

“*Paterson*: An Epic in Four or Five or Six Parts”

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Despite an extensive and diverse body of work, for many readers William Carlos Williams is merely a writer of short verse. His two best-known poems, “The Red Wheelbarrow” and “This is Just to Say,” place him firmly within the Imagist tradition and are the most widely read and taught of his *oeuvre*. And yet, it is his late and much longer work, *Paterson*, which consumed most of his energy and attention for what would be the last twenty years of his life. For biographer Paul Mariani, *Paterson* represents Williams’s major achievement. For other literary critics such as Marjorie Perloff, it is a belated and uneven composition. Either way, the book-length poem is Williams’s longest and most ambitious work. It may also be his most influential: it won him the National Book Award for Poetry in 1950 and is one of the two poems—along with *The Cantos*—that Charles Olson tried to come to terms with in his *Maximus Poems*. *Paterson* is central to any discussion of the American long poem, but it is a poem that many readers, undergraduate students in particular, usually encounter only in extracts, if they encounter it at all. This essay will examine major readings of *Paterson*, its compositional history—covering four decades—and its place within the American long poem as a genre.

Williams began to formulate *Paterson* as early as 1927, but he did not actually begin to write the poem for almost twenty years. In the interim (approximately 1926-1942), he grappled with a serious bout of writer’s block and spent time gathering the materials that would be woven into the verses as primary sources. Originally, Williams envisioned his American epic in four parts. The poem was published volume by volume beginning in 1946; subsequent books appeared in 1948, 1949, and 1951. Although Williams planned out the structure and themes of

these first four books in advance and worked on various sections of the poem simultaneously, his concept for the work changed over the compositional process. He published a fifth installment some seven years later in 1958. And still, it wasn't enough. Williams began work on yet a sixth book, but the physical limitations of poor health forced him to abandon the endeavor in 1961, and it remained unfinished at the time of his death in 1963.¹

As he considered the shape his poem would take, Williams struggled with several important artistic questions. "No ideas but in things," he famously proclaims in Book One of the poem (6), but what things? Once these things were identified, what form would they take? And what ideas would they make concrete? In his *Autobiography*, Williams claims "the first idea centering upon the poem . . . [was] to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world around me" (391). It's an ambitious quest, but the focus on the empirical, the knowable, kept it from becoming an impossible one. In his 1951 "A Statement by William Carlos Williams About the Poem *Paterson*" the poet again emphasizes "knowability," but this time, in language: "this seemed to me to be what a poem is for, to speak to us in a language we can understand. But first before we can understand it the language must be recognizable. We must know it as our own, we must be satisfied that it speaks for us" (*P* xiii). Williams had long championed American literature and the American language, which for him was distinct from its British heritage and history. With *Paterson*, Williams felt the need to compose an American epic poem that featured American subjects and themes. Unlike Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and H. D. who peppered their verses with allusions to literature centuries old and continents away, Williams was determined to keep his focus much closer to home both in time and space.

Like many of his contemporaries, he was deeply influenced by James Joyce's 1922 tour de force *Ulysses*. But where Eliot focused on the Homeric allusions and mythic parallels in the

text, and Pound rhapsodized over the novel's polyvocal, even polyglot, nature and formal innovation, Williams, was most interested in the central role that the city of Dublin played in Joyce's novel.² Dublin, for Williams was the "hero" of the book, and he wanted to find a uniquely American analog for his own work (*IWWP* 74). He rejected out of hand what to many would be the obvious choice: New York City, because "New York was too big, too much a congeries of the entire world's facets. I wanted something nearer to home, something knowable" (*Pat* xiii). In short, he lacked the intimate familiarity that comes from living many years of a life in a place. Williams visited New York frequently, but it was not home for him. He was born and raised in Rutherford, New Jersey. He raised his own family and also cared for patients in New Jersey. And it wasn't just the place itself that mattered, its geography and landmarks, it was also its inhabitants. In his *Autobiography*, he explained "I wanted . . . to write about the people close to me, to know in detail what I was talking about—to the whites of their eyes, to their very smells . . . I had no wish nor did I have the opportunity to know New York in that way" (*A* 391). Williams's medical career in New Jersey, its decades of house calls and patient interactions, contributed to his sense of familiarity with both the place and its people. Moreover, the city of Paterson afforded him local knowledge and a river, which for Williams was important not only because it was rich with symbolic potential but also because it was at the heart of Paterson geographically, economically, and historically.

At the outset, Williams had a fixed plan for *Paterson*, which he outlined in the "Author's Note": "[Book] One introduces the elemental character of the place. The Second Part comprises the modern replicas. Three will seek a language to make them vocal, and Four the river below the falls will be reminiscent of episodes—all that any one man may achieve in a lifetime" (xiv). In practice, it turned out that Williams's overall conception of the poem was

much more fluid than he had anticipated, and his vision for the work changed over the course of his compositional process. In his 1951 “Statement,” Williams explained:

From the beginning I decided there would be four books following the course of the river whose life seemed more and more to resemble my own life as I more and more thought about it: the river above the Falls, the catastrophe of the Falls itself, the river below the Falls and the entrance at the end into the great sea.

There were a hundred modifications of this general plan as, following the theme rather than the river itself, I allowed myself to be drawn on. The noise of the Falls seemed to me to be a language, which we were and are seeking, and my search, as I looked about, became a struggle to interpret and use this language. This is the substance of the poem. But the poem is also the search of the poet for his language, his own language which I, quite apart from the material theme had to use to write at all. I had to write in a certain way to gain verisimilitude with the object I had in mind (xiii-xiv).

This four-book conceit was the last of several attempts, which had also included an attempted expansion of his eighty-five line poem also titled “Paterson” (1927). While the published version of Books I-IV conforms to this overall strategy more or less, the design might suggest a far more linear path than *Paterson* would eventually take in large part thanks to the “hundred modifications” that Williams mentions. And yet, perhaps in keeping with the poem’s river motif, it begins with its own literary version of tributaries, an epigraph and a preface, each offering different directions and focal points, which ultimately combine into the body of the poem itself. Not unlike the course of a river, at times this poetic body meanders; at times it gets muddied or brackish. It draws upon various source materials, some of which play a more prominent role in

the poem than others, some of which were adapted to fit into verse while others were incorporated into the poem as ready-made art in prose form.

And yet, early on, it becomes clear that *Paterson* is ultimately less a poem about a river or about a city than it is a poem about language itself that uses both the river and the city as just two of several dichotomies upon which to map the poet's struggles. The diversion to which Williams alludes, the struggle for an appropriate poetic language and form, takes center stage from the beginning of *Paterson*. In the Preface to Book One, the poem's speaker cites "rigor of beauty" as its "quest" and attempts "To make a start, / out of particulars / and make them general" (3). Over the course of the poem, Williams sets up a series of antithetical pairings: in addition to the contrast between nature and civilization, the poem highlights the tensions between male and female, past and present, poetry and prose, and more. These oppositions and the friction that they generate become a productive source of meaning throughout the work.

The dichotomies also correspond to an event in Williams's life, an evening in 1949 when he first met a woman named Marcia Nardi, whom Mariani credits with "dynamit[ing]" the "blockage Williams had been experiencing" with *Paterson* (Mariani 463). Nardi herself was a poet but had sought Williams's counsel as a doctor regarding her teenaged son. Desperate for any feedback on her writing, Nardi left a selection of her verse with Williams who agreed to read it. In the meantime, the situation with her son worked itself out without Williams's intervention, prompting Nardi to write the first of many letters to Williams informing him of the resolution and asking him, rather apologetically, to return her poems to her. So began a correspondence, by all accounts platonic, that would have important effects on both writers. Williams would help Nardi finally get some of her poetry published, and Nardi's letters would be transformed into the "Cress" letters of *Paterson*.³ The Cress character becomes a central counterpoint to Dr. Paterson

in the early parts of the poem. The two figures embody many of the thematic and structural binaries that drive the first two books of *Paterson*, most notably: man/woman and poetry/prose.

Originally, Williams intended to use Nardi's letters in a prologue or an interlude, but as his ideas for the *Paterson* began to take on a more concrete form, they found their way into the poem itself. As he continued to work on *Paterson*, Williams tried to incorporate many of the materials he had at his disposal, which he had gathered over the better part of thirty years, into the poem. These materials included not just letters from real people (in addition to Marcia Nardi, the poem contains letters from Allen Ginsberg, Ezra Pound, Edward Dahlberg and others), but also passages from local histories, clippings from old newspapers, a geological survey, and other documents. Some of these pieces were slightly shaped or edited while others were imported wholesale into the poem (Sankey 16). Questions of form dominated early discussions as critics wondered if there was, literally, rhyme or reason to *Paterson*. Some readers suggested that the haphazard, arbitrary form of the poem was intended to mirror the chaos of everyday experience, either intentionally or accidentally while Williams himself maintained that the poem was carefully organized and structured. Ralph Nash argues that the incorporation of prose "brings into the poem something of an air of documentation" (23). Or perhaps there is a democratic impulse behind Williams's insistence on the readymade as poetry, be it metered or not.

These fragments, most of which are imported wholesale into the poem as prose paragraphs rather than reworked into poetic meter, have become an essential feature of the work.

As Benjamin Sankey notes:

The most striking of Williams's innovations was doubtless the extensive use of prose, not simply in the notes at the back of the poem (as in *The Waste Land*), nor

blocked out as part of the verse (as in *The Cantos*), but conspicuously inserted into the text and conspicuously unpoetic in shape.⁴

While the hybrid nature of *Paterson* may have been its most striking innovation, *Paterson* was not the first of Williams's mixed-genre works. In fact, *Spring and All* (1923) also presented a hybrid form of prose and verse that, in the words of C. D. Wright, launches "a grand improvisation" and reconciles "the mash-up of affinities, free-floating associations, and spasms of anger" with "order and simplicity" (*SA* vii, x, xi). But where the prose interludes in *Spring and All* are just that—interludes that explore language and the role of the imagination as well as critiques of his contemporaries'—in *Paterson*, the prose pieces are carefully calculated interactions that amplify and reflect or refract the themes of their poetic counterparts. They are not criticism or commentary about the text: they are as much a part of *Paterson* itself as any of its verses.

However, the incorporation of prose was not the only formal innovation that Williams achieved in *Paterson*. He also felt that he had discovered an important new poetic principle in Book II. In *I Wanted To Write a Poem*, Williams identified the "Descent beckons" passage as a personal "milestone," explaining, "it was the realization of my final conception of what my own poetry should be" (81, 82). This passage features what Williams would call "the variable foot," a prosodic technique that "would allow order in free verse" (82). In the 1950s, Williams often had difficulty explaining what he meant by both the "American idiom" and the "variable foot," two concepts that were key to his late poetics and which usually went hand in hand. Hugh Kenner explains them as the way that "patterns made, though built on patterns heard, can tug against the pattern we'd normally hear."⁵ For Williams, the poetry lies in the dissonance between auditory expectation and realization. In addition to the aural discrepancies created by line breaks, the

poetry features an added visual dimension that Mariani refers to it as the step-down line.

Williams himself sometimes referred to it as the triadic stanza or the three-step line. The triadic stanza creates a visual unity that broadens our attention to the page as a unit of meaning beyond individual lines. Marjorie Perloff, a critic who prefers “the complexity and tension of Williams’s earlier visual forms,” has remarked that in *Paterson*, the effect seems forced: “the three step grid is an externally imposed geometric form, a kind of cookie-cutter.”⁶

The tension between aural and visual language and between poetry and prose lies at the heart of *Paterson* both thematically and structurally. It also carries over into a final aspect of the poem’s form: its uneasy relationship to the epic tradition. In a sense, *Paterson* might be thought of as a new kind of epic that more accurately captures modernity in the rapidly changing and growing United States of America. Or perhaps, as James Breslin has argued, *Paterson* is a “pre-epic, a rough and profuse start from which some later genius summative genius may extract and polish.”⁷ Williams had been drawn to the long poem well before he started writing *Paterson*. In part the attraction stemmed from the fact that all of his poetic contemporaries were writing long poems (or had already written them): *The Waste Land* (Eliot), “Marriage” and “An Octopus” (Marianne Moore), *The Cantos* (Pound), *The Bridge* (Hart Crane), *Trilogy* (H. D.), *Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction* (Stevens) and more.

The Waste Land, in particular, had a profound effect on Williams. In his *Autobiography*, Williams explained that Eliot’s poem “had almost single-handedly destroyed the indigenous art that was just beginning to emerge in the United States” (146). From Williams’s perspective, Eliot and his poem full of antiquity and classical allusion transformed American verse into an academic exercise rather than a living text that was generated from those who had experienced it.

Moreover, Williams held that poetry should contain at least a kernel of hope not simply disillusionment and ennui.

And yet, in the years following *The Waste Land*, Williams published *Spring and All* and then did not publish another individual book of poetry for nearly a decade. Instead he turned to prose and wrote several novels, short stories and essays. Of these prose works, *In the American Grain* may have been the most directly related to *Paterson* for it is there that he tries to understand what it means to be an American and what historical forces have shaped American history, American culture, and the American language, all themes that would be prominent in the later work. Breslin cites these years as central to the poetry that would follow: “Williams spent some thirty years of living and writing in preparation for *Paterson*” (169). The epic poem is one that is civically minded. As John Beck has explained, “To write an epic is to deliberately engage in the affairs of society, to tell the tale of the tribe.”⁸ But Williams deliberately violates several generic hallmarks. Rather than affirming a unified cultural history and narrative, *Paterson* celebrates diversity and multiplicity. Rather than embracing a single voice, *Paterson* embraces dialogue. Rather than focusing on progress and success, *Paterson* also examines failure, destruction, and futility.

Like his poetic predecessor, Walt Whitman, Williams attempted to make *Paterson* a democratic and inclusive representation of the American experience. As such, he includes voices of men and women, young and old, and he populates the poem with members of all strata of society from both the present day and various historical moments. For a number of critics, some of these representations are problematic because of their tendency to reinforce racial or gender stereotypes. Perhaps most controversial is the presentation of a character associated with the recurring phrase “Beautiful Thing” in Book III. The character is based in part on a black patient

whom Williams had treated after she had been gang-raped by two different groups of men.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that the use of the term “thing,” particularly as a form of address, lacks sensitivity, objectifies and further victimizes the assaulted woman.⁹ As Mariani points out, “Williams reenacted in his imagination the forcible rape of the woman, lashing out at what the male could not understand, and feared, and wanted therefore to destroy” (414). Gilbert and Gubar note, “[Dr. Paterson’s] sympathy for this sexual victim is, curiously, accompanied by voyeuristic absorption in her mutilation” (48). Terrence Diggory argues that despite the fact that Williams’s poetic persona Dr. Paterson’s desire “propels him towards her as a lover, the doctor channels his energy away from her body” into more appropriate outlets.¹⁰ Louis Martz focuses his reading not so much on the real world embodied counterpart to the poetic character but rather on her symbolic meaning: “Is not the Beautiful Thing the affectionate realization of past and present in the mind of the living?” and “The Beautiful Thing is not the girl herself but the human response, the fire of the imagination, the fire of human affection.”¹¹

However one reads the “Beautiful Thing” passages she, like many of Williams’s female characters, is intimately connected to violence and destruction. And she is just one of the many who suffer violence at male hands over the course of *Paterson*. Elsewhere in Book III, Williams references an “incident” involving the brutal treatment of two Native Americans “accused of killing two or three pigs.” Both men, falsely accused it is later revealed, meet violent deaths while performing a ceremonial dance called the Kinte Kaye (*Pat* 102-103). Later in Book IV, the poem includes an article from *The New York Herald Review* detailing the murder of a six-month old girl by her father (194-95). *Paterson* as a whole is not lacking in brutality; it is an integral part of the larger theme of divorce that runs through the poem, the schism between men and women, between settlers and the land that they have appropriated as well as its indigenous

inhabitants. These rifts express themselves through violence, and it is these fractures that the poem seeks to mend.

Moreover, for Williams annihilation is an essential precursor to creativity, and this binary of creation and destruction is often mapped onto the heterosexual binary: Kore and Hades, Cress and Dr. P., Beautiful Thing and her attackers. In Part III of the poem, not only do we bear witness to the “Beautiful Thing” character, whose “vulgarity of beauty surpasses all their perfections,” but we also learn that she is “intertwined with fire” (120) and “the flame’s lover” (123). Moreover, this fire, an elemental opposite to the poem’s water imagery, gives rise to another destructive and generative force. It engulfs and destroys the town library, a stifling and oppressive place that entraps language and poetry. This conflagration was based on a real fire in Paterson in 1902. The wind, which brings and fans the flames, is presented as a welcome presence that eradicates the “staleness,” the “desolation” and “stagnation” of the outmoded institution and liberates culture (100, 101). For Williams:

The province of the poem is the world,
When the sun rises, it rises in the poem
And when it sets darkness comes down
And the poem is dark (100).

Poetry, and by extension art, belongs in the world rather than imprisoned in books or libraries. It should be born of experience rather than limited to stale and musty bookshelves. At first glance, this passage of *Paterson III* seems almost Emersonian in its rejection of the library and all of its books in favor of lived experience. The blaze literally burns to the ground history and institutionalized knowledge. But for Williams, the binary is never so simple. Albert Gelpi reminds us of “the imagination’s participation in the destructive/re-creative force of nature” that

this scene epitomizes.¹² The creative process, both artistic and scholastic, depends upon devastation and demolition; for Williams the two are intertwined and inseparable.

Reinforcing the important role that destruction plays in the creative process for Williams, Book IV revisits several of the important themes of *Paterson* as a whole: language, creativity, and the importance of the local. It also challenges assumptions about the value of purity and whiteness particularly through the vehicle of the pastoral tradition. According to Williams's original schema, *Paterson IV* (1951) was to be the final part of the poem, "the river below the Falls . . . reminiscent of all episodes—that any one man may achieve in a lifetime" (xiv). It features, as Ann Mikkelsen notes, "a series of idylls depicting amorous, often disturbing, and sometimes comic encounters between a middle-aged, gay, wealthy woman; her younger employee, a nurse, and Dr. Paterson himself."¹³ Corydon and Phyllis are two stock pastoral figures who are based on real women: one a prominent New York socialite and the other a nurse whom Williams had once known in *Paterson* (288). Mikkelsen points out that the pastoral is not unique to *Paterson IV*. In fact, *Paterson I* opens with a pastoral scene, albeit one of a very different tone: Dr. Paterson surrounded by the wonders of the Passaic Falls and natural world. In the opening book of the poem, the pastoral and the epic poetic traditions seem to complement each other as Williams marries the mythic elements of both Dr. P and his female counterpart, whether we call her Cress or Kore, with local history and the local landscape.

Williams's return to the pastoral in Book IV considers not just the sometimes comic sometimes lewd love triangle between the three characters of Corydon, Phyllis, and Dr. P., but it also raises questions about the industrialized landscape of the river and its surrounding environs. The sordidness of these relationships might mirror the contaminated landscape and suggest that progress does not always conform to expectations of tradition, particularly a tradition as outdated

as the pastoral in industrial New Jersey with its factories and manufacturing plants. Book IV also explores the idea of infection and pollution as productive sites of creativity by introducing Marie Curie and her “radiant gist.” Curie is presented “with ponderous belly, full / of thought!” and “knowledge, the contaminant” (176, 177). Earlier in this part of the poem, Williams claims—not once but twice—“dissonance . . . leads to discovery” (175). Friction is again the site of productivity. By the end of the book, the river has reached the sea, which may or may not be “our home” and may or may not be safe to inhabit. The sea is variously described as “a sea of blood,” as inhabited by a shark “that snaps / at his own trailing guts,” and as otherwise inhospitable (199). It closes with a public execution in prose and a final crash of the waves:

This is the final blast
 the eternal close
 the spiral
 the final somersault
 the end (202).

The repetition of “final” and the last line of the book, “the end,” might suggest resolution. But the circular motions of the spiral and the somersault also imply a return to the beginning, a cycle, a circle, and ultimately a more ambiguous ending than one might expect for the final lines of what was supposed to be the final book of *Paterson*. Ultimately, Williams himself found the poem’s conclusion less than satisfactory, writing to his publisher, *New Directions*, “I have been forced to recognize that there can be no end to such a story I have envisioned with the terms which I had laid down for myself” (xv).

As previously noted, Williams’s original plan for *Paterson* did not include Book V, and Williams’s own explanation is vague and offers little guiding imagery or theme. He says, “I

have been forced to recognize that there can be no end to such a story as I have envisioned with the terms I have laid down for myself” (xv). In other words, he just didn’t feel that the poem was over yet. Still it took him the better part of a decade to publish Book V (1958). Williams “got side-tracked” by what would become the long poem “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” (*P* xii, 295). When Book V was finally published, on Williams’s 75th birthday, it was structurally different from its predecessors: Book V did not have a title of its own, and it is much shorter in length—just two-thirds the length of each of the other books. But despite formal modifications, it returns to many of the themes of the rest of the poem. The book opens with a defiant acknowledgement of Williams’s aging mind and body, which had begun to fail in the intervening years:

In old age
 the mind
 casts off
 rebelliously
 an eagle
 from its crag

Not only does he answer those critics who suggest his poetic prowess has declined with his health, but he also returns to the formal experimentation that has marked the whole of *Paterson*, specifically the variable foot and the descending triad. The central figures of the poem are a unicorn and a woman embodying the “virgin/whore” dichotomy (Williams’s description). The latter two, arguably, are not new to *Paterson V*: most recently, the pastoral section of Book IV portrayed Phyllis as both the innocent virgin and the teasing whore, and previously, one might argue that Beautiful Thing shares some of the same character traits as do Cress and Kore from

Books I and II. Purity, pollution, and sexuality more generally have propelled the poem forward from its beginning. The unicorn references a tapestry collection housed in the Cloisters branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art. Further, Book V changes its referential scope from local figures and histories to Williams's contemporaries and artistic influences. Jackson Pollock, Juan Gris, Peter Brueghel and many others make appearances. This broadening of perspective places Williams and his verse more directly in conversation with his artistic peers and makes literal the lines of influence between them.

Finally, while the previous books of *Paterson* have all indirectly addressed questions about the nature of poetry and its role in American culture, Book V confronts the question directly in one of its prose sections, an excerpt from an interview with journalist Mike Wallace. Wallace asks Williams about an E. E. Cummings poem, also included in *Paterson*, "is this poetry?" and then points to one of Williams's own poems and asks whether it is a poem or "a fashionable grocery list." Williams's response is telling: "Anything is good material for poetry. Anything" (222). But while anything can be good material for poetry, a poem is more than its ingredients. Equally important is the treatment of the material. Poetry is not defined by its subject but rather by its metric arrangement. Elsewhere in the interview, he explained, "poetry is language charged with emotion. It's words, rhythmically organized" (221). Book Five concludes with a reflection on measure:

The measure intervenes, to measure is all we know,

A choice among the measures . . .

The measured dance (235)

. . .

We know nothing and can know nothing

But

the dance, to dance to a measure

contrapuntally,

Satyrally, the tragic foot (236).

Ultimately, Williams uses music, art, tapestries, paintings, poetry, and dance, to draw together all of the themes of the poem into a final coda, but as in Book IV, there is no resolution. In fact, Williams acknowledges at the end of Book V that there can be no resolution after all: “We know nothing and can know nothing / But / the dance.” The knowledge and meaning of art reside in its lived experience, which can be joyous, raucous, and tragic—sometimes all at once. To try to formulate a more fixed definition is futile.

And yet, even after the publication of Book V, Williams still did not feel that he was done with *Paterson*, and he was at work on a sixth book at the time of his death, but increasing difficulties brought on by his declining health prevented much progress. Only four preliminary pages of the typescript Book VI remain (*P* 237-240). These fragments revisit a number of familiar figures and motifs from the earlier books of the poem. The pages return to the beginnings of American history with George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and others. But they also reach back farther to Montezuma, Socrates, and Li Po. They revisit the Falls and the fire, destroyer of libraries (this time in ancient Alexandria). They reconsider questions of language and form, maintaining the hybrid verse and prose structure that characterizes the rest of the work. Finally, they bear witness to the struggle that Williams faced in writing at the end of his life when a series of strokes had compromised both his vision and his dexterity.

Paterson's critical reception was decidedly mixed. Writing about *Paterson I* and *II*, poet Robert Lowell proclaims, "*Paterson* is Whitman's America, grown pathetic and tragic, brutalized by inequality, disorganized by industrial chaos, and faced with annihilation. No poet has written of it with such combination of brilliance, sympathy, and experience, and with such alertness and energy."¹⁴ Randall Jarrell, another poet who had selected and introduced *Selected Poems*, praised the early volume but found the later installments inconsistent and ultimately disappointing: "*Paterson (Book I)* seems to me the best thing that William Carlos Williams has ever written," but "[n]ow that Book IV has been printed, one can come to some conclusions about *Paterson* as a whole. My first conclusion is that it doesn't seem to *be* a whole; my second: *Paterson* has been getting steadily worse" and "Book IV is so disappointing that I do not want to write about it at any length."¹⁵ Not everyone shared Jarrell's opinion—after all, *Paterson III* earned Williams the prestigious National Book Award (along with his *Selected Poems* published in 1949) demonstrating that critical reception for *Paterson* was uneven and polarized. *Paterson*'s relationship with the epic was also addressed in the scholarly criticism: Breslin argues that Williams's dedication to openness "as a primary literary and human value" while the epic is a closed and totalizing form.¹⁶ Marjorie Perloff does not share Breslin's perspective contending "the poem that finally made [Williams] famous . . . for all of its seeming openness, it manifested a symbolic superstructure."¹⁷ In other words, the poem isn't all that open after all. Michael Andre Bernstein argues the contrary, that *Paterson* offers so many different versions of closure that they cancel each other out, and as a result, the poem remains open.¹⁸ Perloff also takes issue with Mariani's claim that the poem is "a *process* of unfolding, of discovery" and Breslin's pre-epic reading: "successive readings have convinced me that it is, in fact, a much more 'closed' poem than Williams or his best critics care to admit."¹⁹ Linda Wagner-Martin argues that Williams's

“differing techniques used within the first four books are proof of his search for new, more effective expression” and links this search to Williams’s “physical breakdown” which she claims “brought a noticeable modification in his methods of writing.”²⁰ Forced to slow the composition process because of embodied limitations (a stroke cost the use of his right hand), Williams, in Wagner-Martin’s reading, gained an aura of contentment, of joy” (76).

Despite the mixed reception, *Paterson* is a substantial achievement for one of the United States’ most influential poets. Even those readers, like Jarrell, who were disappointed, or Charles Olson who found it rather sentimental, claiming that the “blueberry pie America” that Williams depicts in *Paterson* has little relation to the modern industrial city, had to come to terms with it.²¹ Most significantly this poem, which made Williams famous, demonstrates his full range of poetic accomplishment, a range that extends far beyond “This is Just to Say” and “The Red Wheelbarrow” in vitally important ways. It stands in sharp contrast to *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*, both global examples of the modernist long poem, and stakes a claim for the local and the everyday as a worthy subject of epic verse. It consumed much of Williams’s time and attention in the final years of his life and however one finally evaluates it, stands as an important contribution to American poetry in the mid-twentieth century.

¹ As the result of a series of strokes, Williams had lost some of his eyesight and the use of his right arm in the mid-1950s. But by 1961, not only had his dexterity deteriorate even further making typing more challenging, he was also experiencing difficulty concentrating, which made writing coherent sentences hard and reading impossible.

² See T.S. Eliot, “‘Ulysses,’ Order and Myth,” in *The Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1975) and Ezra Pound, “Joyce” in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. by T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968).

³ The surviving correspondence between Nardi and Williams is reproduced in Elizabeth Murrice O'Neill, ed. *The Last Word: Letters Between Marcia Nardi and William Carlos Williams* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994).

⁴ Benjamin Sankey, *A Companion to William Carlos Williams's Paterson* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971), 16.

⁵ Hugh Kenner, "William Carlos Williams's Rhythm of Ideas" *New York Times*, September 18, 1983. Online 12/22/14.

⁶ Majorie Perloff, "To Give a Design: Williams and the Visualization of Poetry" in *William Carlos Williams: Man and Poet* (National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine at Orono, 1983) 159-186, 181.

⁷ James E. B. Breslin, *William Carlos Williams, An American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 172.

⁸ John Beck, *Writing the Radical Center: William Carlos Williams, John Dewey, and American Cultural Politics* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001) 136.

⁹ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century. Vol 1 The War of the Words* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988) 48.

¹⁰ Terence Diggory, *William Carlos Williams and the Ethics of Painting* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2014) 51.

¹¹ Louis L. Martz, *Many Gods and Many Voices: The Role of the Prophet in English and American Modernism* (Columbia, MO: U Missouri Press, 1998) 65, 67.

¹² Albert Gelpi. *A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910-1950* (New York: Cambridge UP 1990) 357.

¹³ Ann Mikkelsen, "'The Truth about Us': Pastoral, Pragmatism, and *Paterson*" *American Literature*, (v75, n3 September 2003).

¹⁴ Robert Lowell, "[*Paterson I and II*]" in *Profile of William Carlos Williams*. Jerome Mazzaro, Editor (Columbus OH: Charles E. Merrill Publishing, 1971) 77.

¹⁵ Randell Jarrell, "Dr. Williams' *Paterson*" in *Profile of William Carlos Williams*, 62, 68.

¹⁶ Breslin, 170.

¹⁷ Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Evanston, Northwestern UP, 1981) 148.

¹⁸ Michael Andre Bernstein, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

²⁰ Linda Wagner, "A Bunch of Marigolds" in *Studies in Paterson*, John Engels compiler (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill, 1971) 75.

²¹ Charles Olson, *Selected Writings of Charles Olson* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 84.