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### Dada, Paterson, And Epic Tradition

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[*Editor's note:* This issue of the *Review* has been produced in collaboration with James E. Breslin, Department of English, University of California at Berkeley.]

## DADA, PATERSON, AND EPIC TRADITION

In the fall of 1936 a translation of a diary appeared in *transition*, one of William Carlos Williams' favorite periodicals at the time, which may have influenced two of the most famous passages in *Paterson*, the flood and the fire episodes in Book III. The work was excerpted from the writings of Hugo Ball published in Germany in 1927 but dating from 1916-17, when Ball and Tristan Tzara were two of the founding members of Zurich Dada. Entitled "Dada Fragments," the *transition* pieces were selected and translated by the editor of the magazine, Eugene Jolas, who had turned his publication into an American port-of-entry for the French Surrealists, James Joyce (who published parts of *Finnegan's Wake*), and other European avant-garde writers. Jolas also thought of *transition* as a museum and exhibition gallery for documents relating to the then-defunct European Dada movement. By the 1930s, those manuscripts needed protection: Dada's obstreperous demonstrations had faded from the European scene as suddenly as if they had gone down one of the narrow streets of Paris, Cologne, or Zurich, and then turned a corner.

Since the death of *Broom* and *The Little Review* in the 1920s, there were few American little magazines to which Williams could turn in order to satisfy his curiosity about the European avant-garde, past or present. There were also by then few magazines but Jolas' which would take any of Williams' own experiments with Dadaesque automatic writing, his "Improvisations," as *The Little Review* in 1918 had taken a selection of the pieces which went into *Kora in Hell* (1920). Four of the most free-form (and bawdy) Improvisations that Williams had banged out on borrowed typewriters during his European sabbatical in 1924, however, had appeared in *transition* in 1928, "THEESSENTIALROAR," "THAT POEM JAYJAY" (on Joyce), "THE DEAD GROW," and "WELLROUNDEDTHIGHS."<sup>1</sup> Several consisted of one paragraph-long sentence typed as quickly and omnivorously as possible, filled with street noises, arguments, and surprises and pratfalls for the reader. One even had to have its language cleaned up by Jolas so as not to bring the postal inspectors down on their heads. Jolas' interest in the European avant-garde was matched only by his desire to publish equally provocative material by American writers, and Williams felt that his experimental pieces would be right at home in *transition*.

The excerpts from Hugo Ball's diary which Jolas published in 1936 are not particularly original Dadaisms, for they all lack the telegraphic urgency which was Dada's most arresting feature. Ball's entries read more like private, lapidary epigrams, and one wonders whether he didn't polish them up a bit before publishing them a decade after they were written. Several of Ball's statements in *transition*, nonetheless, are of particular interest for the reader of Williams' work. They appear to provide us with a succinct example of how Dadaist ideas influenced *Paterson*, and they also allow us to raise new questions about the relation of Williams' poem to epic tradition.

Echoing Dada's general determination to scramble all logically ordered syntax, Ball wrote in his June 18, 1916 entry that

We have developed the plasticity of the word to a point which can hardly be surpassed. This result was achieved at the price of the logically constructed, rational sentence. . . . People may smile, if they want to; language will thank us for our zeal. . . . We have charged the word with forces and energies which made it possible for us to rediscover the evangelical concept of the "word" (logos) as a magical complex of images. . . .<sup>2</sup>

This call to disrupt "rational" sentences ought to have reminded Williams of one of the few other European Dada manifestos that we are certain he saw—"Dada Souleve Tout" (Dada Excites Everything), signed by Tristan Tzara, Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Andre Breton, and others. It appeared in French in *The Little Review* in 1921.<sup>3</sup> That tract had also called for the derangement of syntax, but unlike Ball's it practiced the heresies that it preached. With the motto, "Dada knows everything. Dada spits everything out" ("crache tout"), the manifesto employed many different type fonts placed in several directions on the page, as if a newspaper had been cut up and collaged. Other Parisian Dada publications of the same year imitated the look of being spit out even more exactly; a leaflet announcing a Dada happening in April, 1921, for example, scattered sentences and sentence fragments across the page, placing some upside down to heighten the effect of texts being vomited out.<sup>4</sup>

These violent discharges were meant to be disdainful parodies of Apollinaire's popular "Calligrammes," in which the text was carefully arranged to imitate the shape of the thing described. Marius de Zayas had already begun to make fun of the form in 1915, when in his New York Dada magazine *291* he published "Femme" using many different kinds of lettering but arranging it all in the shape of what appears to be a crowing rooster.<sup>5</sup> Dada's later parodies received their inspiration from Tzara's notorious "Dada Manifesto 1918," in which he said that Dada works should not look like "arrangements" at all but should appear to "spit out disagreeable or amorous ideas like a luminous waterfall."<sup>6</sup> The 1921 manifestos are just such works; they appear to have digested the kinds of texts one sees when living in cities—signs, ads, posters, newspapers, etc.—and then thrown them back in the reader's face, despairing and angry news about the state of the world.

We cannot be certain how many of the numerous Paris Dada documents other than the "Soulevé" piece Williams saw first hand; he may have received or heard about others from his friends Picabia (in Europe after 1917), Matthew Josephson (who chronicled Dada happenings in *Broom*), Marsden Hartley (who devoted a chapter to Dada in his *Adventures in the Arts* [1921], a book Williams cites in *Spring and All*), Alfred Stieglitz and Marius de Zayas, or Walter Arensberg.<sup>7</sup> The issue is important because unlike New York Dada, which was dominated by artists and emphasized visual effects, European Dada gave equal weight to both the visual and the verbal. By 1923, Williams clearly associated Dada with the kind of graphic disruption of language that the Europeans were doing. He wrote in the June 1923 issue of *Contact* about the standard "disjointed Dada [poetic] composition" and used upsidetdown type and other absurdities in the opening chapters of *Spring and All*, published in November of the same year. It therefore seems likely that Parisian Dada, including the *Little Review* "Soulevé" piece, was Williams' main source of inspiration

for such experiments. It seems equally likely that Williams would have thought of Parisian Dada and his own efforts when he read Ball's passage on making language more "plastic" at the price of conventional syntax.

All these Dada passages in turn become precedents for Williams a decade later, when he composed the jumble of broken sentences in *Paterson* III.iii to represent the flood debris of dead words which blocked his search for a living language. The *Paterson* passage, Ball's diary entry, the *Little Review* manifesto, and other similar Dada pieces all have the same motive for disordering syntax and linear reading: they spit out a flood of things once known and believed but now thrown up in disgust and despair.

A later entry of Ball's in *transition* bears even more directly on *Paterson*, particularly the library-burning episode in III.ii. For Williams at that point in the poem, the local Paterson library is an Inferno packed with dead thoughts, "books / that is, men in hell" who "reign over the living." To overthrow their rule he proposes to fight their deadly hell-fire with a fire of his own, writing which will obliterate the past in a great firestorm: "The writing / should be a relief, // relief from the conditions / which as we advance become—a fire, // a destroying fire." The spark which will start the conflagration is laughter: "A drunkenness of flames . . . a multiformity of laughter." The past is mocked and then cremated, thus clearing space for the myriad new examples of beauty (the "multiformity"):

Papers

(consumed) scattered to the winds. Black.  
The ink burned white, metal white. So be it.  
.....  
Hell's fire. Fire. Sit your horny ass  
down. What's your game? Beat you  
at your own game, Fire. Outlast you:  
Poet Beats Fire at Its Own Game! The bottle!  
the bottle! the bottle! the bottle! I  
give you the bottle!<sup>8</sup>

The birth of spring in *Spring and All* (1923) was similarly preceded by a drunken, violent upheaval: "The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill."<sup>9</sup>

The following excerpts from Ball's diary in *transition* may have inspired Williams to make the "library" in *Paterson* III.ii a synecdoche for the vaguer "world" of *Spring and All*, and to shift his symbolic liberating action from murder to arson:

*January 9, 1917*—We should burn all libraries and  
allow to remain only that which every one knows  
by heart. A beautiful age of the legend would  
then begin . . .  
*March 30, 1917*—The new art is sympathetic because  
in an age of total disruption it has conserved  
the will-to-the-image; because it is inclined  
to force the image . . . .

Admittedly, in *Paterson* Williams does not advocate a return to oral formulaic literature and innocent audiences, as Ball does; he stresses what Ball calls the "will-to-the-image," the difficult necessity of inventing or seeking out new forms of "The Beautiful Thing," the "radiant gist that / resists the final crystallization" (109). But other assumptions in the Williams and Ball passages seem similar, most notably the

premise that no search can be begun until the ground is violently cleared. Moreover, the use of a library by both writers to represent decadent traditional culture is a striking parallel, because the unusual examples of such decadence for the Dadaists were public monuments, art museums, churches, government buildings, and the marketplace, not libraries.

Heretofore when precedents for Williams' destruction of the library have been discussed, the Dada movement has been mentioned casually, if at all, and then usually in reference to Antonin Artaud, who came to Paris in 1920, followed Dada street theatre, and joined the Surrealists in 1924, publishing articles in *La Revolution Sur-réaliste* and making a living as a stage and film actor.<sup>10</sup> The Artaud connection is stressed because Williams mentions him in *Paterson* during the flood scene and its Dadaesque jumble of textual fragments: "*Salut à Antonin Artaud pour les / lignes, très pures: / 'et d'évocations d'éléments de' "*" (137). Williams praised Artaud for the purity of his Dadaesque principles; like Ball, Artaud had demanded that masterpieces be "broken apart" and "destroyed" to allow literature to become more "plastic" so that it could take on the imprint of contemporary life:

Masterpieces of the past are good for the past: they are not good for us. . . . We must get rid of our superstitious valuation of texts and written poetry. Written poetry is worth reading once, and then should be destroyed. Let the dead poets make way for others. Then we might even come to see that it is our veneration for what has already been created, however beautiful and valid it may be, that petrifies us, deadens our responses, and prevents us from making contact with that underlying power, call it thought-energy, the life force. . . .

Elsewhere, Artaud had written:

The library at Alexandria can be burnt down. There are forces above and beyond papyrus: we may temporarily be deprived of our ability to discover these forces, but their energy will not be suppressed. . . . [A] culture without space or time, restrained only by the capacity of our own nerves, will reappear with all the more energy.<sup>11</sup>

Striking as these passages are for their parallels with Williams' thought (Artaud's ideal of "contact," for example, must have been particularly intriguing for Williams), the importance of Artaud's influence on *Paterson* is easy to overstate, given the fact that the above passages were published in 1938 and that Williams had had much earlier contact with these same Dadaist principles through *291*, *391*, *The Little Review*, *transition*, and other magazines. Artaud did not give Williams new ideas so much as eloquently recall old ones.

In fact, Williams acknowledged his debt to the founders of Dada throughout Book III of *Paterson*, though always in a more oblique way than his citation of Artaud. Of the destroying fire in III.ii, for example, he says that it gives "relief" from the oppressive past which the library represents. This recalls the definition of Dada which Williams improvised in *The Great American Novel* in 1923: "It is the apotheosis of relief. Dadaism is one of its prettiest modes: *rien rien rien*" (I, 173). That 1923 definition was in turn inspired by Francis Picabia, who published a tract in *391* in 1920 declaring that all Dadaists desire to know "*rien rien rien*" so that their art will be truly spontaneous.<sup>12</sup> Picabia, moreover, was for his part echoing Tristan Tzara, whose 1918 manifesto had sought to abolish logic, social classes, sexual inhibitions, the idea of progress, and all memory of the past in order to achieve an "absolute and un-

questionable faith in every god that is the immediate product of spontaneity."<sup>13</sup> What may be another buried tribute to Picabia and the early Dadaists in *Paterson* III alludes to a little piece which Picabia brought out in André Breton's proto-Surrealist magazine *Littérature* in 1923. "What I like," Picabia boasted,

is to invent, to imagine, to make myself a new man every moment, then to forget him, forget everything. We should be equipped with a special eraser, gradually effacing our works and the memory of them.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, in *Paterson* III.iii Williams hoped the flood would destroy the past and allow him to begin afresh: "how to begin to find a shape—to begin to begin again, / . . . / . . . The leaf [is] torn from /the calendar. All forgot" (140). The description may seem like a general paraphrase of Dada's belief that memory should be obliterated, but mixed in with Williams' Dadaist praise of amnesia is what appears to be a specific reference to Picabia's analogy of erasure:

It is dangerous to leave written that which is badly written. A chance word, upon paper, may destroy the world. Watch carefully and erase, while the power is still yours, I say to myself, for all that is put down, once it escapes, may rot its way into a thousand minds, the corn become a black smut, and all libraries, of necessity, be burned to the ground as a consequence. (129)

At first it may seem that only what is "badly written" is to be erased, but when Williams' firestorm appeared in III.ii it consumed the library's treasure and trash alike.

In pointing out some possible sources in European Dada for passages in *Paterson* III, I don't mean to imply that Williams was merely echoing Dada's ideas. The voice of *Paterson* III is emphatically Williams'; it is impossible to imagine any European Dadaist, for example, writing the wonderful passage in III.ii where the poet challenges hell-fire to a game of cards: "Sit your horny ass / Down. . . ." But voices upon voices from Williams' contact with the Dadaists in the 1920s and 1930s echo within Book III, with the most important influence, Picabia's, being the most thoroughly disguised, and the most recent ones, Artaud's and Ball's, being at first the more easily seen.

If Williams' allusions to Artaud, Ball, and Picabia ought to inspire us to do more research on the general influence of Dada on *Paterson*, they ought also to make us raise the question of precisely what role Dada may have played in the overall architecture of Williams' long poem. To answer that latter question involves among other things a consideration of how the structure of Williams' epic compares with those of the past. As a way of integrating the debate about some possible new sources for *Paterson* which I have discussed into the larger questions that we ask about the poem, I would now like to consider briefly the part that seems to have been played by certain Dadaist ideas about the fate of art in giving *Paterson* its unconventional epic structure. The following discussion does not have any pretensions to completeness; nor does it claim that Dada was the sole reason why *Paterson* took the shape that it did. (Emerson's and Whitman's belief in the natural obsolescence of literary forms, for example, was also an important influence on Williams.) Rather, I hope that these ideas will be treated as a series of hypotheses to debate.

In the traditional style, the action begins *in medias res*, with the hero and his companions farthest from their goal. The narrative approaches its end as the hero ap-

proaches his home: Odysseus' reformed Ithaca, mankind's Christian paradise regained, Wordsworth's mature retrospection, Whitman's transference of his quest for the union of body and soul to the reader. Conventionally, epic narrative also has two points of view. One is prospective and dramatic, recreating the past adventures of the book's hero. The other is retrospective and (relatively) static, magisterially framing the action to let us know not only that its events have previously occurred, but also that their meaning and their part in the larger story of the hero's race have already been defined. This retrospective point of view can be said to operate even in epics like Vergil's *Aeneid* or Milton's *Paradise Lost* which seem at first glance to end still in the midst of their stories. In both cases, the endings allude by their self-conscious incompleteness to the larger story of which they are a part. For Vergil, this story is the rise of Augustan Rome, which had already occurred when he composed the *Aeneid*; for Milton, it is God's judgment of man which will occur at the end of Time. From Augustus Caesar's point of view in history or God's point of view above history, the epics are retrospective. In the Romantic period, the prospective and retrospective points of view began to dissolve into one, creating an epic without a frame with the poet's developing consciousness as the one subject in Romantic art having the nobility and universality which traditional epic narratives required. Some indication of this redefinition of epic retrospection by Romanticism can be seen in Wordsworth, who planned a three-part epic including his adulthood but was able to finish only its prelude. As the opening lines of *The Prelude* make clear, however, the poem is narrated retrospectively from the vantage point of the poet's mature consciousness. It is English Romanticism's version of the retrospective epic. American Romanticism was more radial. Whitman's egotistically sublime "Song of Myself" is also a poem about the poet's developing consciousness, but unlike Wordsworth's it is brazenly ahistorical and openended, and thus carries to an extreme the process of conflating the twin points of view which had been begun by Wordsworth. Whitman's poet-protagonist does not have a past and a present identity so much as two selves perpetually in flux, the natural "Me myself" and the artificial (or social) "the other I am." And as is well known, the last sentence of the poem in the 1855 edition did not end with a period. This was because Whitman's quest itself could have none; it is to be continued by each reader who takes Whitman up on his challenge to make himself the hero of his own life. Twentieth-century epics, most notably Pound's, have now generally made these unfinished and unfinishable histories of the growth of the poet's mind the norm for the epic, so that any firm separation between retrospective and prospective points of view becomes impossible. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, insofar as we can call it an "epic" in its ambitions, is of course a calculated exception to this generalization; he pointedly tries to re-establish the extra-temporal perspective and the formal closure of Dante's long poem as a model.

Recently several critics have tied *Paterson* firmly to Romantic epic tradition by stressing that the protagonist Dr. Paterson gradually matures during the course of the poem. In their account, Dr. Paterson possesses an idealized, mythic vision of "The Beautiful Thing" at the opening of the poem, but he loses it and then slowly learns to search instead for a humbler, more time-bound vision which concedes that in modern *Paterson* beauty will necessarily be imperfect and impermanent. James Breslin in particular has drawn our attention to the implications of the scene involv-

ing Dr. Paterson and a poor black woman which follows the firestorm in III.ii.<sup>15</sup> Dr. Paterson encounters the woman in a basement, and suddenly recognizes in her all the primal power which the library lacked and which he has been searching for since the beginning of the poem. The woman becomes a battered Kora or Persephone figure, imperfect and even filthy but carrying within her all of nature's powers of renewal. "I can't be half gentle enough, / half tender enough / toward you," he says, humbled and awed, and then sings, "BRIGHTen / the cor / ner / where you are!" (128) ("Corner" is split by a line break here to emphasize the parallel with "core" and "Kora.")<sup>16</sup> As Breslin has shown, Dr. Paterson in this scene has changed markedly since the previous section of Book III. When he encountered the same woman then, he first turned her into a virgin in a "whitlace dress," and then when she did not conform to his idealized fantasy self-righteously treated her as if she were a whore:

(Then, my anger rising) TAKE OFF YOUR  
CLOTHES! I didn't ask you  
to take off your skin . I said your  
clothes, your clothes. You smell  
like a whore. I ask you to bathe in my  
opinions, the astonishing virtue of your  
lost body (I said) . (104-5)

Williams here unflinchingly records Dr. Paterson's brutal treatment of the woman, but also includes key phrases in parentheses which separate Williams the narrator from Dr. Paterson the protagonist, therefore assuring us that we ought to criticize Dr. Paterson's actions. Such ironic asides in parentheses are absent from the later lyric rhapsody sung by the contrite Dr. Paterson to the woman, and thus help to portray Dr. Paterson's partial regeneration, his new willingness to find beauty in this world, not an ideal one. Much of the drama of *Paterson* can therefore be uncovered if we attend to Dr. Paterson's own struggle to change, and the many successes and reversals that he undergoes.

Despite many instances of Dr. Paterson's growing self-knowledge, however, the examples of anger, despair, and divorce which surround Dr. Paterson at the start of the poem become dominant in Books III and IV, thereby changing the overall mood of Books I through IV from celebratory to satiric. *Paterson* I began in prehistory, with Dr. Paterson witnessing the male and female principles of the poem interpenetrating perfectly, as if sleeping together in a marriage bed the morning after conception has occurred.

Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls  
its spent waters forming the outline of his back. He  
lies on his right side, head near the thunder  
of the waters filling his dreams!

.....  
And there, against him, stretches the low mountain.  
The Park's her head, carved, above the Falls, by the  
quiet  
river; Colored crystals the secret of those rocks; . . . (6,8)

This mythic and timeless union is immediately counterpointed by a vision of modern spiritual, sexual, and intellectual dysfunction, as represented by "automatons" living in the cities,



Who because they  
 neither know their sources nor the sills of their  
 disappointments walk outside their bodies aimlessly  
 for the most part,  
 locked and forgot in their desires—unroused. (6)

At the opening of *Paterson* I.i, the theme of marriage predominates, and the passages introducing the poem's examples of divorce are kept clearly subordinate. The later Books shift their focus downstream from the Falls (first to the Park by the Falls, then to the areas of Paterson below the Falls such as the library, then to New York City and the Atlantic Ocean), and examples of spiritual and physical divorce play an increasingly prominent part in the poem. The economy is shown to be more usurious, the language more corrupt, the communication between people—especially between lovers—more sterile. In Book IV, section II, admittedly, Madame Curie emerges as a heroine, and as such represents an advance beyond the grim frustration of the lesbian Corydon in the poem's previous section. But viewing Mme Curie in the context of all of Book IV, we see that she is surrounded by figures representing self-destruction rather than self-discovery: Corydon, the murderer Jack Johnson, the "blood-red" Atlantic and the shark that snaps at his own guts (200), among others. Even Curie's own important discovery of how to split the uranium atom and release energy (175-78) is parodied in the same section of the poem by another kind of splitting, in which a corrupt evangelist accepts "27 Grand" for his efforts to divide striking Paterson millworkers by "calling them to God" instead (172-73). Book IV, section ii, in other words, is not a "visionary" answer<sup>17</sup> to Corydon's mock pastoral in the first section; its hopeful vision glows strongly at times, but most often in this particular section and in Book IV as a whole we feel that leaden oppressiveness of history. In general, Book IV reads like a long mock pastoral with few truly pastoral or visionary interludes. It is dominated by figures in historical and modern Paterson who distort pastoral's traditional celebration of love, fertility, labor, and honor, and by beasts like the shark, which eats its own guts and thus is a grotesque parody of the interpenetrating River and Mountain at the beginning of Book I.

Book IV also represents the sharpest reversal in the poem of Dr. Paterson's epic quest to discover "The Beautiful Thing." At the end of III, he was hoping to make a fresh start. And, indeed, the homage he paid to the black Kora figure had suggested that he might succeed. But by the opening of Book IV Dr. Paterson seems as far as he has ever been from his goals of reforming society, language, and himself. The liberating clearing of the ground accomplished by the flood and the fire in Book III has been lost; Book IV is set in the most congested locale of the entire poem, the shores and the mouth of the polluted Passaic as it enters the Hudson and then the Atlantic. As Corydon says at the start of the Book, the three guano-stained rocks in the Passaic which she sees out of her window are "all that's left of the elemental, the primitive / in this environment" (152). Even Dr. Paterson himself is apparently not immune from this corruption. At one point he seems about to seduce Phyllis (154-5), but then a thought about the banality of it all blocks him, and both Phyllis and he end up frustrated, ashamed that they wanted to have sex and ashamed that they didn't. Williams comments sarcastically,

Oh Paterson! Oh married man!  
 He is the city of cheap hotels and private

entrances . . . of taxis at the door, the car  
standing in the rain . . .

.....  
Good-bye, dear. I had a wonderful time.

Wait! There's something . . . but I've forgotten. (154)

“He is the city”: Dr. Paterson as a sleazy city is much closer to the “automatons” in Book I or to the exhausted Tiresias of *The Waste Land*, who imitated the clichés of conversation “Goodnight, ladies, goodnight, sweet ladies . . .”) than he is to the mythic giant Paterson in the poem’s opening pages or to the humble but resolute poet at the end of Book III. Moreover, despite Dr. Paterson’s discovery of Mme Curie, Social Credit, etc., in the later episodes of Book IV, he is largely reduced to satirizing the stale conventions of pastoral rather than finding ways to make those conventions new: like Corydon, his alter-ego, he writes a long mock pastoral poem. Compared with his deliriously successful obliteration of tradition in Book III, this attack on tradition in IV seems labored and ineffectual. The “white-hot man” (123) of Book III reshapes and invents; the exhausted man of Book IV resigns himself to parody, documentary, and nostalgia.

Dr. Paterson’s tragic descent seems consistent both with the topography of the Passaic River Valley, which descends toward the sea, and with certain general principles of Dada that appear to have influenced the structure of *Paterson*. The Dadaists believed that art and ideas petrify and therefore have to be discarded soon after they are invented. This is why they urged artists to forget everything they learned; the memory of what they and others have done would impede their efforts to do new things. Dada thus made artists martyrs to the impossible ideal of perpetual self-renewal. As J. Hillis Miller has argued, Williams consistently discriminated between creative shaping energy and the passive forms which are created by that force and then left to congeal as the force passes on.<sup>18</sup> In Book IV of *Paterson*, Williams calls this shaping force “the radiant gist”; it is “The Beautiful Thing” which Dr. Paterson searches for. The stale forms of beauty which congeal after the creative force passes on are called both “the final crystallization” (109) and “lead” (178). In Williams’ earlier volume, *Kora in Hell*, analogously, he imagined creativity and decadence as a wheel cycling between upturn and downturn:

when the wheel’s just at the up turn it glimpses horizon, zenith, all in  
a burst, the pull of the earth shaken off, a scatter of fragments,  
significance in a burst of water striking up from the base of a fountain.  
Then at the sickening turn toward death the pieces are joined into  
a pretty thing, a bouquet frozen in an icecake. (I,71)

The beginning of *Paterson* draws on this passage from *Kora in Hell* to represent the buoyant creativity of the Falls. Its water-drops, Williams shows us, are suspended against gravity and against time: “fall, fall in air! as if / floating, relieved of their weight” (8). But this energy gradually succumbs to its natural fate, to gravity and time; *Paterson* becomes dominated by references to blockage, divorce, decay, murder, and “pretty things” such as stale literary parody used by Corydon in her *Corydon, A Pastoral* (159-62). The shift in the epic’s overall tone from sweet to sour is thus emphatic. All we need to do is to compare the first few pages of Books I and IV to see that the pure, spontaneous energy of the Falls has run its course. The free water of the Falls is now, Williams puns, “seabound” (200).

At the conclusion of Book IV, of course, Dr. Paterson awakens from this entrapping nightmare of New Jersey history: “Waken from a dream, this dream of / the whole poem . sea-bound” (200). If the seabound descent of Dr. Paterson imitates the fate of creativity in time (inevitably declining into decadence, parody, death), at the very end of Book IV Williams’ hero eludes such a fate by refusing to be either sea-bound or tradition-bound. He audaciously stands the traditional conclusion of the epic on its head:

I say to you, Put wax rather in your  
ears against the hungry sea  
  it is not our home!

. draws us in to drown, of losses  
and regrets . (201)

*Paterson* I-IV does not conclude as a traditional epic does, when its hero arrives home, but when its hero realizes that he is *farthest* from home, from the Passaic Falls and their unending creative power. And when Williams wittily alludes to Odysseus blocking his sailor’s ears from the Sirens’ song, he reminds us that as the pilot of his own epic craft he hears the beautiful music of epic tradition, the temptation to follow the “correct” way of ending an epic, but refuses to give in to it.

For Dr. Paterson, knowing that he is far from home is the first step toward a successful Odyssean escape. During the very last pages of Book IV images of cleanliness and fertility dominate the poem once more. After swimming in the sea, Dr. Paterson is greeted joyfully by his dog (one of his alter-egos throughout the poem); spits the seed from a beach plum out onto the dunes; then heads inland with the “steady roar, as of a distant / waterfall” on his mind (203). In doing so, he reverses the “sea-bound” direction of the entire poem and begins a new quest to recover the creative powers which he has gradually lost. Williams, of course, originally planned to have his epic be only four Books long. He thus intended to conclude the poem at the moment when his hero begins a new descent into history. The structural principle of the first four Books of *Paterson* is contained in microcosm in these words from *Paterson* II: “the descent / made up of despairs / and without accomplishment / realizes a new awakening : / which is a reversal / of despair” (78).

When Book IV was published in 1951, Williams thought he was done. But after his stroke, he conceived and wrote Book V inspired by the euphoria of his recovery. By adding it to the first four Books of *Paterson* in 1958, he forced us to read the ending of the Book IV differently from how we read it when considering Books I-IV alone. The ending of Book IV implies that a sequel to the epic does not need to be written because any further adventures of Dr. Paterson would inevitably be other descents made up of gradually increasing despairs and diminishing awakenings. But if Books I-V are taken as a unit, it seems that when Dr. Paterson walks on the dunes at the end of IV he meditates not just on another descent but on Book V, a Book which thoroughly revises the role played by descent in Williams’ poem.

In Book V the destructive and creative principles which had been at war throughout the previous Books are wrested at last into equilibrium, so that each creative “up-turn” and the decadent “downturn” are fiercely held in balance. If the mythical nature-goddess, “The Mountain,” dominated the opening of Book I and the deca-

dent Corydon the opening of Book IV, in Book V Williams introduces a paired or doubled image of women: “The moral // proclaimed by the whorehouse / could not be better proclaimed / by the virgin” (208). This doubling continues throughout the Book, as Williams counterpoints references to creative women (including Mary in Brueghel’s Nativity painting, the Virgin in the *Unicorn* tapestries, Sappho, and the anonymous passer-by on pp. 219-20 to whom Williams impulsively dedicates all his poems) with those to barren or self-destructive women (such as the whores in Gilbert Sorrentino’s letters on pp. 214-15, or the poignant old woman on the penultimate page of the poem who wore “a china doorknob / in her vagina to hold her womb up”). Similarly, if Dr. Paterson migrates in Books I-IV from expressing the comic realm of mythic creative power free from time (the Falls and the Mountain) to the tragic, degenerative fate of all that is born into history (Paterson the city), in Book V history and the eternal world of art are interwoven into a harmonious, tragicomic design. The descent motif no longer governs the poem.

In Book V, moreover, Williams gives Dr. Paterson the homecoming denied him in Book IV:

Paterson, from the air  
                                   above the low range of its hills  
                                   across the river  
 on a rock-ridge  
                                   has returned to the old scenes  
                                   to witness

What has happened  
                                   since Soupault gave him the novel  
                                   the Dadaist novel  
 to translate—  
                                   *The Last Nights of Paris.*  
                                   “‘What has happened to Paris  
 since that time?  
                                   and to myself’”?

#### A WORLD OF ART

THAT THROUGH THE YEARS HAS

SURVIVED!     (209)

Dada’s principles guided Dr. Paterson during his descent into decadence in Books I-IV. But in Book V Williams puts Dada in its place, satirizing it and carefully restricting its destructive energy. The movement that was to end all art has survived, as have the works it meant to destroy; the apocalyptic *Last Nights of Paris* has been translated into another language, and Paris itself has survived two European wars. Dada’s pessimistic view of the fate of art is counterpointed by a faith that creative power is unlimited and perpetually accessible. *Paterson V* thus restores the traditional epic conclusion which Williams excluded from his earlier ending for the poem. That is, if we take Paterson I-IV as a unit, we find that the epic ends with the hero realizing that he is farthest from home. But if we consider Paterson I-V, the poem ends classically, with the hero returning to the Falls, to a world where the eternal and the time-bound, the creative and the decadent, may be held in balance.

Williams acknowledges in the last lines of *Paterson* that this balancing act characterizes Book V as it does no other Book in the poem. The lines describe a satyr's dance. The "tragic" beat of the satyr's foot ("We know nothing . . . / but / the dance, to dance to a measure / contrapuntally, / Satyrically, the tragic foot") represents history as a tragedy in which creativity is lost and the artist is inevitably reduced to Dadaesque satire and disgust ("we know nothing"). Because the satyr is half man, half goat, he can be seen as an emblem of a grotesque degeneration from the norm of what man should be, and is thus connected etymologically for Williams with "satire," that mode of literature, including Dada, which criticizes such deviations. As Williams had said at the end of Book I, quoting J.A. Symonds:

The Greeks displayed their acute aesthetic sense of propriety, recognizing the harmony which subsists between crabbed verses and the distorted subjects with which they dealt—the vices and perversions of humanity—as well as their agreement with the snarling spirit of the satirist. Deformed verse was suited to deformed morality. (40)

But throughout Book V Williams also syncopates this tragic, "deformed" beat with what he calls a "pre-tragic" or comic one (221).<sup>19</sup> It, too, is associated with the satyr, but in this case the satyr represents man's sexual and spiritual potency, his ability to create.

. . . or the Satyrs, a  
pre-tragic play,  
a satyric play!  
All plays  
were satyric when they were most devout.  
Ribald as a Satyr!

Satyrs dance!  
all deformities take wing (221)

The complementary meanings of Williams' references to satyrs thus contain in miniature the contrapuntal, tragicomic structure of Book V itself.

We know that in the late 1950s Williams decided that *Paterson* was to have been an openended epic, for drafts for a sixth Book survive. As the poem now stands (or dances, rather), it is an epic documenting the history of a locality, *Paterson*, N.J., in which its hero, Dr. *Paterson*, succeeds when he discovers that local history is both his proper home and his place of exile. He must journey down-river and face the failures of his city and his self—he must, in his own words, look "death / in the eye" (106). But by the end of Book IV he is also freed to somersault up-stream, aware that his decline into satire and Dadaist disgust and violence is merely part of an inexorable creative dance which will soon counter its own rhythms. If the first four Books of Williams' epic seem to descend from their early poetic heights (as most contemporary critics, comparing the poem to the other epics they knew, saw and protested), Williams would perhaps answer that that is the way time, rivers, and modern epic poems naturally flow. But Book V countered Dadaist pessimism by describing the fate of art and the body in time without despairing of the mind's ability to rediscover its creative heights. Books IV and V thus give us two endings for *Paterson*. The first concludes with the poet farthest from home, contemplating an endless series of further descents into history. The second stresses that history may repeatedly be transcended and home regained; as Williams says near the end of Book V, "The (self)

direction has been changed / the serpent / its tail in its mouth / the river has returned to its beginnings' ” (233). In creating two endings for his long poem, Williams fashioned an agitated equilibrium between the impulses toward closure and exposure, retrospection and progression, which have informed epics from *The Iliad* on.

Because Dada stated so precisely and memorably its claim that all that is created must degenerate, it was for Williams one of the many influences which helped him reconsider what relation his modern epic might have to epic tradition. Dr. Paterson survives his epic descent into history in Books I-IV because he awakens just in time to the grim truth that Dada teaches. In Book V he then sees that he can use that knowledge not to erase the past but to remember, revise, and renew it.

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### NOTES

1. “THEESSENTIALROAR” appeared in *transition*, 10 (January, 1928), the other three Improvisations in *transition*, 11 (Summer, 1928). Those four, plus two others published in 1924, 4 (December, 1924), plus two that were not published in Williams’ lifetime, have recently been collected in *Antaeus*, 30/31 (Summer/Autumn, 1978), pp. 26-33.
2. *transition*, 25 (Fall, 1936), pp. 73-76. The translation was reprinted in Robert Motherwell’s *The Dada Painters and Poets* (New York: Wittenborn, 1951), pp. 51-4.
3. *The Little Review*, VII:4 (January/March, 1921). The piece was recently translated by Lucy R. Lippard for her anthology, *Dadas on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 162-3. I use Lippard’s translation.
4. Lippard, p. 164.
5. 291, 9 (November, 1915). See also Dickran Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde, 1910-1925* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), the thirteenth page of Plates (between pp. 90 and 91).
6. Lippard, p. 20. Lippard’s translation of the complete manifesto runs from p. 13 to p. 20.
7. For the best account of Williams’ contact with New York Dada, see Tashjian, pp. 71-142. The scope of Tashjian’s study (1910-1925), however, does not leave room for a consideration of Dada’s influence on *Paterson*. Other more general accounts of Williams and New York Dada include Bram Dijkstra, *Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 3-46, and Dickran Tashjian, *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 55-63.
8. *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), pp. 113-18. All further citations will be to this edition and will appear in the text in parentheses.
9. Both the prose and poetry of *Spring and All* are now reprinted in William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1970); this passage is on pp. 90-1. All further citations from *Imaginations* will appear in the text in parentheses, the page numbers preceded by I.
10. See especially Margaret Glynn Lloyd, *William Carlos Williams’s “Paterson”: A Critical Reappraisal* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1980), p. 254, and J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Real-*

ty (1965; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1974), pp. 338-9. Mike Weaver in *William Carlos Williams: The American Background* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971) does mention Artaud and other Surrealists in the context of Paterson (pp. 153,155). But his handling of Artaud's relevance to the poem is rather oblique (he does not discuss *The Theatre and Its Double* or the flood episode, for instance), and he gives little background on Williams' earlier contact with Dada.

11. *The Theatre and its Double*, tr. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove, 1958), pp. 74, 78; p. 10. The book was originally published in Paris by Gallimard in 1938. See also Lloyd, p. 254. Paul Mariani, in *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), p. 574, notes that Williams later denied Artaud's relevance to *Paterson*, implying that he included the quotation from *The Theatre and its Double* in the flood episode because he thought it was merely a cliché. In view of what happens in *Paterson* III, however, I'm not as sure as Mariani is that we can take Williams at his word.

12. Lippard, p. 166. 391, 12 (March, 1920).

13. Lippard, p. 20.

14. Lippard, p. 171. *Littérature*, n.s. 8 (January, 1923).

15. James Breslin, *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 153-200. For a more general discussion of the significance of "reversal" in the poem, see pp. 178-82. Other critics who stress that *Paterson* is an ironic epic in which the hero continually has to redefine what he is searching for include Walter Sutton, "Dr. Williams's *Paterson* and the Quest for Form," *Criticism*, II:3 (Summer, 1960), pp. 242-59; James Guimond, *The Art of William Carlos Williams* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1968), pp. 175-200; Joseph Riddel, *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William Carlos Williams* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), especially "Poem and City: The Sarcophagus of Time," pp. 155-202, "The Game of Invention," pp. 227-53, and "The Poetics of Failure," pp. 255-301; Paul Bové, "The World and Earth of William Carlos Williams: *Paterson* as a 'Long Poem,'" *Genre*, XI:4 (Winter, 1978), pp. 575-96; James E. Miller, *The American Quest For a Supreme Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 126-60; and Lloyd, *William Carlos Williams' "Paterson": A Critical Reappraisal*. None of these critics, however, explores the role played by Dada in this matter.

16. Mariani, pp. 581-82.

17. Breslin, p. 201.

18. Miller, pp. 328-44.

19. See also Lloyd, pp. 267-71.

## NATIONAL POETRY FOUNDATION WILLIAMS CONFERENCE

The National Poetry Foundation under the direction of Carroll Terrell is planning a Williams Conference to be held at the University of Maine at Orono, August 23-26, 1983. Requests for program information should be sent to Carroll Terrell, Managing Editor, *Paideuma*, University of Maine at Orono, Orono, ME 04469.