

William Carlos Williams and the Origins of the Confessional Poem

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"A life that is here and now is timeless. That is the universal I am seeking: to embody that in a new work of art, a new world that is always 'real.'"

(William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays*)

NOW that the confessional poem has evolved to a widely practiced and, indeed, meritorious lyric mode, there has been increased discussion of its origins as well as its significance in literary history. I would advance the argument that William Carlos Williams not only originated but structurally developed this mode as used by Robert Lowell and other poets writing today. To date, critics have not searched far enough in the past for early instances of the form. For example, in his omnibus-type study, *The New Poets*, M. L. Rosenthal refers to Lowell as the "discoverer of the confessional mode."¹ And in Robert Phillips' *The Confessional Poets*, the first book-length study on this mode, Phillips says, "confessional poetry substantially began in 1959 when Robert Lowell published his *Life Studies*."² Phillips does discuss the form's distant origins in his Preface, but they pertain to personal outpourings which have been manifest in the lyric since Sappho. When he focuses more specifically on its traceable influences on Lowell's vision, Phillips cites Baudelaire and Rilke. Then, moving closer to home, Phillips adds, "Williams and Stevens, of course, were not confessional poets" (p. xii). Williams' and Stevens' contribution is described in this manner:

They are just two of a host of American poets in the first five decades of this century, whose attitudes toward poetic material made possible the achievement of confessional poetry. (p. xii)

Phillips' yoking of such diverse poets as Williams and Stevens, enjoined by his assertion that the "subjects of confessional poetry are rarely beautiful; the language is frequently less so" (p. xii), demonstrates that greater clarity of attribution and definition is needed. Implicit in the forging of this poetic form is a new concept of the beautiful. For want of this concept, Williams said, "we have gone back to worn-out modes with our tongues hanging out and our mouths drooling after 'beauty' which is not even in the same category under which we are seeking it."³ The mode developed through its own formal necessities, necessities articulated by Williams more extensively through the poems themselves than in his brief, scattered statements about them. Lowell acknowledged this formal necessity — also more extensively through the poems — and emulated Williams. The second section of this essay is devoted to a close reading of several poems by Williams and Lowell, to demonstrate through their parallels, the extent of Williams' seminal influence on Lowell and, subsequently, on the poetic movement.

Williams' pieces on his relatives date as early as 1917, when a poem on his grandmother, "Dedication for a Plot of Ground," appeared in *Al Que Quiere!* There is no evidence that at the time Williams was consciously formulating a confessional mode, in which the subject matter is autobiographical or the characters are related in some very personal way to the speaker. Williams' recorded comments in later career (*I Wanted to Write a Poem*)⁴ divulge his admittedly simplified principle of selectivity, "I looked around me and saw something that suggested a poem" (p. 25). Williams was somewhat more explanatory (in *I Wanted to Write a Poem*) when he talked about "Adam" and "Eve," two companion pieces on his parents, printed in *Adam & Eve & the City* (1936):

'Eve' was written first. I wasn't too proud of it. I was rather excited when I wrote it; it had no revision and looked sloppy on the page, but I didn't want to change it; it seemed typically my mother. 'Adam,' I think, came

off better. The poems used the factual material of my parents' lives. (p. 57)

When "Adam" and "Eve" had appeared, nearly twenty years after "Dedication for a Plot of Ground," critics still did not recognize in them the heralding of a new sub-genre. They were either ignored or deplored. Here, for example, is the reviewer's comment in *Poetry*:

The least successful among Williams' later poems, I think, are those unfortunate excursions in another direction: 'Adam,' a psychological portrait; 'Eve,' a study of a mother-son relationship in which the poet is not free of the object, but inextricably involved with it.⁵

It is now apparent that the "unfortunate excursions" to which this critic refers, are the generating principle for confessional poems. From a technical standpoint, Williams was attempting to draw upon his immediate environment, in rejection of both the Symboliste mode and of the "exile" poetry promulgated by Eliot in the twenties and thirties. Lowell would follow Williams' example when he wrote *Life Studies*. Williams employed place names and concrete, domestic details in these poems, a practice which Lowell would carry to even greater levels of documentary accuracy. And Williams used prosody to imitate the contours of conversational language, which method, apart from Lowell's Whitmanesque long line,⁶ Lowell also closely imitated.

It would be relevant at this juncture to mention the manner in which Williams' confessional poems represented a significant departure from certain Romantic lyrics. In his highly influential essay on Williams in *Poets of Reality*,⁷ J. Hillis Miller claimed that Williams was the first poet to completely break with the subject-object dualism generally embodied in Romantic poetry. Miller presented his argument by examining such Objectivist pieces as "The Red Wheelbarrow" and "Young Sycamore," poems of process which render their subjects in all their ordinary immediacy. These subjects, according to Miller, are not intended to function as symbols or as tools for a dialectical structure. Although Miller did not deal with the inherent immediacy

of Williams' confessional poems, the same poetic process may be found at work in them. Williams' departure from the subject-object dualism becomes more apparent when his poems are compared with representative lyrics by Wordsworth or Coleridge. Inasmuch as Coleridge and Wordsworth addressed themselves to an infant son, a daughter, wife or sister — as, for example, in "Frost at Midnight," "It Is a Beauteous Evening," "Aeolian Harp" and *Tintern Abbey* — these personages remain in the background of meditative compositions, in which some aspect of Nature dominates the imagery. The particular individuals are transformed or absorbed into a larger philosophical context. In Williams' poems the actual relatives *are* the theme. They are presented, with all their shortcomings, in un-transformed backdrop:

There were some dirty plates
and a glass of milk
beside her on a small table
near the rank, disheveled bed⁸
("Last Words of My English Grandmother")

There is no projection of Williams' personages into a cosmic setting. They remain rooted in clay, as will many characters in later confessional poetry.

The link between Williams' very early poems on his relatives, and Lowell's familiarity with such poems, is suggested in two sources. In the first, a *Paris Review* interview of Lowell in 1961,⁹ Lowell speaks of his early fascination with Williams' poetry. After attempting to imitate him in college days, Lowell says he abandoned Williams' vulgar "democratic" style for the formal, symbolist manner of Crane and Eliot. It was not until several decades later that Lowell went back to Williams, acknowledging how his unrelenting fidelity to life glowingly transfigured his subject matter. In the second source, an article in *Hudson Review*,¹⁰ Lowell renders a tribute to Williams, indicating that the elder poet had become a "model" and a "liberator." He speaks of Williams' prosodic innovations and his truly American diction; he also claims, "Dr. Williams and his

work are part of me" (p. 530). Lowell refers to Williams' vital use of the "stabbing detail," that brings with it "the universal that belonged to this detail and nowhere else" (p. 531). These observations offer useful evidence of the extent to which Lowell's attitudes were reshaped by Williams. But a comparison between "Adam" and "Eve" and two Lowell poems on his parents — "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms" and "Sailing from Rapallo," from *Life Studies* — demonstrates with greater particularity how Lowell adapted the "stabbing detail."

"Adam" is a biographical sketch of Williams' father. It deals with his physical as well as his emotional environment. The elder Mr. Williams was an Englishman who grew up on a Caribbean island. In the opening lines, the lack of reconciliation between his British sense of restraint and the tropic sensuality which surrounded him, is described literally:

He grew up by the sea
 on a hot island
 inhabited by negroes — mostly.
 There he built himself
 a boat and a separate room
 close to the water
 for a piano on which he practiced —
 by sheer doggedness
 and strength of purpose
 striving
 like an Englishman

(ll. 1-11)

Incapable of integrating with his surroundings, however, he never felt quite at ease with his life or reality. After the first stanza, this incompatibility is treated by Williams with an increasing use of metaphor:

Thence he was driven
 out of Paradise — to taste
 the death that duty brings
 so daintily, so mincingly

(ll. 16-19)

From this fatal prescription, relating specifically to the father, Williams moves to a wider, more universal statement of this phenomenon:

Underneath the whisperings
of tropic nights
there is a darker whispering
that death invents especially
for northern men

(ll. 45-49)

Then, in a rhythm simulating the expansion-contraction of the heartbeat, the poem shrinks back in context from universal referent "northern men," to "he":

Naked on a raft
he could see the barracudas
waiting to castrate him

(ll. 61-63)

After this stanza, the poem retains a third person singular reference to the end. An oscillation of imagery, moving from the real to the fictive, runs through the stanzas: as in the following, where line 79 is factual and line 80 is figurative:

muleback over Costa Rica
eating pâtés of black ants

or in the following, in which the first two lines are factual, the third figurative:

And the Latin ladies admired him
and under their smiles
darted [sic] the dagger of despair
(ll. 81-83)

Alliteration in line 83 further accentuates this difference between fact and metaphor. In the final stanza of "Adam," Williams suggests the sense of doom that characterizes the life of such a personality. The prosody reinforces it through slowly paced rhythms:

He never had but the one home
staring him in the eye
coldly
and with patience —
without a murmur, silently
a desperate, unvarying silence
to the unhurried last.

(ll. 94-101)

The ominous and unifying use of sibilants: "staring," "patience," "silently," "desperate," "silence," "last," also conveys this solemn tone.

More than twenty years elapse between the appearance of "Adam" and Lowell's piece on his father, "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms." Yet, the resemblance is striking. Lowell, too, depicts his father as ill-at-ease in his universe. This fact is subtly suggested through description. A "boulder" in the elder Lowell's garden is juxtaposed by a description of the father himself:

At Beverly Farms, a portly, uncomfortable boulder
 bulked in the garden's center —
 an irregular touch.
 After his Bourbon 'old fashioned,' Father,
 bronzed, breezy, a shade too ruddy,
 swayed as if on deck-duty
 under his sixpointed star-lantern¹¹

Despite his apparent appearance of physical well-being, "His head was efficient and hairless, his newly dieted figure was vitally trim," the paradox of his imminent death is dramatized by the immediate environs:

. . . sky-blue tracks of the commuters' railroad shone
 like a double-barrelled shotgun
 through the scarlet late August sumac,
 multiplying like cancer
 at their garden's border."

(ll. 18-22)

As in "Adam," the setting here, too, spells out doom. Lowell's technique of mixing fact with figurative language is similar to that of Williams. Thus, Adam had built himself a "separate room" to house the "piano on which he practiced" (fact). Adam is then depicted as "striving/like an Englishman/to emulate his Spanish friend and idol — the weather!" (figurative). Lowell also alternates between these two elements when describing his father's devotion to his car:

but his friend was his little black Chevie, garaged like a sacrificial steer with gilded hooves, yet sensationally sober, and with less side than an old dancing pump.	} (fact) (figurative)
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(ll. 25-29)

And indeed, a lack of integration with the immediate environment has a similar effect on both men. Adam progresses through life as if in mindless compulsion:

he never turned back
 but kept a cold eye always
 on the inevitable end
 never winging — never to unbend
 (ll. 69-72)

Lowell's father exhibits a similar persistence:

Each morning at eight-thirty,
 inattentive and beaming,
 loaded with his 'calc' and 'trig' books,
 his clipper ship statistics,
 and his ivory slide rule,
 Father stole off with the Chevie
 to loaf in the Maritime Museum at Salem.
 (ll. 33-39)

Like the death of Williams' father, which the old man accepted "with patience/without a murmur," Lowell's father expires resignedly: "Father's death was abrupt and unprotesting." Lowell's prosody, like that of Williams, has no fixed pattern throughout the poem. When stressing a paradoxical sense of fate, both poets tend to employ the stately three-stress, iambic line. Also, Lowell's sound structure functions in a manner similar to Williams'. For example, in the first stanza of "Terminal Days," he links the setting to the man through the preponderance of *b* sounds: "Beverly," "boulder," "bulked," "Bourbon," "bronzed," "breezy."

The companion pieces to "Adam" and "Terminal Days" are about the poets' mothers. A similarity, apparent in the latter group, rests in the form of address. Whereas "Adam" and "Terminal Days" are in third person narrative, the alternate pieces employ direct address. This creates a sense of greater intimacy between the speakers and their mothers:

Párdõn mÿ ínjurÿes
 now thát you are old—
 Fõrgive me mÿ áwkwárdnesses
 ("Eve," ll. 1-3)
 Yõur nÿrse cõuld ónlÿ speák Italián,
 but áfter twenty minutes I cõuld imagine your final week,
 ánd téars rán dõwn mÿ chéeks
 ("Sailing," ll. 1-3)

Apart from the prosodic difference in both these passages — namely, the long line in Lowell's poem — the stress

patterns function in an identical fashion. They both reveal a self-abnegation on the part of the speaker (weak stress on "my" and "I") and strong stress on words suggesting suffering ("injuries," "nurse," "tears"). The mother figures are progressively inflated through this technique.

The diction in "Eve" is remarkably modern. Readers today have come to expect a vernacular tone in poetry. But it is easy to imagine readers' reactions, in the thirties, to Williams: "I'll give you brandy/or wine/whenever I think you need it." Biographical poems in this period were essentially proper portraits. The poetic line still opened in upper case, the language was formal, and ordinary details were barely used. Here, to cite another poet for one brief example, is an excerpt from a poem by Robert Penn Warren, written in the thirties, also on his mother:

Such is the substance of this legacy:
A fragile vision fed of acrid blood,
Whose sweet process may bloom in gratitude
For the worthier gift of her mortality.
(*"Letters of a Mother,"* ll. 24-27)

The sort of intimate revelation that we now consider *sine qua non* for confessional verse, is present in "Eve":

I sometimes detect in your face
a puzzled pity for me
your son —
I have never been close to you
— mostly your own fault;
in that I am like you.

(ll. 6-11)

The dialogue the poet sustains is so personal, that "Eve" is even less allusive and figurative than "Adam." In this piece, Williams does not move out to the universal at all, but remains particular in his reference. The myth of the Fall, which is ironically projected in "Adam," ("Thence he was driven/out of Paradise;" "God's handyman/going quietly into hell's mouth"; "Duty/the angel/which with whip in hand") is not employed in "Eve." It is as though the speaker cannot bear to break the intensity of address

with something as removed as biblical allusion. Instead, he relentlessly pursues his dialogue with the indomitable woman, who refuses to loosen her powerful hold on life, and him:

One would think
 you would be reconciled with Time
 instead of clawing at Him
 that way, terrified
 in the night — screaming out
 unwilling, unappeased
 (ll. 104-109)

His fierce ambivalence toward her, a delicate combination of hostility and love, is subsumed into a vow:

I will write a book about you—
 making you live (in a book!)
 as you still desperately
 want to live —
 to live always — unforgiving
 (ll. 82-86)

This immediacy of tone is reinforced by jerky, staccato rhythms. Moreover, the sound structure is not endowed with alliterative or internal rhyme devices. The stylistic effect would be one of prose, were it not for the overwhelming intensity of the piece.

“Eve” and “Sailing from Rapallo” have fewer procedural similarities than do the pieces on the fathers. What they share is a tonal elevation of the mother figure, despite a retention of concrete pathetic details. For example, Williams describes his aged mother as:

reflecting
 the lightnings of creation
 and the moon —
 ‘Cest la vieillesse
 inexorable qu’arrive!’
 (ll. 99-103)

Similarly, when describing his accompaniment of his mother’s corpse from Italy, Lowell’s images suggest the death of a hero:

Mother travelled first-class in the hold;
 her *Risorgimento* black and gold casket
 was like Napoleon’s at the *Invalides*
 (ll. 11-13)

Lowell has even retained — albeit with modification — Williams' French touch!

When Williams was working through his poetic theory in the early decades of the century, his goal was to achieve an open lyric form. Such a form would conform with his belief that a poem exists in co-extension with the universe, not as a separate, box-like object. In conjunction with this principle, Williams had faith in the significance of the "local," where anything is fit subject for poetry. He felt no compulsion to alter what he found; since there is integrity in all things, "detail is its own solution."¹² This democratic attitude also made Williams amenable to the view that prose and poetry functioned in no literary hierarchy of values. The poet could intersperse both within a single composition; thus, he placed prosaic colloquialisms side by side with purely poetic passages.

The combination of these divergent concepts allowed for the evolution of an aesthetically successful confessional mode. Williams' theory, that only in the local may we find the universal, functioned as structural technique in his biographical poems. He could embody and project the sense of a total life in a minimum of particulars. For example, in "Adam," the father's boyhood environment is succinctly recreated through two common nouns: "all the curious memories that come with/shells and hurricanes." This paring down process also permits a somewhat casual use of *synechdoche* and *metonymy*; these very traditional categories of figurative speech are vigorously restored by Williams, and function to elicit characterization. Thus, the music room in "Adam" signifies the father's "doggedness." Lowell effectively adapts Williams' economy of suggestion; in his poems, his family's New England sense of dignity and decorum is established through a minimum of images. A few cemetery items: "the pink-veined slice of marble," or the stone inscriptions on which "Frost had given their names a diamond edge," impart a quality of character. Williams' evocation of his grandmother (in

"Dedication for a Plot of Ground") also emerges through cemetery passages: "She grubbed this earth with her own hands If you can bring nothing to this place/ but your carcass, keep out." In this instance, the relative is portrayed as a pioneeringly courageous woman.

It is Williams' use of synthesis in depicting character that redeems potentially sentimental material. Thus, his realistic diction is fused with a motif, elevating tone. For example, in "The Last Words of My English Grandmother," Williams reiterates her actual words, yet incorporates, through motif, the sense of exhaustion after a life, fully lived: "What are all those fuzzy-looking things out there?/ Trees? Well, I'm tired/ of them." Lowell also utilizes a tree motif to characterize his grandparents' approaching death. Thus, in "Grandparents," "the dry road dust rises to whiten/ the fatigued elm leaves."

Williams wanted to combine his recovery of the past with the vivid present. He achieved this process of actualization by juxtaposing memory with a present consciousness. For example, in "Dedication," Williams recounts the major events of his grandmother's life in catalogue-type narrative: "married, / lost her husband," "sailed for New York," "met her second husband," "bore three more children," "ran adrift on Fire Island." This telescoping, in thirty-odd lines which simulate biblical style, makes a lengthy and undistinguished life seem the biography of a prominent, dramatic personage. Lowell, in similar fashion, employs memory and condensation of details to create memorable characters. In "Grandparents," his childhood impression is reproduced as vivid present: "Grandmother, like a Mohammedan, still wears her thick/ lavender mourning and touring veil."

The examples offered in this paper demonstrate how Williams and Lowell exploited the tensions and trappings of personal experience. What Williams attempted through experimental impulse, back in the twenties, has become a vogue for contemporary poets. It is therefore important

that Williams be granted his seminal position in this poetic movement, which Lowell, through *Life Studies*, technically bridged for present day poets.

NOTES

- ¹(Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 26.
- ²*Crosscurrents Series* (Carbondale: S. Illinois University Press, 1973), p. ix.
- ³*Selected Essays* (New Directions, 1954), p. 339.
- ⁴ed. Edith Heal (Boston: Beacon, 1958).
- ⁵(September, 1939), 333.
- ⁶In an interview with Walter Sutton (*Minnesota Review* I Spring 1961, pp. 309-24), Williams acknowledged Whitman as the fountainhead of modern poetry. He felt, however, that "Whitman's line is too long for the modern poet," whose prosodic structures should reproduce the contours of today's speech patterns.
- ⁷(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 285-359.
- ⁸This and all subsequent citations from poems by Williams are from *The Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams* (New Directions, N.Y., 1951).
- ⁹"The Art of Poetry," (Winter-Spring, 1961), 56-95.
- ¹⁰(Winter 1961-2).
- ¹¹This and all subsequent citations from poems by Lowell are from *Life Studies* (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, N.Y., 1959), ll. 1-7.
- ¹²Phrase found among notes in Williams' files, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.