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UNIT 28 WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS (1883-1963)

Structure

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28.0 OBJECTIVES

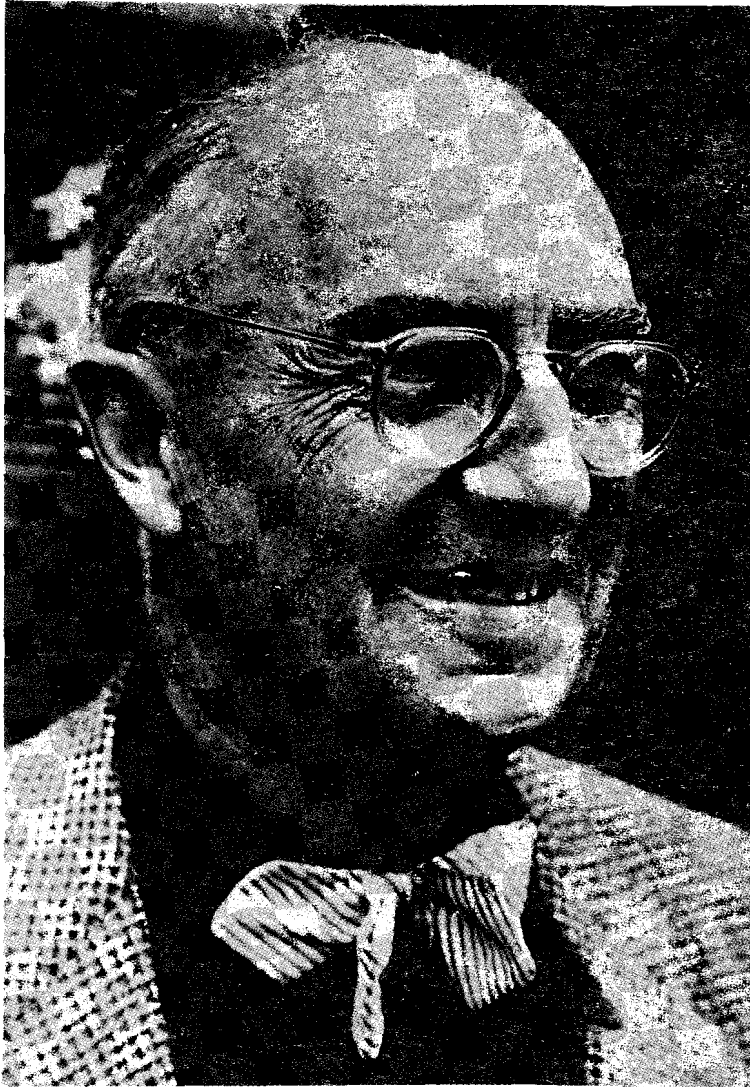
In this unit we study the life and works of the poet William Carlos Williams and his poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" in detail. Williams was an oppositional voice in modern poetry--he agreed with many of the modern poets' endeavours (such as imagism) but was also fiercely critical of the expatriate poets. He was interested in developing a truly robust American voice and idiom in modern poetry. He was a strong influence on the movement called objectivism. He did a great deal to support new talent in American poetry in his lifetime.

28.1 LIFE AND WORKS

This poet did the most to support new talent in American poetry after World War II. He wrote for over sixty years and was both poet and doctor (pediatrics was his specialisation). Along with poetry he also wrote plays, essays and fiction and was, along with Hart Crane, one of the leading inheritors of Whitman's mantle in American poetry.

Williams was born in 1883 near Paterson, New Jersey and he lived there all his life. His father was an English immigrant and his mother a Puerto Rican who had studied painting in Paris. He was thus exposed to European culture but at the same time had a strong sense of America being his only home. He went to local schools as well as to schools in Switzerland and Paris. After graduating from the Horace Mann High School, he studied medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. There he became friends with the poets Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle (H.D.). He graduated in 1906, and after working in New York City and Germany he returned to New Jersey, married Florence Herman, and began practising as a pediatrician. He continued seeing patients till a number of strokes in the mid '50s forced him to turn his practice over to one of his sons. Like Wallace Stevens, Williams pursued his career as a poet at night and in between seeing patients. He was determined to be a writer but equally determined not to let go of a doctor's livelihood. His practice and his community social projects brought him into contact with a wide variety of people and probably led to the energy and physicality of much of his poetry.

His first book, Poems was published privately in 1909. The second volume, Tempers, published in 1913 with the help of Ezra Pound, revealed Williams' interaction with the modern mode in poetry and his attempt to create his own voice.



In the intellectual circles of New York he came to know Wallace Stevens, the poet Marianne Moore, and painters like Picabia and Duchamp. Although he disagreed with Pound on matters like the revival of old verse forms, he agreed with him about his principle of "imagism." He was also attracted to Whitman's celebration of the merely physical and his strong recommendation for a poetry of feeling and of the poet's role as an upholder of liberty and equality. His essays in the magazine Contact which he edited between 1920 to 1923 with Robert McAlmon, his prose and poetry in Spring and All (1923) and his essays in the volume In the American Grain (1925) saw him moving away from expatriates like Pound and establishing his own, individual, even somewhat eccentric American tradition. Poetry, Williams argued, should be impelled by the same energies that bring about a revolution. It should run against the establishment. At the same time it should be grounded in reality--something he felt expatriate poets like T. S. Eliot were running away from. Symbolism should not be used to distance the reader of poetry from reality. Meanings should be found in actual things, actual objects and not vague abstractions. "The Red Wheelbarrow" is an excellent example of Williams' concerns about poetry in this sense. He was for reestablishing the cadences, the rhythms of American diction in poetry--this, he felt, would make poetry more down-to-earth. He also thought the very lack of stability of the American language would make it particularly open to innovation and fruitful change. Williams effectively uses fragmentation in syntax to draw attention to the particular and different ordering that the poet's imagination gives to the world of objects in order to turn it into poetry.

Poetry is not just imitation but "mutation." The influence of painting can be seen in his volume Sour Grapes (1921) as well as the earlier Spring and All. This is something else he has in common with Pound and Stevens. Dadaists, Expressionists, Cubists, Precisionists--Williams was exposed to all of these modern schools of European painting through art shows in New York City. He borrowed from the Cubists their fragmentation of objects; from the Precisionists their combination of geometry and objective realism.

In the 1930s, Williams' poems became one of the models for the "Objectivism" movement. His Collected Poems 1921-1931 was published by the Objectivist Press in 1934. At this time Williams was also writing a lot of fiction. The Great American Novel appeared in 1923, A Voyage to Pagan in 1928 and two collections of short stories, The Edge of the Knife and Life Along the Passaic River appeared in 1932 and 1938 respectively. The first two novels are mostly autobiographical and deal with the life of an artist; the short stories talk about the bleak, comic and heroic lives of American immigrants. Later novels like White Mule (1937) and its sequel In the Money (1940) talk of an immigrant's move from rags to riches in an America dominated by business.

Despite a series of heart attacks which began in 1948 and which made writing increasingly difficult for him, Williams completed his epic Paterson, the first book of which appeared in 1946 and subsequent books in 1948, 1949, 1951 and 1958. The epic is an answer to the Greeks and Romans and an epic about a modern metropolis. Book IV concludes with the hero's return to New Jersey, much like Odysseus' return to Ithaca in Homer's Odyssey.

Williams' honesty, his innovation and the directness and clarity of his style influenced later poets like Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, and Robert Creeley. He received a number of awards like the Dial Award (1926), the National Book Award (1950), the Bollingen Award (1953) and the Pulitzer Prize (1962). As can be seen from these dates, recognition came later rather than earlier in his career.

28.2 "THE RED WHEELBARROW"

28.2.1 Text of the Poem VI

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

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28.2.2 Background and Critical Appreciation

The Red Wheelbarrow (1923)

This is a poem in the style of the Japanese haiku, where a single image is elaborated on and the significance of that image is left entirely up to the reader's imagination. It is objectivist, rooted in reality and uses no metaphors or symbols to escape from hard,

even mundane reality. The fragmentation of the syntax gives proof of Williams' effort to capture the new, intrinsic, particularly *American* cadences in his poetry. Here the object of Williams' attention is a red wheelbarrow, a humble country implement used for carrying straw or manure or animal food around a farm, "glazed" or made shiny by the rain, set up against some white chickens. The image becomes pungent because of the contrast between the red of the wheelbarrow and the white of the chickens. What is also unusual is that Williams can write a poem on such an ordinary farm object--poetry can indeed be composed about anything at all. The phrase "So much depends..." probably refers to the task the poet sets himself--can he indeed compose a poem about a wheelbarrow and some chickens, a poem that people will not laugh at, a poem worth the name? The fact that this poem continues to be anthologised 70-odd years after it was composed answers all those questions in the affirmative.

William Carlos
Williams

28.3 LET US SUM UP

While William Carlos Williams believed in the other modern poets' credos like Pound's imagism, he had problems with what he called the expatriate poets' flight from reality through symbolism. He wanted poems to be sensed as real objects, not to blind the reader to reality. He influenced the objectivist movement. He was also a strong influence in the creation of a robust American tradition in poetry, even though some may have seen his efforts in this direction as somewhat quixotic. In this endeavour he saw Walt Whitman as a powerful influence. "The Red Wheelbarrow" is a characteristically Williams poem--it elevates a humble object, sees it for what it is, does not obfuscate it into a symbol, and writes about it in a plain style that is nevertheless very graphic.

28.4 GLOSSARY

- Imagism:** A literary movement launched in the early twentieth century in revolt against romanticism. It promoted free verse and precise imagery.
- Symbolism:** A movement in France in the late nineteenth century that later spread to England and America wherein artists expressed ideas and emotions indirectly through symbols.
- Mutation:** The act or process of being altered or changed.
- Dadaism:** A western European artistic and literary movement (1916-23) that sought discovery of authentic reality through the abolition of traditional cultural and aesthetic forms by a technique of comic derision in which irrationality, chance and intuition were the guiding principles.
- Precisionism:** A modern school of European painting combining geometry and objective realism.
- Objectivism:** A mode of writing verse that recognises the poem, apart from its meaning, to be an object to be dealt with as such. It pays particular attention to the structure of the poem and its construction.

28.5 QUESTIONS

- Q.1. What is objectivism? Analyse "The Red Wheelbarrow" and say whether or not you think it is an objectivist poem.
- Q.2. In what ways did William Carlos Williams agree as a poet with his contemporaries like Pound and Eliot and in what ways did he differ?

28.6 FURTHER READING

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