Book Review

“Something Urgent I Have to Say to You”: The Life and Works of William Carlos Williams

Herbert Leibowitz

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Reviewed by Kate Falvey

The grand urgency of William Carlos Williams’ sixty-year design to write “in the American grain,” and forge a new modernist poetics made of concrete images, vernacular sounds, and tunefully idiosyncratic line breaks was undiminished by poor sales, caustic judgments from poetic peers, and the exigencies of his equally urgent medical practice. A pediatrician and obstetrician, Williams was trained to closely observe. His writing reveals this acute attentiveness to the singular encompassing image—that painterly still life of a glazed red barrow with white chickens, for instance. Most significantly, he attended to sound, to diction and line breaks that give the ear a chance to savor words as musical meaning—sharp, muscular, lush, wry, atonal, staccato, reverberant.

Williams was a relentless experimenter and wrote and published prolifically: hundreds of poems, short fiction, novels, plays, literary criticism, essays, translations, and hybrid mixes of prose and poetry, like his 1923 declaration of poetic independence, Spring and All, which includes that wheelbarrow poem (poem XXII). Another well-known poem (numbered I in the book) is about perception, focus, and the animating power of imagination. It begins:

By the road to the contagious hospital
Under the surge of the blue mottled clouds driven from the northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the waste of broad, muddy fields brown with dried weeds, standing and falling

Herbert Leibowitz—author of a new biography of Williams—reads this poem as evidence of Williams’ stylistic mastery and distinctive, original voice. Here and elsewhere, he notes the intersections between Williams the artist and Williams the doctor: “He listened to the acoustic properties of words with the same care and skill he devoted to the beating of a patient’s heart.”

“Something Urgent I Have to Say to You”: The Life and Works of William Carlos Williams is a biography of an artist hard at work. As such, it’s best read with the poems nearby, since Leibowitz peers into the poems and finds evidence of the poet’s personal failings, struggles, frustrations, and guarded triumphs.

In his opening chapter, “Poetry as Biographical Evidence,” he defends his method, averting that “[l]iterary criticism is an indis-pensable stethoscope in the biographer’s bag.” Leibowitz, the co-founder and editor of the esteemed, long-running journal, Parnassus: Poetry in Review, disputes Clive Fisher’s choice to “abstain from literary analysis” in his biography of Hart Crane: “[w]ithout his poems and letters, Crane is just another tormented alcoholic who ended his own life.”

A key theme of this biography is “urgency”: Williams’ urgent ambition to become a serious artist and shaper of an American poetics; his urge to express himself freely, in body and mind; and his intense need to be reckoned with—approved of by the gossipy, vitriolic, judgmental literary community.

The title comes from one of Williams’ most revered poems, “Asphodel, that Greeny Flower,” a thirty-page love poem to Floss, his wife of fifty-one years, written late in his life, after Williams was incapacitated by serious health problems and a befuddling public ordeal. A second stroke left him partially paralyzed and aphasic. His appointment as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress was blocked after he failed to pass a McCarthy-era “loyalty investigation.”

In the poem, Williams confesses his infidelities and asks for absolution. Leibowitz goes against the critical grain and takes issue with the husband’s sincerity and the poet’s craft. Williams’ professions of love are “hollow” and self-serving, the language “hackneyed,” the sentiment “insipid.” The poem is not a rare culmination of an aging poet’s gifts and insights, but a “false lyric that strays far from the vigorous speech melodies he pioneered.” Yet Leibowitz uses this poem as a gateway into the competing forces at work in Williams’ character, and takes on something of Williams’ spirit of revolt in the process. It’s no surprise that the biographer, who knew Williams, admits that “[h]is voice is permanently lodged in my head.”

The man who emerges from Leibowitz’s quirky, erudite tour through Williams’ world and psyche is somewhat peevish, deeply insecure, and driven—a serial philanderer who required and balked at the suburban stability represented by his spouse.

He was in the thick of the literary avant-garde. His roster of friends and correspondents in
New York and Europe reads like a modernist index: H.D., Mina Loy, Marianne Moore, James Joyce, E.E. Cummings, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, and, his life-long friend and sparring partner, Ezra Pound, to name a few.

Yet he was also an uneasy outsider, ensconced in his hard-won day-job in Rutherford, New Jersey, a champion of the American idiom who grew up with the sounds of Spanish in his home. In his autobiography, Williams describes, almost comically, how he managed his shifts from working doctor to working poet, conceding that “[n]o matter what I was writing, the practice always came first.”

Williams’ medical practice among the immigrant poor of Northern New Jersey grounded him and fueled his art. He brought, like Chekhov, an “empathic curiosity and indignation” to his patients and their plights. With a scientist’s unflinching gaze, he recognizes that “[t]here’s nothing like a difficult patient to show us ourselves.”

Leibowitz writes: “A writer who attempts to live by uncompromising aesthetic principles can end up a pariah like Poe or confined like Pound in a solipsistic and real jail. Williams avoided these fates” through his love of the natural world, faith in the imagination’s transforming power, and devotion to the medical, as well as literary arts.

Leibowitz’s biography gives us new ways to think about much of Williams’ work, notably his 1925 In the American Grain, “a highly unorthodox, hybrid approach to historical narrative” with “poetic prose” that is “remarkably poised, idiomatic, piercing, and protean.” Leibowitz’s great appreciation of Williams in all his phases invigorates his analyses of the life in the work. Even at his most piercing, Leibowitz is a rousing guide who impels us to read and re-read Williams in all his urgent lyric variety.

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Contributors’ Notes

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Nina Bannett is an associate professor of English and department chairperson at New York City College of Technology, CUNY. Her chapbook, Lithium Witness, was published in 2011 by Finishing Line Press. She has previously been published in Open Minds Quarterly.

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Michael Byers is the author of the story collection The Coast of Good Intentions, the novella The Broken Man, and two novels, Long for This World and Percival’s Planet. His nonfiction has appeared in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post. A former Stegner Fellow, he directs the MFA program at the University of Michigan.

Sarah Cedeño’s nonfiction has appeared in Literary Mama, and her short fiction in Redactions Journal. She has a poem in the anthology Love Rise Up by Benu Press. Sarah lives in Brockport with her husband and two sons. She teaches creative writing at SUNY-Brockport and is an MFA candidate at Goddard College in Vermont.