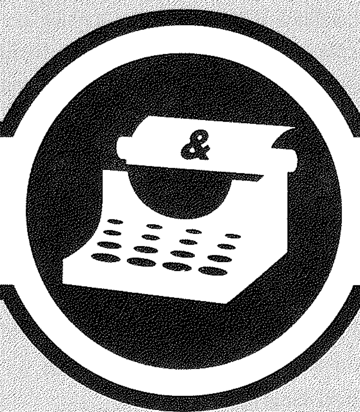
TEACHERS  WRITERS

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Pushing the Red Wheelbarrow

From Age Five to Sixty-five

by Peggy Garrison

SOME OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE POEMS ARE those whose images seemingly took the poet by surprise, giving the poem veracity and freshness—that amazement, as Theodore Roethke said, of having "come to something without knowing why." A woman eating a plum, a white bed, a wet red wheelbarrow next to white chickens—Williams rediscovered common things in his poems and gave them special framing.

I wanted students to explore spontaneous ways of finding material for their poems by suppressing control over their subject matter and letting their unconscious minds do the work. Putting themselves in a heightened state of waiting, they could discover the poetic quality of everyday things. At the time, I was working at opposite ends of the student spectrum, teaching a K–2 poetry residency at a public school in Queens, N.Y., and an adult poetry workshop in continuing education in Manhattan, so I chose a poem I thought might work with both age groups: "The Red Wheelbarrow."

With the younger grades, I began by writing the poem and the poet's name on the board:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

—*William Carlos Williams*

PEGGY GARRISON teaches poetry in the schools and creative writing at New York University. In 1993 she received the New York City Arts in Education Roundtable Award for Sustained Achievement in Literature. Garrison received an M.A. in creative writing from The City University of New York.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS ISSUE

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Then I read the poem aloud, and, because I feel it's important for students to view poets as human beings rather than remote deities, I showed them Williams's picture. I told them he was a doctor and that he came from New Jersey. Then we examined the poem. I wanted to be sure students understood the meaning of the words *glazed* and *wheelbarrow* (some confused *barrow* with *barrel*). Next we talked about how live chickens and a red wheelbarrow (rather than a gray one full of concrete) suggested a rural or small-town setting rather than an urban one. Then because I felt the phrase "so much depends upon" might be misleading, I explained that it could mean "this is important" or "this is special." I urged the students to imagine themselves to be Williams, walking out of a farmhouse, when suddenly chickens and a wheelbarrow seemed to pop out in front of him and command, "Write about me!"

The idea of images "popping out" delighted them. I asked them to look around the classroom to see if anything popped out at them. With excitement the kindergartners dictated a list that I wrote on a big piece of oaktag. It included:

a big red apple
made of crunched-up paper

that pink hippopotamus
with the green house on it

my painting of spaceships
shooting at each other

those four ghosts
on the wall

the flowers for
good behavior on
the blackboard

Equally enthusiastic, the first and second graders wrote their observations individually. Marybeth wrote:

The Pouches

people depend on these
colorful bags with dots
and patterns all magnificent
things on these carriers
all made of wool and glue

this is my magnificent
thing

—*Marybeth Vallejo*

When I returned the following week, my classes continued their attentiveness to "pop-out" images, only this time, like Williams, we went outside. It was a lovely late-spring day and the students were thrilled to be taking this little field trip. Notepads and pencils ready, attention heightened, we walked around the school block, noticing things.

When we got back to the room, I gave the students five extra minutes to finish writing or make changes before we read aloud. The assignment had been simply to record images accurately. Though some students did closely follow the assignment, others surprised me by expanding their observations into poems.

Jolene wrote an ode:

The Pigeons

Oh pigeons oh pigeons
come to me oh pigeons
oh pigeons come to
me your feathers are
gray they brighten my
day your beaks
are orange and brown
they make my day
so round and then
the day is down oh
pigeons oh pigeons
come to me.

—*Jolene Klusko, 2nd grade*

Julian's poem has a sense of urgency:

An ant jumped out at me
and said write about me
or I will bite you. OK I said.

—*Julian Kowlczyk, 1st grade*

As does Patrick's poem:

I see two big blue portable bathrooms.
They look shiny from the sun.
They have no doorknobs
and no locks.

—*Patrick Fan, 1st grade*

In just two class periods the students learned a lot from Williams. They let themselves be inspired by common images; they were sensitive to colors; and most of them wrote in everyday speech rather than in "poetic" language.

Since the red wheelbarrow exercise was so successful with such young students, I was eager to see how it would work with my adult class, a very literate group of seven (two were high school English teachers) ranging in age from forty to sixty-five. In addition to the wheelbarrow poem, I handed out copies of "Nantucket" and "10/22," two other Williams poems that also reflect intense observation of everyday things.

Nantucket

Flowers through the window
lavender and yellow

changed by white curtains—
Smell of cleanliness—

Sunshine of late afternoon—
On the glass tray

a glass pitcher, the tumbler
turned down, by which

a key is lying—And the
immaculate white bed

10/22

that brilliant field
of rainwet orange
blanketed

by the red grass
and oilgreen bayberry

the last yarrow
on the gutter
white by the sandy
rainwater

and a white birch
with yellow leaves
and few
and loosely hung

and a young dog
jumped out
of the old barrel

First a student read the poems aloud, then I asked what all three poems seemed to have in common. One student was especially impressed by the accurate language of the examples and by how Williams created these poems by accumulating images. Another student noted the fresh presentation of common things and the use of colors. Instead of asking the students to discover images in the classroom, I asked them to bring in next time a list of things that seemed to demand their attention. I was hesitant about using "pop out," fearing they'd feel I was treating them as children. I suggested they think of themselves as fishing, but instead of catching the fish (images), they let the fish catch them.

When we met the following week, I saw that a few poems could be pulled directly from their lists:

At orange noon
this day-lily
leans against
the railings of
an iron fence.

—*Anita Feldman*

five mail boxes
leaning towards and away
under an old maple

—*David Quintavalle*

But generally the adults were less spontaneous and less enthusiastic than the younger students. Some felt they had to force their observations to conclusions. One student refused to write a list. He said he couldn't see any point in waiting for images. Another said that Williams's poems were pretty but they had no purpose. She preferred poems with a message. When I invited the class outside to write, two students wanted to stay in the classroom and rework their lists. They said they were tired.

Such resistance discouraged me. I began to question whether the exercise was going to work with this group. The younger students had welcomed the process, but the adults seemed reluctant to believe that through this method of attentiveness a poem could emerge.

I think Williams challenged their concept of poetry. Some felt that poems had to have conflicts and messages. To call descriptions and juxtapositions of simple images "poems" seemed baffling to them. One student kept saying, "But what's the point?" In addition, my emphasis on *discovering* material meant giving up conscious control, to trust the unconscious rather than suppress it. For some this was scary.

Just when I was starting to think this lesson was a flop, poems influenced by Williams began to show up in the workshop pile. The K–2 students had sparked immediately; being part of a group energized them. The adults, on the other hand, were experiencing the assignment slowly and individually. One student later said she'd "needed time to be haunted."

The new poems were spare and very focused, with more emphasis on the accumulation of images than the poems by the younger students:

7/30

Now the light
is hitting
the side of my face;
the cat
has stretched
and is looking
at me—
her cat eyes
studying
my posture
waiting
to see when
I will

get up and
fetch her
dinner.

—*Judith Hawk*

Whately

Along the road are bi- and trifurcated trees
with bark bleeding
and old trunks painted with mold
under a canopy of leaves.

Cars and trucks announce their
coming and passing,
departing at a lower pitch.

Small planes putter above;
crows call below.

A sign shines on silver saw blade:

"J & M Service
IRE REPAIRS

JOHN & MINNIE PILVINNIS"
An arrow points down Pilvinnis Avenue
to 16A and 16B.

—*Hal Drooker*

One student brought a poem to class after her vacation in Italy. She told us she'd rendered it from "Williams-type" notes.

Train Station

The sun cuts across the tracks
pigeons on the roof of *binario due*.
Taxi drivers heavy lidded
lounge against the cement posts.
A rattly rock-and-roll song Italian-style
flows from a radio.
In the provincial train station
the young policeman, a dandy,
gun slung low,
chats with a fellow with
dark chest exposed through barely buttoned shirt.
Orange, purple, black designs,
sunglasses with white rims:
they shoot the breeze.

People study the schedule—
man with heavy belly, pants hanging below,
broad-topped woman tapering to thin black shirt,
bare skin showing,
quick mini-skirt hung on hips,
wraps narrow arms around him and presses close.

The sound of gentle, hoarse voices—
breezes,
an announcement,
the train hums into the Portogruaro station.

—*Nina Drooker*

Another student said that one evening when he was making potato salad he suddenly felt that the enjoyment of life was distilled into preparing this one dish.

All I Want from Potato Salad

Peel and boil
the sting of scallions
oregano, cumin, a pepper sneeze
the comfort of vinegar mixing
with the spices
lifted to my face
by the warmth of the potatoes.

—*David Quintavalle*

In looking over both groups' poems, I was struck by how similarly they reflected Williams's influence. Though each group assimilated the exercise differently, both groups wrote about everyday objects, were sensitive to the use of color, and created an intense sense of the present.

Discussing the lesson with the adults afterward helped me refine it. I described my presentation in the K–2 classes and read some of the younger students' poems. I told them how with the children I'd carefully focused on the concept of images popping out, but was afraid of insulting adults by using the "pop-out" approach. Further, I thought they'd be offended if I cajoled them all into writing together outside. They said they might have caught on faster if I'd treated them more like the children and in the future I shouldn't worry about doing that. In fact they felt that the spirit of this exercise, with its sense of spontaneity and discovery, fully allowed for such treatment.

We are proud to announce that the Arts & Business Council has given Teachers & Writers Collaborative and NBC the Arts & Business Partnership Award for the teaching of classical literature and creative writing in public schools. T&W's forthcoming book on using classics to inspire writing is one result of that partnership.

"January Morning"
Or What Will You Not Be Experiencing?

by Charles North

EARLY IN HIS POETIC CAREER, WILLIAM Carlos Williams wrote a delightful little ode to, of all things, his own nose ("Smell!")[1] in which he calls his nose and himself "tactless asses," unable to stem their "indiscriminate, always unashamed" attraction to all things including the "rank" and "unlovely." "What," he exclaims, "will you not be smelling?" The poem ends: "Must you taste everything? Must you know everything? / Must you have a part in everything?"

The answer to these playful questions, not merely for his nose but for Williams the poet, is Yes! (including the exclamation point). It is as though he can't help noticing and being excited by his surroundings, especially those parts that others often overlook: the unappealing, the apparently trivial or commonplace, the unlovely. And like his great predecessor Walt Whitman, he has the rare ability to make the unpromising details of life striking and even beautiful. These qualities make Williams's poetry a wonderful model for student writers.

Williams's pleasure in his surroundings is nowhere more evident than in "January Morning," a "Suite" of notations having to do with what it is like to be alive on a winter morning in New Jersey in the vicinity of the Hudson River.

January Morning
Suite:

I

I have discovered that most of
the beauties of travel are due to
the strange hours we keep to see them:

the domes of the Church of
the Paulist Fathers in Weehawken
against a smoky dawn—the heart stirred—
are beautiful as Saint Peters
approached after years of anticipation.

II

Though the operation was postponed
I saw the tall probationers
in their tan uniforms
hurrying to breakfast!

III

—and from basement entries
neatly coiffed, middle aged gentlemen
with orderly moustaches and
well-brushed coats

IV

—and the sun, dipping into the avenues
streaking the tops of
the irregular red houselets,
and
the gay shadows dropping and dropping.

V

—and a young horse with a green bed-quilt
on his withers shaking his head:
bared teeth and nozzle high in the air!

VI

—and a semicircle of dirt-colored men
about a fire bursting from an old
ash can,

VII

—and the worn,
blue car rails (like the sky!)
gleaming among the cobbles!

VIII

—and the rickety ferry-boat "Arden"!
What an object to be called "Arden"
among the great piers,—on the
ever new river!
"Put me a Touchstone
at the wheel, white gulls, and we'll
follow the ghost of the *Half Moon*
to the North West Passage—and through!
(at Albany!) for all that!"

CHARLES NORTH's most recent books are *The Year of the Olive Oil* (poems) and *No Other Way: Selected Prose*, both from Hanging Loose Press. North is Poet in Residence at Pace College in New York City.

IX

Exquisite brown waves—long
circlets of silver moving over you!
enough with crumbling ice crusts among you!
The sky has come down to you,
lighter than tiny bubbles, face to
face with you!
His spirit is
a white gull with delicate pink feet
and a snowy breast for you to
hold to your lips delicately!

X

The young doctor is dancing with happiness
in the sparkling wind, alone
at the prow of the ferry! He notices
the curdy barnacles and broken ice crusts
left at the slip's base by the low tide
and thinks of summer and green
shell-crusted ledges among
the emerald eel-grass!

XI

Who knows the Palisades as I do
knows the river breaks east from them
above the city—but they continue south
—under the sky—to bear a crest of
little peering houses that brighten
with dawn behind the moody
water-loving giants of Manhattan.

XII

Long yellow rushes bending
above the white snow patches;
purple and gold ribbon
of the distant wood:
what an angle
you make with each other as
you lie there in contemplation.

XIII

Work hard all your young days
and they'll find you too, some morning
staring up under
your chiffonier at its warped
bass-wood bottom and your soul—
out!
—among the little sparrows
behind the shutter.

XIV

—and the flapping flags are at
half mast for the dead admiral.

XV

All this—
was for you, old woman.
I wanted to write a poem
that you would understand.
For what good is it to me
if you can't understand it?
But you got to try hard—
But—
Well, you know how
the young girls run giggling
on Park Avenue after dark
when they ought to be home in bed?
Well,
that's the way it is with me somehow.[2]

The poem's fifteen sections come in no apparent order and are "unparallel," i.e., varied in content, tone, length, shape, rhetorical strategy, etc. What is immediately striking is how vividly and exuberantly Williams records what he notices. Williams's animated (and animating) sense of things is infectious and inspiring, as is his clear joy in being alive.

What might be called the democracy of his approach—a great variety of things treated with equal respect, emphasis, and enthusiasm—is displayed in the way Williams writes as much as in what he writes about. He is determined to avoid Poetry with a capital P. The language he uses is colloquial and conversational and includes frequent exclamations, interruptions, afterthoughts that give the impression of someone speaking off the cuff, and words that strike some readers as "nonpoetic." Rather than formal devices such as regular stanzas, he prefers casual, even fragmentary notation: *this*, he seems to be saying, is *poetry* as much as anything else is. Even the length and shape of his enjambed lines, a number of which end with "little" words (*of, to, the, as*) add to this air of quick notation.

What Williams does in "January Morning" is, in effect, to follow his nose from one perception, feeling, idea, or association to another. At one point he is struck by "middle aged gentlemen / with orderly moustaches," then by the sun on the roofs of little houses, then by a horse rearing. In section VIII, the name of the ferry he is on provokes a miniature cadenza of associations: from "Arden" to *As You Like It* to Henrik Hudson and the Northwest Passage. One thing follows another not in a logical sense, but rather in the order it appears in the poet's awareness.

•

"January Morning" is one of my favorite Williams poems, and I have had success using it in college poetry-writing classes. It is essentially a list poem wherein each section is free to take on whatever characteristics the writer chooses. That freedom is inspiring to many students. They can choose almost anything as a springboard—a season, a place, an idea, a feeling, a name, an

activity, even a conventional topic—and then follow their noses without predetermining any aspect of the individual sections. Nor need the final product resemble "January Morning." The important thing is to set out to write freely, with the permission Williams's poetry grants us to try new ways and to be honest rather than censor or tailor our feelings to some socially acceptable notion of what is fitting.

One method that often helps is to have students draft twenty sections, and then choose the best fifteen (or ten or five). Or they can simply brainstorm at first, with no thought about sections. This type of poem can also be thought of as Theme and Variations; but it is important to establish that the "theme" can be as firm or as flimsy as the writer likes. That is to say, it's perfectly all right for the nominal subject to be just that, an "excuse" for writing a poem that will find its own way thereafter. I have even suggested to some students, after discussing "January Morning" with them in some detail, that they begin with a title, and then purposely disregard the title in writing the poem. Sometimes Williams's exuberance and concreteness carry over into their poems even so, and the superficial discrepancy between the poem's title and body adds an intriguing dimension.

As a poet myself, I find a great many things about "January Morning" inspiring. Williams's way of writing as though he is right in the middle of what he writes about—rather than scribbling on a prescription pad at midnight after a sixteen-hour day as a physician, as was often the case—gives his poems an extraordinary immediacy. His stops and restarts and qualifications, as in the final section of the poem—which is also a playful but at bottom serious comment on his poetry in general—give the impression that he discovers what to write in the process of writing. His frequent use of a simple "and" to begin a section propels his poem forward. Students who follow their noses in this fashion often find themselves pleasantly surprised by what they come up with. The surprise is part of the excitement in writing poetry, as well as what makes many of the best traditional and contemporary poems exciting for readers. Of course Williams's poetic effects are not as easy to come by as he makes it seem; making it seem so is his gift. It is in fact rare for a writer to be so attentive to surroundings as well as to inner states, and to render both so vividly. What Williams says to the woman in the final section is equally important for student writers: "You got to try hard." But trying hard doesn't necessarily mean laboring over lines or individual words; especially for beginning poets, that approach to poetry can kill off all enthusiasm. Trying hard can mean trying to be as free and inclusive and honest as Williams is. What should be made clear to students is that regardless of the model, the composition of their poems is in every respect up to them, the goal being to produce writing that reflects at least some of the qualities of Williams's poem.

There are many other ways to present "January Morning" as a model, such as by focusing on its "dailiness" and general down-to-earthness. Also noteworthy are the specific settings and place names Williams uses throughout his poetry; not that everything must be identified, but that real names and specific locales contribute to a poem's immediacy, in addition to being, for most modern readers, more evocative than old-fashioned allusions to mythical places like Xanadu or Arcady. In general, reading "January Morning" with the class, with close attention to Williams's poetic choices—despite his self-proclaimed "indiscriminate" attractions, he is in fact highly discriminating as a poet—can help students see that the poem's variety is a vital part of its remaining fresh and compelling from beginning to end.

I have found that the differences between Williams's style—including the look of his poems on the page—and the more orderly arrangements of the majority of poems students encounter in their anthologies often stimulate them to experiment, and in some cases encourage students who were disinclined to write poetry at all. In either case, the important thing is to experience the sheer excitement of writing poems. As a bonus, once students begin to pay close attention to a poem like "January Morning" and try to assimilate some of its qualities into their own writing, they begin to find a wide range of poetry accessible to them as readers and, in turn, find themselves inspired by it as writers.

Notes

1. William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I*, A. Walton Litz and Christopher McGowan, eds. (New York: New Directions, 1986), p. 92.

2. Ibid., p. 100.

Stretching Exercises

Range of Motion and Emotion in Four Poems by William Carlos Williams

by Gary Lenhart

I WOULD LIKE TO TALK ABOUT FOUR POEMS by William Carlos Williams that I have used to teach creative writing to college students, with sometimes exhilarating, sometimes discouraging results. By describing my checkered experience, I hope to broaden what is becoming the received portrait of Williams as an imagist poet, to emphasize the heterogeneous and lively qualities of his poems, to explore some limits of classroom or workshop exercises, and to consider why our enthusiasms don't always fire up our students.

At age forty Williams wrote to his friend Marianne Moore, "You know I began with portraits of old women in bed and the rest of it, and it all seemed very important. Now there has been a quieter, more deliberate composition."[1] I often begin undergraduate workshops by giving students an opportunity to start where Williams did, moving on to "more deliberate composition" later. The two "old women in bed" poems that I use are "Portrait of a Woman in Bed" and "The Last Words of My English Grandmother."

For the purposes of teaching writing, the great virtue of these poems is that they contain speakers who are clearly not the poet. Too often, students view poems as statements created by people who are more sensitive than others. Williams differs from most of the major modernist poets in his fervent, almost spiritual commitment to democracy, i.e., the worth of human experience on its own terms. He does not look down on his audience or his immigrant patients, but directly at them; he listens attentively to other voices and uses those voices in his poems.

Portrait of a Woman in Bed

There's my things
drying in the corner:
that blue skirt
joined to the grey shirt—

I'm sick of trouble!
Lift the covers
if you want me
and you'll see
the rest of my clothes—
though it would be cold
lying with nothing on!

I won't work
and I've got no cash.
What are you going to do
about it?
—and no jewelry
(the crazy fools)

But I've got my two eyes
and a smooth face
and here's this! look!
it's high!

There's brains and blood
in there—
my name's Robitza!
Corsets
can go to the devil—
and drawers along with them—
What do I care!

My two boys?
—they're keen!
Let the rich lady
care for them—
they'll beat the school
or
let them go to the gutter—
that ends trouble.

This house is empty
isn't it?
Then it's mine
because I need it.
Oh, I won't starve
while there's the Bible
to make them feed me.

Try to help me
if you want trouble
or leave me alone—
that ends trouble.

The country physician
is a damned fool

GARY LENHART, editor of the new *Teachers & Writers Guide to William Carlos Williams*, is also a poet and teacher. His collections include *One at a Time* (United Artists) and *Father and Son Night* (Hanging Loose). He teaches creative writing and composition in Vermont.

and you
can go to hell!

You could have closed the door
when you came in;
do it when you go out.
I'm tired.

This poem presents an occasion to discuss unreliable narrators, especially important to students raised on movies and television, media heavily dominated by third-person omniscient narratives. I remind students that the narrator in a poem or story isn't always the author, and that we may find the narrator to be disagreeable or deluded. Mrs. Robitza in "Portrait of a Woman in Bed" is an exemplary case. Her shamelessness, ingratitude, class and religious biases, and irresponsible maternity make her an unattractive character, particularly to younger students, who are less apt to admire her perverse vitality than mature readers. Of course, the speakers in many student poems can be unattractive too, and the teacher should be careful about criticizing them. I have found myself more than once gently deriding the persona of a student poem for being harsh or unsympathetic, only to have the innocent student defend the speaker with a vehement "But that's me!" I knew that, but assumed the student would understand I was trying to be tactful. So it's important to establish early the possibility of discussing the speaker from the distance of literary narrator or protagonist, and this poem provides a perfect occasion.

We discuss the details Williams uses to portray the woman in bed. I ask students what they can know of the speaker from her few utterances. It's clear to most that she is poor and sick, but they don't understand why she "won't work." Often they are confused by the lines

But I've got my two eyes
and a smooth face
and here's this! look!
it's high!

There's brains and blood
in there—

And the threat of nudity makes some suspect her character. But the lines that disturb students most are

My two boys?
—they're keen!
Let the rich lady
care for them—
they'll beat the school
or
let them go to the gutter—
that ends trouble.

and

Oh, I won't starve
while there's the Bible
to make them feed me.

Here's a woman who callously abandons her own sons. Some students find it even worse that she cynically uses the Bible to force people to support her. Students are also offended by the crudity of her talk, which is not just impolite, but disrespectful to the person to whom she is speaking. Many students don't understand why anyone would want to write about a character such as this. A good question at this point is, "Doesn't anyone see virtue in speaking honestly? Won't you at least give her credit for being direct?" If you are dealing with adult students, a few will agree. But if your students are stuck in the difficult transitions of adolescence, where they may be struggling to come to terms with their own feelings, they may resist fiercely the notion that these are anyone's true feelings. "She's just ill and tired," perhaps "a victim of the classism in our society." I remind students that anything we know about the character is gained directly from her lips.

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Then we read "The Last Words of My English Grandmother."

The Last Words of My English Grandmother

There were some dirty plates
and a glass of milk
beside her on a small table
near the rank, disheveled bed—

Wrinkled and nearly blind
she lay and snored
rousing with anger in her tones
to cry for food,

Gimme something to eat—
They're starving me—
I'm all right—I won't go
to the hospital. No, no, no

Give me something to eat!
Let me take you
to the hospital, I said
and after you are well

you can do as you please.
She smiled, Yes
you do what you please first
then I can do what I please—

Oh, oh, oh! she cried
as the ambulance men lifted
her to the stretcher—
Is this what you call

making me comfortable?
By now her mind was clear—
Oh you think you're smart
you young people,

she said, but I'll tell you
you don't know anything.
Then we started.
On the way

we passed a long row
of elms. She looked at them
awhile out of
the ambulance window and said,

What are all those
fuzzy-looking things out there?
Trees? Well, I'm tired
of them and rolled her head away.

Although "The Last Words of My English Grandmother" contains description and a narrator who may be the author, it also contains an exemplary passage in somebody else's voice. First, we try to distinguish who speaks which lines (not always clear to students confused by the absence of quotation marks). Then we discuss the relationship between the speakers—a grandchild and his or her dying English grandmother. I have been asked, "How do you know that?" I begin with the title, emphasizing its important function in this poem, then read carefully through the first exchanges.

In their book *Poetry Everywhere*, Jack Collom and Sheryl Noethe describe how they use this poem as the basis of a "last words" assignment. I mention that to students as one way to handle my assignment: to write in someone else's voice. I suggest that this task is easiest with someone whose speech patterns are distinctive. It may be someone they met fleetingly, or someone whose voice they know so well that they can hear it at the very mention of the person's name. But there should be some difference in speech or personality to distinguish the poem's persona from the author.

It's remarkable how often, early in the course, this brings out the students with the most agile imaginations. As compared with the repugnant stranger of "Portrait of a Woman in Bed," students find it much easier to write about a parent or grandparent who died, though seldom do they write about it with as much distance as Williams. They tend to sentimentalize the relationship and the attitude of the dying toward life and death. But a few are always emboldened to write honestly and unflinchingly. In one class, I received two terrific poems from this assignment. The first, from a woman whose companion's father was dying of cancer, captured sympathetically the ornery, salty, logging-camp speech of the dying man. The other was by a student who had joined the first for a cigarette break the week before, and had listened to her complaints. The second poem captured the commingled sorrow, boredom, and fatigue of the family member whose life has been disrupted by daily visits to the hospital.

"The Last Words of My English Grandmother" also lends itself to a lesson about revision. Williams published three accounts of this event, a prose version in *The Great American Novel* (and reprinted in *I Wanted to Write a Poem*), and two poems now included in *The Collected Poems*. With advanced students I distribute copies of all three, withholding dates to prevent any assumptions about progression. We then compare them, with particular attention to line breaks, stanzas, use of detail, deletions, the unreliability of memory, and the artifice of anecdote.

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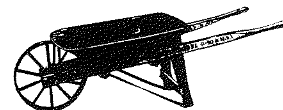
Two Williams poems that I have introduced to workshops with mixed success are "Impromptu: The Suckers" and "Choral: The Pink Church." I do not use these poems with beginning classes, but introduce them toward the end of poetry workshops with advanced students. Most students know Williams only as the author of straightforward descriptive imagist poems like "The Red Wheelbarrow." I would like them to understand that such



is only part of the picture, that he also wrote poems that inspire comparison to the long, shaggy compositions of Philip Whalen, the grand romantic epics of Frank O'Hara, and the obsessive meanderings of Bernadette Mayer, and that poems may be capacious vessels that will hold whatever the imagination touches.

The first problem with "Impromptu: The Suckers" and "Choral: The Pink Church" is that they now require historical introductions. That wasn't true thirty years ago, when Sacco and Vanzetti (in "Impromptu") were still household words. In "The Pink Church," few students recognize William James, John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, or martyred Spanish physician (and Williams's patron saint) Michael Servitus. More recognize Poe, Whitman, and Baudelaire. Most know of John Milton, but are flabbergasted to find him "singing like a Communist." It may also be necessary to provide some background about Cold War politics in the U.S. immediately following World War II. Fortunately, Christopher MacGowan's notes in the current edition of *The Collected Poems* provide sufficient background for both poems.

"Impromptu: The Suckers" is the easier of the two for students. In it, Williams rages at all those complicit in the execution of the Italian anarchists. His poem is a litany of accusations, described by Allen Ginsberg as "a really prophetic sort of anti-police-state radical rant." I remember how astounded I was the first time I read the following stanza:

> But after all, the thing that swung heaviest
> against you was that you were scared when
> they copped you. Explain that you
> nature's nobleman! For you know that every
> American is innocent and at peace in his
> own heart. He hasn't a damned thing to be
> afraid of. He knows the government is for
> him. Why, when a cop steps up and grabs
> you at night you just laugh and think it's
> a hell of a good joke—

My students wonder aloud at Dr. Williams's bad humor. One of my most accomplished poets responded to this poem by complaining that "Williams tries too hard to shock his readers." And there is often one student who believes that if Sacco and Vanzetti were anarchists, then why be so angry about their execution? Most students, however, don't disagree with the indictment of injustice expressed by Williams; they simply don't seem to be outraged or surprised by it. Whether at the community college or in the Ivy League, three decades of constant political scandal has inured most contemporary students to this sort of thing. The general attitude is: why does Williams blame the society for the misdeeds of its politicians? They understand his anger at the hypocritical "high-minded / and unprejudiced observers," but resist the rage that erupts into

> Take it out in vile whiskey, take it out
> in lifting your skirts to show your silken crotches
> [...]
> It's no use, you are Americans, just the dregs.
> It's all you deserve. You've got the cash,
> what the hell do you care?

I ask them to write their own angry litanies, and as they are generally eager to please, they do. But their anger doesn't erupt; it is borrowed, for the sake of the exercise. I have heard students muttering about politicians with such contempt that I still suppose this might be an outlet for real emotion, but so far we have had neither the inflammatory occasion nor the social analysis to produce good, angry poems.

I like to think that students take from the assignment an appreciation of how anger sustained the rant at fever pitch, that the length of "Impromptu: The Suckers" pushes them to stretch their muscles—or at least their stanzas—and that they see expanded possibilities for subject matter. Yet maybe I have learned more than they. Later in one term, when we read Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," some students were visibly excited and agreed that the poem was "on fire." Nevertheless they quickly assured me that they could never write in that vein. One said, "That may have been okay for then, but things have changed too much." As Williams might have reminded me, a new world demands new poetic practices.

In "Choral: The Pink Church" the problem is the brusque juxtaposition of its range of references. It's simple to go through the poem clarifying allusions, but it's more difficult to explain connections that are never explicit. What can we make of the allusions in this poem: dawn in Galilee, Aeschylus, three popular philosophers, a Spanish martyr who advocated religious tolerance but refused to renounce his Catholicism under pain of death, two French novelists (Proust and Gide) and three mid-nineteenth-century poets (two American and one French), drunks, prostitutes, the aberrant, a virgin's nipple? For me, this grand romantic chorus has always seemed a song of artistic and sexual liberation, a paean to those who stand up against cruelty, oppression, and intolerance, all culminating in a grand chorus echoing Beethoven:

> Joy! Joy!
> —out of Elysium!

in which even the "unrhymer" Milton would find room to sing "among / the rest...like a Communist."

The incoherences of the poem are inextricable from the grandness of its ambition. Williams is in the middle of his epic *Paterson* at this time, and, at sixty years old, heading into new territory. His doctor son has yet to be discharged from the military, and Williams is caring for both his own and his son's patients. We know from his letters that he responded anxiously to the increased political instability that resulted from the atom bomb and the beginning of the Cold War.

Williams reacts against this press of literary, personal, and social demands by grasping in many directions. He wants to address the threatened post-war world, but has yet to finish with a complex group of abstractions that had obsessed him for years. In many ways, the poem presents ideas about things, reversing Williams's own credo. His customary impatience with literary convention combines with his sense of urgency to produce a brisk shorthand that resembles the method of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, but with more improvisation and larger leaps. He is still working out a vision of a new mongrel world being whelped. The heroes of Williams's pantheon do not wear the mantle of received authority that Pound's or T. S. Eliot's figures wear. Like everything in Williams,

they remain quick and elusive, irreducible because they are as multidimensional as life.

What is the writing assignment? After we read the Williams poem with Frank O'Hara's "Ode to Joy," I ask students to compose a poem that might be sung in celebration, an ode to joy. It may be assembled from bits and pieces, and doesn't have to be logical. Indeed, in the vision from Keats that Williams and O'Hara inherited, the joy that surrounds things of beauty also liberates us from the cold eye of common sense.

I don't expect students to compose large masterpieces within the two weeks allotted for this assignment, and the poems I have received from it have been modest. But the quicksilver dartings of Williams's imagination can be liberating to students constrained by traditional notions of narrative. I encourage them to be reckless, to open their celebratory songs to whatever attracts them. As they struggle to shape the hodgepodge that often results, they learn that writing poems is not only a craft to be mastered, but also an exciting experiment with unpredictable results.

Note

1. William Carlos Williams, *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, John C. Thirlwall, ed. (New York: New Directions, 1984), p. 57.

BIG PLUG

T&W proudly announces the publication of *The Teachers & Writers Guide to William Carlos Williams*, edited by Gary Lenhart. This new book presents seventeen practical and innovative essays on using Williams's work to inspire writing by students and adults—not only the established Williams classics, such as "The Red Wheelbarrow" and "This Is Just to Say," but also his neglected gems, later poems, poems that relate to the visual arts, short fiction, novels, nonfiction, and the epic poem *Paterson*. The essays contain many examples from Williams's work and by students of all ages.

Also included are a survey of Williams audiocassettes and videotapes, a chronology, and an annotated bibliography/resource list. Never before have the full range and power of inspiration in Williams's writing been made available for teachers and individual writers.

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Another delight of this volume is a full-color reproduction of the rare self-portrait Williams did as a young man.

William Carlos Williams is not only a wonderful writer to learn from and to teach, he is also a gateway into the great modernist writing of the 20th century.

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Using "The Use of Force"

by David Surface

A FEW YEARS AGO I SPENT SOME WEEKS AS visiting writer at a small college in northern Ohio. The students seemed intelligent, reasonably well-to-do, comfortable with themselves. Their ideas about literature, which boiled down to the eternal outcry of the twenty-year-old, needed shaking up. So when one young man leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms, and asked who I thought they should read, I explained that I couldn't tell them which writer would wake them up and help open the world for them—I could only tell them who had done the same for me.

The first time I read the fiction of William Carlos Williams it was a tattered gray library copy of *Knife of the Times*, a collection of stories like I'd never read before. The voice on the page was like a knife cutting through everything that felt dead and difficult about writing. The rapid-fire, staccato sentences, the quotation marks that had fallen away or been burned off by the sheer speed of the writing, the refusal to tidy up experience by smoothing off its rough edges, all seemed to come from a mind that was as impatient as I was with everything artificial about fiction. By the time I'd made it through the first three stories I was laughing out loud, not because the stories were funny (although they often were) but because of the sheer exhilaration of realizing that writing could be like this.

The students' models for "experimental" writing were the usual undergraduate heroes, with Kerouac, Bukowski, and Rimbaud leading the pack. To these young people, lifestyle and subject matter seemed as important as writing style, the more "on-the-edge" the better. So it wasn't strange that many of them found it difficult to recognize Williams as an experimental writer, not just because of the deceptively plainspoken language of his stories, but also because of the middle-class circumstances of the author. Because they took him to be just another traditional, realistic fiction writer, they judged his work the way they would any "normal" American short story. Hence, Williams's jagged endings and breakneck transitions in *Knife of the Times*, which I considered poetic and energizing, the students found confusing or just plain weird. "These aren't stories," was what one young woman said. *Who says?* was the challenge I wanted to throw back at them. I wanted them to see that a story could take many different forms and I wanted them to feel freed by that sense of possibilities. But I realized I needed to find a Williams story that could overcome their objections, one that would fulfill their need for narrative tension while stimulating them to push the boundaries.

DAVID SURFACE is a fiction writer, essayist, and teacher. He has worked as a writer-in-the-schools for the Lincoln Center Dept. of Education and currently leads fiction writing workshops for adults at the Hudson Valley Writers' Center. Surface lives in Brooklyn, N.Y.

In his essay "A Beginning on the Short Story," Williams says, "A novel is many different things, a short story only one." Nowhere is that more brilliantly realized than in his story "The Use of Force." The entire action of the story can be summed up like this: a doctor making a house call tries to make a stubborn little girl open her mouth. Williams turns this simple event into a tour de force by paying attention to *everything* and reporting it as honestly and directly as possible. The story begins in typical Williams fashion:

> They were new patients to me, all I had was the name, Olson. Please come down as soon as you can, my daughter is very sick.

Here you can feel Williams's impatience with the whole expository baggage of "fiction writing": the absence of quotation marks and the borderline run-on punctuation are not affectations—they're the tracks he's left behind in his hurry to get to what really interests him.

Henry James said that "realism, in order to be realism, must take into account the entire field of experience," and that is what Williams does in the following passage:

> The father tried his best, and he was a big man but the fact that she was his daughter, his shame at her behavior and his dread of hurting her made him release her just at the critical moment several times when I had almost achieved success, till I wanted to kill him. But his dread also that she might have the diphtheria made him tell me to go on, go on though he himself was almost fainting, while the mother moved back and forth behind us raising and lowering her hands in an agony of apprehension.

Here you can see Williams's skill at weaving together action, psychological observation, and dialogue into a near-seamless whole. Also typical are his talent for surprising, matter-of-fact admissions that leap off the page, as well as sudden changes of mood (empathizing with the father one moment, then admitting *I wanted to kill him*).

These small, startling outbursts are scattered throughout the story:

> After all, I had already fallen in love with the savage brat, the parents were contemptible to me. In the ensuing struggle they grew more and more abject, crushed, exhausted while she surely rose to magnificent heights of insane fury of effort bred of her terror of me.

And later:

> Feeling that I must get a diagnosis now or never I went at it again. But the worst of it was that I too had got beyond reason. I could have torn the child apart in my own fury and enjoyed it. It was a pleasure to attack her.

Although these could be classified as difficult or even unacceptable thoughts, this is not confessional writing. Williams no more "confesses" these feelings than a radar screen "confesses" the formation of a storm front. It happens, he records it, and moves on. It's this *moving on* that distinguishes Williams from other "psychological" writers who pause in their narratives to provide the reader with insights. Though "The Use of Force" bristles with psychological observations, it never loses forward momentum. This is because, for Williams, there is no separation between thought, feeling, and action. In Williams's work, thought *is* action, feeling *is* action. A man forcing a spoon into a child's mouth, a sudden surge of blind rage—both are physical occurrences, real things happening in the room. And Williams weaves them together within one seemingly minimal framework.

After reading the story aloud in class, I told my students to take one simple action two people are doing together and to write about it from beginning to end. I encouraged them not to step outside of the moment, but to stay inside it and see what happens.

The results were not successful. The students followed the guidelines of the assignment in the most rudimentary way—describing two characters performing one activity together—but did not achieve Williams's dynamic balance of physical and psychological action. Students whose previous work had been action-driven, with little or no internal life, stayed in that vein, while students whose writing had been heavy with psychological and philosophical rhetoric did not bring more physical action into their writing.

I think I was responsible for the students' not "getting" the Williams exercise, partly because I had been so insistent on their seeing his writing as "radical" or "experimental," and because I'd talked too much about his techniques before allowing them to write.

The next time I tried the Williams exercise was in an adult-education course at an arts center in upstate New York. The students there were a mixed group with wildly different backgrounds and tastes in reading. A few seemed familiar with contemporary fiction, while others boasted of having stopped at Hemingway or Dickens. All of them, however, responded to "The Use of Force." For my part, I took care not to prejudice them by labeling Williams as an "experimental" or "modernist" writer; I simply had them read the story out loud in class, then told them what I wanted them to do.

I asked them to choose an experience two people have together, the simpler the better. A father teaching his daughter how to drive. A mother washing her young son's hair. If the experience has a definite beginning and end, that is even better. I told them to tell everything that happens, inside and out. This was tricky because I didn't want them to become bogged down in "confession"; I told them to read the Williams story again and think of it not as confession, but as *reportage*. Most important, I told them to keep moving. "Think of the experience you're writing about as a train," I told them. "You're riding to the end of the line. You may see a lot of interesting things outside the window, you may even make little stops, but you can get off only for a moment before the train starts moving again. Remember to *get back on the train*."

Even after having read "The Use of Force" a second time, some students remained unconvinced that describing a single, elemental experience could make a good piece of writing; although they had no trouble thinking of simple experiences to write about, a few of them doubted their ability to "stretch it out." I told them not to think of it as "stretching it out," but *breaking it open*. I told them to try the following experiment: go home and put a video on, one you've watched before, a movie or a home video of you and your family. Then watch a few scenes in slow motion. If you've never done this before, you'll be surprised at how many things you've never noticed. After a while, it actually starts to look as if it's a whole different video. People who looked as if they were laughing now look as if they're screaming in pain or anger; people playing football and tackling each other look as if they're caressing. Notice all the new things you see. Play it over and over again if you need to. Then do the same thing when you write your Williams exercise, only this time the "video" you're playing is the memory in your head. And it's also inside you, recording your smallest reaction, thought, and feeling, even those you have trouble identifying.

One young man brought in a piece about helping a disabled girl at summer camp:

> We find ourselves keeping pace. So we move on together, and I notice she's smiling, for real this time. It twists me inside a little. A clockwork half grimace in the arc of her swing. We reach the stairs and she stops dead. She hasn't thought this far ahead. I take her crutch and give her my hand.... I stand one step below her and she puts her arm around my neck. Her weight is nothing. She and I sweat into each other and her hair tickles my

cheek.... Marionettes with tangled strings, we lurch and sway all the way down. I help her get in her car, and don't think anything of it. And I can't wait for tomorrow.

—*Jim Keyes*

This piece is remarkable for the easy way it blends unadorned physical statements ("I stand one step below her and she puts her arm around my neck"), more lyrical clauses ("A clockwork half grimace in the arc of her swing"), and the kind of blunt admissions that give Williams's writing its heat and pulse ("It twists me inside a little." "And I can't wait for tomorrow").

One young woman brought in a piece about a long car ride with her father:

> He has never had any tolerance for partial information. So I say no, no plans.... I sound pathetic to myself and avoid my reflection in the side mirror. In the pause that follows is my father's habit of irritation. A habit he thinks I never pick up on. He is irritated because I have shut him out. And it is my guilty pleasure to pretend I don't notice this.
>
> Sometimes we pass a car that floats as if still as we go by. We are superior to them, whoever they are. The curves we see other cars taking ahead of us stretch out and are disappointingly straight by the time we get there—we barely feel the dips and turns of geography, enclosed within the static noise of the car and our gentle propelling forward, which feels much more like sitting still than it does moving.

—*Jean Kellet*

This piece differs from the last in that the psychological admissions come grouped together at the end of the first paragraph, but it's notable for the way that the writing turns next to the shared physical qualities of the experience as a way of helping to erase or ease the uncomfortable distance between the two characters, so that, by the end, *he* and *I* have become *we*.

By limiting students' stories to one basic action, the teacher can relieve some students' anxieties over what should happen next (plot), and leave their minds free to wander deeper into areas of thought and feeling that might go ignored in more busily plotted work.

The work of beginning fiction writers tends to suffer from two different syndromes—either it's excessively external and action-focused with little or no internal life, or it's excessively internal in that the psychological insights come tumbling out at random, not grounded in any particular physical reality. Using Williams's method from "The Use of Force" can give new internal depth to the action-obsessed young writer and give solid, down-to-earth grounding to the young writer with his or her head in the clouds.

Select William Carlos Williams Resources

by Gary Lenhart & Bill Zavatsky

Editions

The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams. New York: New Directions, 1967. Hastily written to deadline, full of errors and edited through the eye of memory, this book estranged friends and riled enemies. But it does capture the spirit of WCW's poetic adventure.

The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I: 1909–1939. New York: New Directions, 1986. Edited by A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume II: 1939–1962.* New York: New Directions, 1988. Edited by Christopher MacGowan. These standard editions of the poet's work include helpful notes, group the poems into the books in which they were originally published, and supplement them with unpublished and discarded poems. Reasonably priced and comprehensive. Very highly recommended.

The Collected Stories. New York: New Directions, 1996. Introduction by Sherwin B. Nuland. Previously titled *The Farmers' Daughters.* Includes 52 stories.

In the American Grain. New York: New Directions, 1956. A peculiar look at the Americas from the time of Red Eric to Abraham Lincoln in a series of essays about individual figures and episodes. One of the great strange books of the century. Highly recommended.

Paterson. New York: New Directions, 1995. Edited by Christopher MacGowan. WCW's epic poem. MacGowan supplies extensive helpful notes.

Selected Essays. New York: Random House, 1954; New York: New Directions, 1969. Because WCW made the selection, we can see what statements he was particularly