

Williams described the publication of T. S. Eliot's WASTE LAND as "the great catastrophe to our letters". His own position on poetry is best seen in the entry he wrote for the PRINCETON ENCYCLOPEDIA OF POETRY AND POETICS, under the heading of "Objectivism":

OBJECTIVISM. A term used to describe a mode of writing, particularly the writing of verse. It recognizes the poem, apart from its meaning, to be an object to be dealt with as such. Objectivism looks at the poem with a special eye to its structural aspect, how it has been constructed.

Hugh Kenner comments: "what the term meant in practice was that the poet 'looks at the interaction of the lines, not at their rapport with their subject.' "The Red Wheelbarrow" is a good example of a poem in which "so much depends" precisely on "the interaction of lines" apart from its "subject". Try to imagine an occasion for this sentence to be said:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens.

Not only is what the sentence says banal, if you heard someone say it, you'd wince. But hammered on the typewriter into a thing made, and this without displacing a single word except typographically, the sixteen words exist in a different zone altogether.

I'm in process of writing a book, the book I have contemplated doing for many years -- prose and verse mixed: "Paterson" -- an account, a psychological-social panorama of a city treated as if it were a man, the man Paterson. I want to work at it but I shy off whenever I sit down to work. It's maddening but I have the hardest time to make myself stick to it.

(SELECTED LETTERS, 216)



Williams was dazzled by the example of the CANTOS of Pound, even as he seems to have felt the obligation to write a kind of anti-Cantos, a poem of "local pride" written in the American idiom and celebrating the daily circumstances of his own locality... PATERSON was America's answer to the mythic mode of Eliot and Pound, a genuinely American epic, in the tradition of Whitman. It seemed to answer the demand for an "open" process-poem, an action model, whose perspective is repeatedly dissolved so as to allow for new beginnings... The idea of inserting documentation, personal letters, diary entries, and other "found objects" into the lyric fabric may well have come from Pound, but nothing in the CANTOS can equal the sense of presence and immediacy that characterizes the neurotic letters from the woman who signs herself only as "C", the histories furnished by patients like that of the retarded "T" who tells the doctor about her lobotomized sister "Billy"...

Marjorie Perloff: VOICES & VISIONS, Random House

William Carlos Williams