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PETER SCHMIDT

## Williams's Lyric "These": His Deepest Descent<sup>1</sup>

Williams's poem "These" (1938) is much admired, if we can judge by the frequency of its reprintings in anthologies. It has been a part of the canon of Williams's most important work since 1949, when Randall Jarrell included it in his influential *The Selected Poems of William Carlos Williams*. Yet critical commentary on the poem is slight, despite the rapid recent growth of Williams scholarship and Williams's ascent into the front rank of American poets.

Why is "These" read but not discussed? Perhaps it is the poem's contorted syntax, double negatives, and gnomic riddling – all apparent deviations from the no-ideas-but-in-plain-style aesthetic for which Williams is most celebrated. Perhaps it is the poem's severe depiction of nature. Its wintry scenes are resolutely barren, no sprig of wild-carrot survives its wasteland, and even the wind – whose violent energy Williams releases in so many other winter and early spring poems – is strangely silent, making the harsh landscape much more foreboding than when it rages. Williams wrote many angry, despondent poems, but until "These" he never published a poem so despairing of nature's ability to renew itself or cure the stupidity of man. The poem's cold helplessness is finally more chilling than the rage and satire we usually see when Williams is angry. Unlike poems written in that mood, which radiate energy even as they attack their targets, "These" shows us the darkest and bleakest part of Williams's soul. It is a heartrending cry of loneliness, pain, and impotence. Of all the poems that Williams wrote, "These" is perhaps the most difficult to reconcile with those qualities of his character and his art that we rightly praise – his sympathy, generosity, good humor, and optimism.

1 This essay is dedicated to Jeffrey Cox. It originally appeared in the Williams Centennial Issue of the *William Carlos Williams Review* 9.1–2 (Fall 1983): 74–90.

Whatever the reasons for the neglect of "These," however, the poem is arguably one of the best that Williams wrote. We cannot understand the full emotional range of his art until we sound the depths of "These." As a way of expanding critical discussion of the poem, I would like to offer both a close reading and an analysis of the lyric mode to which it belongs.<sup>2</sup>

As in many other lyrics written in the middle of his career, Williams is quite conscious in "These" of literary tradition and the need to "Make it new," but he characteristically disguises that awareness in order to have his poems appear to be spontaneously self-generated, unique, and avant-garde. It is as if Williams in mid-career was afraid that he could not remain innovative unless he repressed his consciousness of the generic lyric modes that his poems absorbed and revised. Consequently, his poems from *Al Que Quiere!* (1917) to *The Complete Collected Poems* (1938), contain few literary allusions, and when such allusions are present (as with the opening line "The rose is obsolete" (CP1 195) from "The Rose" in *Spring and All* [1923]), they

- 2 One of the few discussions (rather than citations) of "These" is by Thomas Whitaker, 123–24. Whitaker notes the relevance of other poems of depression, including "Virtue" (CP1 89) and "The Sun" (CP1 445–46), in which the following lines occur:

Lie  
by the broken boat –  
the eel-grass

bends  
and is released  
again – Go down, go  
down past knowledge

shelly lace – (CP1 446)

Whitaker also praises the "hardness and flatness" of the style of "These," and traces its emotional evolution from "rejection or [a desire to] escape" to "a healthy letting-be." See also Paul Mariani 398–99, for other projects that Williams was involved with at the time of "These." Mariani suggests that in writing the poem Williams "very much" had Wallace Stevens's *Ideas of Order* in mind, but I am not sure what he means.

tend to cite sources or traditions only to show how "obsolete" they are. For the most part, Williams in mid-career claims to invent and devise, never to revise. But under the iconoclastic Modernist surface of "These" and many other poems from Williams's middle period lies a deep memory of the past.

In the case of "These," the traditional lyric mode that Williams surreptitiously remembers and revises is the dejection or "penseroso" ode. For Williams, that tradition would have included Stevens's "Domination of Black," Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "As I Ebb'd With The Ocean Of Life," Keats's "Hyperion," "Ode on Melancholy," and "The Fall of Hyperion," Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard," Pope's "Ode on Solitude," Marvell's "The Garden," Donne's "Nocturnall on St Lucies Day" (which like "These" takes place at the "year's midnight"), and, of course, Milton's "Il Penseroso."<sup>3</sup> Outwardly, these poems are quite various. Some, in fact, are not strictly odes; they merge formal features of the penseroso ode with those of other poetic genres such as the elegy or the epic. These poems nevertheless all share specific figures of speech associated with melancholy and dominant in penseroso odes. When we place "These" within the context of this tradition, we find that it is not only a superb poem in its own right but also a haunting meditation on how and why penseroso odes are written.

- 3 Williams knew Stevens's, Whitman's, and Keats's work well, of course, and of the other poems on this list all but those by Coleridge and Donne were in Francis Palgrave's *The Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics*, which Williams said he knew "by heart" (IWWP 8). Williams also said that he read Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" and Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in school (IWWP 3), and I think it is safe to say that he knew Coleridge's "Dejection" ode also. That he knew Donne's "Nocturnall on St. Lucies Day" is indicated by his possession of *The Poems of John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912); the book is now housed in the English Department of Fairleigh Dickinson University, Rutherford, among other Williams memorabilia.

## I

Williams sets "These" during the winter solstice, but unlike another poem of his that takes place in midwinter, "Burning the Christmas Greens" (1944), the year "plunges into night" without promise of rebirth and renewal. The poet, similarly, "plunges / lower than night" into "weeks" of depression so severe that no escape seems possible. He descends into an eerie, visionary landscape – perhaps the only landscape in all of Williams's poetry that he created with his eyes closed.

## THESE

are the desolate, dark weeks  
when nature in its barrenness  
equals the stupidity of man.

The year plunges into night  
and the heart plunges  
lower than night

to an empty, windswept place  
without sun, stars or moon  
but a peculiar light as of thought

that spins a dark fire – (CP1 458)

Although rare in Williams's work, such a landscape is appropriate to the somber, introspective lyric he has chosen to write. The empty, windswept place of the poem is lit by a dark fire

whirling upon itself until,  
in the cold, it kindles

to make man aware of nothing  
that he knows, not loneliness  
itself – Not a ghost but

would be embraced – emptiness,  
despair – (CP1 458)

Here is an image of light seen when the light of sense goes out and the poet confronts a visionary world, like the "saintly" light in Milton's "Il Penseroso" that is "too bright / To hit the sense of human sight" and must therefore be "O'erlaid in black" (lines 13-16). To Williams's troubled vision, however, the absence of truth, not truth, is revealed. And seemingly positive assertions that man "kindles," is "made aware," and desires an embrace are all quickly negated-the kindled fire is cold, man is aware only that he knows nothing, and the only things that he may embrace are ghosts, emptiness, and despair. The doubled negatives, contorted syntax, and negated figures of speech in the above lines shroud the prophecy in darkness.

The poet's bitter and torpid gaze in these lines is comparable to that of Melancholy in Dürer's famous *Melencolia I* engraving. Williams probably knew Dürer's work when he wrote "These," for he cites it in *Paterson* as an indication of the despair behind the book-burning episode: "Dürer's *Melancholy*, the gears / lying disrelated to the mathematics of the / machine // Useless" (P 119). In Dürer's engraving, a winged figure representing Melancholy sits surrounded by technical instruments representing the arts and sciences, but she stares off into space, motionless, her head in her hand and her face in shadow, fruitlessly searching for knowledge and a spiritual confidence that her secular tools cannot give her. In fact, her despair is so deep that she cannot even use the tools she once wielded; as Williams noticed, many lie at her feet broken or disassembled. Like the speaker of "These," Dürer's Melancholy is convinced that all knowledge is vain and stupid, all human ties broken, all nature barren.

As well as remembering his Dürer and his Milton for "These," Williams may also have recalled the image of the windswept house and spinning fire in Stevens's "Domination of Black" (*Others* 1916). In that poem, planets, the wind, autumn leaves, and peacock tail-feathers turn round each other and then merge with a fire that turns within itself. Stevens meditates on blackness, on a dark that comes and erases all light, color, and sound - from the iridescent circles of the peacock feathers to the orbits and glow of the planets themselves. "I saw how the night came," the poet says, and then, speaking in a whisper, he confesses that he is inert, afraid, and alone in the dark.

Only the fading memory of the cry the peacocks gave when their colors were extinguished is left:

Out of the window,  
I saw how the planets gathered  
Like the leaves themselves  
Turning in the wind.  
I saw how the night came,  
Came striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks.  
I felt afraid.  
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks. (*Collected* 9)

As Harold Bloom has shown, the poem expresses not only Stevens's fear of death and his lament that all created things (represented by the peacocks) must die, but also his fear that his own poetic voice might be extinguished.<sup>4</sup>

Like Stevens's poem, Williams's has fire as a central image. Stevens's fire is in a room, but the leaves and the peacock feathers that turn in the wind outside quickly come inside, as they are "swept over the room." Moreover, the circular motions of fire, feathers, leaves, and wind are duplicated by the planets, which gather and orbit right outside the room's window. The room is thus a visionary space without real walls, as large as the universe itself, and when darkness covers all at the end it is star-fires as well as a hearth fire that have died. Similarly, Williams's fire spins around itself in a vague, empty, "windswept" place as large as the heavens, and that space then modulates into a room in the mind that, like Stevens's, has no physical foundation or scale.

But if both poems confront despair, Williams's despair at this point in "These" carries explicit social and public meanings; the poem offers specific examples of man's "stupidity," not just the poet's unnamable fear. The middle of "These," for example, contains a vision of war. The "nothing that man knows," his incompetent use of his own skills, refers here to the weapons men have turned against themselves:

4 See Harold Bloom 375–79. Stevens's poem appeared in the original edition of *Harmonium* in 1922, and again when that volume was reprinted in 1932.



Not a ghost but

would be embraced – emptiness,  
despair – (They  
whine and whistle) among

the flashes and booms of war;  
houses of whose rooms  
the cold is greater than can be thought,

the people gone that we loved,  
the beds lying empty, the couches  
damp, the chairs unused – (CP1 457–58)

Published in 1938 against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War and the arms buildup in Europe, "These" is a chilling example of poetry's ability, in Milton's words, to "ascend to a prophetic strain." With Stevens's "The Men That Are Falling" (1936), "These" is one of the great poetic responses to the violence of the 1930s.

The loss portrayed may represent any depression, civil war, and disruption – psychological as well as historical. The poem moves deftly among a particular historical moment, a moment of deepest despair in Williams's own soul, and an archetypal image of Despair itself. The most arresting scene in these middle lines of the poem depicts houses that have been abandoned during warfare. Williams may also have been thinking of farmhouses awaiting foreclosures during the Depression. At any rate, the fact that the furniture remains behind makes the absence of humans all the more haunting. "Emptiness" and "despair" whine and whistle, destroying dreams as bombs do bodies and homes, and ideas that once housed us in meaning are abandoned.

The appropriate context for "These," however, is even more complex than that of the history of the 1930s or the echoes of Stevens, Milton, and Dürer that I have discussed so far. For Williams's poem is a pensive lyric, an ode to dejection. Accordingly, I would now like to turn aside from "These" briefly to consider how the melancholic humor has been defined in Western culture. Only with that tradition in mind can the full resonance of Williams's lines be appreciated.



## II

Since Hippocrates first identified Melancholy as one of the four bodily humors governing personality types, it has had negative and positive characteristics associated with it. They are, respectively, the saturnine (*furor melancholicus*) and the Apollonian or Pauline (*furor divinus*). But Melancholy has consistently been identified with a solitary figure, a person withdrawn from society who meditates upon human folly and its possible cure.<sup>5</sup>

The negative interpretation of the melancholic temperament, which originates in the writings of another Greek physician, Galen, sees such a withdrawal as basically destructive and portrays the melancholic as a figure in whom emotions burn fitfully and bitterly. Lyric meditations using the topoi of this tradition may be those of a scorned lover, as in Gascoigne's "Dan Bartholmew's Dolorous Discourses" or Sidney's "Ye Goatherd Gods," or they may be those of a figure whose anger and despair prophesy apocalypse. Sidney's poem, for example, expands beyond the lover's lament to include glimpses of the underworld, the nature of evil, and the possible destruction of society. It is this Galenic version of melancholy that Milton dismisses at the opening of "L'Allegro," where his allusions to Melancholy's birth in a "Stygian cave forlorn," in the "dark Cimmerian desert," accurately trace its pedigree back to two classical figures associated with demonic dreams and prophecy. One is Ovid's

- 5 My summary of the ways the humor of melancholy has been defined is partially indebted to Erwin Panofsky's *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* 154–71. Most of the literary examples of melancholy are mine, however, and I make a sharper distinction between modern and Renaissance views of melancholy than Panofsky does. My discussion is intended to provide only the working information needed to interpret Williams's poem and, needless to say, cannot do justice to the tradition's complexity. For further discussion of the motif of "divine frenzy" or *furor divinus*, see Ernst Robert Curtius 474–75, and Gordon Braden's essay. Rudolf and Margot Wittkower's *Born Under Saturn* traces the connection between the saturnine temperament and theories of artistic inspiration in the Renaissance and Baroque periods; for a general discussion, see 98–108.

Morpheus, the god of Sleep, whose cavern in Cimmeria, a land at the edge of the world perpetually in fog and twilight, contains a trickling stream connected with Lethe, the river of forgetfulness in the underworld (in *Metamorphoses* XI 592–618). The second figure is the Cumaean sibyl in Book VI (lines 1–44) of *The Aeneid*, whose prophecies “wrap truth in darkness” and are spoken by a ghostly voice that sounds through “a hundred gateways” hidden in a mountain. Potentially anarchic, the sibyl is held captive by Apollo, the god of Reason, whose temple is nearby. His victory over this rival prophetic figure in turn is meant to recall another battle, in which Jupiter dethroned his cruel father-god Saturn, castrated him, and imprisoned him underground. Continually threatening to destroy the world that has exiled him underground, Saturn is perhaps the largest and most archetypal image of the negative vision of Melancholy, and since Galen he was so closely associated with the melancholic humor that “saturnine” became synonymous with “melancholic.”

Milton's association of Melancholy in “L'Allegro” with “horrid shapes, and shrieks, and sights unholy” (line 4) thus accurately portrays the figure as a kind of Faustian character whose powers of prophecy and ratiocination may have once been ruled by Apollo but now have become a parody of themselves, and are as “lowbrowed” and “ragged” (lines 8–9) as the mountains where Melancholy lives. This version of Melancholy, *furor melancholicus*, represents the folly of human aspirations, particularly those of Reason, and it is often portrayed surrounded by man-made as well as natural ruins. The art historian Erwin Panofsky has shown how Dürer's *Melencolia I* engraving is a portrait of this kind of despair. Panofsky contrasts her pose with that of St Jerome in another Dürer engraving, and notes that Dürer deliberately pairs Melancholy's secular, inevitably futile search for wisdom with the sure, ordered, faithful labors of that more positive *penseroso* figure, the Christian scholar in his study. Milton's “Il Penseroso” makes the same contrast, although secular aspirations are not dismissed as peremptorily as they are in Dürer's two engravings. Milton subordinates secular labors to those undertaken in “the studious cloister's pale” (lines 155–76) at the triumphant conclusion of the poem. The clearest reference to *furor melancholicus* in Milton's

odes occurs, appropriately, in the first lines of "L'Allegro," which mock the saturnine temperament.

In the other more positive view of Melancholy, *furor divinus*, we might say that the god of Reason is confident that he can control and exploit the dangerous powers of divination. This tradition has its sources in Galen too, but also in Plato's and Aristotle's descriptions of divine inspiration. These definitions stress the limitless visionary powers that may suddenly descend upon the artist, poet, or philosopher who has studiously prepared himself to receive them. When this happens he will be able to comprehend the eternal forms behind the world's flux. Lyrics reflecting this more optimistic view of the isolated man, a privileged scholar, include the many poems in praise of solitude, study, exercise, and ease, from Horace's *Satire* II 6 to Pope's "Ode on Solitude." Both Marvell's "The Garden" and Milton's "Il Penseroso" show how man, unlike Dürer's Melancholy, may transcend "old experience" and "ascend to a prophetic strain" (lines 173-74). Not surprisingly, many terms from alchemy and occult philosophy, two activities that also involve isolated and arcane study, are commonly used as metaphors for divine illumination. Of these, the most interesting for the reader of "These" is the one that depicts such illumination as a light visible to the intellect but shrouded in darkness for the earthly senses. Here Milton once again provides the central example of the motif in English poetry, citing its connection with Hermetic philosophy but also carefully subordinating that prophetic strain to the imperatives of Christianity. In both "Il Penseroso" and *Paradise Lost* III 1-55, the light that brings "all heaven before mine eyes" is "too bright / To hit the sense of human sight" and is thus "O'erlaid in black."

Romantic poets use the metaphor of light-in-darkness too. The yew-tree that provokes Wordsworth's meditation on time in "Yew-Trees" stands "single, in the midst / Of its own darkness" (lines 2-3), and allows the poet to ascend into a shadowy, visionary realm where "ghostly Shapes / May meet at noontide." But more common is a night meditation by a figure who resembles Milton's scholar with his lamp and tower in "Il Penseroso." Whitman confronts the ocean and the stars in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and journeys alone into the forest's gloom in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard

Bloom'd" (which merges the pastoral elegy and the penseroso ode). Yeats in "The Phases of the Moon" gives us a resourceful poet-scholar in his tower able to outwit the daemons who appear in his vision into revealing their supernatural knowledge. And Stevens's many night meditations significantly pair darkness and fire; in the greatest of these, "The Auroras of Autumn," the poet stands under the rippling fire-snake that is the Aurora Borealis: "The scholar of one candle sees / an Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame / Of everything he is. And he feels afraid" (section VI).

In general, Romantic and post-Romantic poets blend rather than separate demonic and visionary melancholy, and crises of self-doubt often precede and follow revelation. Milton's in "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" elegantly discriminated between *furor melancholicus* and *furor divinus*, but Shelley in "Mont Blanc," for example, modulates from "old and solemn harmony" (line 24) – to the Earthquake-daemon's landscape of "Ruin" that dominates sections three and four to the unanswerable question that confronts the reader at the end of the poem. Shelley's question implies that Mont Blanc may be both a sign of the "secret strength of things / Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome / Of heaven is as a law" (139–41) and a sign of vacancy, darkness, chaos. The difference depends only on the "human mind's imaginings": "And what were thou [Mont Blanc], and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" (142–44). Similarly, in Keats's Hyperion poems Apollo is meant to represent the new order of gods displacing Hyperion and the other fallen Titans, including Saturn. But though his story in Book III of "Hyperion" begins with Olympian confidence and equanimity ("[...] not a wind of heaven but will breathe / In aid soft warble from the Dorian flute; / for lo! 'tis for the Father of all verse [Apollo]" [Bk III 11–13]), by the end of the Book Apollo is as stricken as the Titans. He too endures a "fall" and acquires knowledge of sorrow and grief. He becomes saturnine: "Tell me why thus I rave, about these groves!" (Bk III 110).

Romantic and post-Romantic penseroso rhetoric, in short, gains much of its drama in involuntarily merging rather than distinguishing between the traditional sources of poetic inspiration. The poet both mocks and laments the loss of secure distinctions between visions

filled with melancholy's bile and visions filled with celestial light. Private despairs irresistibly become universal, and the light flickering over the texts of such poems seems both demonic and divine. Modern *penseroso* odes emphasize *furor* and merge *melancholicus* and *divinus*; the Apollonian is supposed to succeed the Saturnine but frequently succumbs to it instead.

"These," like most recent *penseroso* lyrics, draws upon both the positive and negative attributes of melancholy. In the first lines of the poem, Williams's mood is angry but articulate. In the middle stanzas, as he recites his catalogue of loss and destruction, his anger deepens and his voice becomes broken apart by semi-colons and dashes, stops and starts, and negatives negating each other. The saturnine qualities of melancholy, however, begin to modulate into Williams's own American version of *furor divinus* just after the lines on the abandoned homes quoted above. If those lines mark the point of Williams's deepest descent into despair, the poem's last four stanzas imply that a turn upwards may be possible in the distant future. I take this transition to the last four stanzas to be the crux of "These," and one of the most difficult passages in all of Williams's work.

Williams breaks off his description of the empty houses with a dash and then leaps to a new stanza, as if trying resolutely to distance himself from the barren scene. Take this hell-fired vision of flames, bombs, and abandoned homes, he pleads, and

Hide it away somewhere  
out of the mind, let it get roots  
and grow, unrelated to jealous

ears and eyes – for itself.

In this mine they come to dig – all. (CP1 459)

Because the mind of a poet is jealous of what it apprehends and continually wants to remake the external world in its own image, Williams seeks to restrict this process by "hiding" his private despair within general, universal language that allows multiple meanings rather than jealously guarding a single, personal one. Thus in the above lines the "it" that must get roots and grow is deliberately left ambiguous; the pronoun may refer to the houses, emptiness, despair,

or the nameless "ghosts" in turn. The phrase "hide it [...] out of the mind" may also be taken to describe the very process presently occurring in the poem, as Williams's vision of barrenness and violence is expelled out of his imagination and set down on paper. If so, that explains the poem's next line: "In this mine they come to dig – all." Once given form, Williams's vision is available to all who come to decipher it, and the meaning of Williams's visionary plunge changes; the poet's descent into despair potentially becomes a discovery of wealth, of the resources to be mined from the mind.

By describing truth as something "hidden" yet available to all, the "mine" image prepares us for the stoical confidence of the poem's close, so different from the bitter declamations of its opening lines. The concluding two and one-half stanzas of "These" juxtapose a set of rhetorical questions about the poem's dark prophecies. Each has the phrase "the source of poetry" (i.e., Williams's "mine" of despair) as its referent, and each is to be answered with an emphatic "yes":

Is this the counterfoil to sweetest

music? The source of poetry that  
seeing the clock stopped, says,  
The clock has stopped

that ticked yesterday so well?  
and hears the sound of lakewater  
splashing – that is now stone. (CP1 459)

Here Williams embraces his many ghosts proudly; they are all he has. He forms his ghosts both from private memories (the clock upon a home's mantel) and his knowledge of Nature herself, who over vast spans of geologic time fills in a lake and forms sedimentary rock. These ghosts become "the source of poetry" not because they let the mind retreat into nostalgia but because through them the mind is able to contain both past and present, presence and absence. The poet's prodigious feats of memory, moreover, suggest new strength. His mind spans both clock time and natural history, retaining all: both the vanished sounds of the lakewater and the present silence of the rock exist for him in the present tense. Williams thus casts a cold eye on



both the homes that we build and all that nature makes. He watches as all are unmade. The poem's closing is as dramatic as its opening, but it is subtler drama. Its tone is steady and stoical, not angry and contradictory – all life is to be turned to stone; all music, to silence. If the lines are filled with despair, therefore, they are also compact with potential strength. Such strength represents, I think, a renewed faith that the poet's poetic powers will eventually return, although they seem barren now. In "These" Williams thus unobtrusively blends the sound and fury of *furor melancholicus* with a trust in patience, perseverance, and humility that is associated with the spiritual labors necessary to *furor divinus*.

The stoic mixture of optimism and pessimism at the conclusion of "These" is reassuring, especially in view of the feverish anger of the poem's opening. It seems a moment of calm, of quiet questioning – a prelude to a return of imaginative power. Williams's strength is analogous to Shelley's in the last lines of "Mont Blanc" and to Stevens's in "The Snow Man." Stevens's skeptical man of snow, like the speaker of "These," is composed out of "nothing," a "cold greater than can be thought," and he courageously acknowledges that the imagination may negate itself as violently as any force in nature. But of all the modern *penseroso* poems shadowing "These," Keats's Hyperion poems (1818–19), especially "The Fall of Hyperion," exert the strongest influence, stronger even than Milton's "Il Penseroso" or Stevens's "Domination of Black." The influence of Keats's melancholy poems about paralysis and failure is the most hidden or repressed, however. It can be certainly felt in "These" only in the poem's cryptic last lines about water turning to stone, when Williams echoes prominent tropes that Keats uses. And Williams's sudden recollection of Keats could not occur at a more difficult time. Williams involuntarily opens himself to Keats's ghost just after he has contained the presence of Stevens and Milton and just when he is trying to contrive a close for his poem. To explain these assertions, and to do justice to Keats's presence in "These," I must descend beneath the surface of the poem once again.



### III

Keats was an important force for Williams throughout his career, but his voice is easiest to hear at the beginning and end – in *Poems* (1909) and in certain passages in poems of the 1950s such as "To a Dog Injured in the Street," "The Sparrow," and "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower." In "These" Keats's presence becomes oblique and suppressed – not quoted or imitated but misquoted and disguised. Williams's treatment of Keats is all the more intriguing when we compare it to his relatively straightforward allusions to pensive poems by Stevens and Milton. He alluded to those authors by using a figure of speech that is given prominence in their work – dark light in Milton's "Il Penseroso" and a turning fire and an empty house in Stevens's "Domination of Black." Keats's Hyperion poems, however, leave their traces in Williams's language in a more troubling way. Williams echoes Keats's Hyperion poems very generally until the end of "These," when his figure of water turning into stone ("[poetry] hears the sound of lakewater / splashing – that is now stone") suddenly zeroes in on crucial passages in both of Keats's poems concerned with the sources of poetic inspiration. But this borrowed trope is not developed the way that Milton's and Stevens's fire and house figures are; it is instead introduced and then dropped, and "These" comes to a halt as if nothing more remains to be said or can be said. The figure thus seems to be buried or disguised – to be a troubled allusion to Keats masquerading as scientifically literal, conclusive language about sedimentary rock.

Why would Williams try to repress the presence of Keats in "These"? The answer appears to lie in the fact that "These" and Keats's Hyperion poems, especially "The Fall of Hyperion," are crisis poems in which the poet fears that he has suffered a "fall" and lost the sources of his poetic power. Williams feels himself irresistibly drawn to Keats's texts, but also needs to suppress his consciousness of Keats's influence because to confront it openly would increase his despair even further: it would be proof that his voice had been taken over by another poet. Thus even while Williams own poetic reenacts the crisis of the Hyperion poems in "These," his own instincts for

poetic self-preservation tell him to disguise the powerful presence of Keats's voice within his own. Stevens and Milton were apparently less threatening to Williams, probably because they never were admired as reverently as Keats was. Consequently, in "These" Williams echoes Keats in a rather different way from his relatively direct allusions to Stevens and Milton.

In "The Fall of Hyperion," Moneta is the visionary muse who teaches Keats how to plunge beneath the realities of sight to "take the depth / Of things" (Bk I 304-05). The poem is composed like a dream-vision, with sudden changes in setting and dizzying spatial contradictions between foreground and background:

Turning from these with awe, once more I rais'd  
My eyes to fathom the space every way;  
The embossed roof, the silent massy range  
Of columns north and south, ending in mist  
Of nothing, then to eastward, where black gates  
Were shut against the sunrise evermore.  
Then to the west I look'd, and saw far off  
An image, huge of feature as a cloud,  
At level of whose feet an altar slept (Bk I 81-89)

Williams's visionary landscapes in "These" are less Baroque than Keats's, but their modulations are no less disorienting; the poem's setting rapidly shifts from a winter scene to an empty, nondescript "place" with a black fire at its center, a battlefield, the rooms of an empty house, a mineshaft, the stopped clock, and a lake that has been filled with stone.

The shifting settings of "These" and "The Fall of Hyperion" are unified by a pervasive mood of inertia and despair. Like Dürer's *Melancholy*, Keats's Moneta presides over a world strewn with the refuse of fallen civilizations and lost beliefs. The Poet says:

Upon the marble at my feet there lay  
Store of strange vessels, and large draperies,  
Which needs had been of dyed asbestos wove,  
Or in that place the moth could not corrupt,  
So white the linen; so, in some, distinct  
Ran imageries from a sombre loom.

All in a mingled heap confus'd there lay  
Robes, golden tongues, censer and chafing dish,  
Girdles, and chains, and holy jewelries. (Bk I 72–80)

This heap is associated with a building that is as large as the universe: "an old sanctuary with roof august, / Builded so high, it seemed that filmed clouds / Might spread beneath, as o'er the stars of heaven" (Bk I 62–64). The architecture is different in "These," being an "empty, windswept place," but Keats's and Williams's landscapes are equally forbidding, and represent not just a random pile of images but the wreckage of civilization itself.

In the conclusion of "These" Williams reworks "The Fall of Hyperion" more specifically. Williams's poem ends with the speaker moving from a commonplace example of loss (the stopped clock) to a vision of how even things as seemingly permanent as a lake are destroyed and recreated. Compare the Poet's vision of the deposed divinities Saturn and Thea in "The Fall of Hyperion":

I set myself  
Upon an eagle's watch, that I might see,  
And seeing ne'er forget. No stir of life  
Was in the shrouded vale, not so much air  
As in the zoning of a summer's day  
Robs not one light seed from the feather'd grass;  
But where the dead leaf fell there did it rest:  
A stream went voiceless by, still deaden'd more  
By reason of the fallen Divinity  
Spreading more shade (Bk I 310–17)

Long, long those two [Saturn and Thea] were postured motionless,  
Like sculpture builded up upon the grave  
Of their own power. A long awful time  
I look'd upon them; still they were the same;  
The frozen God still bending to the earth,  
And the sad Goddess weeping at his feet,  
Moneta silent. Without stay or prop  
But my own weak mortality, I bore  
The load of this eternal quietude,  
The unchanging gloom, and the three fixed shapes  
Ponderous upon my senses a whole moon. (Bk I 382–92)

Williams's language in "These" contains no deities, no personification. But his tropes of motionless stone and voiceless water are similar, and he as well as Keats is frozen in a saturnine pose bearing a load of eternal quietude.

If Keats in "The Fall of Hyperion" describes the supplanting of the Titans by the Olympians, however, Williams in "These" represents Time as it has been redefined since the Romantics by Darwin. He outdoes Keats's patience by increasing the period that the poet remains motionless from a moon's cycle to an eon. And he gives us a vista so vast and intimidating in its catalogue of extinctions – as, say, a lake turns to stone as the Mezozoic era replaces the Paleozoic one – that the short units of clock time, lunar cycles, a human being's lifetime, or even the Holocene period itself seem insignificant. Since even Williams's bleakest views of nature in his other poems usually find some source of present or impending life, the inhuman, stony grimness of the ending of "These" makes it all the more remarkable in Williams's canon.

"The Fall of Hyperion" and "These" may also be read for their buried psychological content, as disguised crisis poems about their creators' loss of self-confidence. Their dramatic occasions are notably similar: in each, the poet fears that he will become as voiceless as the silent water in the poems. In Keats's "Fall," of course, this fear is foregrounded. Purportedly a revision of his epic fragment "Hyperion," "The Fall of Hyperion" is in fact a highly personal meditation on the validity of the epic mode itself. The principal characters (Hyperion, Saturn, Thea, and Apollo) are pushed into the background while the poet argues with his Muse and undergoes a series of trials. Even though after a long introductory passage the poet seemingly turns from his private dilemmas to the public dramatic action with which his epic is properly concerned, we may read the later scenes describing Saturn's and Hyperion's melancholy, as displaced or disguised depictions of Keats's own depression. For if the deposed deities Saturn and Thea lie motionless in despair, "like sculpture builded-up upon the grave / Of their own power" (Bk I 383–84), so too is Keats haunted by the fear that his attempt to achieve the marmoreal perfections of traditional epic blank verse will mark the

grave of his true poetic power. He is paralyzed with fear that his attempt to perfect the epic will remain imperfect and incomplete.

The overt plot of the Hyperion poems, admittedly, describes the succession of a more powerful order of gods after the first – the Olympians after the Titans. But the buried psychological plot, as I have described it, is the exact reverse of that: Keats fears that he will not "succeed" the epic poets of the past. He therefore enacts his private fears through an epic story of the Titans' failed succession. Keats's predicament clearly remains that of Saturn, despite the pretense that his epic narrative describes a universal story. In "The Fall of Hyperion" Saturn lies motionless by a voiceless stream, whereas earlier in the poem Keats applied the image of a soundless stream to his own poetic voice:

suddenly a palsied chill  
Struck from the paved level up my limbs,  
And was ascending quick to put cold grasp  
Upon those streams that pulse beside the throat:  
I shriek'd; and the sharp anguish of my shriek  
Stung my own ears – I strove hard to escape  
The numbness; strove to gain the lowest step.  
Slow, heavy, deadly was my pace: the cold  
Grew stifling, suffocating, at the heart (Bk I 122–30)

It is surely not coincidental, moreover, that the phrase "the sharp anguish of my shriek" in the above passage of "The Fall of Hyperion" echoes the ending of the original "Hyperion." In that earlier poem's last lines, the Olympian Apollo has his proud self-confidence painfully overthrown; he becomes a displaced Titan who has "died" or fallen into the knowledge of time's pain. Even the key words "anguish" and "shriek" cluster together. Apollo is like

one who should take leave

Of pale immortal death, and with a pang  
As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convulse  
Die into life: so young Apollo anguish'd:  
His very hair, his golden tresses framed  
Kept undulation round his eager neck.  
During the pain Mnemosyne upheld

Her arms as one who prophesied. – At length  
 Apollo shriek'd; – and lo! from all his limbs  
 Celestial. (Bk III 127–35)

In "Hyperion," Apollo's experience of woe displaces Saturn's, and Keats cannot continue the poem long after that point. In "The Fall of Hyperion," Keats's experience of woe displaces Apollo's and Saturn's, and he has to drop his poem soon after the new fragment is written. Keats set out to write a second, more successful (and hence more "Apollonian") version of his "Hyperion" fragment, but in "The Fall of Hyperion" he suffers the same "fall" that Apollo experienced at the end of "Hyperion," and finds he can no longer believe in heroic epic action.

Not only does Williams's poem enact precisely the same fears that Keats's Hyperion poems do, but it comes to a halt at the same traumatic psychological moment. Williams's plunge into despondency in "These" involves a series of "falls" parallel to those in Keats's Hyperion poems. Keats's narrative falls from one epic tragedy after another, finally to uncover the more modern tragedy of self-consciousness. Williams in turn displaces one public example of man's "stupidity" after another (as well as a series of memories of pensive poems by Stevens and Milton) as he plummets toward his strongest and most frightening source of inspiration, Keats's "Fall of Hyperion." In doing so, Williams involuntarily dismantles one figure of speech after another. This process of dismantling reaches a disastrously appropriate consummation in the last lines of the poem. On the one hand, Williams tries to assert that in contemplating barrenness he has uncovered the "source" of his poetry's ability to renew itself – its objective literalism and stoical honesty. On the other hand, his last trope of water turning to stone disrupts those truths by uncovering the true source of the poem – a source that is visionary and pessimistic and hardly dealt with objectively or honestly. It is as if the cold presence of Keats's achievement in the Hyperion poems, imperfect as it is, paralyzed Williams and brought "These" to a halt as soon as it was felt. Like Keats and like Apollo, Williams felt his fate to be Saturn's. He had hoped in "These" to uncover a "source" of renewal; instead, he ends the poem contemplating the stone that marks



the grave of his own power. As he says earlier in "These," "the cold is greater than can be thought."

Curiously, when Williams in his *Autobiography* (1951) cited the poems of Keats that most influenced him, he mentioned the Hyperion poems but focused on their failure and Keats's anguish: "I quit Keats just at the moment he himself did – with Hyperion's scream" (A 61). Actually Keats's first version, not his second, ends with a scream, and it is Apollo, not Hyperion, who cries out. But Williams's mistake is revealing: he conflates Apollo and the Titans even as Keats did. Moreover, since Apollo's pain is essentially Keats's, I would argue that it is Keats's scream in "The Fall of Hyperion" as well as Apollo's scream in "Hyperion" that Williams remembers so vividly. For the reader of "These," in fact, Williams does not "quit" Keats's Hyperion poems at the moment of the scream but rather enters the poems there. And Hyperion's, Apollo's, and Keats's cries do not haunt Williams nearly as much as their stony silence.

At the start of his career Williams had made a failed attempt to imitate Keats's own Romantic epic "Endymion," and in 1938, the year of "These," he had already been thinking about a long poem called *Paterson* for over a decade without really making a start on it. Therefore at the deepest level of "These," when "The Fan of Hyperion" emerges as its primary source, we find Williams unconsciously acting out his fears that he will not be able to write *Paterson*. He does so by remembering and then repressing crucial episodes in Keats's poems about the anguish of attempting a modern epic. Like Keats, Williams fears that his own second trail of invention in the epic will strangle his poetic voice with a "cold grasp / Upon those streams that pulse beside the throat" ("Fall" Bk I 124–25). Indeed, Williams fears (as Keats did) that his failure with the epic may show that he has failed as a lyric poet as well – that he is a mere dreamer rather than a poet.<sup>6</sup>

6 In *Paterson*, intriguingly, the degree to which Dr. Paterson can or cannot remember the sound of the water rushing over the Passaic Falls is one of our most trustworthy measurements of his successes and failures. And at the moment of Dr. Paterson's deepest despair, in *Paterson*, Book Three, section iii, Williams borrows directly from the ending of "These." Dr. Paterson becomes



## IV

It would not be quite accurate to say that "These" ends so starkly, however, with the poet eternally frozen in the melancholic's traditional posture, sitting with his head supported by his hand watching his poetic power turn to stone. For a full reading of the poem's conclusion subtly qualifies the anger of its opening and the despair of its last lines. A deconstruction of the poem such as I have just made consequently cannot be definitive.

Williams may lose faith in his poetic voice, emptying the houses of his language, turning his "figures" of speech into ghosts, and demolishing his sentences' syntax. And he may have written a radically unstable poem that plunges toward its coldest and strongest source of inspiration, only to repress the true knowledge of what its descent has found. But these dark truths do not destroy the stoic strength of the poem's last lines, nor do they negate the fact that in "These" Williams survives a series of spiritual trials and uncovers the sources of future strength. My conflicting formalist and deconstructive readings of the poem merely show how in "These" selfless revelation and self-deluded repression, *furor divinus* and *furor melancholicus*, are inexorably mixed. The formalist reading emphasizes the poem's efforts to create unity and closure, and treats the ending as a prelude to a return to imaginative confidence. The deconstructive one attends the self-destructiveness of the poem's language and reads the ending as a secretly apocalyptic unveiling of the deepest, most unresolved source

flooded with language but cannot give it form; he therefore is swept away by the flood and eventually buried up to his eyes in mud, his mouth and voice choked off: "FULL STOP // – and leave the world / to darkness / and to / me" (P 140). Williams indicates the relevance of "These" and the pensive tradition in general by quoting line four from Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." (The Gray quotation ought to be added to the notes in Christopher MacGowan's edition of *Paterson*.) Williams also here not only alludes to the immobilization and silence of the poet in "These" and "The Fall of Hyperion," but does those poems one better: Dr. Paterson is now *immersed* in the sediment rather than contemplating it from shore. From this nadir Dr. Paterson must extricate himself, just as he must in "These."

of Williams's despair. Rather than asserting the priority of one of these readings over the other, however, I would instead claim that *both* must be engaged if the full prophetic power of Williams's lines is to be felt. Deconstruction was once as fashionable as formalism was earlier, but by itself it is the equivalent of *furor melancholicus* in criticism and need not necessarily be more correct than other ways of reading. As Williams might say, it leaves the parts of the poem "disrelated" to each other, and "useless" (P 119).

Consider for one last time the list of rhetorical questions with which Williams ends "These":

In this mine they come to dig – all.  
Is this the counterfoil to sweetest

music? The source of poetry that  
seeing the clock stopped, says,  
The clock has stopped

that ticked yesterday so well?  
and hears the sound of lakewater  
splashing – that is now stone. (CP1 459)

Not only is Williams's reference to mining here logically linked to the (future) possibility of rebuilding homes with the stone that is mined, but his concluding reference to lakewater and stone suggests that all absences may eventually be converted into presences again. Lakes disappear, but create stone. The "year's night" may become the year's day. Homes are abandoned and republics destroyed, but some of the inhabitants survive, migrate, and begin again. And a poet who despairs of his language one day may regain his faith in it the next. The cold truths of "These" thus have their consolations, however stonily indifferent they are to individual human beings and their suffering. Williams refuses to give us an easy resolution. Instead, he suggests that we no longer can shelter ourselves with a faith in *furor divinus*, mankind's collective intelligence, or even the old belief that man is the measure of the natural world. Williams also implies that a recognition of the essential barrenness and instability of both nature and language may be a new beginning, a true "source" of power that

we may quarry to build newer, humbler, more temporary structures of belief.

The art of "These" is indeed a mine full of riches; if its violence, delusions, and darkness are ours, its stoic strength becomes ours too. But we must turn to other earlier and later poems in Williams's canon if we want to find the tropes that are emptied of meaning in "These" restored to life. In "A Sort of Song" (1944), for instance, Williams confidently revises the ending of "These" by asserting that "Saxifrage is my flower that splits / the rocks" (CP2 55). In *Paterson*, he begins his poem with a rhapsodic description of the Passaic Falls, thus signifying that the waters of inspiration are flowing again. And in "The House" (1931), "Burning the Christmas Greens" (1944), and "The Lady Speaks" (1955), to pick just three examples, the homes that are abandoned in "These" are redesigned, refurnished, and repopulated. We may wonder at the vehemence with which Williams in "These" despaired of his language and tried to evade as well as absorb his sources of inspiration. But that is what all great pensive poems do.

Near the end of "These" Williams calls his poem a "counterfoil" to the "sweetest music" in his other work. A counterfoil is both the record of a financial transaction (such as a check stub) and, more generally, a fragmentary account summarizing material treated in more detail elsewhere. Williams's choice of this word to describe his poem is at first surprising, particularly since it mixes metaphors of music and finance and since "These" seems not to summarize Williams's other work but to negate it. Yet "These" (like its title) has the compacted terseness of a counterfoil's notations, and it also summarizes poetic debts and the psychic cost of writing. Even more importantly, Williams's choice of the word counterfoil argues that all of his other writings are necessarily incomplete until rejoined to the dark fragment that is "These." The poem plumbs the void, the saturnine silence that Williams's sweetest music seeks to fill.

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