

# BORN STUB BO

Poetic  
Facticity and  
the Avant-  
garde

# POETRIES



PETER QUARTERMAIN

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## Stubborn Poetries

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MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY POETICS

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# Stubborn Poetries

Poetic Facticity and the Avant-Garde

PETER QUARTERMAIN

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## Acknowledgments

Each of the essays in this book was written for and to an occasion. Consequently, they do not as a whole pursue a central argument or explicit thesis that might pull them together into a coherent and interlocking whole. They do not attempt to cover a particular (or even a general) field. They were not written with a collection in mind, nor a book. Gathered together, as here, there is not only an *ad hoc* quality to their assemblage but, inevitably, a recurrence of names, citations, themes, and quotations that reveal some of the constants in my reading and delight—work by Basil Bunting, William Carlos Williams, and Louis Zukofsky. The nature of literary authority is a recurrent but intermittent *motif*.

Such is the nature of occasion that inclusion and omission are in part simply a matter of happenstance: the occasion for some possible essays simply didn't arise, or my efforts were simply inadequate. There are not, for instance, as many essays on women writers as I would have liked, and some pieces—on Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Kathleen Fraser, or Rosmarie Waldrop—were too slight for inclusion. Other omissions, such as the perhaps surprising lack of anything about Robert Duncan, result from slightly different circumstance: in the case of Duncan, the process of editing his collected poems, along with the fairly long introductory essays to the two volumes of his work, tempered my appetite for writing yet another. There is also the thought that with the long-delayed publication of *The H. D. Book*, the two volumes of his *Collected Poems and Plays*, and the *Collected Prose*, Duncan is becoming canonical and the need for the sort of essay I customarily write is less. I encountered a similar situation years before when I went to write about William Carlos Williams. Like Duncan, Williams (and, later, Olson) opened doors for me—Williams is for me the wellhead (I came to Ezra Pound much later)—but by the time I began to attempt an essay (in the mid-1960s) he was rapidly becoming



canonical, and I found myself irresistibly drawn to the sometimes crumpled syntax of Louis Zukofsky. Questions are more engaging than answers.

I have brought references up-to-date where it seemed more or less urgently necessary, and generally made slight revisions in the interests of clarity or even grace. I warmly thank Charles Bernstein and Hank Lazer for their strong and patient encouragement to gather these essays into a book, and Stephen Collis, who, once I'd gathered the essays, gave them an initial and extremely useful copyedit, thereby saving me the expenditure of a lot of energy during a period when I was feeling somewhat overwhelmed by too many commitments. Marjorie Perloff read the whole manuscript, made detailed and useful suggestions at both local and global levels, and wisely urged me to write the introduction; I owe her much.

The essays in this book were written between 1989 and 2006. The first to be written, "Canonical Strategies and the Question of Authority: T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams," was delivered in much-abridged form at the Tri-University Conference, Simon Fraser University, 4 March 1989. It has not previously been printed.

"Basil Bunting: Poet of the North" is the text of a lecture given in March 1990 at the University of Durham, England; it was originally published as a chapbook by the Basil Bunting Poetry Archive in 1990. I am grateful indeed to the Basil Bunting Poetry Center at Durham University for appointing me as its first Mountjoy Fellow, and for the opportunity this afforded me to work in the substantial archive of Bunting materials in the Mountjoy collection. The late Richard Caddel and Diana Collecott of the Basil Bunting Poetry Centre deserve my special thanks, as do Tony Downes of the Society of Fellows at Durham University and Judith Draycott of English Estates North. I also owe warm thanks to Ann Caddel for valuable comments on historical matters, and to Karen Jackson for providing me with a welcome bolt-hole from the not-inconsiderable rigors of dormitory life in Collingwood College. David Burnett and Beth Rainey of Durham University Library were constantly courteous and patient, steering me through the intricacies of the archive and the local history collection, and I thank them. I must add that without the considerable support of English Estates North, Basil Bunting's papers would not have stayed in the north of England, where they belong.

A somewhat different version of essay 4 was given as a lecture in the Department of English at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York, in late 1989 at the invitation of Charles Bernstein, Gray Chair in Poetry, and in further modified form in February 1990 at the University of Durham, in England, as part of the Mountjoy Fellowship. It first appeared as "Parataxis

in Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky," *Sharp Study and Long Toil*, Richard Caddel, ed. *Durham University Journal* special issue (March): 54–70.

Of the two essays on Louis Zukofsky, that on writing and authority in *Thanks to the Dictionary* was initially given as "Procedural Composition: The Case of Zukofsky" at the conference *The First Postmoderns: American Poets of the 1930s Generation* held at the University of Maine, Orono, in June 1993. It was subsequently published as "Writing and Authority in Louis Zukofsky's *Thanks to the Dictionary*" in *Upper Limit Speech: The Writing of Louis Zukofsky*, Mark Scroggins, ed. (Tuscaloosa University of Alabama Press, 1997) 154–174. The other Zukofsky essay, "Thinking with the Poem," is, with several small changes and with longer quotations summarized or paraphrased, the text of an address given at a plenary session of the Louis Zukofsky Centenary Conference, Columbia University, New York, September 2004. It was published by Lou Rowan in *Golden Handcuffs Review* 1.5 (Summer-Fall): 169–181, and in severely truncated form in the electronic journal *Jacket* 30 (2006).

"Reading Niedecker" was written at the behest of Jenny Penberthy in September 1992, and first appeared in her *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet* (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1986) 219–227; an abbreviated version of "'Take Oil / and Hum': Niedecker and Bunting" was given at a panel on "Niedecker and Company" at the *Lorine Niedecker Centenary Celebration 1903–2003*, held in Milwaukee in October 2003; it was first published in *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, Elizabeth Willis, ed. (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2008) 271–283.

"The Mind as Frying Pan: Robin Blaser's Humor" is the text of a paper read in June 1995 at the conference "The Recovery of the Public World: The Poetry and Poetics of Robin Blaser," held at Emily Carr College, Vancouver. It was first published by Clayton Eshleman in *Sulfur* 37 (Fall 1995): 108–116, and reprinted in *The Recovery of the Public World: Essays on Poetics in Honour of Robin Blaser*, Charles Watts and Edward Byrne, ed. (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1999) 50–57.

"Writing on Air for Dear Life," the essay on Richard Caddel, is a somewhat extensively revised combination of two pieces: the review article "Caddel," which appeared in John Tranter's electronic journal *Jacket* 20 (December 2002), and a memorial essay titled "Richard Caddel," which was read in 2002 at the conference at the University of Calgary to honor the work of Fred Wah and mark his retirement; it was subsequently published in the Fred Wah issue of *Open Letter* 12.2 (Spring 2004): 108–120. I am grateful to Meredith Quartermain for her great help in combining the two.

The essays on Mina Loy, George Oppen, Robert Creeley, Lyn Hejinian,

and Steve McCaffery were all initially delivered orally at various conferences and gatherings. “The Tattle of Tongueplay” was read at the Annual Convention of the MLA, held in New York in December 1992, and subsequently published in *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*, Maera Shreiber and Keith Tuma, ed. (Orono: National Poetry Foundation) 75–85. “Conversation with One’s Peers” was given as the Eleventh George Oppen Memorial Lecture at the First Unitarian Church, San Francisco, in December 1996, sponsored by the Poetry Center and American Poetry Archive, San Francisco State University; excerpts were originally published in *The Poetry Center and American Poetry Archives News* [San Francisco] 13 (1997): 11–14. “Momently: The Politics of the Poem” was given at the memorial conference *On Words: On the Life and Work of Robert Creeley*, in Buffalo, NY, October 2006, and published in *On Words: Robert Creeley*, Stephen Fredman and Steve McCaffery, ed. (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2010) 118–139.

“Syllable as Music: Lyn Hejinian’s *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*” was delivered at the invitation of Marjorie Perloff at a panel on “Musicating Language” arranged by the division on Literature and the Other Arts at the Annual Convention of the MLA, San Francisco, December 1991; it was published in slightly expanded form in *Sagetrieb* 11.3 (Winter 1993): 17–31. “McCaffery’s Diptych: *The Black Debt*” was originally written at the invitation of Herbert Leibowitz for a special issue of *Parnassus* on long poetry, but it was submitted too late for publication; it has not previously been published.

At the invitation of Marjorie Perloff, “‘Getting Ready to Have Been Frightened’: How I Read Bruce Andrews” was originally given as a lecture at the English Department, Stanford University, in May 1991, and was published in the Bruce Andrews issue of *Aerial* 9 (1999): 161–182. The essay which follows, on Andrews’s *Lip Service*, was given in April 1997 as a lecture titled “Paradise and Praxis: Dante in a Contemporary American Avant-Garde” at the conference *La Presenza di Dante Nella Poesia Contemporanea Nordamericana* sponsored by Dipartimento di Scienze, Linguistiche e Letterarie, Università “G. D’Annunzio” [Pescara] and Casa di Dante in Abruzzo [Torre de’ Passeri] [Italy]. It was published in *Witz: A Journal of Contemporary Poetics* 6.2 (Summer 1998): 5–18, and in *Dante: “For Use, Now,”* Annalisa Goldoni and Andrea Mariani, ed. (Rome: *Testo e Senso* 3, 2000) 119–132. The bulk of this essay was drafted during a resident fellowship at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center in January–February 1996, when a bout of ill health obliged me to abandon the project I originally proposed for that extraordinary and very welcome stay—I am indeed grateful.

A truncated version of “Undoing the Book” was read at a session on “The

Status of Bibliography in the Profession,” arranged by the Division on Methods of Literary Research, at the Annual Convention of the MLA in Toronto, December 1993. It was first published in *Text: An Interdisciplinary Annual of Textual Studies*, D. C. Greetham, W. Speed Hill, and Peter Shillingsburg, ed. (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997) v. 9, pp. 119–134. I am grateful to the late Charles Watts, Special Collections, Simon Fraser University Library, for bibliographic information about several of the little magazines listed in this paper.

A much longer version of “Poetic Fact,” with slide illustrations, was given as a lecture in the Summer Writing Program, Naropa University, in 2006, and at the Kootenay School of Writing in Vancouver in 2007.

“Sound Reading” was written in 1997 for Charles Bernstein’s collection *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, Charles Bernstein, ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1998) 217–230, and “Paradise of Letters” in 1997 for the “letters” issue of *Chain* 6 (Summer 1999): 175–185.

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## Stubborn Poetries



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# Introduction

## Reading the Difficult

O marvelous! what new configuration will come next?

I am bewildered with multiplicity.

—William Carlos Williams

In 1926 Gertrude Stein suggested that “the creator of the new composition in the arts is an outlaw until he is a classic, there is hardly a moment in between,”<sup>1</sup> and the lure of such disobedience is compelling. If you want to talk or write about innovative writing, it challenges our vocabulary: we don’t have the right words to be precise or exact. We even have great difficulty identifying at all clearly the event our reading is, because we barely recognize it (if we recognize it at all), and *that*, as the word “recognize” reminds us, is a problem of memory. “Americans,” William Carlos Williams observed, “have never recognized themselves. How can they? It is impossible until someone invent the ORIGINAL terms. . . . Invent that which is new . . . and there’s none to know what you have done. It is because there’s no *name*.”<sup>2</sup> The modernist rallying cry “Make it new!” is thus at some point self-defeating if the new does not have substantial bits of the old clinging to its hem. W. B. Yeats, struck with Whitman’s originality, recognized over a century ago, in 1901, that “when Walt Whitman writes in seeming defiance of a tradition, he needs tradition for protection, for the butcher and the baker and the candlestick-maker grow merry over him when they meet his work by chance.”<sup>3</sup> That laughter is very like the scorn John Gibson Lockhart famously poured on the “calm, settled, imperturbable drivelling idiocy” of Keats’s “Endymion.”<sup>4</sup> It is echoed in the mirth of a *Life* magazine editorial in the 1930s that ridiculed William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow,” and likewise points to responses like Cleanth Brooks’s 1964 assessment of Williams’s language in that poem as “quite inert. I see the white chickens and the raindrops glazing red paint. But I have to take on faith the author’s statement that ‘so much depends’ on this scene.”<sup>5</sup> The would-be commentator, attempting to counter such judgment, or faced with unconventional and opaque new work, is often tempted to invent special terms or redefine those already in use. But invent-



ing language frequently leads to an arcane jargon whose complexity is comprehensible (if at all) only to specialists. Redefining terms already in use—especially if they are ordinary words—runs risks of a different sort, for the habitual usage interferes with the revised, and thereby results in a confused response if not in confused thought. Both approaches exclude the uninitiated, and the *event* of the poem disappears.

As a schoolboy in England I was an enthusiastic though unadventurous and inarticulate reader of poetry—the first book of poetry I bought off my own bat, with birthday-present money, was *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, in the Oxford Standard Authors series. It never occurred to me that Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*—which Mum and Dad gave for my eleventh birthday—could be read as *poem*; its agreeable nonsense wasn't serious enough and its clear narrative too simple to count—it was too much *fun*. About a year before I went to university I spread my wings a bit when, for half my weekly pocket money, I bought Kenneth Allott's anthology *Contemporary Verse*, “a collection of verse written between 1918 and 1948” in the Penguin Poets series, for 1/6d.<sup>6</sup> Of the poets—ranging from W. B. Yeats to Sidney Keyes (it took me a long time to notice that only three of them were women)—the only Americans were T. S. Eliot and Arthur Waley. For reasons of space, and not because the book was an anthology of *English* verse, the introduction (dated 1948) regretted the absence of “Ezra Pound, John Crowe Ransom, E.E. Cummings, Allen Tate, Frederic Prokosch, etc.,” and at some length explained why it preferred Eliot to Pound, but otherwise *en passant* mentioned only Amy Lowell and Walt Whitman. The headnote prefacing Eliot's work mentioned F. O. Matthiessen, while that prefacing W. H. Auden's mentioned Randall Jarrell; the book failed altogether even to name Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, or William Carlos Williams. The headnote for Yeats which starts the anthology identifies “the problem facing most contemporary poets” with Yeats's “insight” (in his *Autobiographies*) that “how small a fragment of our own nature can be brought to perfect expression.”<sup>7</sup>

Allott's “Introductory Note” was thoroughly appropriate as preparation for my undergraduate education in English literature: its expression and communicative model of poetry fed into, and owed much to, the New Criticism, much in vogue in my undergraduate and graduate student days, and indeed after. Cleanth Brooks was perhaps its leading practitioner. Like the other New Critics, Brooks owed much to T. S. Eliot, and perhaps through him to I. A. Richards, whose books Eliot cited more than once in his *Selected Essays*. Everyone in our undergraduate study of English was obliged to read Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924); his book *Practical Criticism* (1929) was the foundation of a compulsory discussion course of great vigor

that met once a week for two years. Unlike the book after which it was named, the course did not so much investigate the interpretive process as train us in *explication de texte*, providing exemplary instances of acceptable understanding of the poem or prose under scrutiny. The course gave me the habit of paying close attention to the text, but I was not very good at the overall practice of the course. I continually failed to achieve the prescribed or agreed-upon interpretation (“the paradox of ‘cold heaven’ is the very foundation of the tension in Yeats’s poem!” we were encouraged to discern) in much the same way as, when a schoolboy, I had utterly botched scansion exercises; *then*, I had been told the meter of Donne’s fourteenth Holy Sonnet, “Batter my heart, three person’d God,” is “obviously iambic after the first word!” though my ear *still* tells me otherwise. Under the expert guidance of our mentors, the undergraduate group would achieve interpretive consensus, sometimes excitedly, but I found the professed clarity of my peers’ interpretation of the text unsatisfying, reluctantly and even agonizingly preferring my own hesitant (and as the course rolled on, increasingly unasked) questions to whatever “answers” that emerged in the guise of “understanding.”

Cleanth Brooks’s blindness to Williams’s wheelbarrow is of the same ilk as Richards’s somewhat contemptuous dismissal of H. D.’s “The Pool” as an example of “badness in poetry” because it is a “defective communication”:

#### THE POOL

Are you alive?

I touch you.

You quiver like a sea-fish.

I cover you with my net.

What are you—banded one?<sup>8</sup>

Although he somewhat begrudgingly adds that “it is likely that the original experience had some value,”<sup>9</sup> it is clear that Richards finds the poem’s “simplicity” permanently opaque and blames the brevity of the poem and the direct openness of H. D.’s spare language, with its avoidance of connotation, for the poem’s ineffectiveness. Its closing question can no more be precisely answered with a clear meaning than Williams’s poem can tell us precisely *what* it is that depends “so much” on the red wheelbarrow. In their apparent inconsequentiality and refusal to explain, both poems are stubbornly opaque, and they are difficult even to describe at all precisely.

A demand for such “precision”—a preciseness not only of image and metaphor but of a response identifying the tensions and paradoxes which are (or are assumed to be) the source of the poem’s dynamic—is the salient hallmark

of a critical method which assumes that the work of art is, in its complexity, self-sufficient, ahistorical, and atemporal: the meaning of the work can be known objectively. The task of the reader is, through detailed consideration of relationships within the text, through consideration of symbols, images, ironies, ambiguities, and the like, to discern that meaning and its movement, and through the reconciliation of jarring and even contradictory elements in the text to discover, or rather establish, the essential unity of the work. Such criteria for the identification and assessment of poetry derives from Eliot's suggestion, in his essay on "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), "that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning."<sup>10</sup> Eliot might have Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" or his own *The Waste Land* in mind. Faced with these examples of the new, our mentors in "Practical Criticism" preferred the challenges thus offered by Eliot and Pound to the ones posed by H. D.'s pool or Williams's wheelbarrow. With their use of quotations, foreign languages, arcane reference, and (in Eliot's case) footnotes, they are so obviously "difficult" that they demand the sort of explication New Criticism called for and which now fills so many shelves in university libraries. They are puzzling poems, and the implication (at least by our mentors, if not by the poems themselves) is that their stubbornness will yield to analysis because their essential riddle can be solved. Eliot's judgment of "Mauberley," that it is "a document of an epoch," led us—and our teachers—along with countless text-anthologies—to prefer it to Pound's "Homage to Sextus Propertius." Eliot included the first ("a great poem") and excluded the second ("a most interesting study in versification") from his edition of Pound's *Selected Poems*, noting of "Propertius" that "I was doubtful of its effect upon the uninstructed reader, even with my instructions."<sup>11</sup>

For the poem, especially the *new* poem, to be worthwhile, for it to be what Richards called of "some value," we learned that it must offer difficulty of a similar sort, and that analytic description, untangling it detail by detail, was the way to understanding. But faced with simplicity, not that of the new like Williams or H. D. (we hadn't even *heard* of Williams, and—but for "The Pool"—hardly at all of H. D.), but that of ballads from Percy's *Reliques* or early traditional work, we were at a loss:

Westron wynde, when wilt thou blow,  
The small raine down can raine.

Cryst, if my love were in my armes  
And I in my bedde again!

Even with Quiller-Couch's regularized version to compare, there was not much to say.<sup>12</sup> Like the new, the simple resists description, and this poem simply lacks those dynamic qualities we were taught to notice and "appreciate." If pressed, we might resort to the kind of associative response which we scorned in Walter Pater's aesthetic effusions over the Mona Lisa. We might—and did—recite "Westron wynde" with pleasure and even glee, so instantly did its condensed loneliness move into our hearts, but it didn't lend itself to the critical act. There was nothing to describe for there was nothing to peel apart. Shakespeare's songs, and Ben Jonson's short lyrics (such as the well-worn "Drinke to me, onely, with thine eyes")<sup>13</sup> were equally resistant; I got no help from Eliot, who, contrasting Ben Jonson with John Donne, and with fellow playwrights (other than Shakespeare), wrote: "He is no less a poet than these men, but his poetry is of the surface. Poetry of the surface cannot be understood without study. . . . [T]he polished veneer of Jonson only reflects the lazy reader's fatuity; unconscious does not respond to unconscious; no swarms of inarticulate feelings are aroused. The immediate appeal of Jonson is to the mind; his emotional tone is not in the single verse, but in the design of the whole."<sup>14</sup> After untangling the difficulties, unpacking the abstruse dense referentiality, and tracking the almost gnomic epigrammatic syntax of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," to see Eliot praise Pound's poem for its "simplicity"<sup>15</sup> was, to say the least, startling and baffling. What exactly might the distinction be, between "polished veneer" and what I took to be such simplicity as H. D.'s? As I read further and further through English and American poetry it became clearer and clearer, and more and more distressing, that the critical reading-method we were learning disqualified many poems from serious critical dialogue. What could you say about "The Hunting of the Snark"? Why didn't the lectures I eventually skipped talk about William Barnes of Dorset or John Clare or even Thomas Campion? In his essay on Jonson, Eliot had suggested that this sort of poetry demanded study, demanded "intellectual saturation in his work as a whole." But, Eliot warned, "not many people are capable of discovering for themselves the beauty which is only found after labour," a stricture that, coming as it did hand in hand with the critical approaches I was being told to learn, severely undermined the great pleasure I and some of my peers took in such songs and singers by authoritatively calling that pleasure into question. It did not occur to me that the available critical vocabulary was inadequate to the task; poems like Carroll's "The Hunting of the Snark" and "You are old, father William" were spurious poems, poems

for children. Like “The Red Wheelbarrow,” like almost anything by Edith Sitwell or Stevie Smith or the despised Vachel Lindsay, they were “light verse,” so by definition lacked Matthew Arnold’s requisite “high seriousness”; they were too easy.<sup>16</sup> Or they were simply, as Richards had pronounced, “bad poetry.” They failed to create metaphysical ambiguities and multi-layered symbols and image-patterns, failed to demand of poet and reader the reconciliation of apparent contradictions, lacked wit and recondite allusiveness. The sheer enjoyment of chant and recitation, clarity and simplicity, were not sufficient, or even indeed legitimate; nor was, finally, the discursive poetry of say Samuel Daniel or Hugh MacDiarmid, whose demands on the reader—whose difficulties—were of a quite different order.

By the time I got out of graduate school I had stopped reading poetry altogether, it had become such a task, and an onerous one at that. I knew I could not understand it and certainly had no desire to teach it. But in 1962 I found myself obliged to teach poetry in a survey course of “American Literature After 1880,” and shortly after that, completely unaware of the sheer unlikelihood as well as good fortune of it, met Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and (a bit later) Basil Bunting, each of whom had quite some effect. Reading the old New Directions *Selected Poems* of William Carlos Williams<sup>17</sup> to get ready for that 1962 course, and reading those poems with dawning excitement and intense pleasure, I began to grasp how subject I had been to the tyranny of an understanding which insists that the poem meet whatever notions of appropriateness we bring to the reading of poetry, whether of manner or matter, and that all violations of protocol can be accounted for. Such necessity to understand demanded that I take from the poem a meaning I could carry over and apply some other place—that I read, as Zukofsky put it, with “predatory intention.”<sup>18</sup> “To Daphne and Virginia,” “The Desert Music,” and “Asphodel That Greeny Flower”—the long poems in Williams’s *Pictures from Brueghel*—were an astonishing and exciting revelation. I carried them around for days, for weeks, the way I carried “The Red Wheelbarrow” in my head it was so vividly easy to remember—like some of the hard-to-find poems of Louis Zukofsky, it haunted me. I began to suspect that Brooks’s dismissal of the poem came from a failure of attention, and that his failure of attention came from a failure of vocabulary. Insistent that the poem “say something,” say “something worth saying,” he had no vocabulary that would permit or enable him to attend the syntactic, rhythmic, and visual play at the heart of that poem, and leave it at that. Unlike Eliot, who is a much more sympathetic and generous reader than his magisterial and *ex cathedra* tone might suggest (though he too seems not to have liked Williams), Brooks (like Richards and many New Critics) is so trapped in the protocols of his own

procedures that the sheer accessibility of Williams's language, its simplicity and lucidity, undoes his ability to discuss it.<sup>19</sup> Williams's poems are reader-friendly, the warm and even intimate voice so inviting and (*contra* Eliot) so *personal*, the language so accessible, that it struck me *anyone* could write like that. But of course, *anyone* could not: "The smell of the heat is boxwood"—the flat statement so immediately familiar, the perhaps ruminative not-quite-conversational voice singling out the pungent telling detail, brooking in its personal and unambiguous reportage neither disagreement nor interpretation. Yet I knew instantly, on reading it for the first time, that I might well be reading "To Daphne and Virginia," "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" and those other late poems for the rest of my life, so loaded are they with multiply suggestive meaning. As Pound said in 1928, Williams "does not 'conclude.'"<sup>20</sup> Many of his poems, though pointed, are nevertheless deliberately pointless, baffling the New Critical demand that a poem lead to something conclusive and definable, in Williams's view all too frequently *stopping* thought.

Like many traditional lyrics, Williams's short poems begin *in medias res*; there's not an ounce of preparation, no warm-up for the reader, no thematic or social setting of the scene. The language is blunt, even if the bluntness is somewhat tempered by subordinate clauses.

#### BETWEEN WALLS

the back wings  
of the

hospital where  
nothing

will grow lie  
cinders

in which shine  
the broken

pieces of a green  
bottle<sup>21</sup>

The language is close to journalism: flat and plain, in blunt facticity. It is, if we add punctuation and ignore the line breaks, indistinguishable from prose. Any attempt to explore the connotations of "green" or the contrast between *its* suggestiveness and the sterility of the cinders on which the glass lies, leads only to the banal—the poem registers a syntax of attention, of perception.

It is a noticing. To read the syntax as “the hospital where nothing will grow” leads us away from the poem into fruitless and irrelevant speculation, since there is a straightforward and easily sorted syntax available, even if the sentence itself seems pointless and the poem seems to “lead nowhere.” In this, “Between Walls” is like “The Red Wheelbarrow” even if that poem might be said in its opening words at least to gesture toward a point. For both poems, it is difficult to imagine a social context or setting for the apparently inconsequential utterance: Under what circumstances might somebody say this? And when? Yet both poems, like so many of Williams’s short poems, seem to exist simply “just to say.” There is implacability in the language that resists both paraphrase and explication. The language is so spare, the details so sparse, the statement so stubbornly *there* before the reader, uncompromising, that the reader’s knowledge *cannot* intervene, cannot interfere with the poem; indeed it renders that knowledge irrelevant, the poem open. The poem doesn’t care whether you are puzzled or not; it’s an event, and you can join it, take part in, or not.

As the opening essay in this book suggests, the central issue that distinguishes Eliot from Williams—each representative of different critical and poetic conventions—is the question of authority and where it is to be found: in the social group or in the individual; in the values of high culture or the values of the street; in calculation or in spontaneity; in the canon or in poems, one at a time. Eliot is just as insistent in his desire to define and establish himself within an explicitly British and European canon of great works as Williams is to position himself outside it. Given such polarities, complex though they are, it is not a very large jump from a poem by Williams to a poem by, say, Bruce Andrews or Maggie O’Sullivan. Both suppress allusiveness, in vocabulary and rhythm playing down literary and cultural convention and even association, the words flat and plain (though frequently startling in their unusual predication and juxtapositions), the words so aggressively and uncompromisingly *there* on the page, language constitutive of experience, of a social or even a human whose existence we might not suspect. No “easy lateral sliding” (as Williams said of “the associational or sentimental value”) into reference or symbol.<sup>22</sup> These are take-it-or-leave-it poets; language is a “What Is,” inescapably and implacably opaque. There are two essays on Andrews in this book, but there is none on O’Sullivan—she’s a performance poet, utterly terrific, but I haven’t found a way even to talk about the pleasure her work affords me. Her work, like most of the work discussed in this book, so insistently resists the definitive that even now, fifteen to twenty years since I first heard her read, all I can do is point with pleasure: “Here. And here. And here. Look! Listen to this!” The sheer *presence* of her words, the obduracy of her language and its refusal to explain, is not unlike work by Gertrude Stein, who

also drops the reader abruptly into the deep end to sink or swim in her ocean of playful indeterminacies.

nailed Eagles	beryl	alter vanish
Owls, Blood-bed		
Bird gear	turbulent	
Ruled		
it,		

is how one poem, “Hill Figures,” begins.<sup>23</sup> The difficulty simply even to *say* it, as well as the sheer fluidity of syntax and the indeterminacy of even paraphrasable sense or meaning, are but extensions of the kind of relentlessness I see in Williams. They compel active reading, reading as an event. Harry Mathews has gone so far as to say, prefatory to his brief discussion of the opening of *Northanger Abbey*, that “of writer and reader, the reader is the only creator” because reading is “an act of creation for which the writer provides the means.”<sup>24</sup> Those means, Mathews says, rest largely upon successive acts of omission. In a similar vein, Zukofsky often commented that to establish the poem as thing, the essential task of the poet is not to choose what to include but to discover what to leave out. For anyone trying to write about the poem as an active object in space and time, local and immediate, right before the senses under the nose, the essential challenge is that of description.

At just about the same time I was discovering Williams I also began, with growing excitement, to read Charles Olson. In “Human Universe” Olson talked about the “dodges” of discourse which “come out as demonstration, a separating out, an act of classification, and so, a stopping”:

All that comparison ever does is set up a series of *reference* points: to compare is to take one thing and try to understand it by marking its similarities to or differences from another thing. Right here is the trouble, that each thing is not so much like or different from another thing (these likenesses and differences are apparent) but that such an analysis only accomplishes a *description*, does not come to grips with what really matters: that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short . . . its particularity.<sup>25</sup>

Or, one might say, its inescapable *thereness*, its ineluctable presence, its facticity: that quality which resists explanation and interpretation and cannot be accounted for. Paul Celan said that for a poem to be a poem it must by



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