russia, Russia!

Unable to imagine the circumstances that would convince anyone of these verses, I tracked down copies of Lewis’s pamphlets; these lines were not untypical. Nor were these, about which Williams said that the poet’s “convictions have forced him to write well”:

I’ll say,
Phew, for Chrissake,
The brains of the “Brain Trust,” that’s it,
Rrrrrrotten!

Pity the poor American donkey,
Pity the poor American farmhand,
The one nervously zigzagging,
The other compelled to jerk him back to the row,
Plowing under cotton!
Such an “asinine”
Torturing
Strain on the sound sense of both!

(Something to Say, 81)

To end the *New Masses* essay, Williams revised the final paragraph of the *Poetry* essay quoted above. The later version reads:

If Lewis’ subject matter should distress some readers, it’s about time they learned what makes their fruit and vegetables grow for

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them, what kind of thoughts their cultivation breeds in a man, and, finally, what the meaning of poetry is. (82)

In the years that Williams was championing H. H. Lewis, his old friend Ezra Pound was writing *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*. They were contesting heritage to the American revolutionary spirit—Williams found it embodied in a Missouri farmhand who wrote communist doggerel, Pound in Il Duce, the “Boss” of Fascist Italy. It was a time when many felt they had to choose sides between laborer or boss. Williams believed that Lewis had “one great strength without which there can be no art at all—the sincerity of belief in his own songs, in their value, and in their power to penetrate to the very bones of the listeners.” Maybe Pound believed the same about Mussolini. Sincerity is a virtue that cries for context.

In *Writing the Radical Center: William Carlos Williams, John Dewey, and American Cultural Politics*, John Beck persuasively argues that Williams’s political position during this period resembled the philosopher’s. Though opposed to the injustices of industrial capitalism, their faith in civil liberties and the individual imagination made both men wary of Communism. Given, however, the particular issues and battles of the era, they often found themselves in sympathy with Communist figures and positions. Beck concludes that, like other American liberals such as Dewey, Herbert Croly, or Randolph Bourne, Williams’s commitment to a sense of community prevented him from developing any clear analysis of or position on class conflict. Ultimately, he was an ameliorist, not a revolutionary.

Though Williams wrote again for the *New Masses* and was ardently anti-Franco during the Spanish Civil War, after the Lewis articles his writings move back toward an emphasis on technique. It is not a political turning, as *The Wedge* and “The Pink Church” later demonstrate, but an aesthetic distancing, as if the outbreak of war moves him to emphasize tolerance and

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inclusion instead of partisan rigor. By 1940 he wrote in a letter to *Furioso*:

Pound says that everything he’s written has economic implications. Everything (nearly) that Genevieve Taggard writes says “better read Marx.” In other words most of the modern poets *think* they’re pointing toward something which they believe is right. And I want to know if they’ve picked the right medium. (*Something to Say*, 105)