

# From Pastorals to Paterson: Ecology in the Poetry and Poetics of William Carlos Williams

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FROM PASTORALS TO PATERSON: ECOLOGY IN THE POETRY AND POETICS  
OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

by

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ABSTRACT  
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Modernist poet William Carlos Williams died in 1962 – a landmark year in the history of the modern environmentalist movement. He did not live to see contemporary culture come to the deeper appreciation of humanity’s place in the world which we now know as ecology. This dissertation will argue, however, that supporting his entire oeuvre of poetry are philosophical and poetic underpinnings which resonate strongly with – and usefully anticipate – our modern understanding of the *interpenetrative* relationship between natural and culture, human and nonhuman.

I begin by tracing the roots of Williams’s “ecopoetics” back to the father of Williams’s beloved free verse: Walt Whitman. Both Whitman and Williams use nature as subject and trope in their poetry, but the latter pointedly improves upon the work of the former by shifting the voice of his poetry from an anthropocentric (human-centered) perspective to a more ecocentric one – one which breaks down the traditional American Romantic notion of nature as apart from us, instead more readily acknowledging humanity as integral part and parcel of nature’s cyclical systems.

In the middle sections of the work, the focus centers exclusively upon Williams, especially in his earlier poetry and prose collection *Spring and All* (1921), as well as in his later five-book epic *Paterson*. In these, I reveal three distinct ecopoetic qualities of his poetry: 1) a continuation of the ecocentric poetic voice; 2) treatment of the “imagination” as a natural force (akin to steam or lightning) which humans harness to generate art; and, 3) an anticipation of modern ideas about the “local” in his use of his native New Jersey landscape as poetic subject. Through close readings, the study highlights these qualities as integral facets of Williams’s poetics, marking his as a proto-ecopoet.

The dissertation closes with a broader historical contextualization of Williams’s ecopoetics as contrasted with other Modernists contemporary to his day – specifically Wallace Stevens and Lorine Niedecker. Through formal elements that mirror the previously argued traits of ecopoetics, we find Williams exceeding his peers and, I conclude, ultimately anticipating the kind of poetry we see being written by ecopoets in our own time.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	i
CHAPTERS	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1) “One by one, objects are defined” .....	2
2) “an inward review” .....	9
3) “clarity, outline of leaf” .....	11
II. AMERICAN (NATURAL) BEAUTY.....	15
1) Introduction.....	15
2) Poet of the Word/Poet of the Idea.....	16
3) Tree Songs.....	29
4) From Compost, Renewal.....	44
5) Two Shepherds.....	54
6) Conclusion.....	60
III. THE FIRST SIGNS OF SPRING (AND ALL).....	62
1) Introduction.....	62
2) Spring and Renewal.....	66
3) Spring and the Imagination.....	77
4) Spring and Modernity.....	83
5) Conclusion.....	93
IV. ACROSS THE PASSAIC IN <i>PATERSON</i> .....	95
1) Introduction.....	95

2) Paterson as (Biographical) Bioregion.....	96
3) <i>Paterson's</i> Proto-Environmental Poetry.....	107
4) The Seed of the Imagination.....	118
<i>Fire</i> .....	120
<i>Seed</i> .....	123
<i>Water</i> .....	125
5) Conclusion.....	129
V. SOME VERSIONS OF MODERNIST ECOPOETICS.....	132
1) Introduction.....	132
2) Modernist Version of the Local.....	134
3) "Compost Poetry".....	150
4) Conclusion.....	167
VI. CONCLUSION.....	170
1) "but what the hell does it mean?" .....	170
<i>Imagination</i> .....	172
<i>The Local</i> .....	174
<i>Biocentrism</i> .....	175
2) "O marvelous! what new configuration will come next?" ....	179
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	185

## I. INTRODUCTION

This study provides a guide to ecological and environmental qualities in the work of William Carlos Williams. It argues that although ecopoetics as a broader field of American poetry has only come to be defined and critically interrogated in the past few decades, Williams was clearly engaged (both implicitly and explicitly) in writing ecopoetry throughout his career during the first half of the twentieth century. I will argue that Williams was ahead of his time especially in two critical, and contemporarily relevant, areas: 1) his appreciation for the interrelatedness of humanity and the natural world, and 2) his philosophical centering upon his local environment as an ecosystem out of which that appreciation arose. Through close readings and critical analysis, I will show that his poetry reflects, and implicitly argues for, an understanding of humanity's equality with (not superiority to) the rest of the natural world, and the interrelatedness of these equally valuable members of the biosphere, and that he revealed his understanding of the human role in relation to the nonhuman through his intimate knowledge of, and deliberate artistic focus upon, his local milieu.

In the coming pages, I will trace how ecocritics have previously characterized *ecopoetry*, and how my use of the term both draws from and builds upon the most recent critical definitions. This leads into a review of the broader background of both Williams and Modernism in the context of past ecocritical writing. Finally, I'll outline the structure of this study, forecasting how the analyses in each chapter will work together to build toward the overarching argument of the work, namely, that Williams was a practicing ecopoet before there existed the terminology for such an artist.

### 1) “One by one, objects are defined”<sup>1</sup>

In point of fact, while the terms “ecopoet” and “ecopoetry” are common appellations applied to writers whose work frequently describes or engages with nature, the precise definition of ecopoetry is still being thoughtfully deliberated. In order to clarify the fundamental terms of this study, it behooves us to begin in firmly grounded definitions of what I mean when I refer to ecopoetry, and how my definition fits into the related but varied ways in which it has been defined in the past.

Ecopoetry descends from a tradition of classification begun by Lawrence Buell in his seminal ecocritical work *The Environmental Imagination*. In it, Buell delineated the four qualities necessary to all “environmentally oriented works” of any genre:

- 1) the presence of the nonhuman as more than mere backdrop,
- 2) the expansion of human interest beyond humanity,
- 3) a sense of human accountability to the environment, and
- 4) treatment of the environment as a process rather than a constant or given.<sup>2</sup>

Out of the definition of these traits, various subcategories and genres have since gradually evolved, with greater or lesser agreement on their subsequent definitions. The classification of the genre of environmentally-oriented *poetry*, in particular, was being critically defined at about the same time as Buell’s *Environmental Imagination*, when Terrence Gifford referred to “green poetry” as “those recent nature poems which engage

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<sup>1</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I*. Christopher MacGown and A. Walter Litz, eds. New York: New Directions, 1991. 183.

<sup>2</sup> Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996. 4.

directly with environmental issues.”<sup>3</sup> Though, as we’ll see in a moment, “nature poem” has come to be a somewhat loaded term, Gifford doesn’t clarify what he means by the phrase, except that he seems to take for granted any poem which “deals directly with environmental issues” must inherently be a “nature poem” and thus, in his terminology, “green poetry.” Such a description lacks the necessary specificity of the varied ways in which poems may “deal” with those issues, and even what those issues are. As a result, it becomes necessary to seek more specific terms.

In the decade following Buell’s seminal work, and Gifford’s poetry-specific classification, two useful definitions emerged of the explicitly-named genre of “ecopoetry,” which help move us toward the way in which I will be defining it over the course of this study. First was Leonard Scigaj, who in his *Sustainable Poetry* (1999) notes, “we might define ecopoetry as poetry that persistently stresses human cooperation with nature as a dynamic, interrelated series of cyclic feedback systems.”<sup>4</sup> Scigaj usefully highlights the scientific qualities of such poetry. His use of “eco” comes explicitly out of “ecology,” meaning the study of the cycles and the interpenetrative relations between species within the “feedback systems” he mentions. (It’s useful to note here that the prefix “eco” comes out of the Greek “oikos,” meaning “dwelling” or “home.”) His definition of ecopoetry reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the field of ecocriticism, in that it uses the vocabulary of the hard sciences (“cyclic feedback systems”) to describe the artistic field of poetry.

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<sup>3</sup> Gifford, Terry. *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry*. Manchester University Press, 1995. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Scigaj, Leonard. *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Eco-poets*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999. 37. The verbiage of the latter half of Scigaj’s definition may stand out to some humanist readers as decidedly un-literary, but this is because it cleaves rather tightly to the common verbiage used by environmental scientists to define “ecology.”

Three years later, in the introduction to the essay collection *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (2002), editor and ecocritic J. Scott Bryson offers a definition for the term which makes some very important distinctions; he describes it as “a subset of nature poetry that, while adhering to certain conventions of romanticism, also advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues.”<sup>5</sup> He further describes ecopoetry according to its three main characteristics: 1) “an emphasis on [an] ecocentric perspective,” 2) “an imperative toward humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature,” and 3) “an intense skepticism toward hyperrationality”—elements of each of which would be carried through in future definitions, and especially the first part of which will contribute to the way in which I will be defining ecopoetry in this study.<sup>6</sup> Bryson’s treatment of ecopoetry as a subset of the broader category of “nature poetry” (which he never explicitly defines but at one point mentions as having “natural subject matter and imagery”) hints at the diversity of approaches possible in poetic descriptions of, or engagement with, the natural world. However, Bryson notes, as he’s in the act of clarifying his own definition, that “[a]ny definition of ecopoetry should remain fluid at this point [2002] because scholars are only beginning to offer a thorough examination of the field.”<sup>7</sup> A decade later, in 2012’s *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, editors Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street offer the most complete and useful taxonomy to date of ecopoetry, and the main definition upon which I will be building my analyses of Williams’s ecopoetics.

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<sup>5</sup> Bryson, J. Scott. *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*. New York: New Directions, 1978. 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

In a departure from Bryson, whose definition they explicitly cite, Wirth and Street see ecopoetry as a broader category, encompassing the three subsets of: 1) *nature poetry*, which “often meditates on the encounter between the human subject and something in the other-than-human world that reveals an aspect of the meaning of life”; 2) *environmental poetry*, or “poetry propelled by and directly engaged with active and politicized environmentalism”; and 3) *ecological poetry*, which “engages questions of form,” (both poetic form and the traditional form of the poetic persona as a single, coherent self) as well as being “informed by a biocentric perspective and by ecological interrelatedness and entanglement.”<sup>8</sup> In the coming chapters, I will examine various poems by Williams from all three of these categories, but I am most interested in the ways in which he anticipates modern ecopoets and ecopoetry when working especially in the mode of the *ecological*.

As I will argue, Williams’s ecopoetics are most compelling when they eschew the anthropocentric perspective of more traditional nature poetry and instead achieve a “biocentric” perspective (to borrow Wirth and Street’s term), which endorses equality between humanity and the other organisms in our ecosystems, inherently valuing all life, as well as acknowledging the interdependence of the diverse elements of a given ecosystem. Along with a focus upon biocentricity, the two additional distinguishing characteristics I will be ascribing to Williams in using the term “ecological poetry” are: 1) a dedicated focus upon a writer’s local environment and natural features, and 2) Williams’s specific and explicit views on the imagination as an element of nature, as

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<sup>8</sup> Wirth, Ann-Fischer and Laura-Gray Street, ed. *The Ecopoetry Anthology*. San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2012. xxviii-xxix.

articulated in the prose sections of *Spring and All*, but evident in work from throughout his career, most especially in *Paterson*.

Williams's lifelong pursuit of what he called the "American idiom"—the universal language of his native land and country—was an extension of his mission to find collective experience in the individual and local context. As he notes in a 1929 essay on his friend, philosopher Kenneth Burke,

From the shape of men's lives imparted by the places where they have experience, good writing springs...One has to learn what the meaning of the local is, for universal purposes. The local is the only thing that is universal."<sup>9</sup>

This was during a period in American letters when expatriation was the norm, and Europe was home to both his closest friend (Ezra Pound) and his greatest poetic rival (T.S. Eliot). But Williams chose to stay home in provincial Rutherford. Paraphrasing the old environmental slogan, he sought to think globally while writing locally. Informed by the philosophy of John Dewey, from whom the "local as universal" idea came, he saw suburban NJ as just as good a place, or better, from which to observe America, just as Walt Whitman less than a hundred years earlier and less than a hundred miles away had "contained multitudes" from the shores of Camden. But this presented its own difficulties. As ecopoet and critic Wendell Berry recently noted, the most formidable and lasting of the implications of Williams's choice was "the mass of local details...that came crowding into his mind: details of geography, of daily work, of local life and economy, and of course the details of an imposed industrialism and its overwhelming power to

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<sup>9</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *Selected Essays*. New York: New Directions, 1969. 132.

uproot, alienate, and corrupt.”<sup>10</sup> It is here that we can see most clearly an intersection between Williams’s personal philosophy and poetic goals and the modern environmental movement. In the same way that recycling or energy conservation is posited to us as a responsibility we have to future generations, “[P]oetry...became for Williams a civic obligation, a kind of work relating to community membership and neighborhood.”<sup>11</sup> That dedication to the local vs. global foregrounded all of Williams’s work and is among his strongest eco-poetic qualities.

To put a finer critical point on what it means for an artist’s poetry to inhabit an immediate locus, it’s useful to consider how ecocritic Neil Evernden has described such a move in scientific terms. In one of the foundational texts of ecocritical studies—Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s *The Ecocriticism Reader*—Evernden argues, “there is no such thing as an individual—only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place.”<sup>12</sup> Evernden’s argument is put forth in his article “Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy,” and begins with a one-word definition of ecology’s basic premise as “inter-relatedness.”<sup>13</sup> Evernden goes on to note that in appreciating the ecology of a text, “we must deal...with the individual [writer] as a component of, not something distinct from, the rest of the environment.”<sup>14</sup> He describes, by way of an ecological example found in nature, the “territoriality” of the common cichlid fish and its tendency to (against all logic and self-preservation) attack much larger enemies within a certain distance from the cichlid’s established territory. (For our

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<sup>10</sup> Berry, Wendell. *The Poetry of William Carlos Williams of Rutherford*. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2013. 27.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 30.

<sup>12</sup> Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm, ed. *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. 103.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 98.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 97.

purposes, that territory can be understood as the cichlid’s “local.”) From here, Evernden moves into how this experience can be described in and by the social sciences, arguing, “there appears to be a human phenomenon, similar in ways to the experience of territoriality, that is described as aesthetic and which is, in effect, a ‘sense of place,’ a sense of knowing and being part of a particular place.”<sup>15</sup> As noted above, ecocriticism is inherently an interdisciplinary project, a way of bringing the natural sciences to bear on artistic creation, and Evernden’s article helps us to see how the distinct and deliberate sense of place at play in a number of species outside our own also finds expression in the ways in which writers don’t simply write about the near-at-hand, but write from a sense of attachment to that place and a kind of emotional, artistic territoriality. In Chapter V, I’ll explore the contrasting ways we see this expressed in Williams, Lorine Niedecker, and Wallace Stevens. That dedication and attachment to their local milieu is one quality beyond Wirth and Street’s definition that I am arguing as being distinctly ecologically poetic.

Another context in which Williams reveals his own ecopoetics is, as examined in Chapter III, when he posits that the imagination is “an actual force comparable to electricity or steam...[with the power] to give created forms reality, actual existence.”<sup>16</sup> His discussion of the effect of the imagination on the artist and its active role in affecting external reality, as well as the praxis these views saw in his poetry, from the 1920s all the way through his book-length poem *Paterson*, will add to Wirth and Street’s definition of what constitutes ecological poetry and contribute new ways of understanding the genre of ecopoetry.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 100.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, *Collected Poems, Volume 1*, 120.

## 2) “an inward review”<sup>17</sup>

In a certain sense, claiming Williams’s poetry as ecopoetic (whether as nature poetry or as ecological or environmental poetry) seems inevitable, given that the natural world is such a frequent subject of his writing. Too often “Modernism” conjures mental images of industrialization and urban blight (cf. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”) on one hand, and on the other, the invocation of ecology brings to mind associations with the interpenetrative cycles of animals, plants, and weather systems, often centered in rural spaces, if not the outright wilderness. But any reader intimately familiar with Williams’s poetry, and his biography, will immediately recognize the ecopoetic project as a ‘natural’ fit, because of Williams’s intentional poetic position in his own life’s locale, and because of the intense attention he paid to the natural features of that local environment.<sup>18</sup>

Williams’s work, from juvenilia to late-period poems, was saturated with the language of his environs—his self-consciously ‘local’ Rutherford, New Jersey—and with the imagery, names, and descriptions of a wide array of both metaphorical but also quite literal flora and fauna.

Nonetheless, ecocritical work on Williams has almost exclusively appeared in isolated essays in academic journals.<sup>19</sup> In Bryson’s aforementioned *Ecopoetry: A Critical*

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 180.

<sup>18</sup> Ann Fisher-Wirth, co-editor of *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, laid the groundwork for such a consideration of Williams’s biography, and locality in her 1989 book *William Carlos Williams and Autobiography: The Woods of His Own Nature* (University Park: Penn State University Press). Additionally, David Frail’s *The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams* (UMI Research Press, 1987) usefully describes Williams’s sense of the place in that book’s tenth section, “The Politics of the Local” (145-169).

<sup>19</sup> Notably, none of these articles has appeared in *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature and the Environment* (*ISLE*, Oxford University Press), the journal of record for ecocriticism’s main organization, the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment. *ISLE* did recently (in its eighteenth year) publish a special issue devoted to modernism and ecocriticism (Summer 2012), but the articles seemed to favor relatively minor fiction writers and poets and did not include Williams, Stevens or Niedecker.

*Introduction*, Mark C. Long has a useful article on the ways in which language acts as mediator for the human habitation of a given place or environment, an idea which Williams addresses in *Spring and All* and which is discussed in Chapter III of this study.<sup>20</sup> In a short section of his second book, *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), Lawrence Buell reads “Williams as Bioregionalist,” an argument that is useful for my discussion of *Paterson* in Chapter IV. Buell’s reading also helps contextualize Williams within the eco-poetic tradition, as coming out of the legacy of Walt Whitman (the title of the section in Buell’s book is “Whitmanian Modernism”). This is an idea I address in my discussion of Whitman’s and Williams’s work of the pastoral tradition, and of their disparate modes of speaking nature through anthropocentric and biocentric voices, respectively, in the second chapter.

But while there have been no book-length studies on Williams yet, there have been monographs on the other poets treated in this study in relation to Williams, including Whitman and Wallace Stevens.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, other ecocritical work on modernist writers outside the group of writers I address shows that while there still remains much to be said about how modernism’s approaches to eco-poetics can shape our understanding of artistic representations of nature, ecocriticism as a field has been expanding its valuable interdisciplinary work.<sup>22</sup> This study aims to fill in what I perceive to be a large gap in the ecocritical work to date in offering interpretive avenues by which to read Williams, a poet for whom large-scale ecocritical work is perhaps long overdue.

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<sup>20</sup> “William Carlos Williams and Contemporary American Nature Poetry,” in Bryson, *Eco-poetry: A Critical Introduction*.

<sup>21</sup> Namely, M. Jimmie Killingsworth’s *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study of Eco-poetics*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005, and Gyorgyi Voros’s *Notations of the Wild: Ecology in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997.

<sup>22</sup> Such as Guy Rotella’s *Reading and Writing Nature: The Poetry of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and Elizabeth Bishop*. Lebanon: Northeastern University Press, 1990.

### 3) “clarity, outline of leaf”<sup>23</sup>

The framework within which I will argue for Williams’s ecological poetics, especially as they express themselves in the biocentrism, localism, and use of the imagination in his oeuvre, will begin in his American poetic predecessor Walt Whitman and trace Williams’s poetry and explicit prose poetics through his 1923 *Spring and All* and then his five-book epic poem *Paterson* (published from 1946 to 1958), and finally conclude by bringing his ecological qualities into focus against the backdrop of two of his contemporaries and fellow Modernist eco-poets, Wallace Stevens and Lorine Niedecker.

In the Chapter II, I closely read Williams’s “The Trees” next to Whitman’s “Song of the Red-wood Tree,” contrasting the former’s biocentric and the latter’s more anthropomorphic techniques. In both poems, their personae use the perspective of trees to remark, for better or worse, upon humanity. I also read two poems about the afterlife (Williams’s “A Unison” and Whitman’s “This Compost”) again highlighting Whitman’s more traditionally anthropocentric assessment of the relationship between humanity and nature with Williams’s more modern biocentric one, with particular regard to human decomposition. Poems on this particular biological intersection between the human and the natural I term “compost poetry,” arguing that Williams’s and Whitman’s works fit within a longer tradition, a vital and valuable one for appreciating a poet’s sense of their own ecopoetics (and one to which I return when discussing Stevens and Niedecker in Chapter V). By reading Williams’s ecological poetics side-by-side with Whitman’s more anthropocentric voice, I help situate the former’s position within the longer American

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<sup>23</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 1*. 183.

tradition, while revealing the latter's clearly historically-grounded proto-ecopoetics within the broader movement of American Romanticism.

The third chapter centers upon Williams's *Spring and All*, an early-career mixture of prose arguments on his poetics, punctuated by object lessons in some of his most well-known poems, including "The Red Wheelbarrow," "To Elsie," and "Spring and All." By reading these poems in tandem with some of his more biocentric moments in the prose interjections, I go further in depth in defining his sense of the "local" as well as how he uses biocentricity, not only in subject and poetic perspective, but also, especially in "Spring and All," in his syntax and form. Further, drawing from the section within the prose writings where Williams's describes poetry's relationship to (and, in cooperation with the imagination, creation of) physical reality, we will see him making a distinction in poetic form similar to that argued by present day critics as being between nature poetry and ecological poetry. Finally, by highlighting the moment in *Spring and All*'s prose where Williams talks about the imagination as that aforementioned "actual force comparable to electricity or steam," I lay out in earnest my argument for imagination, in Williams, as a complementary trait of the ecopoetic.

Chapter IV looks at Williams's epic work *Paterson* through the same lenses of the local, the biocentric, and the imagination. In it, I argue that Williams is using nature as more than mere backdrop or setting: rather, his poetics are inextricably tied to his environment, and his sympathy with the landscape reveals him to be working in a surprisingly contemporary style of ecopoetry. Further, by emphasizing moments in Book I of *Paterson* where Williams reveals humanity's exploitation of natural resources, he reveals a proto-environmentalist perspective which, given his historical moment, predates

the eventual political understanding of pollution and environmental degradation, and shows him taking part in Wirth and Street's second category of ecopoetry: environmental poetry.

In this study's fifth chapter, using ecocritic Neil Evernden's framework of the "tourist" vs. the "resident," I read Williams's ecopoetics alongside those of his Modernist contemporaries, Stevens and Niedecker. Given that Niedecker and Williams both lived (and wrote within) lives of intentional focus upon their hometowns, I contrast this perspective with that of Stevens, who famously wrote a significant amount of his poetry about a locus distant from his home, namely Florida. Also, returning to the "compost poetry" of Chapter II, I examine the disparate treatment of human decomposition and re-entrance into nature's physiology as reflective of all three poets' contrasting views of humanity's role in relation to our natural environment. Finally, the chapter concludes with analyses of how these poets reveal biocentricity in their work, offering us diverse samples of the forms modernist ecological poetry can take. Moving from here into the Conclusion, this gives greater clarity to the specific ways in which Williams, especially, is calling forward in his work to the ecopoets of our contemporary era.

This dissertation seeks to help unearth and expose the work of William Carlos Williams, and his fellow Modernists, as ecocritically rich fields. Throughout, I will demonstrate and expand upon Williams's implicit and explicit ecological poetics by utilizing close readings on a range of poems from throughout Williams's career and by building upon recent work in the field of literary ecocriticism. The results of such a perspective opens up new avenues by which others may read Williams, and his

contemporaries, and helps revise how we currently understand their respective approaches to the natural world.

## **II. *American (Natural) Beauty***

### **1) Introduction**

The study of ecology teaches us that no living thing exists independent of the elements, organisms, and structures that surround it. A similar proposition may be made with regard to the literary tradition: that no artist—especially one educated in the history of his or her given medium—creates art without an awareness of other artists, past and present. In our search for the elements of ecopoetics in the poetry of William Carlos Williams, it is essential that we understand the American tradition from which he comes; and, whether discussing poetic form or notions of literary ecology, no figure looms larger in that American tradition than Walt Whitman.

This chapter will look at Williams's own ideas about Whitman (*vis-à-vis* both form and ecological themes) and will explore ecologically poetic traits they both share, as well as suggest ways in which Williams seems to be updating certain themes of American ecopoetics in his own context in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among the things these two poets seem to have in common are a shared fascination with their local environment, their respective uses of nature as both poetic object and metaphor, and a desire to offer their readers the perspective of the natural world by infrequently taking as their persona specific features of the landscape (such as trees).

While these similarities are clear, differences also abound. The most striking difference in their respective ecological poetics is that while Whitman seems confined to an imperialist, “manifest destiny”-inspired anthropocentrism (largely the product, I will argue, of his historical moment), Williams instead offers a broader biocentric perspective

in his poems that reveals a decentering of the human experience. In a way that forecasts how we have come to conceptualize the environment in our own time, Williams works from the assumption that we, as humans, are members of an ecosystem that is larger than ourselves. I will argue that this implicit underpinning to Williams's personal philosophy, as expressed in his poetic form and content, clearly marks him as an (albeit apolitical) environmental writer. Put simply, Whitman's poetry reads as the work of a proto-ecopoet still working within the framework of American Romanticism, while Williams brings some of Whitman's efforts into the context of the twentieth century, and thereby inaugurating some of the qualities of contemporary ecological poetry. A better understanding of both of these poets' relationship to the natural world, as found in their poetry, will help us contextualize ecopoetry within the longer American poetic tradition.

## **2) Poet of the Word/Poet of the Idea**

In 1955, on the centennial of the first edition of Walt Whitman's best-known work, Milton Hindus collected a number of poems, essays, and commentaries into a book entitled *Leaves of Grass: One Hundred Years After*.<sup>24</sup> It includes a consideration by the then already well-recognized William Carlos Williams. The essay was solicited for the book and as such bears some of the earmarks of having been written under compulsion. Williams reveals in "An Essay on *Leaves of Grass*" some of his contentious views on Whitman, namely, that the latter's use of free verse marked a sea change in the American poetic tradition but that his overindulgence in it sometimes bleeds into an uncontrolled poetics. Williams acknowledges that Whitman's experimentation with free verse was an

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<sup>24</sup> Hindus, Milton, ed. *Leaves of Grass: One Hundred Years After*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1955.

admirable “assault on the very citadel of the poem itself,” and that the “direct challenge to all living poets” it represented “is a challenge that still holds good after a century of vigorous life.”<sup>25</sup> Williams goes on to say, however, that after ‘discovering’ free verse, “to do any more with it than simply to write the poems was beyond him.” In other words, once Whitman initiated a revolution in poetic form, he was at a loss as to how to control it, or how his poetry might best profit from its use. It’s Williams’s belief that it took the work of poets after Whitman (himself included) to refine free verse into a usable material for creating forward movement within the art form and to bring it to its full potential.

The extent to which Williams’s poetics are informed by Whitman’s work in open form/free verse, and the extent to which Williams’s body of work represents a poetic evolutionary step beyond Whitman, has been the focus of much prior critical study.<sup>26</sup> This chapter will focus specifically on how this evolution can be traced in the writers’ respective approaches to nature and ecology in poetry. As we’ll see, they clearly shared an interest in the use of the natural environment as fertile ground for poetic source material. Both Whitman and Williams took as their focal point a mutual locale—America, certainly, but more specifically the more immediate *local* surroundings of that country’s “Garden State,” New Jersey. Both poets wrote using immediately grounded sensory experience of that local as a jumping-off point for larger statements about their milieu with markedly contrasting results.

Williams, in his “Essay on *Leaves of Grass*,” pinpoints one of the fundamental differences between himself and Whitman: regardless of the freedom of poetic form they

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<sup>25</sup> Williams, William Carlos. “An Essay on *Leaves of Grass*” in *Leaves of Grass: One Hundred Years After*. Milton Hindus, ed. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1955. 22.

<sup>26</sup> Most notably in Stephen Tapscott’s *American Beauty: William Carlos Williams and the Modernist Whitman*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), as well as in articles by Albert Gelphi, George Layng, and Rosemary Gates.

both shared, their understanding of the function of verse put them at odds with each other. Williams believed that Whitman too often saw poetry as merely a vehicle for expressing thought with thought taking precedence over form, whereas Williams viewed thought/content as secondary to the language that expressed it. As he points out in his essay, “the idea which originally set [Whitman] in motion, the idea on which he had been nurtured, [was] the idea of democracy.” This was just one of the many “ideas of his time” with which Williams felt Whitman was “preoccupied,” and he believed that such preoccupation created a blind spot in Whitman’s poetic form. “[A]fter all,” Williams notes, “poems are made out of words, not ideas. [Whitman] never showed any evidence of knowing this.”<sup>27</sup> This stands in direct contrast to Williams who, whether as an Imagist, Objectivist, or any specific school’s label, devoted his poetic life to the search for the right *measure* and *line* to perfectly capture what he called the “American idiom.”

Williams’s idea that “poems are made out of words, not ideas” comes from a statement made by French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé to painter Edgar Degas<sup>28</sup>. Interestingly, it not only suggests that part of the poetic philosophy undergirding Williams’s “American Idiom” was cribbed in part from the French Symbolists; it also echoes another instance in which Williams quotes indirectly from a major French poet. Intellectual and polymath Paul Valéry, in a 1939 lecture at Oxford University entitled “Poetry and Abstract Thought,” again put the focus of poetry more on text than meaning when he argued “a poem is really a kind of machine for producing the poetic state of mind by means of words.”<sup>29</sup> Williams’s gloss above that “poems are made of words, not

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<sup>27</sup> Williams. “An Essay on *Leaves of Grass*.” 27.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Valéry cites this in an anecdote in his essay “Poetry and Abstract Thought,” which appeared in *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Follot. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958. 81.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 82.

ideas” hints that he was sensitive to the necessity of establishing just such a “state of mind” in order to get past the “idea” by way of the “words.” Further, this echoes Williams’s own statement of 11 years earlier in which he paraphrased Valéry (just as he’d later paraphrase Mallarmé) claiming “a poem is a small (or large) machine made out of words.”<sup>30</sup> What seems important to both Valéry and Williams is to get past what the line of poetry simply signifies (the “idea”) to the mood the words create in the reader. As Valéry says, the poetic machine’s goal is to “produc[e] the poetic state of mind.” For Williams, this element of form is vital to the success of a poem, and for us it’s central to understanding the difference between Williams’s and Whitman’s respective approaches to how they write about their natural, local environment and how they are meant to signify, describe, or enact that environment.

Having now established the primacy of form to Williams’s sense of poetics, one thing for which he was more than willing to praise Whitman is the important role free verse played in the reconception of the our national poetry—distinctly American, like Williams’s own “idiom.” “The thing that no one realized,” he says of Whitman’s new form, “is that the native which they were dealing with was no longer English but a new language akin to the New World to which its nature accorded in subtle ways that they did not recognize.”<sup>31</sup> Here, Williams brings to the fore one of the most compellingly ecological qualities he and Whitman share: a fascination with and fixation on the aforementioned “local.”

From bumper stickers (“Think Globally, Act Locally”) to the slow food movement, one of the underlying assumptions of modern environmentalism is that

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<sup>30</sup> From “Introduction to The Wedge,” reprinted in *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry, 1800-1950*. Ed. Melissa Kwasny. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 342.

<sup>31</sup> Williams. “An Essay on *Leaves of Grass*.” 27.

ecological awareness begins in one's immediate surroundings. This idea has its philosophical grounding in the basic unit of ecology: the ecosystem. It's a minor miracle of sorts that both of these towering figures of American poetry happened to have their roots in relative geographic and ecological proximity as lifetime New Jerseyians. Even more important than the fact that Whitman and Williams inhabited a similar land(and sea-)scape is that they both remained (personally and poetically) inextricably tied to these immediate surroundings. Whitman and Williams devoted their careers to seeking universal truths in their own backyards. If Blake saw "the world in a grain of sand," then Whitman and Williams seem to be examining worlds within sand from a shared Jersey shore. Whitman (the poet of the idea) enacted this local method through sweeping catalogs of all those places and people he sought to bring to himself through his verse, an autonomous democratization of the people. Stanza after stanza of "Song of Myself" (a poem that begins and remains in the most local of locales, the poet's own body) is given over to calling forth the universe to his own spiritual and physical "local." For Williams (the poet of the word), the effort is a more deliberate one: to observe in the close-at-hand elements of artistic and philosophical truth applicable to the far-away.

Poet and critic Stephen Tapscott offers us a useful beginning framework for understanding how Williams's use of the local-as-universal can be understood in an ecological as well as linguistic argument. He notes:

Unlike Whitman's hieroglyphic reading of divine meanings spelled out in the materials of the world, Williams' "local assertion" is not [spiritually] transcendent; he uses the local details to register, in a new world of the

imagination's words, the individual's perceptions and imaginative encounters with the physical world, through a kind of immanence.<sup>32</sup>

These “encounters” can be further read as the direct sensory experiences that the poet and reader have with the natural world. When Tapscott reads the noun subjects of “the red wheelbarrow” as a move from “inactive, processed material” (the wheelbarrow) into “active organic material” (rain water) and finally ending in “living creatures” (the chickens), he traces a useful line from abstraction into grounded reality.<sup>33</sup> When reexamined in an ecological context, we can see Williams taking the reader from the *cultural* (that is, manmade) wheelbarrow into the elemental *natural* subject of the rain water and finally into (what Tapscott calls the “vitality” of) a living, breathing member of the human-natural biotic community. As Tapscott reads the chickens, “their name seems to be the destination of the entire linear sequence.”<sup>34</sup> It is not, however, simply their name that is the destination, it is their vitality and nature as a part of a symbiotic relationship with humanity. While most readings of the poem take as the main subject—the thing upon which “so much / depends”—the wheelbarrow itself, Tapscott’s reading highlights the focal quality of the chickens, typographically isolated in the final line and directly followed by a conclusive period. Humanity manufactures tools to handle the resources of the Earth and willingly accepts the life-giving elements of its meteorology, but our closest connection to our environment is with the living species that serves as both domesticated resource and as fellow interactive members in our ecosystem.

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<sup>32</sup> Tapscott, Stephen. *American Beauty: William Carlos Williams and the Modernist Whitman*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 203.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

A Marxist interpretation of the poem (Marxism being one of the fundamental schools out of which ecocriticism was born) might come to the conclusion that the utility of the wheelbarrow is important, but it is the value of the chicken as food-producer (in their eggs) and food provider (in their meat) that takes precedence. Similarly, their ecological value is as part of a recursive cycle (albeit a domesticated one) in which rain waters the grain, upon which chickens feed, upon which (implicitly) humanity feasts, and all then serve to figuratively nourish the poet, who consumes them together in this Imagistic moment. By contrast, a Whitman-persona would likely have difficulty dealing with such a scene with anything approaching the clinical objectivity Williams, in the end, exhibits; it's challenging enough to find a poem among the many versions of *Leaves of Grass* that eschews the first-person perspective. Williams's poem, on the other hand, derives much of its success (and its critical longevity) from its transition from the subjective human-emotional perspective of the opening ("so much depends") to the final stanzas' unobtrusive sense of clear-minded (Imagist) observation.

For both the subjective Whitman and the more objective Williams, the seeds of poetic inspiration that may flower into a poem can be found outside one's back window (i.e. in the local). For Williams especially, those inspirations need only be observed through sensory experience, then universalized in the poetic line, to prove valuable. By contrast, Whitman would be likely to use an image of inspiration as grounds for an anthropocentric sermon on how, once internalized into himself, the image is thereby incorporated into the human race he contains. Williams's differing tactic gets to the heart of how he defined "the universality of the local." He articulates it clearly in a 1939 essay entitled "Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist" by describing the exact process:

If I succeed in keeping myself objective enough, sensual enough, I can produce the factors, the concretions of materials by which others shall understand and be led to use—that they may the better see, touch, taste, enjoy their own world.”<sup>35</sup>

There are two explicitly ecological factors at work here. First is sensory (not intellectual) experience as the basis of all universal art. The second follows out of that: the important role played in that process by that which immediately surrounds us: “their *own* world” (emphasis mine)—in other words, the local.

Ecology as a field of study is founded on a similar principle to that of Williams’s “universal” poetry: it posits that the lessons learned from the study of the local (ecosystem *or* poetic field of vision) can inform our understanding and decisions in areas far afield. To put this into a direct scientific illustration, while a given ecological crisis may seem localized, the experience it offers can be used to alter or reinforce behaviors elsewhere; it’s the cliché “butterfly effect.”<sup>36</sup> By way of a more concrete local example, consider the decimation of the oyster population in the Passaic River valley in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an event Williams includes in his prose sections in Book 1 of *Paterson*. There, the discovery of the value of pearls from oysters in the local waterways sends the townspeople on a mad dash to harvest the oysters and their treasure, but this is a short-sighted action that all but eliminates oysters from the immediate ecosystem. While the (im)balance of the ecology of the Passaic River may be uniquely localized, the lesson learned from such an environmental misstep can and should be carried to other places and is applicable to nearly any ecosystem that includes a healthy, pearl-producing population

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<sup>35</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *Selected Essays*. New York: New Directions, 1954. 198.

<sup>36</sup> In chaos theory, the “butterfly effect” refers to the idea that a small change in a nonlinear system can lead to larger implications (and larger related changes) to that system, in a later state. While the concept was first formulated by mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz in 1961, the phrase “butterfly effect” was coined by Ray Bradbury in his short story, “The Sound of Thunder.”

of oysters. All that is demanded to prevent such crises in the future is to disseminate the observation. Such dissemination, to return to the poetic, takes place in the writing and publication of a poem.<sup>37</sup> Williams goes on to explain this in his discussion of the universality of the local in poetry: “From me where I stand to them where they stand in their here and now—where I cannot be—I do in spite of that arrive! through their work which complements my own, each sensually local.”<sup>38</sup> The “sensual” nature of this experience overlaps with a different definition he gave of the “local” in an essay on “The Work of Gertrude Stein” (1930): “Local...is the sense of being attached with integrity to actual experience.”<sup>39</sup>

Williams’s local, then, is experiential, markedly objective (the better to find its universal counterparts in the spirits of his readers) and, importantly, largely externalized. Whitman, on the other hand is, as Stephen Tapscott describes him, “the giant who incarnates his place by recognizing it within himself.”<sup>40</sup> In terms of place, this puts one in mind of John Muir’s oft-quoted remark from his unpublished journals, “I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.”<sup>41</sup> He is among those who “‘turn inward’ toward the local in order to ‘break through’ to a general truth embedded in local detail.”<sup>42</sup> Both poets value close observation, but the way in which they relate the specific details of place differs.

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<sup>37</sup> Williams seems aware of the difficulty in disseminating facts through poetry, and paradoxically its importance, when he notes in the later long poem, “Of Asphodel That Greeny Flower,” (1955): “It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there.”

<sup>38</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume I*. 198. The mid-sentence exclamation point is Williams’s own.

<sup>39</sup> Williams. *Selected Essays*. 118.

<sup>40</sup> Tapscott. 96.

<sup>41</sup> Muir, John. *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*. Linnie Marsh Wolfe, Ed. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1938. 427.

<sup>42</sup> Tapscott. 97.

Whitman's relationship to his locale in his poetic personae is highly subjective.<sup>43</sup> He doesn't so much observe as directly "identif[y] himself with the world he sees."<sup>44</sup> A century later, Williams holds his local(e) at a distance as he describes it with sometimes Imagistic clinical precision. Much of his nature-based poetry sounds arguably sterile upon first reading, but it nearly always contains at least a glimmer of his frequently playful and always empathic individual personality.

The result of Whitman's subjectivity is to highlight his own personal presence in the poem, thereby forcing the reader to take the role of a dialectical "other." Much of Whitman's trademark forceful inclusiveness is, in fact, devoted to breaking down these dialectical barriers. ("And what I assume you shall assume" he tells us in line two of "Song of Myself"—leaving us little choice but to comply.) For some, such a self-conscious act only serves to highlight the dialectical nature of the poem's construct. Williams, on the other hand, often writes in the first-person, with his role as a poem's grammatical subject subtly revealed, and as mere background to, the poem's action or focal subject.<sup>45</sup> The effect of this is further universalizing in the way it allows the reader narrative entry into the poem, or at least an easy (self-) identification with the poem's persona. Such inclusiveness between reader and poet, as well as being inclusive of the then-universal poetic subject, finds Williams more perceptive and aware of the interrelatedness of these respective actors than Whitman. As such, his poetic voice is

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<sup>43</sup> One quality it could be said Williams shares with Whitman is that of the consistent use of personae who are easily (mis)read as biographical. Most of his poems are relatively based in the character of a middle-aged country doctor, husband, and father. Even first-person lyrics in a different voice, though, such as "The Widow's Lament at Springtime," feel more *observational* of a different point of view than fully "lived-in."

<sup>44</sup> Tapscott. 97.

<sup>45</sup> "Last Words of My English Grandmother" is a good example of this. Appearing in one "I" and two "we"s over the 40-line poem, the subject is most present in the title. Without the title, and given enough distance, one can sometimes recall it as being written from the third-person perspective.

arguably more ecologically sensitive. As a transcendentalist, Whitman is more prone to view a poem, and a poet's, starting point as inherently *self* in contradistinction to an *other* who must then deliberately be compelled to inclusion. Without a doubt, his desire to become one with his poetic interlocutor ("For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," his persona says in line three of "Song of Myself") is ecologically admirable. But the fact that Williams's poems are more frequently predicated on an assumed unity between reader and speaker implies that he is already taking for granted an ecologically-aligned perspective. Such a presupposition is not only ecological but also clearly in line with his vision of the universalization of local detail.

Given that Williams seems to take this biocentric perspective for granted, it is significant (though perhaps unsurprising), then, that so many of the linguistic analogies Williams uses to describe Whitman's successes and failures as a poet rise organically out of natural imagery. Noting the way the latter's poetry is dominated by the disruption (namely free verse) of the "conventional aesthetic," Williams argues "the philosophic, the aesthetic, and the mechanical are likely to stem in their development from the same root."<sup>46</sup> Here he is mid-argument talking about Whitman's inability to have foreseen "the discoveries in chemistry, in physics[...]or the disclosure of our subterranean wealth in petroleum," all elements (literally and figuratively) that inform Whitman's work as well as his own. Still speaking of these natural phenomena in relation to poetic form, Williams points out that "the discovery of the advance in the structure of the poetic line is equated by an advance in the conception of physical facts all along the line," that is to say that the evolution of artistic form is nearly parallel to the advancement of human knowledge in the physical (and, for the sake of this argument, environmental and

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<sup>46</sup> Williams. "An Essay on *Leaves of Grass*." 30.

scientific) realms. They are nearly parallel in that they follow a similar path; *nearly* parallel in that they will and *do* meet. We will see throughout this and subsequent chapters how Williams's poetry reveals moments where his precise scientific understanding of the world around him clearly informed the content and context of his poetry. The extent to which contemporary science and art eventually intersect takes practical form in Williams's work, perhaps most notably in *Paterson* Book 4 (which has as one of its central themes Marie Curie and the ramifications of her discovery of radioactivity) and "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" (which repeatedly figures the atom bomb as a flower of destruction). Alas, though, Williams seems to feel most of this was beyond Whitman's own comprehension: "But the waves on the Jersey shore still came tumbling in, quieting him as their secret escaped him, isolating him and leaving him lonesome."<sup>47</sup>

Given the focus Williams seeks to place on the organic nature of his own poetic line (arising as much from the landscape of his own local as from the American tradition of poetry itself, it may be useful to think of Williams's engagement with Whitman as a kind of compost in itself) using the same poetic materials as his forebearer to produce a richer product—a poetry of his own time, more pointedly ecological in its treatment of humanity's relationship to the other members of the natural order. James Breslin seems to note the extent to which Williams is working *out of* Whitman rather than simply *against* him when he writes "in *Leaves of Grass*, Williams discovered a poet who had defiantly shattered conventional forms in order to release *his* feelings. Williams was thus stirred to affirm the ardent, extravagant side of his own nature—to achieve, in his broken,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 26.

oppressive world, a version of Whitman's process of continual renewal."<sup>48</sup> Whitman's historical moment (as we'll see in the next section) predicated his views of America on such concepts as Manifest Destiny in the westward expansion of the American populous. As an American poet focused deliberately on the American milieu, he was by necessity somewhat myopic; Whitman treats America, throughout *Leaves of Grass*, as a solitary entity, independent of its place in the global environment. As we'll find in looking at Williams's later efforts, the poet seems to grow more attuned to the role America plays on the global stage. Coming out of his own life experience, living through both World Wars, and the beginnings of what we now understand as globalism, Williams couldn't help but have a heightened awareness of America as existing not in a vacuum but within a much larger historical, diplomatic, and geographical ecosystem of sorts. As with T.S. Eliot and others, such conditions were crucial to shaping modernist art and literature. As we go on to examine the use of nature as subject and object of Williams's poetry, as idea and word, it behooves us to keep in mind that his America (in contrast to Whitman's America) lives in this larger, Modern political context.

Williams concludes his "Essay on *Leaves of Grass*" with a compelling meditation on humanity's interiority as the locus of inspiration for artistic development:

Man finds himself on the earth whether he likes it or not, with nowhere else to go.  
 What then is to become of him? Obviously we can't stand still or we shall be  
 destroyed. Then if there is no room for us on the outside we shall, in spite of

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<sup>48</sup> Breslin, James. "Whitman and the Early Development of William Carlos Williams" *PMLA* 82:7, Dec. 1962. 613-634.

ourselves, have to go in: into the cell, the atom, the poetic line, for our discoveries.<sup>49</sup>

Not wishing to overstate the relevance of the earth-bound context in which Williams places us, it's at the very least valuable to take note of his equation of the building blocks of our physical world with the building blocks of the poem. As we will see continually throughout this study, Williams's training as a medical doctor, a scientist of the human body, informs his poetic self-conception in a way that renders his physical environment inextricable from his poetic efforts to articulate any greater truths he may find there. Through close examinations of two further specific natural phenomena—namely, trees and death's decay, respectively—we can glean what truths Williams reveals, as well as how his poetic rendering of these ideas can be seen as more contemporarily ecological in their mindset than that of similar ideas found in Whitman's lyrics.

### 3) Tree Songs

One of Whitman's most interesting environmental poems, and a frequent go-to for ecocritical discussions of his poetry, is his "Song of the Redwood Tree." Written in the fall of 1873, it was sold to *Harper's Magazine*, which printed it in February 1874. It was subsequently published in 1876's "Two Rivulets" among the "Centennial Songs" and saw its final publication in the *Leaves of Grass* 1881 edition. Over the course of these publications, it remained largely unchanged in title and text. The "Song" is a unique variety of dialogue between a redwood tree contemplating its impending death and a third-person omniscient narrator offering contrast to the tree's voice and providing details about the poem's subject and context. Among the manuscript drafts, Whitman made a

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<sup>49</sup> Williams. "An Essay on *Leaves of Grass*." 31.

note to himself about the poem's theme noting, "This final idea of the poem, I (the tree) have fill'd my time and fill'd it grandly. All is prepared for [humanity]." <sup>50</sup> Whitman's goals for the poems are borne out in the vocabulary the redwood tree uses to address his redwood brethren. The tree notes it is their responsibility, in lines 71-72, "to duly fall, to aid, unreck'd at last, / To disappear, to serve."

In his *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, J. Scott Bryson uses "Song of the Redwood Tree" as an illustrative example to contrast with late 20<sup>th</sup> century nature poetry. He describes "a whole new generation of poets...taking up the theme of nature in a manner that diverged even further from that of 19<sup>th</sup> century poets" like Wordsworth, Longfellow and Whitman. <sup>51</sup> Bryson contrasts Whitman's "Song of the Redwood Tree" with W.S. Merwin's 1977 ecopoem, "The Last One." Unlike Merwin's parable which "renders the consequences we can expect from cutting down the last one, the final tree in the forest," Whitman's "Song" stands as a "propagandistic justification for the clearing of centuries old redwoods who are portrayed as willingly yielding to humanity." <sup>52</sup> In *Walt Whitman and the Earth*, M. Jimmie Killingsworth agrees that "the language of the poem...nods toward the darker side of manifest destiny," even going so far as to point out the parallels between the deforestation of the American landscape with the displacement of its native peoples. <sup>53</sup> In his discussion of Whitman's poem as an ecopoem, Killingsworth usefully points out that in "Democratic Vistas" (published just a few years before "Song of the Redwood Tree") Whitman had "forcefully warned that the focus on material development threatened to destroy the inherent spirituality of America, and this

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<sup>50</sup> Moon, Michael, ed. *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*. By Walt Whitman. New York: W.W. Norton, 2002. 173n.

<sup>51</sup> Bryson. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>53</sup> Killingsworth. 9.

theme echoes, albeit weakly, in [the poem] to suggest what amounts to the ghost of a protoenvironmentalist critique.”<sup>54</sup> Protoenvironmentalist though it may be, Whitman's “Song” remains a distinctly anthropocentric poem in ecopoem’s clothing.<sup>55</sup>

William Carlos Williams has a ready parallel to Whitman’s “Song of the Redwood Tree” in his 1930 poem, “The Trees.” It appeared in its first draft in the May 1930 issue of *Imagist Anthology*, a 50-line version similar in most respects to the final third 43-line version. In between appeared a second 94-line version in the November 1930 issue of *The Miscellany*.<sup>56</sup> Like Whitman, Williams uses his lyric to speak the inner voices of trees as they contemplate the humanity surrounding them; but where Whitman’s poem is grounded so specifically in its own time and place, Williams takes the specific and makes it general, a move that is partly a byproduct of the imagist goals of his poem but also a rhetorical move toward the universal in his characterization of trees’ views on “the race of men.” In the end, Williams’s ability to speak with greater empathy for the trees of his poem, and with markedly greater derision toward humanity, offers us a clearer example of his ecological perspective.

Whitman’s poem opens as “A California song, / A prophecy in direction” (1-2), making repeated references to the “western shore” that is home to the redwood: “Along the northern coast...In the saline air from the sea in the Mendocino country” near San Francisco (10-12).<sup>57</sup> In his decision to write not just the song of a tree but the redwood in particular, Whitman marks himself geographically on the American frontier and, by

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<sup>54</sup> Whitman. 73.

<sup>55</sup> In this way, it reminds one of Whitman’s poem of a little over a decade earlier “I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing,” which at first seems to make clear parallels of the solitude of both the poet and the Oak, but with its last line (“I know very well I could not”) performs a swift reversal of all that came before.

<sup>56</sup> For the full text of all three versions, see Williams’s *Collected Poems, Volume I*.

<sup>57</sup> In this and subsequent chapters, parentheses will be used to cite line numbers in the poem.

describing the contemporary clearing of the redwoods, places himself temporally in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The human progress for which the redwood is sacrificing itself is a moment in time that, once past (once cut down and cleared) cannot come again. By contrast, Williams's titular "Trees" make no such claims to either location or time. His trees have nearly as much to say as Whitman's do, though they lack both the grandiosity and verbose nature of Whitman's sermonizing redwood but with strikingly more commentary on their human counterparts. They have no specific species, coastal locale, or historical moment to ground them in any limiting way in the reader's mind. We know them only by their words and the way those words reflect a century's-later idea about the relationship between man and nature. The effect of this is to take Whitman's time/space-specific sermonizing and develop it into a larger and more universal commentary, not just on California forest clearing, but on trees' interrelationship with humanity in a universal sense. Like Whitman's poem, Williams's "Trees" is ecological without being fully biocentric. Unlike Whitman, Williams's trees' mocking tone reflects a more nature-centered sensibility. Far from anthropocentric and not quite biocentric, Williams's poem offers the reader an interesting update to Whitman's redwood "Song" that reflects a more contemporary mid-20<sup>th</sup> century nature-centric perspective.

Before examining what the contrasting voices have to say, it's necessary to point out Whitman's and Williams's disparate approaches to how they set up those voices in relation to the reader/listener. Both poems create a kind of dialogue between an outside narrator—in Whitman's case, the poem's first-person, human persona and in Williams's case a third-person omniscient speaker—and the central subjects of the trees. Whitman's approach is predictably sweeping: it moves from his first-person persona's point of view

to a single redwood tree addressing his “brethren” to the redwood trees philosophizing collectively on a range of subjects and finally returns to the human persona, who rhapsodizes on humanity, then the landscape, and finally the “new world” and its “grander future” (102 and 105, respectively). Williams, on the other hand, wastes little time with his third-person omniscient narrator, allowing him one five-line stanza before jumping directly into his trees which collectively pass judgment on the race of men.<sup>58</sup>

The third-person persona reappears briefly (after the trees have devolved into laughter at the ridiculousness of man) to bring the poem back to its rhetorical roots for a quick four-line stanza describing the trees’ abundant fertility “buds / bursting from each pore” before the trees once again take over, silencing the human voice and continuing their tirade at man’s inefficacy (15-16).

Eleven lines later, just as the trees begin to break down into laughter again, the voice in Williams’s poem takes an interesting turn. Beginning in line 32 with, “[t]here were never satyrs,” the poem’s narrator begins to describe how the souls of nature (satyrs, maenads, eagle-headed gods) that we have culturally inherited have no grounding in the earth itself but instead are cultural constructs of man: “These were men / from whose hands spring / love / bursting the wood –” (35-38). (This calls to mind the modern ecocritical commonplace of our collective dichotomous self/other approach to nature as more cultural construct than epistemological inevitability, an idea we’ll return to shortly in the discussion of poetic voice in pastoral.) Williams’s following lines describe “[t]rees [as] their [men’s] companions,” implying that the third-person omniscient has returned. But before the sentence is complete, the persona shifts back to the voice of the trees,

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<sup>58</sup> The use of gender-specific pronouns in recalling humanity here follows Williams’s lead in line 5 of the poem. It’s understood that in the modern context one acknowledges the sexless equality of these referents.

recalling the “cold wind” of winter left “no part of *us* untouched” (39-43, emphasis mine). Comparison with the two other published drafts of the poem make it clear that the “us” in the final line refers to the trees and not to the race of man. The effect is to unite the third-person voice with that of the trees, granting the latter an omniscient perspective, a rhetorical position of power anticipated by the trees’ condescending standpoint in relation to humanity. Where Whitman, in his poem, gives himself (in the first person) an equal platform for elocution to that of his redwood tree(s), Williams eschews the human perspective, showing the reader how omniscience can be transferred from outside the laughing trees into the “hollows of [their] flesh,” and strengthening the authority of what they have to tell us. The consequence is that it is understood that Williams seeks to place trees above humanity in a hierarchy of voice. Although the words of the trees are undermined by the frantic and somewhat overcompensating tone of their objections to man, their voice is one of authority and deserves to be heard (according to the lyric) on an equal, if not higher, plane with that of humanity. Imbuing nature with this kind of authority goes a long way toward justifying an ecological and non-anthropocentric reading of this and other Williams poems.

Having established the weight with which Williams’s trees speak in contrast to Whitman’s more turgid but less weighty redwoods, we can now contend with what their respective trees have to tell us. Whitman’s “Song of the Redwood-Tree” is relatively straightforward in its message. The occasion for the poem is nineteenth-century westward expansion and the clearing away of redwoods and other natural elements from the landscape (“*These virgin lands, lands of the Western shore*”) to make room for “*the new culminating man, to you, the empire new...we pledge, we dedicate*” (52-54). In most

interpretations, and accurately so, it is noted that the forest clearing taking place in the poem is a fulfillment of the trees' wish for themselves:

*We welcome what we wrought for through the past,  
And leave the field for them.*

*For them predicted long,  
For a superber race, they too to grandly fill their time,  
For them we abdicate, in them ourselves ye forest kings! (36-40)*

Killingsworth calls this “an obvious instance of social Darwinism” and goes on to highlight the frequency with which critics have substituted the fate of the “*Redwood*” with that of the “*red man*,” “suggest[ing] the nationalizing or globalizing impulse and the environmental racism against which contemporary protestors raise their voices” (70-71).

By contrast, Williams's trees offer less politically pointed but just as poignant commentary on the tense relation between humanity and nature. Rather than writing the voice of humankind through the puppet mouth of the trees as Whitman seems to do, Williams attempts to offer us a biocentric perspective on this tense dichotomy. The result is a typically playful Williamsian voice:

Christ, the bastards  
haven't even sense enough  
to stay out in the rain—

Wha ha ha ha

Wheeee

clacka tacka tacka (6-11)

The trees seem to feel that man is purposefully avoiding the life-giving benefits of rain. Reading into the subtext, we realize that the inevitable places into which man retreats from the rain are the architectural structures (homes, most frequently) which mankind has built out of the very material that trees offer us—we have, as a later line notes, “burst[ ] the wood” (38). The caustically satiric tone of the trees’ attitude toward man is forecast in the lyric’s opening lines: “The trees—being trees / thrash and scream / guffaw and curse [...] damning the race of men” (1-3 and 5, respectively). It is, then, in their nature to do so: “being trees” they have no other way. The rhetoric by which they do so, however, complicates our understanding of their relationship with humankind. On the one hand, they clearly consider themselves superior; humans lack common “sense” and, as the trees note later, humans cannot “Do what [we] please”—we are “ghosts, sapped of strength / wailing at the gate,” our desire “dead in the heart” (21-28). These images utilize an interesting tree-centered vocabulary where the “sap” of life is “dead in the heart,” humanity’s root system, perhaps underfed by our stubborn choice to come in out of the rain. This matches well with the brief omniscient perspective in the fifth stanza which describes the trees’ inherent fertility:

knocking knees, buds  
 bursting from each pore  
 even the trunk’s self  
 putting out leafheads (15-18)

The contrast between the naturally virile trees and the dried-out and desire-less heart of humanity is made clear and even partially explained a few stanzas later, as the trees are

commenting and laughing, “dead in the heart / haw haw haw haw / – and memory broken / wheeeee” (lines 28-31).

The reader of this final version of the poem can parse generally what the trees mean in describing mankind’s “broken” memory, a contrast, seemingly, to the ages-old consciousness the trees themselves carry, a part of the general myth of nature’s long memory. But an earlier version of “The Trees” (the second), published in the literary magazine *The Miscellany* in November 1930, reveals Williams’s meaning with greater clarity:

Seedless, spent

Science

– wheeeee! (60-62)

[...]

Philosophy!

– haw haw haw haw

Where is the memory unpocked with the disease of school (67-71).

Here, the trees—mouthpieces of nature—are directly critical of human culture, mocking its processes, products, and institutions. Carrying this implied meaning through to the final (third) version, we can interpret “memory” as a natural, precognitive awareness inherent to all natural creatures, trees as well as humans. But the trees mock us for “break”ing our memory through science (ironically, the field by which we think we best understand the natural world), philosophy, and other forms of so-called human learning. The implication seems to be that we rely too heavily on outward instruction and analysis;

that we'd be better served if we were to allow our own inborn, natural consciousness to inform us. As the last lines of the earlier version note: "nothing / to be learned now / not long since forgotten" (93-95). The more civilized we become, they seem to say, the further we distance ourselves from the inherent knowledge—the natural memory—that really matters.<sup>59</sup> Naturally, such inherent knowledge would likewise be "rooted" in sensual experience. Like the objectivity that, I argue above, is such an important part of Williams's contrast from the more subjective Whitman, the knowledge of natural memory is based in empirical observation. This makes it all the more ironic that the trees mock us for our "sciences," upon which we pride ourselves for their foundational uses of observation and experimentation.

From the human point of view, of course, these institutions and that sense of civilization are exactly what elevate us above the too-natural trees. As rhapsodic as Williams's trees are, the human race is, as Whitman would have it, the "superber race" precisely *because of* our long tradition of philosophy. It's our ability to explain the world around us through science that further sets us apart, placing us higher in any ecological hierarchy, separate from animals, plants—and trees. More explicitly in the final version of the poem, Williams invokes two other, more immediately relevant human institutions: religion and art. When the third-person lyric voice declares, "There were never satyrs / never maenads / never eagle-headed gods— / These were men," he seems to be both subjectively siding with the trees, while simultaneously making an objective observation about the fallacious "nature" of cultural traditions in our Western civilization (32-35). The

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<sup>59</sup> This "natural knowledge" cleaves close to that experiential, decidedly non-academic knowledge supported by William Wordsworth in his preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, "Tintern Abbey," and other works. In the former, he notes, the poet "considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature." (Wordsworth, "Notes Affixed to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)," poetryfoundation.org, 5.

implication is that the memory that humanity invented to replace its natural consciousness (namely, these hybrid human-natural myths) was merely a weak cultural construct. Those traditions could never live up to or be substituted for the “memory” we’ve lost—the same memory the trees retain today, and for the lack of which they now chastise us. Just as we’re foolish enough to take ourselves in out of the (life-bringing) rain, we’re also foolish enough to think that we could ever replicate or replace the collective ecological memory of the earth.

In addition to the mocking of our cultural institutions and traditions, the previously-mentioned second version of Williams’s “The Trees” contains other, even more distinct, moments of ecological sensibility. Coming out of a specific satirization of religion, the trees lament,

Christ (man) God in  
Heaven Almighty  
why have you created me  
for lice to crawl on? [...]

God (man) Almighty King  
in Heaven since men  
have no thought  
other—

than to kill (5-8, 10-14).

The trees here perform two actions of ridicule. First, they openly negate the divinity of humanity’s religion by directly equating Christ/God with man, thereby highlighting the artificial cultural invention of the Christian faith. “Christ (man) God” is clearly not

meant to elevate or deify the human race but instead to cut down the divine to the human level. Second, the trees openly pass judgment on humanity as a willfully destructive race, with “no thought...but to kill.” This serves the double purpose of pointing out mankind’s self-destructive tendencies (trees being a species wholly incapable of waging war) as well as to obliquely refer to humanity’s habit of *natural* destruction. Here is Whitman’s “Red-wood Tree” sending the exact opposite message: the trees are not willingly sacrificed for the “superber race”; instead, they’re merely victims of a species that sees fit to slaughter not only itself but the very world around it. From a tree-centric point of view, the same forest-clearing discussed by Whitman is repositioned as yet another instance of foolish human devastation.

Nearly fifty lines later in the same (second) version of “The Trees,” the titular narrators actively lobby for that destructive tendency to be enacted upon its human aggressors: “Blight the / race of men. Chop / them down,” they demand, turning the tables on mankind in an actively protoenvironmentalist battle cry (55-57). Just as the trees’ vocabulary earlier finds a lack of common sense in mankind’s coming in out of the rain, or having its energy “sapped,” Williams importantly (and somewhat humorously) has the trees describing the retaliatory destruction in very tree-centric terms: “Blight” them, “Chop / them down”—let what they have done to us be done to them. Whether one chooses to describe this sensibility as “protoenvironmentalist” (to again use Killingsworth’s word for Whitman) or biocentric (as we might describe it in a more contemporary vocabulary), the message is that Williams is exhibiting in this version of the poem a decidedly forward-thinking awareness of the negative environmental impact that humanity was enacting upon its natural surroundings. Without over-politicization,

Williams is subtly moving toward an ecological mindset, a frame of reference that values trees on an equal plane with that of humans. By speaking out in poetry on behalf of trees who cannot speak for themselves, he is articulating a value system that will one day come to be central for poets who follow, thematically and formally, in his footsteps.

Here we arrive at a contentious notion—that of the human poet speaking on behalf of nature. David Gilcrest, in his eminently useful 2002 study *Greening the Lyre*, devotes a chapter to “Green Speech: The Trope of Speaking Nature.” In it, he points out the difficulty inherent in poets representing nature on its own behalf, given the poet’s innately anthropocentric viewpoint. Further, no matter what form the nature-voice takes, he argues, “the trope of speaking nature is thus supremely *anthropomorphic* in that nonhuman linguistic ability is modeled after human linguistic forms.”<sup>60</sup> By forcing nature’s voice into the conduit of a human-language-based rhetoric, “green speech” performs an act of linguistic colonization, or, for the sake of a simpler analogy, puppetry. Killingsworth concedes Gilcrest’s point relating the green speech argument back to Whitman, allowing that such a criticism is “fully justified in a poem like ‘Song of the Redwood-Tree.’”<sup>61</sup> The central tree, after all, spends the better part of its final words extolling the trees’ virtuous act of self-sacrifice for the sake of the “superber race,” *homo sapiens*. But just as William Carlos Williams improves upon Whitman’s efforts to let trees speak for themselves by ascribing to them a voice more ecologically nuanced and more biocentric (utilizing what he imagines to be an arboreal vocabulary and perspective),

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<sup>60</sup> Gilcrest, David. *Greening the Lyre*. Place: Press, 2002. 45. Some critics and poets argue, as Gary Snyder does in *The Practice of the Wild*, that “the dialogue to open next [in what he calls the “posthuman” age] would be among all beings, toward a rhetoric of ecological relationships” (68). The inarticulate status of the natural world, of course, precludes to a large extent humanity’s ability to fully incorporate a genuine voice of nature into an inherently linguistically-based debate.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 67.

Williams's titular trees seem, admittedly from a human's point of view reading another human's artistic endeavor, a healthy departure from the kind of "anthropomorphism" that Gilcrest is criticizing. Forcing his trees into the act of human speech no doubt skews the dialogue toward an anthropocentric voice, but Williams is clearly making a much stronger effort than Whitman to give the trees their fair say, philosophically, and to try to speak through them an ecological argument. Linguistic colonization though it may be, the voices of "The Trees" are a far cry from the manifest-destiny-endorsing language of "Song of the Redwood-Tree."

Interestingly, in "The Botticellian Trees" (written around the same time as "The Trees," both in 1930), Williams forecasts this issue of the limitations of inter-species communication and seems actively to acknowledge the challenges of green speech about which Gilcrest and Snyder would argue more than sixty years later. "The alphabet of / the trees," the poem opens, "is fading in the / song of the leaves" (1-4). The alphabet is a literal visual one, as the criss-crossing of the branches intersects into cuneiform-like shapes overhead. The poem describes the transition of the branches' letters from stark, bare-lined winter into the new life of spring, "illumined / with / pointed green" of budding leaves (10-12). As the trees awake into summer, their representative written language is obscured "until the stript / sentences / move as a woman's / limbs under cloth" (23-26). Save the cultural/linguistic references to "alphabet" and "sentences," the simile invocation of the feminine form is the only intrusion of humanity into the linguistic interplay of the trees until the poem concludes, "In summer the song / sings itself / above the muffled words—" (31-33).

Following out of his experience, perhaps, in giving English voice to trees' inner thoughts in his earlier poem, Williams seems here to acknowledge the limits of humankind's ability to hear what Gary Snyder will eventually term a "rhetoric of ecological relationships"—the true and singular voice of nature itself, both enhanced and obscured by the earth's seasonal cycles. He has accepted that while the trees may have their own alphabet, it must only "sing[] itself / above the muffled words" of mankind below. Meanwhile, humans on the ground hold forth in the language they've created (both verbal and visual), and ne'er the twain shall meet. For all the ecological ties between humans and trees, and for all their near-interdependence in an ecological sense, they, of necessity, remain mute to one another. Even the voices in "The Trees," which rail against "the race of man" and its foolishness, do so in a way that turns the language of man against him. Their tone is mocking; they continually find humor in our unnatural ways, and they use the cultural construct of human language to simultaneously undercut the cultural institutions to which this language gives birth, namely, philosophy and science, which are both utterly dependent on mankind's tongue to give them full expression. If the trees cannot be written into the poem in their own idiom, then the least Williams can do for them is to give them enough of a benefit of intellect (and instinct) to rebuke us in our own speech.

In that sense, the trope of "green speech" becomes for Williams's trees a form of common ground with the races with whom they share this earth. By placing humanity and trees on that level playing field, Williams is taking a step toward the ecological equality of species that ecopoetry endorses, but it is merely a step. In another, later,

poem he will find in death (the “great equalizer”) a more egalitarian state for not only humankind and trees but, indeed, for all species.

#### **4) From Compost, Renewal**

First written and published in *The Nation* in 1946, William Carlos Williams’s “A Unison” was ultimately collected in his 1948 book, *The Clouds*. The poem is a recollection of the sojourn Williams took 20 years earlier in the countryside of Wilmington, Vermont. In it, Williams directly addresses his companion, recalling and reflecting upon their walk through a deserted pasture near an abandoned farmhouse on Haystack Mountain. Even with the most perfunctory of readings, the poem is a self-consciously verbal act, an overt pastoral, and a metapoetic statement. Upon closer examination, one finds it highlighting ecological themes of the local, as well as nature’s cycles of decay and regeneration.

Fittingly, the persona’s voice in “A Unison” is almost aggressively intimate. “The grass is very green, my friend,” the poem opens, forming an immediate relationship between speaker and reader/listener. The lines immediately following (“tussled, like the head of – / / your grandson, yes?”) introduce the third-party character of Williams’s long-ago companion. By this time, however, we as readers have come to consider ourselves as members of an intimate group. This inclination is reinforced and encouraged by the repeated use of second-person or first-person collective pronouns. (Various forms of “you” and “we” have four times as many occurrences as either “I” or “they.”) This “Unison,” we will come to understand, brings together not only Williams, his companion, his companion’s grandson, and ourselves as readers, but will expand over the course of

the poem to include elements of the natural setting, as well as the mysterious voices of the “Undying” dead. As I will point out below in a discussion of Walt Whitman’s “This Compost,” this sweeping collectiveness and group identification are even more ambitious and ecological in spirit than Whitman’s formulation, separating himself from the earth and the decaying dead of his own poem.

The most striking “Other” to contrast with the collective voices of Williams’s “Unison” are the voices that the persona continually calls upon the reader to hear. At three separate moments equally spaced throughout the poem, Williams’s persona interrupts himself typographically with an italicized voice calling upon the listener/reader to “Listen! *Do you not hear / them? The singing? [...] Hear! Hear them! / The Undying [...] Hear! / Hear the unison of their voices*” (13-14, 23-24, 51-52). What’s most striking about Williams’s use of both the second-person perspective and the italicized quotations/references to the undying voices is the interesting moment between lines 10 and 19 when he contrasts these verbal acts with an interruption of self-consciously *written* metapoetics. He seems to undermine the unison of the poem’s title repeatedly with the cognitive disruption and interruption of meta-commentary. After a naturalistic description of an old barn peaked “faithfully, / against the sky,” the poetic persona seems to step back from the letter/speech/missive declaring:

...And there it is  
 and we can’t shift it or change  
 it or parse it or alter it  
 in any way. *Listen, do you not hear*  
*them? the singing?* There it is and

we'd better acknowledge it and  
 write it down that way, not otherwise.  
 Not twist the words to mean  
 what we should have said but to mean  
 —what cannot be escaped: (10-19)

Having already interrupted his bucolic description of Vermont's Haystack Mountain to philosophize for a moment on the interaction between permanence, the scene, and the poem, we find the persona interrupted again, if not by choice, by the *spirit-like* voice. It's useful to note the ambiguity Williams uses here to make the transition from the reality of the mountain to the textuality of the poem and to the other-worldly vocal quality of the spirits of the Undying before recursively circling back to allow reality and the poem to overlap, in unity. The referents of line 10's "And there it is," as well as the "it"s of subsequent lines, are left unclear. Is "it" the peak of the farmhouse, the sky, the whole pastoral scene? Or is "it" perhaps (as the vocal-conversational quality of the poem may lead one to infer) the written record of the moment? (Whatever "it" is, is relatively permanent, as "we can't shift it or change / it or parse it or alter it / in any way." [11-13].)

Further, once the ethereal italicized voice has had its say, the ambiguous "it" returns to unclearly refer again: "There it is and / we'd better acknowledge it and / write it down that way, not otherwise" (14-16). In this "it" stance, the object of the lines could as easily be the spirit-voice, as it could be the natural setting or the poem itself. Such an assumption is immediately called into question, however, by the lines immediately following: "Not twist the words to mean / what we should have said but to mean / —what cannot be escaped:" (17-19). Typically, poems themselves are twisted in meaning, reformed to mean what the

poet may or “should” have said. What follows that important colon, however, makes it clear that the thing that cannot be escaped—the thing the words should “mean”—is reality: “the / mountain riding the afternoon” (19-20). Thus, the persona returns again to the “it” of line 10, to the bucolic and pastoral natural scene. The action performed by the insistent ambiguity of “it” all is to meld together—to unify—the setting with the words used to describe it. Poetry as concrete reality is a notion Williams has comfortably exercised before in the Imagist phase of his earlier work. Here, the goal goes beyond Imagism, though, to an effort towards a poetic ecology. Just as biotic communities are made up of organisms interrelated and interdependent, the poetry is related and dependent upon its subject in such a way as to make separation impossible. As we’ll see in the next chapter’s discussion of Williams’s *Spring and All*, his poetics call for a clear distinction between objective reality and poetry as the product of that reality, when filtered through the imagination of the poet. Though he seeks to demarcate external nature as separate from art, they are nonetheless interdependent, as art relies upon nature (or reality) as source material to be processed through the artist’s creativity (which is, notably and rather surprisingly, figured as an element of nature unto itself).

Let us, then, turn our attention to the least concrete element of “A Unison,” to the spirit-like voices recurrent throughout. Though appearing as early as line 13, the voices, and the italicized voice which calls upon us to hear them, are occasioned instead by a simple object: a “white stone” introduced in line 35. The stone is a grave marker, the only remaining one of its kind on the mountain, memorializing the death of one Mathilda Maria Fox, aged nine years. It is the voices of Mathilda and her companion dead to which the persona refers in line 24 as “the Undying.” The visual disruption of the stone

in the otherwise overgrown pasture is what calls to the poet's mind the Undying voices that still remain in this place.<sup>62</sup> That visual distraction, then, occasions the verbal interruption of the poem itself, first in the philosophizing on the nature of that which is "written" and then further in the ethereal voices calling down through time to the persona and, perhaps (though never explicitly), to his companion.

The ecological purposes of the graveyard at the center of the poem are twofold: first, it places the scene in a precise spiritual and physical locale and, second, it calls to mind humanity's place within the larger ecological cycle of that place. The poem is actively indefinite in the location of its setting, a universalizing technique that follows out of Williams's philosophy of the local as universal and the concrete as necessary in explicating the abstract.<sup>63</sup> We only know the poem's literal location as Vermont's Haystack Mountain because of a recorded conversation between the Williamses (Floss and William Carlos) and friend John Thirwall.<sup>64</sup> But the existence of the graveyard calls to mind the immediacy of such a location as the former setting of an entire community, now long since passed (on). Were it not for the graves, Haystack could be any mountain in New England, but this was a mountain with a very real and concrete (or, as the poem may have it, "stone") history. In addition, the presence of a field of corpses, now decomposing beneath the surface of the pasture, calls to mind thoughts of our own role as humans in a larger ecosystem, one in which decomposition serves as fodder and fuel for a larger community of bio-organisms: "a unison and a dance, joined / at this death's

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<sup>62</sup> The stone also seems to me to perform a similar work as that of the jar in Wallace Steven's "Anecdote of the Jar" that, by its very presence as the only cultural object in an otherwise natural setting "made the slovenly wilderness/ surround that hill" and "[took] dominion everywhere." (3-4, 9).

<sup>63</sup> "One has to learn what the meaning of the local is, for universal purposes," Williams writes in his 1929 essay "Kenneth Burke:" "The local is the only thing that is universal." (*Selected Essays*, 132) Williams's philosophy of the local will be discussed at greater length in Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>64</sup> MacGowan, Christopher, ed. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume 1*. 475n.

festival” (33). It is this idea of nature’s active use of the human dead that recalls a thematically similar poem by Walt Whitman.

Published about 90 years prior to “A Unison,” Whitman’s “This Compost” deals much more scientifically and exploratively with this idea of humanity as subsumed and utilized by the ecological cycles of nature.<sup>65</sup> In it, Whitman’s persona is “startled” into a rhapsodic contemplation of the wonders of these cycles. (It was first published in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* under the title “Poem of Wonder at the Resurrection of The Wheat,” before having the poem’s title revised to “Leaves of Grass No. 4” in 1860, and ultimately its final title in 1881.) As M. Jimmie Killingsworth notes in *Walt Whitman and the Earth*, “The pastoral scene [of the poem] comes straight from the late summer fields, orchards, and wood margins of the eastern United States,” again anticipating the importance of the local we similarly find in Williams’s “A Unison.”

In the first section, Whitman’s wonder soon turns to a variety of disgust and awe: “O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?[...]Are they not continually putting distemper’d corpses within you?” (6, 9). Resolving to “run a furrow with my plough,” he hopes to “expose some of the foul meat” of the dead (15-16). This leads us into the second section, wherein Whitman seeks to describe in amazement “that all is clean forever and ever. [...]Though probably every spear of grass rises out of what was once a catching disease.” (36, 41). Whitman has a clear, if imprecise, understanding of “What chemistry!” makes this all possible, of the regenerative and self-cleansing power

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<sup>65</sup> In Chapter 4, I will treat “A Unison” and “This Compost” within a larger framework of poems that I refer to as “compost poems.” The coinage is my own and is a way of grouping together a handful of lyrics by disparate authors which all deal, to varying degrees, with the ecological and biological action of human corporeal decomposition.

of earth's ecology. "It gives such divine materials to men," he notes in the poem's final line, "and accepts such leavings from them at last" (47).

The phrasing of that last line gets to the heart of Whitman's continued anthropocentric poetic mentality. Just as "Song of the Red-wood Tree" found him treating the razing of forests in California as a willing sacrifice on the part of the arboreal environment to the "superber race," he similarly ends a poem that marvels at nature with a statement on nature's ability not to regenerate itself *per se* but to "accept" the "leavings" of humanity. It speaks to the mentality of his time that nature is so clearly and explicitly the Other, against which the human race is positioned, and further, an Other that passively receives from humankind what it leaves behind, the human here the subject and earth/nature the object. What we saw in Williams's textual play as the sublimation of man/text/natural setting, one into another, remains in Whitman a decidedly *us/it* proposition. Possibilities for why this is the case include a shift over the course of a century in American cultural concepts of nature, with Williams advocating a more ecological understanding of the interdependence of nature and man (as opposed to Whitman's formulation of nature's *dependence* on man), or Williams's medically-inspired scientific appreciation for said interdependence.

One contrast that seems to support the idea of Williams's heightened awareness of our physical and spiritual symbiosis with our natural world is that of the poems' respective (and, very importantly, for Williams) voices. Whitman's "This Compost" opens, "[s]omething startles me where I thought I was safest," a nod to the persona's habit of pastoral retreat in natural environs but clearly a centering in the self: of the six iambic feet in the line, three of the stresses fall on singular personal pronouns. Contrast

this with Williams's "[t]he grass is very green, my friend, / and tousled, like the head of-- / your grandson, yes?" (1-3). As discussed above, the shift from "my friend" (an inclusive term that lends itself to readers' identification with the interlocutor) to "your grandson" is a habitually second-person construct. In the fifty-two lines of "A Unison" "I" appears only twice. (By contrast, "I" appears 13 times in the first 16 lines of "This Compost.") While, admittedly, the voice in the second section of Whitman's poem shifts for the first stanza-and-a-half to the second person, its rhetoric lacks any of the intimacy of Williams's persona. In fact, the second section only uses the second person insofar as Whitman's persona is lecturing/entreating us to "[b]ehold this compost! behold it well!" (17). At no point does he ever actually address the reader directly, or, more importantly, pull us into any communal use of "we." This says a great deal about the stereotyped rhetorical voices we have come to expect from these respective poets, but in a project and an analysis that takes as its central point ecological poetics, situations of community and isolation come to bear more weight than they otherwise might. Williams's poem, from its very title, seeks to both describe and create "A Unison." The explicit unison in the text is that of the Undying voices, but it can be extended, it seems, to poet/persona, reader, text and, importantly, for an ecopoetic reading, pastoral setting.

Another contrasting feature of the two poems is the way in which they deal with the role of time in relation to their subjects. Since both works invoke the interplay of the living present, and the deceased and the decaying past, it is tempting to take them as relative equals in temporal relations. A close and careful reading again reveals, however, Williams's appreciation for the ecology of decay and its timelessness. In "This Compost," the initial setting is the present, a temporal setting which is maintained for the majority of

the poem before being given over to a reflection on humanity's compost and its role in the *future* of the earth. The opening of the poem reveals a persona writing firmly in the present: "I withdraw from the woods I loved. / I will not strip the clothes from my body to meet my lover the sea," (2-3). The "loved" of line 2 gives the poem a patina of nostalgia for the place of the poem's setting. Grammatically (from "withdraw" through the "gives and accepts" of the final line), the poem's action is firmly ensconced in the present. The present tense is upheld in stanza after stanza and line after line. A few lines into section two, Whitman describes how "[t]he grass of the earth covers the prairies, / The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden" (19-20). Only briefly, in the final stanzas of the poem, do we find any sort of temporal shift, and that is an implicit one: "[w]hat chemistry!... That all is clean forever and ever" (31, 36). The implication is that the natural renewal of earth's resources in spite (or because) of human decomposition is a cycle that will continue long into the future; regeneration is inevitable. But for that moment of eternity, "This Compost" remains firmly grounded in the immediate, present experience of the persona.

By contrast, Williams's "A Unison" takes from its first lines a temporal repositioning. The poet is writing in the present, while recalling the past. "[T]he mountain we climbed," the poet recalls, "twenty years since for the last / time (I write this thinking / of you) is saw-horned as then." The pastoral nature of the scene remains unchanged, as it was twenty years earlier, though the writing ("I write this") is in the immediate present. Of course, the poem is swept repeatedly into the past—not just twenty years, but further, implicitly, back to the time of the pasture's use as a village cemetery. The dead of a century earlier are here "Undying" (24) and indeed, this idea of

intransitive nature is carried throughout the poem in “the / unchanging mountains” (47). There are instances of brief reference to the future, but even those are tied to the present, as when “the wet grass-- / through which, tomorrow, bejeweled, / the great sun will rise” (44-46). That same wet grass has, slightly earlier in the poem, been used to settle the poem into an immediate present, cognizant of its past: “still there, the grass / dripping of last night’s rain” (39-40). The grass then, is simultaneously now, yesterday, and tomorrow, just as the Undying voices call through time across centuries from past to present and, implicitly, will continue to do so into the future. Again, we see a unison, not only of text and voice and setting, but of past, present and future; again, the poem offers a clearer understanding of the timelessness, the “unchanging” nature of the pasture’s ecology. Nature’s sense of time is forever in the present, in contrast to humans: the only species we know to maintain records of a distant past, or to actively speculate on a distant future. The past has shaped it into what it is, but the future extends only so far as the next season, the next phase in the earth’s ongoing (eternally present) cycles. Applied, then, to Haystack mountain: the decay of the corpses (likely long since fully decomposed and incorporated into the mountain’s ecosystem) began then; its visual remnants (in the “white stone”) remain now in the present; and its spirituality (in its Undying voices) will remain into the future.

It is, perhaps, surprising that for all his scientific and medical training, Williams’s approach to human burial, decomposition, and incorporation into the local ecology is as spiritual as it is literal and natural. Whitman seems more focused even than Williams on the processes that lead festering rot to give birth to new crops of wheat. No, for Williams the mountain is unchanged, but its connection to the present, while partly visual, is

predominantly found in the ethereality of the “voices” calling down through time, to twenty years past, and into the present. From Whitman, the bard of the “barbaric yawp,” we get a more clinical appreciation of nature’s biotic cycles within the fields and pastures. For Williams, the clinician, it is humanity and its spiritual vocalization that haunts (and will continue to haunt) the mountain.

### 5) Two Shepherds

Both “This Compost” and “A Unison” offer us glimpses of their respective poets eliding themselves into the tradition of the pastoral. Pastoral poetry has come to be a commonplace in ecocritical studies, from the critical tradition of William Empson’s *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935) and Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), through Lawrence Buell’s focused argument of its powerful influence on modern environmental literature in *The Environmental Imagination*,. With a history stretching back five centuries, it is, perhaps, the oldest institutionalized genre demanding an examination of humanity in the context of the natural (read: rural). Killingsworth notes the importance of the tradition to Whitman when he argues the poet “draws himself upon pastoralism in many poems, most clearly perhaps in ‘This Compost’ and ‘Out of the Cradle.’”<sup>66</sup> “Compost” gives us a poetic persona making a deliberate retreat from civilization and, ironically, further away from nature itself:

I withdraw from the still woods I loved,

I will not strip the clothes from my body to meet my lover the sea,

I will not touch my flesh to the earth as to other flesh to renew me, (2-4)

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<sup>66</sup> Killingsworth. 113.

The persona seems to habitually seek with the earth, positioning himself at a distance, certainly, from any locus of the city and from any influence of the human environment, but also away from the intimacy. Whitman is self-conscious here of the reputation he had previously created for himself of tree-embracing sea lover and intimate of nature. The heretofore pastoral retreat, then, is recast into a physical and emotional distance from both humankind and nature—allowing the poet/persona to generate for himself a new plane of existence in limbo between the two: a safe, healthy distance from which to more objectively consider his philosophical subject of earth's regeneration through decay. Two stanzas later, we find him discovering a path by which to re-enter nature from a scientific/observational standpoint, that of the truth-seeker and philosopher: "I will run a furrow with my plough, I will press my spade through the sod and turn it up underneath, / I am sure I shall expose some of the foul meat." (15-16). Whitman spends the rest of "This Compost" engaged in a contemplative, increasingly-awed awareness of the power of earth to cleanse itself of its own refuse and of the refuse of humanity's dead.

In "A Unison," Williams is slightly more subtly engaged in the pastoral practice of retreat. He and his companion (and the companion's grandson) have come away from the town for an idyllic stroll up the mountain, and it is only then that their surroundings force upon them the shared contemplation with Whitman's voice on natural renewal through human decay. Whereas Whitman's realizations about nature forced him to step back and consider, in Williams's poem the reverse happens: it is only when they have retreated fully into the bucolic countryside that the intellectual and spiritual awakening/realization occurs. In this dichotomy, it's Williams who is more clearly upholding the pastoral tradition. Like the shepherds and courtly members of old, the

retreat from civilization leads Williams and his cohorts to a new realization, and the experience of the retreat itself is what offers them a new awareness of nature and a new lesson to take with them back to civilization. Only through the communion and “Unison” can these realizations occur.

Staying in the vein of the pastoral tradition, 1914 found Williams writing a sequence he called “Pastorals and Self Portraits” which never saw publication in his lifetime, although three of the explicitly-titled pastorals would go on to appear in the collection *Al Que Quiere!* (1917). Some of the lyrics included in the sequence feel like deliberate entries into the tradition, while others read more as anti-pastorals. Among the former group, “Pastoral 2” is both the most ecological in its content and the most decidedly Whitmanian in its voice. To the latter point, it opens with an invocation of its persona’s voice in relation to the reader, while at the same time setting the stage for its ecological value system:

If I talk to things  
 Do not flatter yourself  
 That I am mad  
 Rather realize yourself  
 To be deaf and that  
 Of two evils, the plants  
 Being deaf likewise,  
 I choose that  
 Which proves by other  
 Attributes worthier

Of the distinction. (1-11)

On the one hand, this moment feels decidedly Whitmanian (in the “suffering private self” mode), while at the same time it enacts a strong and deceptively anti-Whitman-like rejection of the reader<sup>67</sup>. The persona is making a calculated move away from human interaction or even observation (in a typically pastoral mode) and toward direct and, it will soon prove, linguistic, interaction with “plants.”

Williams spends the rest of the poem alternately lecturing his natural environment and offering a running meditation on his own role in contrast to the ecology of that environment. “Hear me / You who listen without malice,” he implores, “[y]ou crusts of blue moss, / And black earth,” later declaring himself “[w]iser than you - / Though you have virtues greater than mine.” (12-16, 43-45). Here, Williams acknowledges the fundamental difference between humanity and nature: the “wisdom” to contemplate, the logic (as contrasted with instinct) that raises us up above the baser elements of earth. By the end of the poem, we’ll come to see the wisdom Williams’s persona discovers in nature, a wisdom the setting has already taken to heart. But throughout, as he explores his way toward this understanding, the poet seeks a deeper communion with nature, to “crawl in naked / There among you” and to strip away (literally) the clothes and layers “That holds me / From *you* likewise— / I would fling them by in a moment,” were it not for the societal consequences he’d suffer (38-39, 65-67). In the latter stanzas, he tries to offer counsel to nature about the detrimental effects of these layers between himself and

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<sup>67</sup> In his discussion of the “two Whitman’s” (formulations of Whitman’s two most prevalent personae) Williams invented for himself to interrogate, Tapscott makes informative use of what he terms the two sides of the “Transcendentalist metaphor”—the “self-reliant giant self” and the “suffering private self.” Tapscott. 122-123.

his world, entreating the landscape to “Kiss the wind when it kills you / Lean your surfaces / Against the frost / With your whole heart—” (86-89).

This very advice is that which the poet seeks to give to nature. Here, then, is the “wisdom” which he claims for himself and the lesson learned from the pastoral experience. In a stridently ecological moment, Williams’s persona realizes that this guidance comes too late or is, rather, redundant: “[y]ou have taken the counsel” of stripping away artifice in favor of one-to-one unity, “[b]efore [it is] given.” (90-91). The takeaway lesson for the reader is to seek that communion, just as the poet does and just as nature is already wont to. Implicitly, the persona realizes that the “wisdom” he ascribes to himself is nothing new to his environment that, in its ecology of interrelated organicism, already lives by this moral. If pastoral is the long-past and ancient tradition of how humanity’s poets articulate their relationship with nature, and ecopoetry the contemporary present and future, we can see in Williams’s “Pastoral 2” a moment of transition—a poem that incorporates elements of both.

The idea of an already-wise nature in no need of mankind’s manufactured “wisdom” hearkens back to “The Trees” and to the natural/instinctual “memory” those trees carry with them. Those trees chastise “the race of men” for their “memory broken”—broken, as discovered in the second version of the poem, by the institutions of philosophy and science. Similarly, the poet of “Pastoral 2” finds the “futile colors” of his societal clothing a hindrance to union with the instinctual nature he has left behind. Unfortunately, the persona of “Pastoral 2” is self-aware enough to realize that it is all but impossible anymore to achieve this union given the strength of his social restrictions. He tells his natural setting:

That this hide  
 I have drawn about myself  
 To shield me  
 Has bound me more subtly  
 Than you have imagined.

It is no good to  
 To strip the bark  
 From an old tree  
 It will not be young again—

I have bound myself better than that! (75-85)

Whether clothes or skin, he is inextricable from his identity as a human, and all he can offer is the too-late and ineffectual counsel he himself cannot follow: to “lean your surfaces / Against the frost / With your whole heart—“ (87-89). Given the plethora of poetic moments in which Whitman seeks full communion with both his fellow human and his environmental setting, it is difficult to imagine that he would be likely to acknowledge his own limitation in this sense, though we see shades of that in the conclusion of “This Compost.” Therefore, we find Williams once again cynically updating a facile idea Whitman put forth, and instead instituting his deeper, more modern awareness of the extent to which society has become an inherent aspect of humanity’s makeup and identity. No simple shepherd, Williams turns a critical eye on the accepted notion of the pastoral retreat into purity and natural unity, an eye more critical, it must be noted, than we can (or should, given his political and poetic context) expect from Whitman.

## 6) Conclusion

These readings show us the extent to which Whitman and Williams share a mutual fascination with their natural, local environments, while simultaneously revealing the contrast in what they choose to do when poetically mining that same milieu. Neither seems interested in nature as mere metaphor, which thus puts them safely within the realm of ecopoetry. However, the similarities end there. Whitman's anthropocentric sensibilities mark him as a product of his historical moment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as express the extent to which his own poetics tend toward a democratization-by-self. As Williams notes in his essay on Whitman, the latter is a poet of the idea—that idea being democracy through all-inclusiveness. “Lean[ing] and loaf[ing]” amid the *Leaves of Grass*, he calls into himself all people and all things.

By contrast, Williams, the poet of the word, uses nature as a vehicle not for philosophy per se but for his experiments in form, all in service of a perspective that is markedly more biocentric. The union of self with surroundings is more implicit, as his poetic personae seem to assume before speaking that they are already interrelated to one another, whether or not the poet calls them so. Whether speaking as a tree, the Undying, or the “shepherd” of the modern pastoral, Williams shows a distinct appreciation for the “interpenetration” of all members of a given community—biotic, ecological, or spiritual. Only by contrast with a proto-ecopoet like Whitman, whose themes speak for nature but only insofar as humanity can, do we come to appreciate the full extent to which Williams is an ecopoet in full.

In the next chapter, we will find Williams experimenting further with both his poetry and his prose. In what will prove to be one of the most culturally and artistically significant books of his career, 1923's *Spring and All*, we find him at once himself, as well as enacting something akin to the persona of Whitman. "In the imagination" he claims in the opening paragraphs of the book, "we are henceforth...locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one,"<sup>68</sup> It's hard to find a more (as Tapscott puts it) "exuberantly Whitmanian" moment in Williams. The Doctor continues (almost paraphrasing the opening of "Song of Myself"), "Whenever I say 'I' I mean also 'you.' And so together, as one, we shall begin." The next chapter of this study will deal directly with what exactly is "begun" in *Spring and All*, and how it shows Williams to be even more explicitly coming into his own as a voice for ecological poetry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>68</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume I*. 176.

### III. The First Signs of Spring (and All)

#### 1) Introduction

For William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* (1923) was a turning point in his career. Published ten years after his first book of poetry (1913's *The Tempers*), it served as a declaration of his artistic sensibilities and as an active effort on Williams's part to remake American poetry. It remains one of the most assertive and influential poetic arguments he would ever write and includes some of his best-known and most anthologized early poems. Since its first (small circulation) appearance, the book has been required reading for most budding Modern poets, and, because of its lasting influence, was even recently re-issued in a facsimile edition by New Directions—its first complete stand-alone volume form since its original publication.

For the purposes of this study's exploration of Williams's ecopoetics, *Spring and All* is one of his most densely concentrated expressions of literary ecology. Whether in the book's poems or the prose that surrounds them, Williams clearly communicates a number of important ecological qualities, including his specific reasoning for centering himself and his art so firmly in the 'local'—an overt case for a consideration of "imagination" as a direct force of nature, a clear distinction between the two genres of form we now call "nature poetry" and "ecological poetry," and an implicit argument about how humanity's understanding of, and relationship to, nature has been negatively impacted by the processes and products of the modern world. I will explore each of these in depth in this chapter.

In order to appreciate the extent to which Williams's ecopoetics were a novel form within the American poetic tradition, it will be useful to first understand the extent to which *Spring and All* was itself a revolutionary kind of book. As noted, it is comprised of alternating sections of prose and poetry. The prose offers a place for Williams to flesh out some of his arguments about poetics and is interspersed with 27 poems that give direct application to his artistic theories. However, the two formats rarely inform each other explicitly, and the connections are commonly left to the reader to discern or interpret. The book's form is especially playful in its prose, with frequent contrasting moments of clear sincerity that mirror the gravity of the poetry. Williams later recalled the prose as "a mixture of philosophy and nonsense. It made sense to me, at least to my disturbed mind, but I doubt if it made sense to anyone else."<sup>69</sup>

It is at times crystal clear—as in its more imagist poems or the paragraphs of "philosophy" in which Williams elucidates some of his more explicit poetic theories. On the other hand, it can also be frustratingly opaque. What, for example, should one do with Williams's claims early on that the "monster project of the moment" is for Americans to go to Europe, "armed to kill every man, woman and child in the area west of the Carpathian mountains (also east), sparing none...First we shall kill them, and then they, us"?<sup>70</sup> Or how shall one critically discuss poem XXV, which is a handful of aphorisms and the text copy of a commuter train advertisement transposed into poetic form? Motifs can emerge from close readings of certain sections, such as in the Carpathian example above, which gestures toward the theme of "renewal" (sometimes at the cost of wiping out the status quo)—a theme that serves ecocritical purposes in the

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<sup>69</sup> Williams. *I Wanted to Write a Poem*. 37.

<sup>70</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 1*. 178.

*Spring* Williams is proposing, both in the book's title, as well as in specific moments throughout the book, some of which I outline below. Similarly, the recursive nature of the text, demanding multiple readings in order to attain anything like a comprehension of the whole project, also feels like an important conveyance of the book's overarching point—that the conventional forms of the past in prose, but especially in poetry, are in need of that Carpathian-like renewal and recovery, even (and perhaps especially) if it challenges the reader.

Where, then, shall such renewal begin? For Williams, there could be only one useful place of action: the local. Both the poetry and (especially) the prose in *Spring and All* reveal much about *why* he chose to remain throughout his career so firmly entrenched in his geographically immediate locale. By way of context, it will be useful to begin with some historical and philosophical information about Williams's relationship to his environment. He was born and raised in the Meadowlands of New Jersey, specifically in the suburban town of Rutherford. He lived out his entire adult life at Nine Ridge Road just a few blocks from the house on Passaic Avenue in which he was born. There were forays away from home, such as a year or two in Europe (attending boarding school with his brother) and the requisite time spent away at college earning his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

In contrast to his Penn classmate and poetic mentor and friend Ezra Pound, however, Williams eventually made a choice to eschew the expatriate European lifestyle, and, after interning in nearby New York City, he set up his medical practice in 1910 (aged 27) back in Rutherford. He wrote much of his poetry late at night in the attic at Nine Ridge Road, after having seen patients throughout the day in his office on the

second floor. His magnum opus, *Paterson*, takes its title from a town within walking distance of his own backyard, and as its central theme, a river that flows less than a mile from his front door. As a country doctor, he made house calls throughout Bergen and Passaic counties, steering his Ford through the landscape he had known all his life, treating families with whom he had grown up, and would eventually grow old, frequently jotting down snippets of their authentic “American” language, or poetic lines for future poems, on his own prescription pads.

As a poet, he wrote about what he knew—philosophy and art discussed in apartments and hotel rooms across the bridge in New York City, social and economic issues inspired by the families he served as a rural doctor, and, especially relevant to the study at hand, a landscape that included the local ecosystems and biosystems, the trees, flowers, rivers, animals, and people of the Passaic River Valley. His dedication to the topics most immediate to him made his choice to remain indefinitely in his hometown a deliberately personal and ultimately deeply poetic one.

As noted in Chapter II, dedication to the local has, in the past few decades, become a commonplace of the environmental movement. “[Williams’s] commitment to one small part of the world,” notes modern ecopoet and environmental philosopher Wendell Berry, “made him radical in a way that he may only partly have recognized—that undoubtedly is more recognizable now than it was, even to him, during his lifetime.”<sup>71</sup> But, while the political implications of local, sustainable food or resources are now routine within the green/“eco” movement, Williams was clearly more focused on the value of the immediate environs specifically to and for *artistic* expression. He argued, in a number of prose writings, for the importance of the artist’s amassing experience and

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<sup>71</sup> Berry. 28-29.

inspiration from his immediate surroundings. As he would go on to write in a 1927 profile of Kenneth Burke, “one has to learn what the meaning of the local is, for universal purposes. The local is the only thing that is universal.”<sup>72</sup> Williams is drawing directly from the works of then-contemporary American philosopher John Dewey whose 1920 essay, “Americanism and Localism,” strongly informed Williams’s ideas about immediacy and contact with the local as a starting point from which to understand and interpret the larger (universal) world. Throughout *Spring and All*, Williams will use such “universality” as he can find in his local place and time—20<sup>th</sup> century Rutherford—to give the local/universal direct application in his poetry and in his prose. From the very first poem in the book, we will find him working (both as poet and doctor) in his hometown, holding the reader in the kind of close contact and concentrated observation that brings his poetics, and the natural environmental, into sharp focus. The result is a geographically and temporally immediate engagement with nature and the imagination.

## 2) Spring and Renewal

Let us begin by examining *Spring and All*’s first (and eventual title) poem. Marked in the original text by a simple roman numeric number “I,” and sometimes referred to by its first line (“By the road to the contagious hospital”), in Williams’s 1951 *Collected Poems*, the poem came to be called simply “Spring and All.” This is, perhaps, because more than any of the other 26 poems in the book, *Spring and All*, it encapsulates the spirit of “Spring” most explicitly. It acts as a poetic climax to the prose sections opening the book. Mere paragraphs before the first line, under the heading “THE TRADITIONALISTS OF PLAGIARISM,” Williams describes how the past that has led

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<sup>72</sup> Williams. *Selected Essays*. 132.

to this moment: “Now at last that process of miraculous verisimilitude, that great copying which evolution has followed, repeating move for move every move that it made in the past—is approaching the end. / Suddenly it is at an end. THE WORLD IS NEW.”<sup>73</sup> This sentiment seems to metapoetically speak to Williams’s goals for the book, a slate-cleaning of past forms and themes (which were merely “plagiarism” anyway) in favor of the present moment.

From there, Williams launches into “Spring and All,” an enthusiastic recounting of the influx of energy that gives birth to new and renewed life. This focus upon the earth’s renewal and the potential of new life reflects Williams’s attention to the ecology of the landscape and to the evolution of poetry itself. Given his interest in form and the American tradition, the poem has long been read as both a rebirth of the natural landscape, as well as a figurative new beginning for American poetry. The prose that invokes plagiarism and copying might be seen to be a subtle accusation leveled at the likes of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, the latter of whom’s “The Waste Land” (which Williams referred to as a death-bringing “atom bomb” on the American poetic scene) had debuted to great acclaim only a year earlier in 1922.<sup>74</sup> Williams was clearly no fan of the style of classicism and imitation he saw in Pound and Eliot and sought instead to reinvigorate his country’s poetry with its/his own American idiom. Williams makes a nearly explicit reference to Eliot’s opus in the early prose in *Spring and All* when he notes, “If I could say what is in my mind in Sanscrit or even Latin, I would do so. But I cannot. I speak for the integrity of the soul and the greatness of life’s inanity.”<sup>75</sup> In the opening paragraphs of *Spring and All*, he apostrophizes a skeptical reader who criticizes

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<sup>73</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume I*. 182.

<sup>74</sup> Williams. *Autobiography*. 174.

<sup>75</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume I*. 179.

Williams's own poetry, calling it "the antithesis of poetry. It is antipoetry."<sup>76</sup> Williams's straw man reader goes on to decry a few lines later, "You moderns! it [sic] is the death of poetry you are accomplishing." Of course, as seen in the rebirth motif of the book overall, and in the poem itself, it is precisely the opposite act he is performing; he is both bringing life to the natural landscape, and poetically and metaphorically, planting a new seed of *Modernist* form. The subject and the form of the poem are both full of life and broad enough to contain within them the language and energy of a new Modern era.

This awareness of the need for something fresh—both a younger, newer version of the poetry of the past and an organic natural renewal—is emphasized by Williams's playful sense of time in "Spring and All." Verbs are largely eschewed in the first half of the poem, in favor of the prepositional phrases and gerund adjectives of description. Mirroring the recent dormancy of the earth, there is no activity, as such, until "dazed spring approaches" (15), and then, like the plants themselves, the verbs begin to pop up with frequency—"they enter" (16), "objects are defined" (22), "the profound change / has come upon them" (25-26), until "they / grip down and begin to awaken" (26-27) in the poem's final, unpunctuated line. The ending phrase is (at last!) a complete thought, a closing articulation of the action of the poem's disparate subjects (plants and poetry) but one that lacks conclusion. Ultimately, the awakening continues beyond the end of the poem, both literally, in the sense of the life cycle of the local environmental system, and figuratively, in the way it reawakens with each new reading on the page. It is suspended in time, awaiting future poets and readers of poetry to experience it anew.

Such elements of the inconclusive speak to an appreciation for the cyclical nature of an ecological environment, as well as that of literary fashion. That which can

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 177.

figuratively be renewed has no end, just as authors in years to come will find ways to remake what we now understand literature to be into newer forms more suited to their own time, as Williams himself is attempting to do. This gesture toward the cyclical forecasts ideas like those in Williams's later poem, "A Unison" (discussed in Chapter II). That poem took as its "local" setting a specific and actual former cemetery on a mountainside in Wilmington, Vermont, a place in which Williams discovered both the human deaths of past and the natural life of the hillside's present. The scene in "Spring and All" is similarly placed in a locus that has a history of death and, simultaneously, is a fertile ground for new life: a hospital.

The poem opens, "By the road to the contagious hospital" (1). Realizing Williams's habit of composition on prescription pads as he drove from one house call to another, it's a short leap to imagine the poet pulled over to the side of the road on his way to an appointment. Philip Bufithis notes in his article, "William Carlos Williams Writing Against *The Waste Land*," "The 'contagious hospital' is probably one of Williams' many car poems. Dr. Williams is on a medical call; he sees the roadside growth from his Ford, and he is trying to take it all in."<sup>77</sup> Paul Mariani repeatedly notes in his biography, *A New World Naked*, Williams's habit of composing small poetry on his own prescription pads.<sup>78</sup> Though not explicitly argued in Williams criticism, it has become commonplace to ascribe some degree of credit to this method of writing, for the shortness of his poetic line and the compact visual nature of many of his poems. At this time, Williams worked on staff at Passaic General and, given his professional routine, it seems the likeliest choice for the "contagious hospital" to which he was going was "on the road." Further,

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<sup>77</sup> Bufithis, Philip. "William Carlos Williams Writing Against *The Waste Land*." *SAGETRIEB* 8:1-2, Spring-Fall 1989.

<sup>78</sup> Mariani, Paul. *A New World Naked*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1981. 187, 288, 311.

Passaic General had previously been used as a site for treating the victims of the flu epidemic that swept the East coast in 1918, a pandemic Williams actively battled after having established his practice in Rutherford in 1910. So, there, near the location of so much previous disease and death at Passaic General, we find spring re-awakening the landscape in the poet's mind and in the reader's.

The extent to which the reader's attention is intently focused upon the field near Passaic General has been noted before by Williams scholar James E. Breslin who, in his book-length study on Williams, argues:

This poem does not simply describe the physical qualities in a landscape: its center is an act of perception...the slow penetration of a desolate landscape by an awakening observer. We follow the thrust of his imagination downward, through obstacles, to a new union with the physical environment. The progression in the poem is literally downward: the observer goes from 'the blue / mottled clouds,' across a distant view of 'broad, muddy fields,' to the quickening plant life right before him—and then penetrates even further downward [in the poem and the landscape], into the dark earth, as he imagines the roots taking hold again.<sup>79</sup>

Breslin's observations show how the lyric's perspective doesn't merely observe the earth but enters it, breaking down the separation between humanity (the poet or reader) and nature (the landscape, earth, and burgeoning plant life). The reader and the poet (both are Breslin's "awakening observer") become analogous to the roots taking hold in the ground. Such de-centering of the human subject, who, as we'll see in a moment, is absent from

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<sup>79</sup> Breslin, James E. *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970. 64-65.

the narrative of the poem's action, is precisely the biocentric thinking that helps us identify Williams as an eco-poet.

Just as the boundaries between humanity and the natural can be broken down through such immediacy of experience, a similar temporal immediacy helps us realize the timeless, eternal present in which nature operates, an eternal moment Williams is explicitly seeking in *Spring and All*. In the book's opening pages, Williams says of "the writer" that "the thing he never knows and never dares to know is what he is at the exact moment he is. And this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested."<sup>80</sup> The prose section just before the poem "Spring and All" self-consciously focuses the reader's mind upon temporal presence, having "now arrived...at that exact moment" when the world is renewed.<sup>81</sup> This is borne out by the verb conjugations and the repeated references to the present scattered throughout the poem. Finally, in Line 15, we come to the first active subject and verb of the poem: "Lifeless in appearance, sluggish / dazed spring approaches—" (14-15). This follows half of the poem's-length worth of prepositional phrases ("By the road...under the surge...Beyond, ... All along the road...") piled upon scene-setting nouns ("a cold wind...the waste of brown, muddy fields...patches of standing water / the scattering of tall trees," etc.), lulling the reader into a grammatical stasis that mirrors the landscape, interrupted finally by the new life of spring.

Upon arrival at the "approach" of spring in line 15, it's important to note that the poem at no point takes a single living organism as its grammatical subject—no human, no persona, self-identified or otherwise—just spring, and the budding plants it brings

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<sup>80</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 1*, 178.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 186.

with it. Nature itself is the subject, a gesture that would now be recognized for the ecological implications it holds. As if to further emphasize its centrality, the couplet comprising “sluggish / dazed spring” is not just the grammatical focus but indeed finds itself at the typographical and line-count center of the poem. Interestingly, even here, spring is still “approach[ing],” its true *arrival* postponed yet another line until the subject shifts to the empirical evidence of the season—“They [the buds of flora in the field] enter a new world naked” (16).

“[E]nter[ing] a new world *naked*” seems to refer itself back thematically to the “hospital” of the poem’s first line, a locus of childbirth, as much as contagion and death. There is no human subject in the poem, but verbiage such as “naked,” “dazed,” and “grip” all have human-centered meanings, subtly calling to mind the parallel between the natural and the human. Newborn babies come into the “contagious hospital” “naked” and “dazed”; they instinctually “grip” any finger placed in their palm. So, too, then, these newborn plants. Williams is not anthropomorphizing nature as “just like us,” which would strike one as a holdover from the Whitmanian-like Romantic view of nature, but calling to mind the spoken “Song of the Red-Wood” discussed in Chapter II. Instead, his more subtle use of a few simple words (not *cultural* objects, just shared actions) reveals a clear parallel between the newborn elements of the earth, human and nonhuman. The parallels show Williams’s refined sense of ecology as having a dynamic mutuality about it. This is not spring in a world *without* people, but a world in which humanity and the nature that surrounds it are so interrelated as to share certain qualities, especially at that crucial moment of birth, entrance into the “new world.”

“Enter,” is the second active verb in two lines and still just the second verb in the entire poem. Prior to the moment in which the poem takes place (the precise time in which the reader is reading it), spring has remained “lifeless *in appearance*” only, the potential energy of life ever present, awaiting its time and place for fruition. Similarly, the idea of nature as “lifeless in appearance only” may communicate something of how humanity interacts with the natural world. In the slow crawl of growth, we tend to think of nature as static in the present moment until the human gaze (informed by our ecological understanding of germination, maturation, and evolution) imbues that nature with a constant and ongoing life. Also, in a poetic sense, the text itself could be thought to be “lifeless in appearance” until the reader’s engagement with the text (informed, especially, by the way Williams’s understands and describes the imagination in later prose sections of *Spring and All*) comprehends the poem as already alive with meaning. Nature is, after all, full of organisms already in motion, if not at the breakneck speed of a storm then instead at the glacial measured pace of growth, or evolution.

But existence is not without its false starts. Throughout the poem, both em dashes and stanza breaks act as typographical indications of the stuttered beginning to both the life contained in the poem and the difficulty of the language used to express it:

All about them

the cold, familiar wind—

Now the grass, tomorrow

the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

One by one objects are defined—

It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf (18-23)

The voice of the poem struggles to find the phrases that can communicate the wondrous transition from snow-studded field to the green buds of life. Williams said of his early form, “The rhythmic unit usually came to me in a lyrical outburst... The rhythmic pace was the pace of speech, an excited pace because I was excited when I wrote. I was discovering, pressed by some violent mood.”<sup>82</sup> In the case of “Spring and All,” the energy of that excitement translates into the new life, of the budding plants at the poem’s narrative center. Other em dashes, both at the end and in the middle of stanzas, serve as a kind of textual pause, a transition from a sentence fragment into a new grammatical subject and into the new energy of the budding plants as they “enter” the world. Breslin describes the evolution of the form in the poem thusly: “At the beginning, a plain diction, use of short, disconnected phrases, loose, flat rhythms create a sense of stasis; but the poem tightens at the end with the pounding stresses, heavy pauses, and epigrammatic force of its final stanza. We get a final, compact moment of illumination.” That “illumination” is both the organic illumination of new life, and an intellectual illumination, as the poet’s imagination imbues the lyric with a new kind of formal “life.”

Within the context of the larger theme of the poem, the em dashes act as their own renewals, their own stages of spring, a chance for the poet and his language to start again, undergirding the natural new beginning of the field’s green life. Here, the form is enacting a decidedly ecological theme. The spring brings with it both the field’s ecological, cyclical renewal and that of American poetry. As John Lowney points out in *The American Avant-Garde Tradition*, “The ‘clarity, outline of leaf’ [in line 23] represents not only the ‘leaf’ of spring growth but the *page* as ‘outline of leaf’ as well, the

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<sup>82</sup> Williams. *I Wanted To Write a Poem*. 15.

frame that directs our attention to the ‘clarity’ of vision the words evoke.”<sup>83</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, that Williams shows the language literally renewing itself. Each time the poet interrupts himself with an em dash, it gives him an opportunity to begin again, a new breath, a new sentence, and a new way to articulate (within the context of American poetry, using a new form) the message of spring’s arrival.

As mentioned, Williams is working in direct reaction to Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” offering his own alternative for how the new American Modernist poetry should sound and what subjects it should treat, particularly the world itself. Philip Bufithis’s article provides a valuable catalogue of the many similarities and deliberate differences, not least of which includes the contrast between Eliot’s opening line (“April is the cruelest month”) and Williams’s decision to set “Spring and All” in that same transitional season, with precisely the opposite message—a new world in place of a “Waste Land.”<sup>84</sup> In terms of the syntax, Bufithis points out the “adagio, studied quality” of Eliot’s broken lines, more settled in memory, contrasting them with Williams’s more “rough, unfinished, provisionary” phrases intent on an unmediated present. Taking Bufithis’s observation a step further, that unfiltered moment (Williams’s stated goal in the prose) mirrors the natural landscape itself—uncomposed, disheveled. The em dashes that interrupt those phrases act on the page like the landscape itself, with its “dried weeds, standing” by “leafless vines—.” In that last phrase, the em dash offers a kind of inky leafless vine on the page, the poem itself reflecting the renewing view it describes.

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<sup>83</sup> Lowney, John. *The American Avant-Garde Tradition*. (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1997), 64.

<sup>84</sup> Bufithis. n7.

The penultimate stanza performs a similar act of renewal with its break placement midsentence. It also introduces, in a style imitating the future flowering of spring's buds, a final stanza that contains in it all the energy of the poem's composition in bloom:

But now, the stark dignity of  
 Entrance—Still, the profound change  
 has come upon them : rooted, they  
 grip down and begin to awaken (24-27)

After the stutter of a mid-line em dash, “—Still, the profound change” has come. With that visual pause before “Still,” Williams focuses our attention on the lynchpin moment of the “profound change,” the moment of birth. “Still” in this line also carries with it an ambiguity with respect to Williams's search for the immediate moment. “Still” seems to imply that “in spite of” the dead fields, the plants are overcoming a challenge to be born, while simultaneously referencing a “past perfect” verbal state—the profound change *yet* comes, continuously. The latter reading seems to be reinforced by Williams's statement in the *Selected Essays*, “There are no beginnings and ends in nature [...] There is only, we might say, flux in nature.”<sup>85</sup> Interestingly, the “profound change” to which the buds of spring are subject is experienced in a surprisingly passive way (it “has come upon them”) making the change itself the subject of the sentence (26). Immediately following, the green plants take over in the most purposeful, animating act of their lives, repeated annually—“rooted, they / grip down and begin to awaken” (26-27). The passive becomes active. Through the inspired effect of the imagination, Williams the ecopoet gives us not a metaphor for natural life but the life itself. As he says later in *Spring and All*, “the [work of the] imagination [is] not ‘like’ anything but *transfused with the same forces*

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<sup>85</sup> Williams. *Selected Essays*. 303.

*which transfuse the earth.*”<sup>86</sup> Both the literal plants at the poem’s narrative center and the lines used to name them are powered by the same force—the organic artistic imagination.

Two textual elements further underline for the reader the promising nature of this moment: the open-ended poem’s finish without a period, or so much as a comma; and the nuance in the plants’ action as they “grip down and,” not simply awaken but, “*begin to awaken.*” As profound and important as this moment of spring is, it is just the beginning. Similarly, as I will next demonstrate, Williams hoped that the poem was just the beginning of a new literary idiom, the fertile ground and opening seeds of a new American poetry, not just for his collected volume of prose and poetry *Spring and All*, but in the American tradition on the whole and among his artistic contemporaries.

### 3) Spring and the Imagination

The dominant trope to which we find Williams returning again and again in *Spring and All* is the “imagination.” As he says in the book’s opening: “To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force: the imagination. This is its book.”<sup>87</sup> Throughout said book, Williams conceives of the imagination as a bridge—reality cannot be made into poetry without its creative spark. The imagination is the very thing that takes his poetry from the more passive and unimaginative “nature poetry” to active “ecological poetry.”<sup>88</sup> Williams himself seems to distinguish this for the reader when he notes that “[t]ruly great men,” when faced with a “good or great work,” do not see it as an experience meant to “block out” or escape

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<sup>86</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 1*. 207, emphasis mine.

<sup>87</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 1*. 187. Ecopoetically, “That eternal moment in which we alone live” could be interestingly conceived of as a kind of metaphysical local—both a time and place immediate to the one who experiences it.

<sup>88</sup> The distinction between these two genres is elucidated in greater detail in the Introduction.

from life. Instead, “[i]t is a work of the imagination. [The good or great work] gives the feeling of completion by revealing the *oneness of experience*; it rouses rather than stupefies the intelligence by demonstrating the importance of personality, by showing the individual... that his life is valuable—when completed by the imagination. And then only.” As if to suppress any thought of mere nature poetry, he follows by noting, “[s]uch a realization shows us the falseness of attempting to ‘copy’ nature.”<sup>89</sup>

Perhaps the most radical facet of Williams’s use of the imagination throughout *Spring and All* is that he characterizes the poet’s imaginative work as another, albeit somewhat more mystical, function of the normal processes of nature. At his most ecological (and by extension ecopoetic), Williams describes the imagination as “an actual force comparable to electricity or steam, it is not a plaything but a power that has been used from the first to raise the reader to a new level of understanding.”<sup>90</sup> The “unique power” of this force, this power of imagination, is “to give created forms reality, actual existence.”<sup>91</sup> For Williams, the organic world has its place in reality, on an equal par and in an equal reality with nature when filtered through the poet’s imagination. Williams makes an extended argument based in Shakespeare’s notion of art “holding up a mirror to nature.”<sup>92</sup> “The mistake in it,” Williams says, “is to have believed that the reflection of nature [in art] is nature. It is not. It is only a sham nature, a ‘lie.’” He continues, “Of course *S.* is the most conspicuous example desirable of the falseness of this very thing. He holds no mirror up to nature but, with his imagination, he rivals nature’s composition

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 107. Though not explicitly literary art, this discussion takes place in reference to “art in general”—and amidst a discussion of the painter Juan Gris and the ways in which Williams is striving to achieve a literary version of such visual imagery.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 120.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 120.

<sup>92</sup> Williams is making reference to the well-known speech from *Hamlet* (II.iii) when the title character speaks to the Players, advising them to strive for the realism in which he has instructed them, “to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature” (line 20).

with his own. He himself become [sic] ‘nature’—continuing ‘its’ marvels—if you will.”<sup>93</sup> By “continuing its marvels,” the artist is understood to be not merely describing reality/nature but becoming a part of it through the dynamizing power of the imagination. As previously noted, but worth recalling, Williams says elsewhere in *Spring and All*, “the imagination [is] not ‘like’ anything but transfused with the same forces which transfuse the earth.” The artist’s role in nature parallels the role humanity plays within a broader ecosystem.

What follows Williams’s prose discussion of reality and nature is a poem showing an artifact of that nature reimagined in the harsh reality of the Modern(ist) world. “The Rose,” poem VII in the original volume, is a verbal adaptation of a 1914 cubist painting by Juan Gris (an artist Williams references repeatedly in *Spring and All*). The poem opens with the stark notion that “[t]he rose is obsolete” (1), before going on to make much use of the rose petal’s edge which “cuts without cutting / meets—nothing—renews / itself in metal and porcelain” (6-8). Nature is refigured in the artificial materials of modern (mercantile) humanity. But, the Modern poetic voice and the “obsolete” flower he is describing are not without their tradition. Harkening back to the plant’s more romantic ‘roots,’ the poet recalls “[t]he rose carried weight of love / but love is at an end—of roses” (21-22). Continually the petal’s edge is invoked but what remains unsaid, sometimes in an abrupt ‘cutting off’ of the poet mid-sentence, is what lies at or beyond that edge until the penultimate stanza, which finally finds its subject in some activity, provides the inevitable ‘action’ for the poem:

From the petal’s edge a line starts  
that being of steel

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 120.

infinitely fine, infinitely  
 rigid penetrates  
 the Milky Way  
 without contact—lifting  
 from it—neither hanging  
 nor pushing— (32-39)

In this obscuring of the organic plant Gris was painting with its artificial poetic counterpart, we begin to see an awareness of nature's role as simultaneously real and fake. Williams is clearly invoking Gertrude Stein's famous notion that "A rose is a rose is a rose," from her 1913 poem "Sacred Emily." Both poems speak to the differences between a naturally blooming rose and the cultural symbolic baggage the word rose carries with it in the Modern (post-Romantic) era. The rose in Williams's poem, at once manmade and natural, has its place in the present moment and even its place within a cosmic order.

Lest we misunderstand the poem as merely Romantic "nature poetry" reapplied to a more modern subject, however, Williams returns the reader for the final stanza to the image of the organic rose we know, now engaged in continuing its ecological interpenetration: "The fragility of the flower / unbruised / penetrates spaces"—those "spaces" calling back to the Milky Way of just a few lines earlier. This achievement, the conflation of the organic with the inorganic, is performed by Williams via the vehicle of the "imagination." As he says a few pages later in the prose of *Spring and All*, "[t]he only realism in art is of the imagination."<sup>94</sup> This mirrors Gris's own comments upon his "Roses" painting when he said, "[t]he world from which I draw the elements of reality is

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<sup>94</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 1*. 111.

not visual but imaginative.”<sup>95</sup> Giving ecocritical weight to his comment, Williams goes on to add, “[i]t is only thus that the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes a new creation.”<sup>96</sup>

This rosy imagery will return a few times over the course of Williams’s career, most compellingly, perhaps, in Book I of his expansive epic poem, *Paterson*. Section III of that book opens:

How strange you are, you idiot!  
 So you think because the rose  
 is red that you shall have the mastery?  
 The rose is green and will bloom,  
 overtopping you, green, livid  
 green when you shall no more speak, or  
 taste, or even be. My whole life has hung too long upon a partial victory.  
  
 But, creature of the weather, I  
 don’t want to go any faster than  
 I have to go to win.

Music it for yourself.<sup>97</sup>

The metaphor of the rose has died. The human insistence that “the rose / is red,” centered as it is in inherited Romantic notions, is “at an end. The “livid green” power of nature, as filtered through the poet’s imagination, “overtops” the reader, eternally cyclical, even beyond the silence and death of reader and poet alike. When humanity and its language

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<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Daniel Kahnweiler’s *Juan Gris: His Life and Work*. Douglas Cooper, trans. Harry N. Abrams, 1946. 194.

<sup>96</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 1*. 111.

<sup>97</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 29.

one day cease to “even be,” the rose, and the nature that gave birth to it, will remain to outlast us all. Again, humanity’s importance to itself is displaced. Williams would have us understand ourselves as biocentrically as we can, as just another species. We are merely a part, and not even the strongest part, of the natural world.

In a fortunate confluence of themes, a later section of *Paterson* brings the rose back together with a contemplation of Williams’s dedication to his very local scene. In the last pages of Book II, section 2, he proclaims:

Why should I move from this place  
 where I was born? knowing  
 how futile would be the search  
 for you in the multiplicity  
 of your debacle. The world spreads  
 for me like a flower opening—and  
 will close for me as might a rose—  
  
 wither and fall upon the ground  
 and rot and be drawn up  
 into a flower again...<sup>98</sup>

The original title of this subsection was “Address to the Deity,” thus an identification of the interlocutor of the speaker of the poem, the poet Paterson’s, words. The lines speak to Williams’s enthusiasm for his local milieu, to the regenerative powers of composition and decomposition (both as writing process and as nature’s organic cycle), and provide a relatively comforting conclusion to the thread of the rose’s bloom. The simultaneously

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<sup>98</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 79.

authentic and artificial flower, with its petal's edge, finishes, finally, in an eternal lack of conclusion.

#### **4) Spring and Modernity**

If “The Rose” offers Williams a chance to describe the natural image as is found in modernity, “To Elsie” is an opportunity to show how disconnected humanity has become from the local and natural world, and the “degraded” state to which that brings us. The poem is one of *Spring and All*'s better-known (and oft-anthologized) lyrics. In it, we see Williams bringing some of his ideas about the local, the imagination, and a disconnected humanity more pointedly into the context of the modern, industrialized world. At the poem's center is a woman based on Williams's direct experience—a nanny for the Williams children—used as an exemplar of what happens when a place and its people are devalued. “Value” is an especially appropriate word considering the motif of commerce that runs throughout the poem from its very first line: “The pure products of America go crazy.” The “mountain folk” to whom we're subsequently introduced are “products” in the sense of being the result or outcome of America, but the word choice also leads the reader to an imagery of commercial esteem which will come to bear again later in the reading, and which begins to offer a commentary on the distinctly Modern setting of the poem.

The first half of “To Elsie” articulates some of the problems of this Modernity, in general, as well as for the “pure products” mentioned. They are introduced in snapshots of desolation, in both their natural and cultural environs. The “devil-may care men” (10) and “young slatterns” (13) are defined at first by their participation in the workforce. The

former have “taken / to railroading / out of sheer lust of adventure,” while the latter are “bathed in filth from Monday to Saturday” (presumably their work week), performing unspecified and seemingly unskilled jobs that leave them as “filth[y]” and “degraded” as the landscape mentioned later in the poem. Even the respite both groups enjoy on their only free day of the week is a garish performance without cultural value:

tricked out that night  
 with gauds  
 from imaginations which have no  
 peasant traditions to give them  
 character  
 but flutter and flaunt  
 sheer rags (16-22)

These young mountain folk, Elsie implicitly included among them, are tied to their locale by a long history (about which I will say more in a moment); but their lack of culture, explicitly here the heritage of a shared cultural past, the line’s “peasant traditions,” leaves their courtship resembling an imitative charade. The result is that they come together, “succumbing without / emotion / save numbed terror” in implied lustful trysts, tellingly, in explicitly natural settings, “under some hedge of choke-cherry / or viburnum” (22-26). In the absence of a culture, one may expect to find the natural world as their fallback, but it is instead both a shelter and a prison. The native shrubbery of New Jersey (the specificity of which, when named by the species “choke-cherry and viburnum” helps focus the reader on an immediate locale) affords these youths privacy for their

indiscretions, while simultaneously trapping them in their state of “numbed terror,” an imagery that forecasts Elsie and her ilk’s being “hemmed round / with disease or murder” a few stanzas later (32-33).

The people Williams is referring to in the first line are the “*pure* products of America” in the sense of being a distillation of their locus—America on the grand scale, but more immediately their surroundings in the Ramapo Mountains. In fact, the poem is populated not merely by “Americans” but by people tied specifically to their direct environment: “mountain folk from Kentucky // or the ribbed north end of Jersey” (3-5). The poet uses a very deliberate sense of geography to offer the reader a perspective that begins wide and increasingly narrows during the poem, from “America,” (1) to the “north end of Jersey,” (4-5) to “the suburbs,” (39) until it finally centers on its titular Elsie (40). In the interceding lines, he offers commentary on these mountain folk, a people who were in Williams’s time pejoratively called “Jackson Whites” but are understood in our own time as a unique tribe called the Ramapo (sometimes Ramapough) Mountain Indians. This narrowing of perspective, and the specificity with which Williams names it, focuses the reader on the importance of place in Williams’s poetic project.

Ironically, the people are identified with their location, since one of the primary reasons they’re in such a bad way is their lack of connection to that environment and to that land. As the late stanzas describe, it is,

as if the earth under our feet

were

an excrement of some sky

and we degraded prisoners

destined

to hunger until we eat filth (49-54)

The metaphorical hunger for a connection with the land can only be achieved through a more organically “tradition”-bound imagination. The imagination, that natural force so important to Williams and his project, comes up short for these pure products, and for “us.” (The transition to a collective pronoun brings the epiphany that the poet is not merely judging from afar but including himself and his reader among those who have been “degraded” in the modern context.) The imagination fails because these mountain folk, though geographically and genealogically well-positioned for contact with the land, have become “isolate”d.

It is important to maintain a sense of historical context here and to try to understand the Ramapo people, his “pure products,” as Williams would have it in 1923. The Jackson (or Jackson’s) Whites emerged as a unique group around the turn of the nineteenth century, though much about their origins remains obscure. In a prose section in *Paterson I*, Williams himself gives a synthesized story, convoluted, and only partially true, of their background. He describes them as a combination of exiled Tuscararo Indians from Tennessee, “Hessian deserters from the British army [of the American Revolution], a number of albinos among them, escaped negro slaves, and a lot of women and their brats released in New York City after the British had been forced to leave.”<sup>99</sup>

The “marriage / perhaps / with a dash of Indian blood” in the tenth stanza of “To Elsie” seems to make direct reference to the partially-Indian racial mixing among the group. Whatever their ancestry, the Ramapo Indians were a people tied by geography to their immediate surroundings in rural parts of the Jersey mountain range where they still

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<sup>99</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 12.

live today (in a clan numbering “a few thousand”<sup>100</sup>). Not surprisingly, given his time, Williams makes claims to the Ramapo range “with its isolate lakes and // valleys” as being populated by “deaf-mutes, thieves / old names [such as Jackson] / and promiscuity” (6-9). Stereotypes about the Jackson Whites were common among urban New Jerseyans and the “devil-may-care men” and “young slatterns, bathed / in filth” reflect the prejudices of his time—prejudices which simultaneously tie Williams to a now-outdated thinking toward the group.

The clearest ecopoetic quality in the poem is its central focus on Williams’s local surroundings, but by expanding for some stanzas on their cultural and environmental context, the poet also uses the Ramapo Mountain Indians (whose name, to this day, is drawn directly from their ecological milieu) as an interesting case study in the intersection between the natural and the cultural. As he says in *Paterson I*, “If there was not beauty, there was a strangeness and a bold association of *wild and cultured* life grew up *together* in the Ramapos: *two phases*.”<sup>101</sup> The group was perceived at the time to be a part of the land from which they come. They are rooted members of an ecological community, especially living as they do in a challengingly rural environment. (By contrast, Williams, again in *Paterson I*, refers to Patersonians as “automatons,” a pejorative for the decidedly modern city dweller, “who because they neither know their sources,” walk “incommunicado” about the concrete city streets.<sup>102</sup>) Native American ancestry may make the Ramapo/Jackson Whites more authentic and original “product[s]

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<sup>100</sup> Ready comparisons between the Ramapo people and contemporary rural Appalachian people provide a contextual clue for the “mountain folk from // Kentucky” in lines 3-4. Though there has been no substantial literary criticism on Williams’s treatment of them to date, background information on the Ramapo Mountain Indians comes from David Cohen’s *Ramapo Mountain People*. Rutgers UP, 1974.

<sup>101</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 12, emphasis mine.

<sup>102</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 6.

of America,” even and perhaps especially when mixed with other lineages. They are both native and “melting pot” in one, and all the while deeply connected to their environment by both their Native American past and their dedicated local ecosystemic present.

Williams’s invocation of the Ramapo Indians in the poem is at once prophetic of environmental literary theory as we understand it today and problematic for the way it rehearses outdated views on race, class, and gender as they intersect with environment. The modern sociological and literary lens of environmental justice seeks to “call attention to the ways disparate distribution of wealth and power often lead to . . . social upheaval and the unequal distribution of environmental degradation.”<sup>103</sup> Williams’s view from his privileged, though “hard-pressed / house in the suburbs,” and his “doctor’s family,” seems self-consciously aware of the disparate nature of economic status between himself and his live-in nursemaid (and her people). His lumping together of “mountain folk” across geographic swathes of Kentucky and New Jersey feels dismissive, and his characterization of the Ramapo as “deaf-mutes, thieves,” “devil-may-care men” and “young slatterns” a facile stereotyping of an economic other. Given Williams’s clear sympathy with the poor (as evidenced in a number of his poems), such a dismissal feels like a poetic persona somewhat distant from Williams himself. The language of that persona is inherently critical of the Ramapo and their history-less “imaginings” with “no / peasant traditions to give them / character,” their “sheer rags” being addressed to “cheap / jewelry.” This stands in contrast to his privileged role as a middle-class, mainstream American with peasant traditions (such as his father’s English heritage), the “character” of his mother’s Puerto Rican background, and all the linguistic and historical

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<sup>103</sup> Adamson, Evans, and Stein. “Introduction: Environmental Justice - Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy” in *The Environmental Justice Reader*. Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002. 5.

traditions of which that makes him a part. Though he classifies the “mountain folk” as the “pure product of America,” unlike them, he seems not to “go crazy,” instead writing from the relative tranquility of modern suburbia.

Even from an occupational perspective, the Ramapo men who’ve “taken / to railroading / out of sheer lust of adventure” strike a contrast with his own “doctor’s house,” established as it is in a career-minded profession, offering a redeeming service to the people in his community: a community, it should be noted, which he claims as geographically and socially his own, apart from the rural community of the Ramapo. While his attentiveness to separation marks him as socially aware of what we now understand as environmental injustice, he seems less interested in repairing the damage than in using the Ramapo’s role within their environment as material for a larger statement about the “degradation” to be found more universally in modern society.

But the problematic nature of this seeming blind spot does not go unnoticed by the voice of the poet. We can see this revealed through his use of collective pronouns in the poem. He opens discussing the “mountain folk” and, as noted, clearly feels the separation between himself and them, but by the end of the poem, we find him *attempting* to bring all of them together into one when he notes Elsie “expressing with broken / brain the truth about us” in lines 42-43. However, what appears at first a unity is in fact another technique of partitioning. Elsie, a Ramapo and therefore an outsider in his home, is teaching the “doctor’s house” something about themselves. Her lesson is less for herself than it is instruction for the Williamses. The poet comes much closer to that desired unity in his pronoun choice when describing the “earth under *our* feet” as an “excrement of some sky // and *we* degraded prisoners / destined / to hunger until we eat

filth.” In these final stanzas of the poem, the separation apparent from the opening lines begins to break down, as the universality of the despoiled state of modernity comes to affect *all* of those whole inhabit it.

The early “isolated” nature of the Ramapo serves another distinct function for the theme of the poem as a statement of American modernity. Both the Jackson Whites and the Appalachian “mountain folk from Kentucky” of line 3 live a very separate existence from the more mainstream communities that surround them, such as Williams’s own. This geographic and cultural isolation introduces problems beyond mere economy, including the inbreeding that can result from these remote communities intermarrying. Never made explicit, such concerns seem to inform certain moments in the poem, such as the “deaf-mutes,” “old names / and promiscuity,” “marriage...with a dash of Indian blood,” “disease,” and even Elsie’s own “voluptuous water / expressing with broken // brain the truth” about her more sophisticated, urban counterparts (7, 8-9, 28-30, 33, 41-43). Elsie is a Ramapo who has been “rescued by an / agent— / reared by the state” and sent out to work in the Williams’s “hard-pressed / house in the suburbs.” But the intermarriage prevalent in Ramapo communities has traveled with her, and it carries with it the burden of a tendency toward recessive genes and an increased vulnerability to genetic disorders and mutation that can result in higher rates of “deaf-mutes,” “disease,” and mental retardation, such as that suffered by the Williamses’ nursemaid.

However, even within the tragic tendency toward “voluptuous water,” there can be in that fluid element a prophetic quality, as she “express[es] with broken // brain the truth about us” (42-43). This speaks further to the spiritual connection between the Ramapos (such as Elsie) and the most basic natural resource of the earth—water.

Ecology, biology, and mythology seem to come together here. Like the oracle at Delphi (“what was it?” Williams asks earlier in *Spring and All*, “A poisonous gas from a rock’s cleft”), Elsie’s prophetic ability to “express[] truth” is elemental and of the earth, and her brain “broken” by water. She brings together a union (“marriage”) of language at the juncture between the human and the natural elements.<sup>104</sup>

James Breslin treats Elsie as another incarnation of “the presiding mythic figure of *Spring and All*,” namely Persephone. For Breslin, she “express[es] the truth about a culture in which aspirations are not fed by an organic relation to the physical environment.”<sup>105</sup> Such organic aspirations may once have served people like the Ramapos well, as they have a more direct relation to their environmental and ecological milieu. But years of isolation—the same kind of isolation that modernity has forced upon the Patersonian automatons, and the “us” of “To Elsie”—has brought even these “wild and cultured” people to a state of broken brains, disease, and murder.

The key problem of modernity, then, is isolation—from each other and from our own organic natures. This leads to the “degraded” state mentioned above, with the misperception that the “earth under our feet” is “an excrement of some sky,”

while the imagination strains  
after deer  
going by fields of goldenrod in  
  
the stifling heat of September (49-58)

Notably, “imagination,” the central conceit of *Spring and All*, makes an explicit appearance in connection with the natural world. In the book’s first and title poem,

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<sup>104</sup> Breslin. 185.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 69.

imagination added a patina of reality to the extant world, enhancing an environment perceptible to the senses and processing it through the mystically and poetically human improvement of imagination. However, the imagination is “straining” (that is, striving unsuccessfully) to achieve something like a more idyllic, bucolic, even pastoral vision of the modern world. It has the major players on hand—a deer in a peaceful enough field of goldenrod—but the conditions are no longer right. This is, in part, because of the hostility of the season; the earth’s cycles have their own effect even on the imagination. Where the earlier poem, “Spring and All,” offered up the natural renewal of a post-winter landscape coming to life, Williams here shows the challenges of harsher conditions—the “stifling heat of September,” when the earth’s (specifically, New Jersey’s) meteorology will no longer allow for a pastoral idyll. In essence, the figurative “heat” of the contemporary world “stifl[es]” the imagination’s usually transformative powers, leaving it merely “straining” and condemning us to remain “degraded prisoners.”

In terms of Williams’s ecology, it comes as little surprise that his all-important imagination “strains after” the biological and botanical. Deer and fields of goldenrod offer a respite from, and a stark contrast to, the isolated Modern human condition described in the poem. “Somehow / / it seems to destroy us,” the poet notes of humanity’s excrement-filled landscape, and “[i]t is only in isolate flecks that / something / is given off” (59-63). Those isolate flecks are the all-too-rare successes of the imagination, of which art is implicitly one. The word choice, “isolate,” further underlines the importance of the isolation-versus-communion problem persistent in the poem. At its most basic, ecology is about appreciating the extent to which different organisms are inextricably linked with one another. In other words, ecology is inherently anti-isolationist. Given

Williams's sense of imagination as both a natural force and the solution to the isolating problems of modernity, it's clear that "To Elsie" is implicitly informed by an ecological sensibility. This is not, as it was in "Spring and All," because the poem attempts to actively break down the divisions between humanity and its environment but, rather, because it acknowledges those barriers that modernity has put up and decries their existence. Taken collectively, the poems of *Spring and All* combine to reveal the underpinning in Williams's work of his larger eco-poetic project, which is to bring greater unity, through art and through the imagination, to the Modern world.

#### 5) Conclusion

As we'll see in the next chapter, Williams's success in attaining this unity is borne out in *Paterson*, which offers us an extended example of the forms and themes of *Spring and All*. If the latter shows us Williams experimenting with the integration of forms by abruptly alternating between prose and poetry, *Paterson* shows him mastering such integration on an even more ambitious scale, incorporating into the body of the poems not just his own poetic arguments but also diverse elements of nonfiction in the form of factual historical accounts, his own correspondence, and scientific data. Similarly, the eco-poetic themes present in *Spring and All* (including the use of the local, a treatment of imagination as a natural force, and a biocentric poetic perspective) find more nuanced development in *Paterson*. By centering *Paterson* within a locale mere minutes from his own home, and sustaining that focus over its five separate books, there is an implicit (and at times textually explicit, as seen in the selection quoted above) argument for the use of local materials as material for artistic creation. Also, as in *Spring and All*, *Paterson* finds

Williams acting out his (eco)poetics of the imagination. He uses the elements of fire, a plant's seed, and, mirroring Elsie's "broken brain" and its "voluptuous water," as both metaphorical vehicles for and object lessons of the imagination in natural contexts.

Examining these two works consecutively helps us better appreciate the extent to which ecopoetry was more than merely a sometime topic in select works but in fact a pervasive undercurrent throughout Williams's oeuvre.

#### IV. Across the Passaic in *Paterson*

##### 1) Introduction

Taken as a single work, *Paterson* marks a major departure in Williams's poetic career; it is a poem of epic length, written by an artist who had previously worked almost exclusively in the form of the short lyric. Though originally planned as four books, *Paterson* eventually comprised five volumes, published over the course of twelve years (from 1946 to 1958), with extant fragments of an unfinished sixth book. The poem's composition consumed Williams, on and off, from its beginnings in the early 1920s until his death in 1962. Its origins can even be traced back as far as his earliest days as a writer. Williams later referred to his 1917 poem "The Wanderer," which also takes the Passaic River as a central symbol, as a spiritual predecessor to *Paterson*.<sup>106</sup>

Just as "The Wanderer" was one of Williams's earliest and (up to that point) most experimental poems, *Paterson* is a culmination of Williams's lifelong work in poetics and form and similarly brings together many of the ecopoetic elements heretofore discussed. Like *Spring and All*, *Paterson* draws direct parallels between the processes of nature and those of poetic composition. Specifically, Williams continually revisits the idea of the "imagination" throughout the poem, using metaphors such as fire and radioactivity to elucidate how the poet remakes immediate objective reality into something finer. But, perhaps the most prominent ecopoetic qualities in the poem are: 1) Williams's rendering of his suburban New Jersey milieu as an isolated, closed ecological

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<sup>106</sup> Williams. *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, 73. *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet* is a collection of interviews Williams did with a Columbia University graduate student in the mid-1950s. Edith Heal spent more than five months visiting 9 Ridge Road, to discuss Williams's work with the poet and his wife, Flossie. The book is invaluable to students of Williams's poetry.

system or (to put it in the ecocritical parlance) bioregion, 2) his efforts to bring his ideas about the imagination as a natural force into full praxis, and 3) his revision of prose episodes from Paterson's history, used to highlight moments of human degradation of the natural world, a now-strikingly environmental poetic message that reveals Williams as ahead of his time. Through these lenses, we will find that Williams, in *Paterson*, is using nature as much more than backdrop or setting. Rather, his poetics are inextricably tied to his environment, and his sympathy with the landscape reveals him to be working in a surprisingly contemporary style of ecopoetry.

## 2) Paterson as (Biographical) Bioregion

After publishing the first four books of *Paterson*, Williams looked back on the poem's origins and recalled, "I had known always that I wanted to write a long poem, but I didn't know what I wanted to do until I got the idea of a man identified with a city."<sup>107</sup> The problem this created, of course, was to demand "What city? [...] The problem of the poetics I knew depended upon finding a specific city, one that I knew." Eliminating obvious choices such as nearby New York ("It couldn't be... anything as big as a metropolis") and his own home town of Rutherford ("Rutherford wasn't a city"), Williams was left with the next best thing to his own backyard—Paterson, New Jersey, a mere 10 miles from Rutherford. As an added benefit to its proximity, "It had, besides, a river—the Passaic... the river was a symbol handed to me. [...] This was *my* river... I had grown up on its banks, seen the filth that polluted it."<sup>108</sup> The sense of ownership that Williams felt toward the Passaic was born out of the connection one feels with one's

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<sup>107</sup> Williams. *I Wanted to Write a Poem*. 71-72.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* 72-73, emphasis mine.

immediate surroundings and, further, reflects his desire to elevate his “local” through universal themes. On the one hand, Williams is selecting Paterson and the Passaic because of his own knowledge of it, but at the same time he’s following through on the personal philosophical inclination he had toward examining the near-at-hand. As discussed in Chapter III, Williams made the deliberate choice not to leave the rural New Jersey countryside in which he had spent his life, so when it came time to select the setting for his epic poem, it seems fitting that he would feel the closest kinship to that place that was closest to him geographically. Interestingly, we find Williams returning to the same geographic and poetic place addressed in *Paterson*’s spiritual predecessor, “The Wanderer,” from nearly three decades earlier—the Passaic River, and the city of Paterson.

The early pages of *Paterson* incorporate this philosophical underpinning of Williams’s “local as universal” (discussed in Chapter III) when, in the preface, his opening goal is stated as being,

To make a start,  
out of particulars  
and make them general [...]  
– since we know nothing, pure  
and simple, beyond  
our own complexities”<sup>109</sup>

Here the “particulars” and “our own complexities” represent the elements of the immediate locale, made universal in the “general.” While this seems to hint at humanity’s occasional myopia (as we focus too closely on our own self-interests), it also argues that by looking closer at that which is in front of us, we can come to appreciate the

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<sup>109</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 3.

qualities of the local that are applicable universally. As George Zabriskie pointed out in his article, “The Geography of *Paterson*,” “I do not think that the importance of the locality and the geographical and historical references can be overemphasized if we are to feel the impact of Williams’s drive from the particular to the general.”<sup>110</sup> Zabriskie is right to highlight the over-arching nature of Williams’s specifics, as they appear in the poem. By focusing on the local landscape, *as well as* its history and its people, Williams is able to transcend place and time in his attempts to universalize *Paterson*. Just as, in ecology, naturalists tend to work within a given ecosystem, so does Williams in *Paterson/Paterson*, applying the lessons drawn from his own local ecosystem and trusting in their artistic applicability in more universal contexts.

The opening of the poem also introduces another ecological element Williams uses throughout *Paterson*: a personification of the poem’s setting, a literal “bringing to life” of the landscape itself. His attempt to do this is significant for the extent to which he treats the elements of his (and the poem’s) surroundings not as mere backdrop, but as an integral part of the work’s poetics. Personification at first blush appears to fall into the trap of the pathetic fallacy, anthropomorphically humanizing a static object. But, Williams’s ecological characterizing of the *Paterson* landscape doesn’t recognize the environment as a static object but as active subject. Neil Evernden says, in his reinforcement of John Dewey’s philosophical argument of the local, ecology is “a process, an interaction between the viewer and the viewed, and it is in that joint association that the aesthetic experience lies.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Zabriskie, George. “The Geography of *Paterson*.” *Perspective*, 6:4, Autumn, 1953. 201.

<sup>111</sup> Evernden, Neil. “Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy.” in *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. 97.

Rather than being the place in which the action of the poem happens, the environment (natural/rural, urban/cultural, and otherwise) is a clearly active player in the poem's narrative. In a fusion of the human and nature, *Paterson* shows its anticipation of modern ideas about ecological writing when Williams uses features of the immediate landscape (river/falls, mountain, and city) as unique characters in the poem. As previously discussed in the Introduction, this is the opposite of more passive "nature poetry" which uses landscape as a focal point for observation. Williams instead goes beyond observation and accepts nature as equal player in humanity's history in *Paterson* from the past into the present. The first words of Book 1, canto 1 are, in fact, a kind of naturalistic survey of the surroundings, combined with an introduction to the book's central personage:

Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls  
 its spent waters forming the outline of his back. He  
 lies on his right side, head near the thunder  
 of the waters filling his dreams! Eternally asleep,  
 his dreams walk about the city where he persists  
 incognito. Butterflies settle on his stone ear.<sup>112</sup>

Williams makes a fluid transition here from *Paterson* as city to *Paterson* as character. The "its" in line 2 initially seems to refer to the factual city mentioned in line one, but in a subtle manipulation of grammar, it actually possesses the "spent waters" that serve to set up the personal pronoun of "his" back. Within the first two lines of the book, Williams has introduced his poem's place and conflated it with the book's central figure. As the poem progresses, *Paterson* is simultaneously place and person—the city *Paterson*,

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<sup>112</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 6.

and the narrator Paterson (sometimes “Dr. P,” or simply “He”), a country doctor mirroring Williams’s own experience. Interestingly, it is not merely the experience of the place that Williams mines from his locale but his own subjective experience as a professional inhabitant of that place. In this, Williams fulfills Neil Evernden’s criteria of having a clear and acute “sense of place” or “a human phenomenon...that is described as aesthetic and which is, in effect, a ‘sense of place,’ a sense of knowing and of being a part of a particular place.”<sup>113</sup> Putting Paterson in his own shoes as a doctor enables the poet not just to write what he knows, but it offers him a uniquely intimate view into the minds of the people of the city Paterson, an intimacy only possible through the vulnerability that medicine affords. The local being made universal is, again, not just geographic but experiential.

But, lest the city be thought the only geographical character in the poem, Williams also gives his Paterson a companion:

And there, against him, stretches the low mountain.  
 The Park’s her head, carved, above the Falls, by the quiet  
 river; Colored crystals the secret of these rocks;  
 farms and ponds, laurel and the temperate wild cactus,  
 yellow flowered . . . facing him, his  
 arm supporting her, by the *Valley of the Rocks*, asleep.<sup>114</sup>

The mountain is feminized to match Paterson’s masculine nature, and she holds within her “the secret of these rocks,” crystals from out of Paterson’s geographical and geological past. The Valley of the Rocks mentioned in line 33 is the water gathered at

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<sup>113</sup> Evernden. 103.

<sup>114</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 8.

the base of the falls, the same “spent waters,” in fact, that form the “outline of his back” a few pages earlier.

Williams’s dual personifications of the landscape show his continual understanding of nature as an integral part of humanity’s environment in a symbiotic relationship with the city it surrounds. In Chapter III, I argue that Williams’s ecological sensibility acknowledges the interpenetrative status of humanity and nature. Williams goes one step further by giving elements of Paterson’s environment human qualities—describing their corporeality in physiologically human terms, giving them a “back,” a “head,” and a kind of consciousness. This very explicitly equalizes the role of Paterson/*Paterson*’s human elements with its natural ones, lending itself to the conclusion that while Williams’s poem is grounded in the human experience, it is not anthropocentric per se. Instead, by elevating nature (which is often marginalized as other) to the human plane, Williams reveals the biocentric sensibility that pervades his ecological poetry.

Interestingly, the introduction of Paterson’s low-mountain companion also includes a short survey of the flora of the region (“farms and ponds, laurel and the temperate wild cactus, / yellow flowered,” 31-32) which further highlights Williams’s intimate knowledge of the ecosystem and calls back to his stated goal of finding the universal in the “particulars.” This dedication to the “particulars” is among the things that set his ecological poetry apart from more generic nature writing. When Williams wants to write about a tree or a bush, he does not generalize about these features of the landscape. Instead, in a decidedly locally-centered move, he specifies by name what kind of tree, what color, and what species of flower is present in the landscape, or the poem.

In “To Elsie,” for example, it is no mere “bush” that hides the “pure products of America” as they join in coitus, but “under some hedge of *choke-cherry* / or *viburnum*” (lines 25-26, emphasis mine).<sup>115</sup> A similarly specific example is the “wildcarrot leaf” that begins to sprout through in “Spring and All” (line 21). In the first twenty pages of *Paterson* alone, the poet specifies “black sumac,” the aforementioned “laurel and the temperate wild cactus / yellow flowered,” “apple-blossoms,” “willow,” “blue flowered / pickerel-weed,” “juniper,” “sycamore,” “yellow bindweed,” and “daisy.”<sup>116</sup> As these examples suggest, Williams is not content to merely generalize about the flora and fauna of his setting; rather, he goes so far as to highlight its biodiversity with the interspersing of a precise and wide variety of plants, as perhaps only a native son of the area would be capable of doing. Williams underlines the effectiveness of such specificity-of-the-local and ties it into philosophical ideas about memory, when he quotes a letter from a real-life family friend, early in Book 5. He incorporates into the poem a fragment of a letter received in 1956 from Josephine Herbst, who writes:

A place is made of memories as well as the world around it. . . . Hepatica and bloodroot are now all over the place, and trees that were infants are now tall creatures filled this season with orioles, some rare warblers like the Myrtle and magnolia warbler and a wren has the best nest in the garage.<sup>117</sup>

Herbst seems to share Williams’s intimate knowledge of her local environment, and Williams uses her catalog to highlight how specificity in itself is a testament to the power

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<sup>115</sup> Tellingly, though in some ways unsurprising given the limitations of a single location’s biodiversity, “choke-cherry” makes an explicit appearance in Book 2 of *Paterson*, among a catalog of tree varieties “matted in the shallow soil” of the park on Garret Mountain (60).

<sup>116</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 7, 8, 9, 18, 19, 20, 22. He also includes comparably specific citations, though to a lesser extent, of the animal life around Paterson.

<sup>117</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 208.

of a “place,” and the “memory” of that place is tied directly to the natural features of the landscape. The lines immediately preceding this excerpt call for ““la réalité! la réalité! / la réa, la réa, la réalité!”” reinforcing (like “no ideas but in things!”) the vitality of immediate objective reality.<sup>118</sup> On the surface, this reflects Williams’s straightforward tendency toward imagism, but in the context of a discussion of his ecopoetics, that search for truth in the reality of his immediate experience takes on a new meaning. While largely understood as merely a poetic form/movement of his time, the very precepts of Imagism take on new meaning when viewed through an ecocritical lens. Especially interesting in that sense is Ezra Pound’s third principle for Imagism that calls for “Direct treatment of the ‘thing,’ whether subjective or objective.”<sup>119</sup> As it’s taught and understood in most scholastic settings, the “thing” in Imagist poetry is understood to be objective. Here, we see Williams, though, treating the “image” of his reality in a decidedly subjective, and thus more ecological, way.

In strikingly similar language to that of Herbst, Book 4 includes a prose passage taken from a letter to Williams by Allen Ginsberg (one of four in the book) that shows how strongly the locale of Paterson can be bound to a poet’s work:

This place [Paterson was Ginsberg’s hometown] is as I say my natural habitat by memory [...] I know you will be pleased to realize that at least one actual citizen of your community has inherited your experience in his struggle to love and know his own world-city.<sup>120</sup>

Ginsberg recognizes Williams’s dedication to the place of Paterson and reaches out as a comrade-in-arms in the struggle to make poetic use of immediate, local experience from

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 207.

<sup>119</sup> Pound, Ezra. *Poetry*. 1:6, March 1913.

<sup>120</sup> Williams. *Paterson*, 173.

one's "natural habitat." Both poets are joined in the effort to, as Williams says in the poetic lines just before the letter's excerpt, "Brighten / . . . the corner where you / are!" (172: 22-24).

Bringing this technique of shining a light on the local "corner" where one finds oneself into its contemporary context, seminal ecocritic Lawrence Buell has noted the extent to which Williams's use of Paterson as a location, as well as its evolutionary history, seem to call forward to a contemporary ecocritical practice we now know as bioregionalism. According to Greg Garrard, a "bioregion" is "an eco-political unit that respects the boundaries of pre-existing indigenous societies, as well as the natural boundaries and constituencies of mountain range and watershed, ecosystem and biome."<sup>121</sup> For Buell, Williams's bioregionalist tendencies manifest themselves, in part, in his ability to recognize humanity's "connectedness with person, animal, thing, and place across class and time."<sup>122</sup> As Buell argues, Williams, like contemporary ecopoets, shows a sensitivity to the past of his place, extending back beyond modernity and colonial industry, acknowledging the city's history as non-city:

*Paterson* imagines a place where both outer and inner landscapes have been in motion for more than 200 years. Williams has to a remarkable extent anticipated the bioregional premise that 'counter to modern appearances, even urban areas sprang into existence, and most often continue to depend on environmental circumstances that lie just below the level of our awareness.'<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Psychology Press, 2004. 118.

<sup>122</sup> Buell, Lawrence. *Writing for an Endangered World*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2001. 116.

<sup>123</sup> Buell. *Writing for an Endangered World*. 116. Buell is here quoting from Dan Flores's "Place: Thinking about Bioregional History" in *Bioregionalism*, ed. McGinnis, p.44.

According to Buell, Williams shows a uniquely sensitive appreciation of Paterson's role as a place, not just modern city, but an area that once was wilderness, a bioregion inhabited variously over two centuries by Native Americans, Dutch and English immigrants, and, now, dedicated Americans by birth. By way of example, Buell cites a passage from Book 3 that interweaves a Native American animal burial ritual performed by the Lanape Indians with a modern dispute between two townspeople over an unruly pet dog. The mingling of these two episodes shows, according to Buell, Williams transcending time through the connection of both to their history in the place that is now Paterson (as in "A Unison," discussed in Chapter II).

Buell's point about Williams's heightened awareness of Paterson's evolutionary development from its native past to its settlement by the Dutch and English to its growth into a self-contained industrial community into what Buell describes as a "depressed, polluted outback," marks the poem as self-aware bioregionalism, as well as an example of Williams's "experiment[s] in urban ecopoetics." These experiments successfully acknowledge, in Buell's words, "the mutuality of physical environment and human action."<sup>124</sup> We see this in the passages quoted above introducing Paterson and his unnamed companion, taking the natural as human, and vice versa, as well as in subsequent lines that treat Paterson's rushing water as his breath of life, in turn "animating" the people of the town:

[...] he breathes and the subtleties of his  
 machinations  
 drawing their substance from the noise of the pouring  
 river

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<sup>124</sup>Ibid. 117.

animate a thousand automatons. Who because they  
 neither know their sources nor the sills of their  
 disappointments walk outside their bodies aimlessly  
 for the most part,  
 locked and forgot in their desires – unroused<sup>125</sup>

While the “animation” of line 10 seems reversed by the “unroused” state of the people of Paterson, the reason is clear and ecological: they have forgotten their sources. Like the human counterparts of “The Trees” discussed in Chapter II and their “broken memory,” or the “degraded prisoners” of “To Elsie” mentioned in Chapter III, the townspeople have lost their ancient connection with the place in which they dwell, the landscape that surrounds them. The characters mentioned in these various poems (all human) send the clearly ecological message that in losing that connection, the inhabitants of the modern world have, by the definition of ecology, lost a part of themselves.

Williams declares himself throughout *Paterson* to be working in his own local bioregion of Rutherford/Paterson, New Jersey. In “The Trees” and “To Elsie,” he is especially qualified to undercut the lost connection with nature only because he stands in contradistinction from such a disconnect. He is consciously connected to his local surroundings, not just in the species of flora and fauna but also (as will be explored in the next section) in the shameful history of the local people’s interaction with that environment.

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<sup>125</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 6.

### 3) *Paterson's* Proto-Environmental Poetry

Williams is sometimes straightforward in showing moments in *Paterson's* history that seem to lead up to the loss of a connection between humanity and its dwelling place. The same moments are also remarkable for being among the most environmentally poetic in *Paterson*.<sup>126</sup> They appear in the prose sections Williams chose to highlight in Book 1. The functions of these prose interjections throughout the poem are many: they provide literal historical background of the Paterson/Passaic region; they allow the reader to 'ground' him/herself in a concrete "reality" more approachable and relatable than that of the more esoteric verse sections; and they slow the momentum of the reading eye, in some ways ensuring a more deliberate reading of both genres in the poem's entirety. The excerpted prose pieces take the form of direct narrative lifted from local histories: newspaper accounts altered and adapted by Williams to suit his needs, 'found poetry' in his own personal correspondence, geologic studies, and itemized inventories. The most environmentally relevant of these are those historical recollections that highlight the "wonders" of the Passaic valley's natural ecology. These wonders are sometimes mere natural anomalies in the local population—the local legend of a dwarf with a head as large as his body, or a seven-and-a-half foot sturgeon—but they also pointedly take the form of American economic exploitation of natural resources. These actions violate what contemporary philosopher Rolston Holmes III calls an "ecological ethic."

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<sup>126</sup> It may be useful here to recall that, as noted in this study's Introduction, I'm adopting Ann Fischer-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street's definition of "environmental poetry," meaning "poetry propelled by and directly engaged with active and politicized environmentalism," and which contrasts with the "ecological poetry" I have been heretofore discussing (xxviii). Both "environmental" and "ecological" poetry are, along with "nature poetry," subcategories of the broader field of ecopoetics.

Holmes's article, from a 1975 issue of *Ethics*, seeks to determine, "Is There an Ecological Ethic?"<sup>127</sup> Through technical discussions of ethical antecedents and "if" options, Holmes makes the "discovery of a moral ought inherent in recognition of the holistic characters of the ecosystem, issuing in an ethic that is primarily ecological."<sup>128</sup> He notes the objective ethical fact that "[a]s Living beings we must come to terms with the environment about us...promoting rather than disrupting those great cycles of nature."<sup>129</sup> Holmes wisely cites as a precedent Aldo Leopold's famous essay "The Land Ethic" in which Leopold's overarching thesis is that "[a] thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."<sup>130</sup> Though Leopold's article was published within Williams's lifetime, it did not attain its now-widespread popularity until the environmental movement took off later in the 1960s, after Williams's death. Nonetheless, we find in Williams's poetry, and specifically in moments of the prose selections included in *Paterson*, sympathy with the ideas of an ecological ethic. By bringing into his poem adapted "historical" accounts of these ethical violations, Williams in some ways predicts Holmes's awareness of the moral relationship humanity has with its ecological environs. As such, Williams reveals himself as supporting the modern political "environmentalist" perspective before there was such a word to describe it.

The clearest example of this sympathy is the account of the decimation of the Passaic mussel population in search of pearls in the first canto of Book I. Following the colorful and foreshadowing description of the companion "low mountain," "Pearls at her

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<sup>127</sup> Holmes, Rolston III. "Is There an Ethological Ethic?" *Ethics*. 85:2, Jan. 1975. 93-109.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* 96.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* 95.

<sup>130</sup> Aldo Leopold. "The Land Ethic." *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Oxford UP. 205.

ankles, her monstrous hair / spangled with apple-blossoms,” Williams interjects the following story:

In February 1857, David Hower, a poor shoemaker with a large family, out of work and money, collected a lot of mussels from Notch Brook near the City of Paterson. He found in eating them many hard substances. At first he threw them away but at last submitted some of them to a jeweler who gave him twenty-five to thirty dollars for the lot. Later he found others. One pearl of fine luster was sold to Tiffany for \$900 and later to the Empress Eugenie for \$2,000 to be known henceforth as the “Queen Pearl” the finest of its sort in the world today.<sup>131</sup>

This is only the first half of the story, but its main elements and its value to Williams’s poem are already clear. It is a twofold account of natural resource as saleable commodity and the human tendency to fail to recognize, and ultimately destroy, elements of natural beauty. Williams forecasts modern ideas about the economic exploitation of natural resources not just by merely highlighting the event but through his subjective manipulation of the historic sources’ account of it.

Tellingly, Hower’s joblessness and poverty is an interesting character aspect and one which is largely Williams’s exaggeration, as we’ll see in a moment. Hower’s social position also foreshadows the lower-class characters to which we will see Williams return in all five books: the patrons of the public park and the Klaus Ehrens with his riches-to-rags story in Book 2; the “beautiful thing” who stands out from her dismal environment to serve as the poet’s muse in Book 3; the “Jackson white” Phyllis employed by her cultural superior “Corydon” in Book 4; and even the milieu in which we find Henri Toulouse-Lautrec in Book 5. Hower is the first of these characters, and like Ehrens or

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<sup>131</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 9.

Beautiful Thing, he is poor and out of work. Like Phyllis, he is culturally illiterate, to the extent that he does not even recognize a valuable jewel when he bit into it, and “at first, threw them away.”<sup>132</sup> As a member of the laboring class, he’s more interested in feeding his family with a batch of mussels purloined from a nearby creek than in “pretty stones.” But the pearl business seems to pay better than shoemaking and garners him maximum economic reward for minimum effort. As a result of the large returns the pearl offers, word soon spreads, as does Williams’s narrative:

News of this sale created such excitement that search for the pearls was started throughout the country. The Unios (mussels) at Notch Brook and elsewhere were gathered by the millions and destroyed often with little or no result. A large round pearl, weighing 400 grains which would have been the finest pearl of modern times, was ruined by boiling open the shell.<sup>133</sup>

Editor Christopher MacGowan indicates in the annotation to this section of *Paterson* that the story’s details were drawn from an article in the November 1956 *Bulletin of the Passaic County Historical Society*. The article, entitled “The ‘Pearl Craze’ in Passaic County,” has some interesting things to tell us about what Williams chose to include and what to leave out. For example, as MacGowan notes, the tale of David Hower, the “poor shoemaker,” is conflated with that of Jacob and John Quackenbush. The Quackenbush brothers are characterized in the *Bulletin* article as casual “pearl hunters,” inspired as children by their father’s stories of “pretty stones” found in “the lowly mussel.”<sup>134</sup> In April 1857, Jacob happened upon the pearl described in *Paterson* as the “Queen Pearl,”

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>134</sup> “The ‘Pearl Craze’ in Passaic County,” *Bulletin of the Passaic County Historical Society*. November 1956. 38.

valued first at \$900, then resold for \$2,000. As both the poem indicates and its source explains, the discovery of the Queen Pearl starts “many others...in the quest for the hidden gems. At one time, more than 300 people were seen about Notch Brook all hunting for pearls.” The hunts eventually extend beyond Notch Brook to include “others in the county as well as those [brooks] in Bergen county,” with a handful of waterways named.<sup>135</sup> Of course, the drastic over-farming (unorganized though it may have been) of the local mussel population has a predictable result: “Within a short space of years, Passaic county and its entire surrounding area had been entirely divested of mussels—thus eliminating for all time the pearl industry. It was great fun while it lasted and many people were handsomely rewarded.”<sup>136</sup>

It’s significant that a story of natural discovery which had its origins in a pair of pearl-hunting hobbyists is transposed in the final poem/text to that of a “poor shoemaker with a large family, out of work and money.”<sup>137</sup> In fact, the *Bulletin* notes that the story is either of Daniel Howell, a carpenter, or of David Howe, a “poor shoemaker.” Williams not only chose the latter, but also *embellished* his poem’s faux-factual tale to include a “large family” and a plight of unemployment and destitution, which is absent from the *Bulletin* account. The source material paints Hower as the foolish Paterson man who destroyed a near-priceless 400-grain pearl by boiling it in his dinner, as opposed to Williams making him the unprosperous but lucky protagonist, a lottery-winner who through his enthusiasm for his newfound wealth accidentally instigated the destruction of a local mollusk species. This is appropriate given that one of Williams’s larger projects in providing accounts of ecological missteps from Paterson’s past is to show that they are

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 39.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. 44.

<sup>137</sup> Willams. *Paterson*. 9.

repeatedly driven by economic concerns. They also underline some of the class consciousness (in terms of both culture and wealth) that runs throughout the poem—one man’s discovery that pearls from the backwater brooks of New Jersey earn disproportionately large sums across the Hudson in New York City inspires the ruin of a formerly abundant local species in the course of just a few years.

For neither the first time in our history nor the last time in the poem, the American desire for prosperity and property brings a drastically negative effect upon the natural world. Williams’s more general argument against particularly exploitative capitalism is borne out in other thematic moments, such as the second Book’s evolution of Hamilton’s grand plans for Paterson as the prototype of the American industrial city, or the critical thread running throughout Book IV condemning the inception and growth of the Federal Reserve system. In these latter cases, Williams depicts economic exploitation by the upper classes of the lower income Patersonian and American people; in the cases discussed here, he suggests that exploitation from above can sometimes motivate the lower classes to exploit the only resource over which they have control, their natural environment.

Another similar example of this occurs in canto iii of the same Book I, when Williams recounts the draining of a nearby lake. Underlining that the decimation of the mussel population was no mere fluke – that, indeed, history shows case after case of humanity coming into direct, violent (and frequently financially-motivated) conflict with nature – Williams adapts a story entitled “Draining the Lake at Lakeview,” which appeared in an August 1936 issue of *The Prospector*, a local Paterson paper. To summarize, by nightfall on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August, a contracted agency opened the dam that

maintained the lake and drained it, gradually revealing a teeming (and, to the townspeople, surprisingly large) population of still-wriggling fish and eels. That night, and through the next day into the following evening, a scene of pandemonium ensued as a crowd of “hoodlums” (as Williams ironically calls them) took the opportunity to raid the drained lakebed, clubbing the animals into submission, some gathering them for their families, others selling them to onlookers.

Taken on its own, it is possible to consider that Williams included the story as merely a factual account of Paterson’s history, a colorful tale that provides some insight into the character of the period and its people. What ties this story to the account of the Queen Pearl, however, and reveals the extent to which Williams seems to be manipulating his source material to prove a larger, environmental point? Most striking is the difference in tone and verbiage between the original news account and the version that appears in the poem. It’s important to note that in the case of both the Lakeview and the Pearl inclusions, the textual appearance of their printed context within the poem, and the visual contrast from the poetry that surrounds it, is such that the reader is led to believe that the news stories are being presented undoctored (so to speak) from their original sources. As a brief examination will show, this is not the case.

Fundamentally, the story as it’s told in *The Prospector* has a more jovially informative “boys-will-be-boys” tone, whereas Williams’s telling is considerably darker and gives a more sensory story with a stronger impression of the single-mindedness of the men and the frenzy of the scene itself. *The Prospector* calls the scene “exciting” and provides the humorous scene of “[o]ne man [who] passed the eight o’clock train from Paterson on his way up with a snapping turtle in one hand, three great eels in another and

his boys with all they could carry.”<sup>138</sup> Williams excludes this detail, choosing instead to focus on “[a] man going to the depot with a peach basket [who] gave the basket to a boy and he filled it in five minutes[...] and he charged the modest sum of .25 cents for the basket.”<sup>139</sup> This throws a somewhat morbid pall over the proceedings, or at least over its participants, who seem not to be there for their own enjoyment but instead to gain from the event whatever economic recompense they can. The Lakeview account reveals this monetary exploitation of nature at the hands of humanity, while simultaneously calling attention to the destructive force of human “progress” in the destruction of an entire ecosystem with the lake’s draining.

The newspaper report later calls the scene a “funny circumstance,” though there’s little humor in the “hoodlums and men”<sup>140</sup> Williams describes “hard at work [who] had sticks with which they struck the big eels and benumbed them as they glided along the top of the mud in shoal water.”<sup>141</sup> Gone is the “great amusement to those on the shore” in the news story that describes men “tumbling down upon” one another in their race to catch the fish. Williams (in a move again indicative of his local awareness and specificity) catalogs the “catfish,” “suckers and pike,” and “three black bass” caught by a silk weaver. The account in the prose excerpt in *Paterson* also closes on the dark note that, “[n]ight did not put an end to the scene. All night long with lights on shore and lanterns over the mud, the work went on.”<sup>142</sup> He chooses, again, to omit the final lines of *The Prospector*’s story, which ends by remarking upon the “delight” of the crowd.<sup>143</sup> As

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<sup>138</sup> “Draining the Lake at Lakeview.” *The Prospector*. August 1936. 4.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* 34.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

<sup>141</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 34-35.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.* 35.

<sup>143</sup> “Draining the Lake at Lakeview.” 5.

with the account of the Queen Pearl, Williams edits and filters the original account of the lake draining to give it a darker tone, indicating that he understood to a greater extent the grisly nature of this interaction between humanity and its ecosystemic surroundings.

Such changes speak to Williams's environmental poetic sensibility, his sympathy with the idea of a larger "ecological ethic," and his ability to see the scenes for what they are: dark chapters in Paterson's natural and socio-cultural history – at once exploitative and environmentally devastating to a plethora of marine life. More than mere poetics, this shows Williams politically engaged in revealing what happens when the human element of an ecosystem finds something to be (financially) gained from exploiting a natural resource. His edits further an idea of nature-vis-a-vis-economy and calls attention to the human annihilation of another (albeit minor) ecosystem.

The pearl and lake draining accounts are but two of a number of occasions in *Paterson's* Book I that reveal Williams as ahead of his time in his sensitivity to environmental degradation. Some of these episodes have the benefit of specifically addressing the caustic effects of industrialization on the waters of the Passaic and elsewhere. As Williams recalled in *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, "This was my river and I was going to use it. I had grown up on its banks, *seen the filth that polluted it*, even dead horses."<sup>144</sup> The direct effects of pollution (which would not even become a buzzword or public topic of discussion for nearly a decade) appear in at least two explicit moments in the poem. One such moment appears during a brief passage that describes (according to MacGowan's endnote) Williams's first trip by air, to Haiti. In it, *Paterson's* narrator describes

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<sup>144</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 72. The horse he mentions even makes a brief appearance at the end of Book I, when the townspeople throw it "Into the sewer" and the poet ponders, "What birth does this foretell?" (37).

the land-locked  
 bay back of Port au Prince, blue vitriol  
 streaked with paler stream, shabby as loose  
 hair, badly dyed – like chemical waste  
 mixed in eating out the shore.<sup>145</sup>

“Chemical waste” and its polluting effects upon landscape, however, are not limited to distant countries. Williams makes a similar discovery in his own local(e), on the Passaic itself, with “[h]alf the river red, half steaming purple / from the factory vents, spewed out hot, / swirling, bubbling. The dead bank, / shining mud.”<sup>146</sup> In both cases, manufacturing appears at fault for the chemical pollution of local waterways. Since the centerpiece of the poem is a river that powers such industrial operations, it is important that Williams brings these into clear focus so that his message about the negative impact of humanity on nature, specifically the river powering Paterson/*Paterson*, reveals the pollution of its (the poem’s) source.

The pollution is a direct result of the same industry that made the town as prosperous as it was—silk. Alexander Hamilton originally harnessed the force of the Great Falls under the auspice of the Society for Useful Manufacturing (or S.U.M.), whose initials still adorn gates and steel fences around the falls. The electricity generated by S.U.M. was eventually used to power facilities such as (starting in 1853) the Colt gun factory and many others. But the high pH levels of the Passaic River were also discovered to be ideal for dyeing delicate silk, to such an extent that by the 1880s Paterson was producing nearly half the silk manufactured in the US and had earned a

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid. 36.

nationwide reputation as “Silk City.” As in the cases of the mussel population at Notch Brook and the eels and fish at Lakeview, humanity is found ruining some aspect of its natural wealth in favor of a wealth of a more cultural—that is, financial—variety. Pointedly, writing as early as 1925 in *In the American Grain*, Williams already characterizes Hamilton’s S.U.M. as an environmentally unsound enterprise, remarking, “he organized a company to hold the land [in Paterson], with dams and sluices, the origin today of the vilest swillhole in Christendom, the Passaic River.”<sup>147</sup> Clearly, from his earliest days, Williams was sensitive to the pollution of the Passaic as an environmental tragedy on a par with the pearl and lake episodes he chose to include in *Paterson*.

This prescient awareness of the detriment that humanity wreaks upon its natural environment, which is found in his manipulation of these historical events in *Paterson*, marks Williams as clearly, ecologically speaking, ahead of his time. Contemporary ecocritical readings of poetry (such as those of the work of Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, and Mary Oliver) frequently seek to connect the ecopoet’s work to a direct political engagement with environmentalism. In Williams’s case, his proto-environmentalism reveals the extent to which he was both intellectually and emotionally connected with his local landscape.<sup>148</sup> For Williams, it’s less a matter of a causal relationship between his burgeoning proto-environmentalism and the environmental and ecological poetics that undergird his work; instead, it’s more a case of his intimate relationship to the immediate, natural milieu serving as a source for both. The reason that both are so prominent stems in part from the strength of, and long biographical history of, that relationship. As a child

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<sup>147</sup> Williams, Williams Carlos. *In the American Grain*. New York: New Directions, 1956. 136.

<sup>148</sup> Williams’s tendency to practice political activism through his poetry has a clear precedent. Some of the clearest examples of this include his poem, “Impromptu: The Suckers” on the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, and his musings upon socialist idea(l)s in “Choral: The Pink Church” and “The Yachts.”

growing up in Kipp's woods, Williams dreamt of one day becoming a forester (mentioned in the Introduction to *Paterson*) and, as an adult, he channeled this calling, in part, into a poetics that frequently took as its subject the flowers and trees of his youth. What began in his youth as an intimate closeness with the natural world became in his maturity an artistic relationship, enmeshing his art with their natural subjects. As we'll see in the next section, Williams's ability to overlay objective reality (in many cases, nature) with some new insight (as he has here in his proto-environmentalism) stems from one source, a source to which he refers again and again over the course of his career, the imagination.

#### 4) The Seed of Imagination

In Chapter III, I argued that *Spring and All*, written in the early 1920s, was saturated not only with naturalistic imagery and an eco-centric poetic perspective but that the relationship between art and objective reality was, according to Williams, fueled by an intersection of the two: the imagination. As noted there, in the prose sections of *Spring and All*, Williams posits the imagination as “an actual force comparable to electricity or steam, [which] is not a plaything but a power that has been used from the first to raise the reader to a new level of understanding.”<sup>149</sup> *Paterson* frequently finds us once again in the realm of the imagination, described in Book 1 as moments of “wonder” and in Book 3 as instances of “discovery.” What is remarkable about the imagination's role in the epic poem, however, is that *Paterson* gives poetic praxis to Williams's theory of the “natural imagination.” No longer merely implied, the imagination's role in the world, and in the poetics of the poem, are made explicit; and its successes and failures in

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<sup>149</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 1*.120.

the face of the modern world reveal Williams working toward a deeper understanding of the relationship between the imagination and nature, marking his continued and more frequently successful engagement with ecological poetry.

In Book III of *Paterson*, entitled “The Library,” Williams introduces a series of meteorological disasters that act as centerpieces for his musings on the nature of the artist’s imagination within the microcosmic environment of the city Paterson. All of them are based, as befits Williams’s extensive historical research in preparing *Paterson*, on the factual compost from which Williams grows his poetic materials. Nature’s ability to overpower humanity was brought into stark reality when Williams was 14, with a “devastating fire” in 1902 that “consumed much of Paterson” and destroyed the city’s Danforth Public Library. The fire was followed a month later by a tremendous flooding of the Passaic River, and later in the year by a “freak tornado,” all in the Paterson/Rutherford area.<sup>150</sup> In that book, Williams uses these natural disasters as background to the poem’s central character, Dr. Paterson’s, retreat to the city library. According to Benjamin Sankey’s *A Companion to Paterson*, “Paterson goes to the Library and reads. . . . about the past of his region, hoping that in the past he can discover terms for understanding his own world.”<sup>151</sup> For Williams the poet, these “terms” also take the form of attempting to negotiate the role of the imagination in his life and work.

Not surprisingly, given Williams’s ecological formulations in previous works such as *Spring and All*, the imagination and nature intersect at multiple turns. For him, there is no place for poetic invention except within the objective reality of the Earth as humanity observes and interprets it:

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<sup>150</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. note on 97.

<sup>151</sup> Sankey, Benjamin. *A Companion to William Carlos Williams’s Paterson*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971. 116.

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 .<sup>152</sup>

Williams here figures natural reality as the regulator of poetry, and poetry as reality's reflection. But poetry is also, as he notes a few pages later, a *performance* of that reality, a performance which the soul of humanity seeks: "What language could allay our thirsts, / what winds lift us, what floods bear us / past defeats / but song but deathless song?"<sup>153</sup> The "winds" and "floods" invoked here, of course, call forward to the tragedy of the flooding of the Passaic, and to the winds which carried the 1902 fire through the city.<sup>154</sup>

### *Fire*

Williams uses this analog between fire and imagination a number of times in Book III, most notably during his discussion of a bottle deformed by its interaction with flame. The bottle represents objective reality (or, ecopoetically, the natural world) and the fire: the poet's imagination. The result in both cases is a new, improved version of the old:

An old bottle, mauled by fire  
 gets a new glaze, the glass warped  
 to a new distinction, reclaiming the

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<sup>152</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 100.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* 108.

<sup>154</sup> MacGowan cites in his note on the historical background a contemporary account of the fire and the role of these "winds." Quoting from William Nelson and Charles Shriner's 1920 three-volume *History of Paterson and Its Environs*, he records "'there was a strong gale blowing [during the fire]...[which] acted like a bellows'" and both increased the size and determined the direction of the flames. (n. 97, 280).

undefined.<sup>155</sup>

...

Beat you

at your own game, Fire. Outlast you:

Poet Beats Fire at Its Own Game! The bottle!

the bottle! the bottle! the bottle! I

give you the bottle! What's burning

now, Fire?<sup>156</sup>

Here, the poet "Outlasts" fire's destructive force through the longevity of the poem, the aforementioned "deathless song." The poet gives us the bottle as an example of the imagination (and fire's) positive effects. Just a few stanzas previously, he had noted his ability to recast fire in this new, positive light, "calling it good. Calling the fire good. / So be it. The beauty of fire-blasted sand / that was glass, that was a bottle: unbottled. / Unabashed. So be it."<sup>157</sup>

Williams further plays with the ecopoetic qualities of his metaphor of a bottle changed by flame. The bottle is, after all, a human manipulation of the naturally occurring element of stone. The melting of stone (in the form of sand) creates the unnatural, or cultural, object of glass. That glass can then be formed into bottles, which, though another flame may once again try to deform it, can be reshaped, but not reformed (that is, returned to sand/stone), in fire. Hence, in the "Poet Beating Fire at Its Own Game," not only does he show fire's failure to undo the work of humanity in remaking stone into glass, he's also circumvented fire's assumed "goal" of destruction by enshrining it the

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<sup>155</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 118.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.* 119.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.* 118.

“deathless song” of poetry. On the one hand, the writer’s imagination is analogous to the natural phenomenon of fire in that both take previously extant objects and rework them (sometimes) into something better, as in the case of the bottle. At the same time, though, the imagination can actually transcend the fire it so closely mirrors, by “Beating” it “at Its Own Game,” as Williams does in Book III.

As one of several interpretations, the bottle mentioned above represents, in this section, language. It is a human construct—a human interpretation of the natural world, just as language is the cultural tool humans have for interpreting their world. But when that natural world, filtered and formed through language, meets the poet’s imagination (fire), it gets a “new glaze” and is “warped” to a “new distinction”; language is the poet’s tool for (re)creating something better from the natural materials at hand. In this sense, it is simultaneously cultural and ecological, both a human creation and a reflection of how humanity expresses its role within the larger ecology of the world. The imagination is, then, at once a part of nature and an active force in (re)shaping it in the same way that, for example, brush fires are an inherent part of nature’s cycles, both destroying the plants and organisms nature has put in place and at the same time clearing the field and plains for (cyclically necessary) new life. The imagination—by Williams’s thinking, an inherent part of nature, acted out through humanity’s creativity—can reshape the landscape of the objective world, putting its powerful force to the selfsame renewal of that world.

It should also be noted that *Paterson* is not the only case of Williams’s use of a glass bottle for ecologically poetic ends. In his oft-anthologized 1938 short lyric “Between Walls,” Williams offers the reader a wonderful imagistic moment in “the back

wings / of the //hospital where / nothing // will grow.” Here lie “cinders / in which shine / the broken // pieces of a green / bottle.”<sup>158</sup> While fire is absent here, its analog (imagination) is very much present and has reset the seemingly destroyed pieces of a green bottle as a kind of replacement grass, a faux nature. Though “nothing // will grow” here, the poet’s imagination has taken hold of the notion that glass is itself a kind of natural element (among the more cultural ground covering of cinder). “Between Walls” seems to invoke a modernist world in which all is manufactured, but given that humanity is as much a part of nature as stone, sand, or grass, the spark of imagination recognizes the natural origins of the (notably *green*) glass. The poem exists to give language (the glass) a new glaze. The scene of “Between Walls” (a broken bottle behind a hospital) might have been observed by anyone. But, it is the imagination of Williams as a poet who is able to raise that material to a “new distinction” and produce something better, namely, a poem which brings figurative, artistic unity to the otherwise fractured modern world.

### *Seed*

While Book 3 finds the spark of imagination in the simultaneously creative and destructive element of fire, it’s far from the only iteration of the imagination in the poem. In the poem’s earliest pages, Williams has planted the sign of the imagination in one of the most basic of nature’s units, the humble seed. In the poetic preface to Book I, during a discussion of Paterson’s Great Falls (“rolling up out of chaos”), Williams introduces a certain “knowledge” that he feels is lost in the “chaos” of the modern era:

[...] In ignorance

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<sup>158</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 1*. 453.

a certain knowledge and knowledge,  
undispersed, its own undoing.

(The multiple seed  
packed tight with detail, soured,  
is lost in the flux and the mind,  
distracted, floats off in the same  
scum)<sup>159</sup>

The seed is packed tight in a natural sense with the potential for the life of a plant or tree but in an artistic sense with the “knowledge” of the world that can only be unpacked if it’s “[ ]dispersed” by the artist through the imagination. Echoing the opening lines of the poem (“But how will you find beauty when it is locked in the mind past all remonstrance?”), the seed is also a kind of a mind, “lock”ing away the secret to “beauty,” “souring” that “certain knowledge,” floating off in “the same / scum” at the bottom of the falls, where the water collects before continuing the river’s voyage.

Yet therein, it seems, lies the solution. A few lines later, we find Williams’s persona attempting to resolve this difficulty before finishing out the poetic preface:

and the craft  
subverted by thought, rolling up, let  
him beware lest he turn to no more than  
the writing of stale poems . . .<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 4.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

This admonition to himself as a writer calls upon him to not “subvert” the positive effects of the imagination through too much intellect or “thought”; the imagination is natural and instinctual, and to overthink artistic inspiration and expression lends itself to the dangerous practice of “the writing of stale poems.”

### *Water*

One of the remarkable elements of *Paterson*'s treatment of the imagination is this continual tension between instinct and thought, between natural forces and the human elements that subvert them. For this reason, Williams reveals that while the imagination is present, it is not always successfully discovered or controlled; it is not always made to work for the benefit (in this case artistic/intellectual) of humanity. The analog that the imagination took in Book 3 was fire, but some of the most interesting uses of imagination in *Paterson* are when it takes the form of the most obvious natural element—and fire's natural enemy—water. It is water, of course, that makes up and sustains a river; it is what the poet hears crashing over the Falls; it is the natural element whose power is harnessed by the S.U.M.; and it is an elemental symbol of life and inspiration as old as poetry itself. Just as the other natural forces (steam and electricity) to which Williams compares water in *Spring and All* need to be harnessed by humanity and subjected to its will, the imagination is similarly dependent upon the efforts of the artist to tap into its power—“beat[ing] the fire at its own game.” In Book 3, Williams helpfully offers us a nearly literal analogy to the need of the artist to find, access, and utilize this source: the imagination.

In the section of Book 3, canto 3, which describes the terribly destructive flood of 1903, Williams inserts into the poetry a selection of unattributed quotes from his correspondence with Ezra Pound that make reference to books and what is to be found in them. In a book entitled “The Library,” this seems only fitting, but then this discussion is abruptly interrupted by a full-page excerpt from a geological survey performed in Paterson in 1879-1880. Adapted by Williams from William Nelson’s 1901 *History of Paterson*, the entry is titled “Substratum,” and it details specimens of minerals discovered at increasing depths near “Passaic Rolling Mill, Paterson” in an apparent search for an “Artesian Well.” Discovering mostly “[r]ed sandstone” of varying grades, and at varying depths up to “2,020 feet,” the survey apparently ended with the “[s]haly sandstone” found at 2,100 feet. The excerpt ends with unfortunate news: “At this depth the attempt to bore through the red sandstone was abandoned, the water being altogether unfit for ordinary use.”<sup>161</sup> Williams’s decision to “extract” this survey in the midst of his poetic adventure through Paterson’s destructive past reveals his narrator’s frustration at the lack of water—the lack of the source of imagination “suitable for ordinary use”—in the locale. But hope “springs” eternal, as Williams mentions in Book 4 when he very briefly returns to the topic to note, “Just because they ain’t no water fit to drink in that spot (or / you ain’t found none) don’t mean there ain’t no fresh water to / had NOWHERE . . .”<sup>162</sup> Which is to say that the search for potable imagination must continue elsewhere.

The necessity of finding the water of “imagination” (or, as Book 2 calls it, “invention”) is made clear by moments such as this in Book 2, canto 1:

without invention

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<sup>161</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 139.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.* 182.

nothing lies under the witch-hazel  
 bush, the alder does not grow from among  
 the hummocks margining the all  
 but spent channel of the old swale”<sup>163</sup>

Growth is impossible without a source of life, just as poetry is impossible without invention and imagination. Later in the same book, the importance of invention as a particularly human enterprise is made clear:

And She –

Stones invent nothing, only a man invents.<sup>164</sup>

What answer the waterfall? filling  
 the basin by the snag-toothed stones?

And He –

Clearly, it is the new, uninterpreted, that  
 remoulds the old, pouring down .

And She –

It has not been enacted in our day!<sup>165</sup>

Here the female speaker (the low mountain, upon which the action of Book 2, “Sunday in the Park,” takes place) makes an interesting argument, namely, that the elemental source (water) is no “answer” and that only humanity is capable of “invention,” or the use of nature’s imagination. Paterson replies by making a case for the intrinsic value of the river’s cyclical, renewing nature, which “remoulds the old” into something new. This

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid. 50.

<sup>164</sup> This contradistinction echoes a similar sentiment earlier in the same book: “The stone lives. The flesh dies.” (49).

<sup>165</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 82.

figuration of water as eternally renewing, forever continuing, echoes Paterson's introduction as a narrative figure for the poem, in its earliest pages. There, the "jostled" waters of the Falls are also Paterson's thoughts—they "interlace, repel and cut under, / rise rock-thwarted and turn aside / but forever strain forward."<sup>166</sup> Though rock-thwarted, it's vital to realize that the waters eternally "*strain forward*," and Paterson's thoughts strain with them.<sup>167</sup>

The female mountain notes the water similarly "filling / the basin by the snag-toothed stones," ever thwarting the rocks, which nonetheless "remould the old." The mountain also states something that ties into one of Williams's continual Modernist arguments, that of the tenuous state of the imagination in the modern era. According to her, the renewal of invention "has not been enacted in our day." Even she, however, believes in the hope of renewal. A few pages later she implores Paterson: "Invent (if you can) discover or / nothing is clear."<sup>168</sup> For Williams, lack of clarity is the status quo in the modern age, but the imagination is still there to "invent" and "discover" the world anew, to *renew* the past (as Williams does continually in his prose pieces in *Paterson*). The latter conversation ends, appropriately, with the thundering sound of the Falls accompanying Paterson's departure from the Library in the final pages of Book 3: "He fled pursued by the roar."<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>167</sup> The diction calls to mind the moment in "To Elsie" where "*the imagination strains / after deer / going by fields of goldenrod*" (55-57). In both cases, imagination and nature are inextricably interwoven.

<sup>168</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 85.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. 85.

## 5) Conclusion

A sense of closure, for the character Paterson's journey, for Williams's ideas about the imagination vis-à-vis nature, and indeed for the original poem itself, can be found in a markedly self-conscious, almost meta-artistic moment in Book 4: *The Run to the Sea*.<sup>170</sup> Much of that book's action takes place in The Cloisters, an architecturally monastery-like compound in New York City that houses hundreds of medieval works from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Among those works hang the seven tapestries that make up the Flemish series "The Hunt of the Unicorn." Williams spends parts of Chapter V in reflection upon the scenes depicted as they work within his larger argument of the imagination, noting, "*So through art alone, male and female, a field of / flowers, a tapestry, spring flowers unequalled /in loveliness*" are rendered in fabric through threads dyed, notably, with colors from three plants native to Europe. Recalling his statements in *Spring and All* about the imagination's ability to improve upon natural reality, Williams argues,

*We shall not get to the bottom:*

*death is a hole*

*in which we are all buried*

*Gentile and Jew*

*The flower dies down*

*and rots away .*

*But there is a hole*

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<sup>170</sup> Published in 1951, Book 4 was originally intended by Williams as the conclusion of the *Paterson* cycle. Only years later did he decide that there could be no true end to the poem as long as he was alive, and Book 5 was subsequently published in 1958, with fragments of a sixth book found to be underway at the time of his death in 1962.

*in the bottom of the bag.*

*It is the imagination*

*which cannot be fathomed*

*It is through this hole*

*we escape . . .*

and later: “*Through this hole / At the bottom of the cavern / Of death, the imagination escapes intact.*”<sup>171</sup> Here we come upon the near-conclusion of Williams’s goals for the imagination—it is ultimately an escape from death.

Nodding to the universality of the local, it is only just across the Hudson River from New Jersey, in New York City, that Williams finds in the ancient tapestries brought over from Europe a source for his meditations upon the imagination. Also of note is the content of the art, which speaks to a moment of humanity’s attempts to control and subvert nature (in the form of the unicorn), as in the final tapestry in the series, “The Unicorn is in Captivity and No Longer Dead.” The unicorn, which had previously been killed, has been mystically brought back to life but remains literally fenced in, under the control of its captors and killers. The unicorn’s death and resurrection fits well with *Paterson*’s continual insistence upon the cyclicity of nature, such as the river’s unending renewal of itself through meteorological means and Williams’s invocation of the earth’s four seasons; and in Book 4, the “flower” which “dies down / and rots away” rises again. That the unicorn remains captive, despite this self-renewal, may nod toward Williams’s appreciation for the extent to which nature is, in the modern context, inevitably dominated by human influence.

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<sup>171</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 209-210.

Even in the face of humanity's destruction of nature (in the Great Pearl and Draining of Lakeview accounts, for example, as well as in the slaying of the unicorn), it is art (both poetry and tapestry) fueled by the imagination that will sustain us, that offers us an "escape" from death. These lines bring together the ecopoetic qualities this chapter puts forth. Williams's sense of the local as material for the universal, his claiming of his own bioregion, and his explicit ideas about the natural force of the imagination renewing nature to a greater, brighter life in art all identify him as a poet clearly engaged in the act of not just describing nature, or offering it as a metaphorical vehicle for artistic ideas, but instead as the animating idea of the poetry itself. He argues in Book 4 and throughout *Paterson* (as we've seen) that even in the face of our collective human disconnect from the natural world, the imagination (itself a force of nature, animated in art) can be a bridge by which we are able to re-establish this connection. Ultimately, the evidence of such a reconnection can be clearly seen in the very art he uses to make his argument.

## V. Some Versions of Modernist Eco-poetics

### 1) Introduction

In order to better understand the scope of Williams's eco-poetics within his own time, it behooves us to examine his poetry within the context of his contemporaries. Previous books and studies have observed the poetry of writers in the modern era working in the mode of nature, including Frost, Stevens, Moore, Bishop, and others. Not even these poets, however, have written as extensively and deliberately in the ecological form as Williams. Further, these earlier critical studies, while focused on work more fittingly described as nature poetry, have failed to claim that work as specifically eco-poetic, as I do here with Williams. In previous chapters, I have focused upon some qualities that help claim Williams as an eco-poet, such as a deliberate focus upon the "local" and the use of an biocentric (as opposed to anthropocentric) perspective. In this chapter, I will use these criteria to reflect upon how the work of two poets writing contemporaneously with Williams, namely Wallace Stevens and Lorine Niedecker, can help bring more pointed places for comparison, contrast, and qualification of Williams's ecological poetics. The previous chapters have all sought to show ecology as it is revealed in Williams's work. This chapter will provide a clearer sense of the context for that work. Given the relative dearth of ecocritical work on these three poets, our awareness of Williams's ecologically poetic qualities (informed by previous chapters) will allow an exploration of Stevens and Niedecker to provide examples of the disparate approaches to eco-poetry possible amongst three contemporary artists, all working (to similar degrees, but via distinct, if interrelated, techniques) in ecological modes. To wit,

these three Modernists all achieve ecological forms through their respective uses of the biocentric perspective and through their use of their own immediate local as setting and source for their poetic enterprise. For example, while Williams's sense of the local remains firmly rooted in his literal hometown in New Jersey, Niedecker's focus begins in her hometown in Wisconsin but expands in at least one poem beyond that place to inhabit a distant locus in Lake Superior. Wallace Stevens offers an interesting contrast to both poets by only nominally using his place of residence as an ecological local, instead achieving from a distance, a resident-like familiarity with his routine recreational destination of Florida. Using a lens of resident-vs.-tourist provided by the work of Neil Evernden, I hope to magnify the impact of Williams's most unwavering dedicated concentration upon the environs in which he was born, lived, and died. Further, by looking at these three poets' respective use of "compost poetry" (a term I'm coining to describe poetry that centers in the human body's transition from life into death, and further into decomposition, decay, and reintegration with nature) and the use of the poetic subject and perspective, either based in the human experience, the natural, or in the grey area between the two, I examine their relative achievement of a biocentric (that is, anti-anthropocentric) poetic engagement with the natural world. Finally, this chapter will conclude with analyses of those biocentric perspectives, arguing that while Stevens and Niedecker both achieve such perceptions, they do so via a certain negativity that casts a pall over their ecopoetics, a contrast to Williams's more optimistic and life-affirming sense of the union between humanity and nature as a celebration of the ecological systems that undergird it. Ultimately, there is little need to classify any of these poets as inherently "better" ecopoets than the others; this chapter instead seeks to reveal the

diversity of attitudes towards nature that each of these modernists embodies, while revealing to us, by comparison, that Williams's specific brand of ecological poetics more closely call forward to, and resemble, what eco-poets today have come to practice in their work.

## 2) Modernist Versions of the Local

In the case of these poets' deliberate focus upon the "local" (one of the qualities I have used throughout this study as an indicator of an eco-poet at work), we find Niedecker and Williams, especially, engaged in specifically intimate artistic relationships with their respective lifelong geographic milieus. One of the ways Williams (especially in *Paterson*) and Niedecker (especially in "Paeon to Place") make clear their dedication to the physical setting of their lives is through the specificity with which they lay claim to the precise flora and fauna that surrounded them on an immediate daily basis. Both are private individuals and public artists utilizing the places of their birth, and the uniquely local natural features thereof, to go beyond simply "writing what they know" but instead actively claiming the near-at-hand as a way of transforming their surroundings into ecologically-minded art.

Interestingly, in comparison, Wallace Stevens offers a contrasting example in the way that he *chose* his "local" in Florida, an *adopted* place far from his habitual and geographic home. The lush fauna and raging sea of his beloved Florida coast serve as an adopted conduit for his own devotion to an *oikos* (home), revealed largely in the ways the landscape and seascape act as a mirror for his natural themes. Because (given the relative dearth of time spent there) his relationship with and knowledge of Florida is less intimate

than Williams's with New Jersey, or Niedecker's with Wisconsin, Stevens's ecopoetics of the local frequently takes a more abstract and general form, citing relatively fewer species by name and relying instead on more general and impressionistic versions of the natural world. As we'll see, this can actually prove to be surprisingly similar in effect to Williams's concept of the "local as universal" (discussed in Chapters II and III), since the inherent generality of such a technique universalizes Stevens's poetic content to a broader natural world of "sea" and "soil" that is readily accessible and relatable to readers.

The inextricable attachment to the local, which Evernden calls the perspective of a "resident" (see Introduction), is most clearly shared by Williams and Niedecker, in that they practiced a calculated geographic locality. Both opted to spend the vast majority of their lives and careers within miles of the houses in which they were born. While (for example) William Carlos Williams's artistic contemporaries, including Pound, Eliot, and other major figures of modernism, took their craft across the sea to live as expatriates in the capitals of Europe, Williams chose to firmly root both his medical and writing practices in Rutherford, New Jersey. Rutherford was, especially in Williams's younger years, a largely rural commuter town, still an hour's ride by steam train from downtown New York City. Lorine Niedecker, meanwhile, though engaged in near-constant personal and artistic correspondence with major American poetic figures half a continent away (like Louis Zukofsky and Cid Corman), made few major trips away from her family's rustic cabin on BlackHawk Island, near Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. Instead, she lived a local and sustainable lifestyle, biking or walking to work as a librarian's assistant at the

Fort Atkinson Library or as a stenographer and proofreader at the nearby Hoard's Dairyman newspaper.<sup>172</sup>

While Niedecker's decision to stay among the muddy marshes of her native southeastern Wisconsin was dictated largely by her poor economic situation, Williams's was one of deliberate personal expression. As early as 1921, he notes in the inaugural issue of the small magazine *Contact*, "[I]n proportion as a man has bestirred himself to become awake to his own locality he will perceive more and more of what is disclosed and find himself in a position to make the necessary translations."<sup>173</sup> Williams seems to be speaking explicitly of and to himself. Those 'necessary translations' are the ways in which the (especially American) artist's imagination can animate the reality of the world around him. "We want to give all our energy to the setting up of new vigors of artistic perception, invention and expression," Williams says a few paragraphs later, referring specifically to artists in the United States.

Speaking to the artist's ability to be "awake to his locality" in *Paterson* (even before the Preface to Book 1) Williams's epigraph opens with the phrase, "*a local pride ; spring, summer, fall and the sea.*"<sup>174</sup> Such "local pride" is not merely a matter of civic devotion but a nature-centric one. The "fall" is a pun on the Niagara-like Great Falls of Paterson, which serve as a central eco-image in the poem, and the seasons are all the evidence he presents after the semicolon as the focus of his "pride," namely his "local pride" in the bioregion of northeastern New Jersey, expressed in *Paterson* and other poems.

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<sup>172</sup> Margot Peters. *Lorine Niedecker: A Poet's Life*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001. 27, 72.

<sup>173</sup> Williams. *Selected Essays*. 28.

<sup>174</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 2.

As Williams describes in a Foreword to Book 5 of *Paterson*, “The problem of the poetics [in centering his epic study upon a modern city] depended upon finding a specific city, one that I knew.” Eliminating obvious choices such as New York (“It couldn’t be...anything as big as a metropolis”), or his own home town of Rutherford (“Rutherford wasn’t a city”), Williams was left with the next best thing to his own backyard: Paterson – a mere 10 miles from Rutherford. As an added benefit to its proximity, “It had, besides, a river – the Passaic...the river was a symbol handed to me. [...] This was *my* river...I had grown up on its banks, seen the filth that polluted it.”<sup>175</sup> The sense of ownership, or, as Evernden might have it, “territoriality,” that Williams felt toward the Passaic was born out of the connection one feels with one’s immediate dwelling place and reflects his desire to elevate his “local” through universal themes. One will recall that the third chapter of this study outlined Williams’s affinity for the philosophy of John Dewey, specifically in his echoing of Dewey’s claim that “the local is the only universal.” As an individual and as an artist, Williams is expressing a certain ownership of his locale, that was earned through his lifetime habitation of the area. On the one hand, Williams is selecting Paterson and the Passaic because of his own knowledge of it, but he’s also following through on the personal philosophical inclination he held of examining the near-at-hand. As he asks the spirit of the poem *Paterson* itself in canto ii of Book 2, “Why should I move from this place / where I was born? Knowing / how futile would be the search / for you in the multiplicity / of your debacle.”<sup>176</sup>

Environmentalist and Deep Ecology proponent Paul Shepard has argued that “[k]nowing who you are is a quest across the first forty years of life. Knowing who you are is

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<sup>175</sup> Williams. *I Wanted to Write a Poem*. 72-73, emphasis mine.

<sup>176</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 75.

impossible without knowing where you are. But it cannot be learned in a single stroke.”<sup>177</sup> The challenge of deeply and intimately knowing the place from which one comes will be addressed shortly, but immediately relevant here is the depth of knowledge Williams and Niedecker both bring to their milieu, through two lifetimes of attentive inhabitation in their respective locales.

This grounding of the self (and the poetry produced therefrom) in the immediate home/dwelling/*oikos* is similarly enacted throughout Niedecker’s poetry, vis-à-vis the natural environs of BlackHawk Island, Wisconsin. The ‘island’ is, in fact, more of a small peninsula, on a floodplain surrounded by a variety of aquatic landscapes—the Rock River to the south, marsh and ponds to the north, and Lake Koshkonong to the west. By virtue of the area’s high water table, the river, more than any other part of the landscape, inevitably dominates the inhabitants’ awareness of their dwelling place.

Niedecker, then, remained all her life in a place that was not simply a bit rural (like Williams’s Rutherford); she lived on a plot of land that flooded with regularity, an *oikos* in which *not* being in touch with the natural cycles of the flora and fauna, the wildlife, and the weather could have uniquely dire consequences in the form of property or crop damage and even personal danger. She illustrates both her and her family’s lives as inexorably tied to the river when she notes in the opening stanzas of the autobiographical (and eco-biographical) poem “Paeon to Place” that they are “born / in

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<sup>177</sup> Shepard, Paul. “Place in American Culture.” *North American Review*, 262 (Fall 1977): 22-32. Evernden also quotes, separately, from this article in his article, previously referenced, “Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy.” Deep Ecology is a modern philosophical framework for understanding all living beings, human and nonhuman, as equally intrinsically valuable.

swale and swamp and *sworn / to water*" (8-10, emphasis mine).<sup>178</sup> She writes later in the poem about her childhood:

I grew in green  
 slide and slant  
 of shore and shade  
 Child-time—wade  
 thru weeds  
 Maples to swing from  
 Pewee-glissando  
 sublime  
 slime-  
 song (91-100)

Here, her “rootedness” in the local is nearly literal as she grows up wading through weeds, singing the “sublime / slime- / song.” It calls to mind the opening of another, much shorter, untitled poem of hers written about twenty years earlier: “I rose from marsh mud / algae, equisetum, willows, / sweet green, noisy / birds and frogs” (1-4). In notes on early drafts of this poem, Niedecker wrote of wanting to convey in the image “the primordial slime” and to “make my beginning by creation,” forming herself out of the earth.<sup>179</sup> She seems especially attuned to the role her place played in her personal formation as a poet and a person, that (as Shepard noted) “[k]nowing who you are is impossible without knowing where you are.”

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<sup>178</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, this and all subsequent Niedecker citations come from *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, Jenny Penberthy, ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. Parentheses indicate line numbers.

<sup>179</sup> Niedecker, *Collected Works*. 414n.

Perhaps as a way of connecting her landscape, and her knowledge of it, directly to her life's work in poetry, we find in some of her work deliberate efforts to note specific, almost catalog-like, mentions of the flora and fauna that surround her. A true daughter of Fort Atkinson, she's not content to describe the muddy earth without its "algae, equisetum, willows" and various wildlife serving as foundation upon which to build. In a markedly biocentric move, she elides herself directly with those specific species in her local landscape. The traditional boundary between nature and the human—between BlackHawk Island and Niedecker herself—is broken down, by reaching into the land's past and present and calling the poet herself forth from the mud. In a notably ecological moment from one of her letters, she makes her union with her local environment explicit, saying, "I looked back of our buildings to the lake and said, 'I am that I am because of all this—I am what is around me—those woods have made me.'"<sup>180</sup> Niedecker's awareness of how her environment shaped her selfhood cleaves tightly to both Paul Shepard's and Neil Evernden's stated sense of identity as inextricably tied to one's locality.

In a later moment in Niedecker's "Paeon to Place," we find her describing her father's familiarity with and savvy harvesting of such flora as "dandelion greens," "marsh marigold," "coiled celery," and "pickerel" weeds, and such fauna as "carp" and "duck."<sup>181</sup> In an especially nuanced, ecologically poetic technique, the species Niedecker selects for this brief catalog of local plant life are all edible elements of her environs, revealing that by the harvest and consumption of said species, she is quite literally sustained by and comprised of her natural environment. While Williams's use of his

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<sup>180</sup> "Letter to Gail Roub," in Jenny Penberthy's *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet*. Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1996. 42. Notably, Niedecker's gaze here encompasses only the natural "lake," from the perspective of (but excluding) the manmade "house."

<sup>181</sup> Niedecker. *Collected Works*. 263.

local species as fodder for art is explicit, he never goes so far as to treat it as literal sustenance. In this way, Niedecker reveals her literal *locavore* tendency, shining light on how she, as poet and as person, consumes—perhaps even subsumes—the natural world around her.

Another instance of Niedecker’s use of scientific cataloging offers us an insight into her ability to be fully a resident of her native *oikos*, while an observant tourist to areas beyond. It is useful here to highlight Neil Evernden’s dichotomous split between the two. In his previously mentioned article, “Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy,” he makes note of the difference between “tourists” in a given locale, as opposed to dedicated “residents.” Evernden makes the distinction thusly: “The *tourist* can grasp only the superficialities of a landscape...the landscape is merely a facade, but to the *resident* it is the outcome of how it got there and the outside of what goes on inside. The resident is, in short, a part of the place, just as the fish is a part of the territory.”<sup>182</sup> Both Niedecker and Williams were dedicated residents of their home ecosystems and intimately knowledgeable about the flora and fauna. What’s especially compelling about Niedecker’s ecological poetics is that, more deliberately than Williams, she was able to bring the perceptive eye of a resident to places where she was herself a tourist. One of only a handful of holidays away from southeastern Wisconsin for Niedecker was a car trip she and her husband took to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in 1966. Niedecker used the tour as fodder for a long poem titled “Lake Superior.” Interestingly, even when writing about the great lake nearly 300 miles from her hometown, Niedecker made a conscious, deliberate effort to over-inform herself on the history and local ecology of that place, so that when writing (eco)poetically about it, she

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<sup>182</sup> Evernden. 19.

would be writing with as much knowledge, conviction, and dedication as she had, in most of her other work, about her own *oikos*. In the poem, Niedecker's knowledge and research of the geological record has her specifically referencing the basic ores of the earth, from basalt and hornblende granite to iron and other "azoic rocks." The accuracy and specificity of the area's geology is no accident but is instead a clear symptom of Niedecker's ecological poetic efforts to treat all natural subjects with as much locally-minded specificity and accuracy as she could.

In her article, "Writing 'Lake Superior,'" Niedecker scholar Jenny Penberthy tells us the 5-page poem, "Lake Superior," came out of more than 260 typed, single-spaced pages of notes.<sup>183</sup> The notes were a combination of field research performed during the week-long car trip she took, in addition to significant scholarly research and correspondence with local geologists. Penberthy cites Niedecker's remark in a letter to confidante and fellow poet Cid Corman that she'd written "for geographical maps from the office in Washington, D.C.," all of which contributed to four research booklets Niedecker made for herself, including one with the soft cardboard cover—"Remember Rocks." Niedecker, then, is making a conscious effort to understand Lake Superior as a resident might, with her geologic study literally digging deep within the environment. We see Niedecker actively trying to overcome her role as a "tourist" to Lake Superior, informing herself on the natural history of the region to better appreciate the *oikos* of the region.

In another Penberthy article, 2013's "The Very Variants: A Few Revisions to Lorine Niedecker's *Collected Works*," Niedecker's editor publishes added fragments and

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<sup>183</sup> Penberthy, Jenny, ed. "Writing 'Lake Superior,'" *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008. 61-82.

variants that include an earlier version of “Lake Superior,” showing that these three stanzas were once a mere three lines and markedly less forceful for any claim of natural unity.<sup>184</sup> The stanza originally read merely: “Iron the common element of earth / in rocks and freighters – / and most things living.” That Niedecker revised this to include more detail and changed the “some” to three “every”s shows the conviction with which she’s writing of her ecologically-informed concept of this universal element, namely, iron. Certainly the iron ore mined from the planet’s crust takes a different form from its reprocessing into freighters, which is, in turn, a different form from the trace elements of iron found in the human bloodstream. But as Niedecker’s source material states, “*Every bit of you is a bit of the earth*, and has been on many strange and wonderful journeys over countless millions of years.” Margot Peters cites in her biography of Niedecker the philosophy of Herman and Nina Schneider in *Rocks, Rivers and the Changing Earth*, one of the sources from which Niedecker was working in “Lake Superior.” Peters helpfully quotes further the source: “You are part of the earth’s story. In your blood is iron from plants that drew it out of the soil. Your teeth and bones were once coral of the sea.”<sup>185</sup> Niedecker is working from the ecological understanding that, earth and animal, plant and human are all made up of some of the same elements, bringing us that much closer to a unity amongst the disparate members of a single ecological community.

What her efforts show us is that Niedecker was entirely deliberate in not offering just a broad-stroke poetic view of the Great Lakes’ shoreline of the upper Midwest but a scientifically accurate and specific history of it. Niedecker herself speaks directly to the value of scientific accuracy and specificity in a letter to Louis Zukofsky, stating, “For me,

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<sup>184</sup> Penberthy, Jenny. “The Very Variant: A Few Revisions to Lorine Niedecker’s *Collected Works*.” *Jacket2*. Philadelphia: Kelly Writer’s House, June 24, 2013. Web. Accessed 7/20/13.

<sup>185</sup> Peters, Margot. *Lorine Niedecker: A Poet’s Life*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011. 208.

when it comes to birds, animals and plants, I'd like the facts because the facts are wonderful in themselves."<sup>186</sup> The geology of the local landscape of "Lake Superior" becomes a character unto itself in the poem – just as the blossoming plants had in Williams's "Spring and All" (see Chapter III). In both cases, the persona speaking of and through the ecosystem of a place (the lake, and New Jersey, respectively) expresses a fully biocentric perspective. Niedecker's use of the geological history ties her directly to Evernden's theoretical stance that a "resident" sees the landscape "not as a collection of physical forms, but as the evidence of what has occurred there" (19). While any poet might use the natural setting of the lake as fodder for poetry, in a tourist-ic sense, Niedecker the ecopoet goes much further, "digs" even much deeper so that in a place that is not her home she can see the natural world through a local lens.

Niedecker's use of a locale that was distant from her own home (*oikos*) will help us better appreciate Wallace Stevens's use of the two locales he knew best—Connecticut, where he lived most of his adult life, and Florida, where he spent a significant amount of his time on a combination of business trips and vacations. To begin in the more immediate place, of which he was a literal "resident," one of the clearest statements of his personal and poetic connection with place can be found in his "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" published in 1950's *The Auroras of Autumn*.<sup>187</sup> "Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves," the poem's persona reflects, narrating his stroll through New Haven: "So much ourselves, we cannot tell apart / The idea and the bearer-being of the idea" (19, 35-6). The place is the "bearer-being of the idea," and the human resident is

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<sup>186</sup> Penberthy, Jenny, ed. *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky, 1931-1970*. Cambridge University Press, 1993. 66.

<sup>187</sup> Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. New York: Random House, 2011. 465. This and all future references to Stevens's poems come from this collection.

the “idea itself.” Stevens makes explicit that one “cannot tell apart” the one from the other, so closely is inhabitant linked to his or her place of inhabitation, mirroring the inexorable link between self and place. (Stevens seems to be using the coastal town of New Haven as a stand-in for his residential home of Hartford, Connecticut, just 45 minutes inland.) Stevens’s long poem (comprised of 31 cantos) goes on to become, in part, a meditation on the blurry line between reality and one’s perception of it, but, it begins by negotiating between the speaker’s sense of self as defined by the place in which he lives and moves. It serves us well to recall again the source of our modern prefix “eco” as the Greek “oikos” – translated literally as “dwelling.” Stevens, by joining together the “*houses...composed of ourselves*” (emphasis mine) brings together the person (“idea”) with the dwelling/place (“bearer-being of the idea”).

However, Stevens’s sense of a local environment in which to show his ecological joining of person and place was, as with Niedecker, not limited to his place of full time residence, his merely geographic home. Just as Niedecker, in “Lake Superior,” inhabited a distant place as local, making herself an Everndenian “resident,” Stevens repeatedly did the same with Florida. His sense of place in relation to Florida was, in fact, so entrenched as to be a source of reflection for those who knew him well. According to the account given by a correspondent/friend of Stevens, Jose Rodriguez Feo,

He always talked with nostalgia about the South and south Florida. And the climate, too. ...[T]o him it was not going to Florida or going to Havana to get away from the cold. It was something sensuous in his appreciation of being in Florida: what he felt in the skin. He said that [there] you live with your senses

more than when you live in a cold place. This has to do with his poetry; it was part of his personality.<sup>188</sup>

As Feo points out, this inarguably does “[have] to do with his poetry”; it helps highlight the fact that Stevens’s relationship with Florida’s landscape was not merely “tourism” (in both the traditional sense and in the sense of an Evernden-like superficial view of nature). Instead, Stevens’s perspective on Florida went beyond being mere environment tied to simplistic ideas about a snowbird’s vacation but extended further to a more “residential” inhabitation of the local, “feel[ing it] in the skin...[as] part of his personality,” a part of himself.

Lorine Niedecker, no stranger herself to achieving a sense of “residence” in a landscape that is not her home (as she did in “Lake Superior”), interestingly makes note of Stevens’s devotion to the Florida landscape. As a poet similarly devoting herself to a place, she’s likely to be attuned to such an environmental sensitivity. In a 1968 letter to Cid Corman, Niedecker notes, “What a love that man Stevens had for Florida, for Key West...Florida where the sun ‘gives much more than light.’”<sup>189</sup> Niedecker is quoting from a letter Stevens wrote to his wife contrasting Florida with his home in Hartford, where “with the Spring snows ahead, it is hard to believe that the sun does much except give light. But here [in Florida] it gives much more than light.”<sup>190</sup> Stevens implies that his role as a “tourist” gives greater clarity to the qualities of Floridian nature and sunlight that might escape even a resident.

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<sup>188</sup> Peter Brazeau, ed. *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985. 141.

<sup>189</sup> “*Between Your House and Mine*” *The Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cod Corman, 1960-1970*, ed. Lisa Peter Faranda. Durham: Duke University Press, 1986. 180. Niedecker’s quotation comes from a letter Stevens wrote to his wife Elsie, from Key West, in 1935.

<sup>190</sup> Holly Stevens, ed. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. 275.

Stevens's devoted focus upon his adopted local of the Florida Keys proves especially present in his first two volumes, *Harmonium* (1923) and *Ideas of Order* (1935), the former of which includes the poem "O Florida, Venereal Soil" which opens:

A few things for themselves,  
 Convolvulus and coral,  
 Buzzards and live-moss,  
 Tiestas from the keys,  
 A few things for themselves,  
 Florida, venereal soil,  
 Disclose to the lover. (1-7)

The sensuality of the rest of this poem is enough to remind us of Stevens's versatility in using the natural world to his own ends, envisioning Florida through the corporeal filter of its people, and the loving interplay between *oikos* and inhabitant. The "[v]enereal of the title means "of Venus (the Roman goddess of love), but the double entendre with "venereal's" more common use, to refer to sexually transmitted diseases or in Stevens's time, VD's, seems likely as well. As with Williams and Niedecker, we have some markedly specific renderings of the natural elements that come out of that "love"ing soil, the vine-like "convolvulus" and the sea's "Coral," the juxtaposition of the death-seeking "buzzards" and the syntactically energized "live-moss," even the soil itself, capable of offering up to the lovers these "few things for themselves." Just as Williams in "By the road to the contagious hospital" found fertile ground in the "muddy fields," it's notable that Stevens chooses in "O Florida" to focus not upon the stereotypical Floridian sun but instead its "Venereal Soil" (emphasis mine). Nothing could be more directly connected

to a sense of local place than the soil of that place itself. As we'll see in the next section, Williams makes this point even more explicitly – and ties it directly to Stevens's sense of the earth's sometime-diseased nature in his "The A, B, and C of It."

Another poem from Steven's collection *Harmonium* that names its Floridian locale, "Fabliau of Florida," both describes and enshrines the landscape as a locus of endlessly earth-bound (or sea-bound) cyclical nature. The "[b]arque of phosper" that opens the poem rides "[o]n the palmy beach" of Florida itself (1-2). Riding the horizon in which "[f]oam and cloud are one," joining earth to sky in a biocentric move, the barque is instructed by the persona to "[f]ill [its] black hull / With white moonlight," gathering up the luminescence of the sky into its human-crafted wooden frame (6, 9-10). Stevens brings the heavens to earth in the foam/cloud of the horizon and harnesses through human means the light of the celestial bodies by pulling the "white moonlight" into the "black hull" of the boat like a fisherman's catch. Still and all, "[t]here will never be an end," we're told, "[t]o the droning of the surf" (11-12). Though humanity can channel the light of the distant moon, it is powerless against the timelessness of Florida's immediate sea. Stevens here uses the local environment of the coast to express a larger contemplation about humans' place in their physical, earthly world. As in "O Florida, Venereal Soil," he does this by bringing the eye of the tourist-cum-resident to his ecological appreciation of the tropical environment. That eye is directed at the subject before him (Florida's natural landscape) but finely informed, like Williams's poetry, by the artist's imagination.

Stevens sees the explicit process by which this habitation of a "residential" place happens and makes clear his focus on a Williams-like "local" in a letter written to the

editor of a small magazine named Ronald Lane Latimer, in 1935. In the letter, Stevens explains:

While, of course, my imagination is a most important factor, nevertheless I wonder whether, if you were to suggest any particular poem, I could not find an actual background for you. I have been going to Florida for twenty years, and all the Florida poems have actual backgrounds. The real world seen by an imaginative man may very well seem like an imaginative construction.<sup>191</sup>

He implies that “any particular poem” is grounded in the immediate, local reality out of which it comes, via the “imaginative construction” of himself as an “imaginative man.” This offers us two new ways of viewing Stevens’s ecological poetic process. First, he’s clearly stating the extent to which his poetry draws from the local reality of place. Second, his suggestion that “[t]he real world seen by an imaginative man may very well seem like an imaginative construction” can act as a precedent and corollary to Williams’s insistence that “the only realism in arts is of the imagination.”<sup>192</sup>

In discussing “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” Stevens even directly echoes Williams’s notion that “the local is the only universal” when he writes about the poem in a letter to Louis Martz: “that’s the way things happen with me. I start with a concrete thing, and it tends to become so generalized that it isn’t any longer [just] a local place.”<sup>193</sup> Such a “generalization” of the concrete object is a direct parallel to Williams’s “local as universal” discussed in Chapter III. It also echoes a sentiment Williams

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid. 289.

<sup>192</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems. Volume 1*. 111. For further discussion, see section 3 of Chapter 2.

<sup>193</sup> Martz quotes Stevens’s letter to Peter Brazeau in the latter’s *Parts of a World: Remembering Wallace Stevens, An Oral Biography*. North Point, 1985. 175.

describes explicitly in his “Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist” in which he notes:

Being an artist I can produce, if I am able, *universals of general applicability*. If I succeed in myself *objective* enough, sensual enough, I can produce the factors, the concretions of materials by which others shall understand and so be led to use – that they may the better see, touch, taste, enjoy – their own world differing as it may from mine. By mine, they, different, can be discovered to be the same as I, and thrown into contrast, will see the implications of a general enjoyment through me.”<sup>194</sup>

What Williams here calls “objectivity” is the same as Stevens’s “concrete,” and though the terminology differs, it’s clear both of these modernists were separately but dedicatedly working toward similar ecopoetic goals, that is, finding, as John Dewey had theorized, a way of using the local(e) as material toward universally-relatable subjects.

In the next section, I will turn to another ecopoetic trait, namely, the way these poets’ artistic output reflects their respective thinking about humans’ relationship to their environment. While the traditional human perspective is person-centered, or anthropocentric, I will argue that Niedecker, Stevens, and, especially, Williams convey a *biocentric* viewpoint, which preconceives a subtler understanding of humanity as one (equal) member of a larger ecosystem.

### 3) “Compost Poetry”

What is especially notable about Williams’s aforementioned sympathy with the theories of John Dewey is that, perhaps not surprisingly, even though Williams and

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<sup>194</sup> Williams. *Selected Essays*. 197-198, emphasis mine.

Evernden were separated by some 40 years, Neil Evernden also draws from Dewey's aesthetic theories in his discussion of ecology within the social sciences:

The aesthetic experience, in Dewey's terminology, lies in the relationship between the individual and the environment... Rather than a subject-object relationship in which the observer parades before the supposedly beautiful view, we have instead a process, an interaction between the viewer and the viewed. ... Instead of a detachment, from the environment, we have a subtle diffusion into it.<sup>195</sup>

This "diffusion" speaks directly to the next ecologically poetic quality I'm arguing is present in these three modernists, namely their "biocentrism."

One of the readiest thematic forms in which to find such biocentric inhabitation of nature can be found in these three poets' respective use of decay and humanity's breakdown from a larger unified corpus into the various smaller organisms which occur in death, as well as the resultant natural decay of the body back into the earth in which it's buried. The body's decay presents perhaps the clearest example of the meeting, and unity, of nature and human culture. In life, our bodies are prone to the various ravages (and benefits) of microbes, viruses, and other cellular-level interactions with the organisms of our environment. As Evernden notes in elaborating upon his definition of "inter-relatedness,"

Where do you draw the line between one creature and another? Where does one organism stop and another begin? Is there even a boundary between you and the non-living world, or will the atoms in this page be a part of your body tomorrow?

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<sup>195</sup> Evernden. 97.

How, in short, can you make any sense out of the concept of man as a discrete concept?<sup>196</sup>

It is precisely upon a human body's decay back into the earth when buried that we see that "line between one creature and another" blurred and, ultimately, broken down past recognition. The poetry of our corporeal reintegration into the earth (casket burial and the inherent barriers therein aside) recognizes a lowering of the oft-privileged human element of nature to an equal, and decidedly biologically active, playing field with supposedly "lesser" organisms, reminding us in thematically ecological terms of our own impending death and return to the earth in the inter-relatedness of nature's interpenetrative cycles.<sup>197</sup> Such poetic themes challenge a reader's inherent anthropocentrism by positing an Evernden- and Dewey-like universal perspective.

Those poems which address this re-integration of the human body back into nature will be referred to as "compost poetry." Scientifically speaking, the material into which the human body decomposes is referred to as "humus," "compost" being its plant matter-based equivalent. In choosing to use the term compost, I am taking my cue from Whitman's "This Compost" (which itself mistakes humus as compost), discussed in Chapter II, and the spiritual predecessor of the decay poems treated here. The discussion at hand of how Williams, Niedecker, and Stevens eschew an anthropocentric perspective for a more biocentric treatment of humanity's role in nature will begin in close readings of their compost poems, and then expand into other instances of poetic anti-anthropocentrism, offering an avenue to seeing the conscious interpretation of nature as equally inclusive of, not separate from, human life. I will reveal through the following

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid. 95.

<sup>197</sup> Such privileging of the human comes from the Western dualistic split between mind and body, in which the indestructible human soul or spirit elevates humanity above its natural counterparts.

readings that these three modernists are, to varying degrees, working against this tradition, establishing themselves (albeit unknowingly) as eco-poets.

The reasons why decomposition of the human body is so ready a referent for eco-poets are two-fold: first, the corporeal state following death has been a common theme of literature, and second, the return of the human body to its most basic cellular state, reintegrating into the earth, offers the most literal intersection of the human with the natural. Poetry on that intersection is a tradition that extends at least as far back as Book 23 of Homer's *Iliad* when the gods uphold Hector's human dignity by keeping his body from decomposing, through Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, who tells Claudius in IV.iii, of the dead Polonius "Not where he eats, but where [he] is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him," and into the Romantic period with Wordsworth's suggestion in "[t]his lawn, a carpet all alive" that "the genuine life... Is in the grass beneath," and by implication in the compost that maintains that grass's life. The poets under examination at once continue *and revise* this tradition of compost poetry, a phrase used before in order to highlight the subgenre of eco-poems which maintain a focus on the subsumation of the human body into the earth.

As argued in Chapter II, Walt Whitman's "This Compost" and William Carlos Williams's "A Unison" both serve to continue the aforementioned tradition of compost poetry. Williams's "A Unison" performs the action of bringing together the living and the dead in the "spirit-like voices" of the mountaintop cemetery. The "unison and a dance, joined / at this death's festival" of line 33 is a calling out of the interplay between earth's organisms and the decomposing human bodies of the poem's cemetery setting. By contrasting Williams's unison with Walt Whitman's more anthropocentric view in

“This Compost,” in which the earth “gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last,” I have argued for recognition of Williams’s decidedly more ecological awareness (47). Whitman privileges the human perspective, ultimately treating the humus of decomposing bodies as a gift to the earth. Even his amazement at nature’s ability to incorporate the remains of humanity into fertile ground is centered in what humanity puts into the earth. While he clearly sees humanity as “offering” something to nature, Whitman’s tireless focus upon the human sets humanity at a distance from nature—as opposed to Williams, Stevens, or Niedecker, who offer a more interpenetrative point of view in their personae’s voices, treating humanity as one with nature, not separate from it.

Turning to Wallace Stevens, for example, in his poems “The Worms at Heaven’s Gate” and “The Anatomy of Monotony,” we find a heightened awareness of mortality and the inevitable, cyclical result of our corporeal human substance. In the former poem, published in Stevens’s first collection (1923’s *Harmonium*), the message is fairly straightforward—in death, the human body is reduced to putrid material subsumed or “carried” by the worms (maggots, really) of the grave. The poem is written from the collective point of view of the titular worms who declare themselves vehicles of humanity: “Out of the tomb we bring Badroulbador , / Within our bellies, we her chariot” (1-2).<sup>198</sup> In this context, Badroulbador stands for the anonymity of any human who in death and en“tomb”ment is inevitably subject to the decay and decomposition of the grave. The worms name pieces and parts of the person (an eye, a cheek, a finger, a hand, and the “bundle of the body”), all of which are treated with the same cold objectivity of

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<sup>198</sup> Stevens. *Collected Poems*. 49-50. From an Arabic name meaning “moon of all moons,” the most well-known Badroulbador was the love interest of Aladdin in the *Arabian Nights*.

nature in its natural processes (8). They note with some irony that even the “genius of that cheek” is processed through their “bellies” (7, 2), as they perform their natural and instinctual duty of devouring the decomposing flesh of dead humanity.

“The Worms at Heaven’s Gate” is a short, playful poem, which critic Guy Rotella characterizes as a “compost” of “eternal life, making a wormy joke of the rites of resurrection.”<sup>199</sup> While I agree with his assessment of the poem as “sardonic,” his later argument that “the odor of twenties irreverence hangs too thick in the poem’s air” seems an overstatement as the poem, topically, is able to engage with contemporary ecocritical issues. I read the poem as more dignified than Rotella seems to, especially with regard to its thematic topic of spirituality. Given the reference in the title to “Heaven’s Gate,” the goal of the poem seems to highlight that the only thing responsible for bringing a person “[o]ut of the tomb” by “chariot” is the objective process of nature. There’s an atheistic, or at least an agnostic, theme to the poem—no divinity here, no soul, no resurrection. Guy Rotella notes that “the reduction of the spirit to flesh in the phrase ‘The genius of her cheek’ does earthy work.”<sup>200</sup> Though he fails to tell us how “earthy” is meant here, my interpretation is that the potentially ironic “genius” of the cheek is subsumed as equally as the flesh itself, thereby underlining the worms’ ability to democratize all organic matter back into the earth. As Whitman had marveled at the earth’s ability to reprocess the sickness of humanity into healthy, fallow ground in “This Compost,” Stevens, here, reminds the reader that the only afterlife of the dead is food for the lowly worm. Centered in the experience of the worms and not of the human, Stevens’s poem speaks

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<sup>199</sup> Rotella, Guy. *Reading and Writing Nature*. Lebanon: Northeastern University Press, 1990. 110.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.* 110.

from a more ecological perspective in its awareness of the interpenetrative natural, biological fact.

Interestingly, William Carlos Williams actually had a hand in helping Stevens achieve a greater sense of this biocentricity while editing the small magazine, *The Others*, which first published the poem. Stevens's first version included two additional lines that served to anthropomorphize the worms. Collectively addressing each other, the worms proclaim, "O, stallions, like a pitiless charioteer . . . / She will forget us in the crystalline."<sup>201</sup> The worms likening themselves to "stallions" and expressing a sense of regret when their human meal "forget[s] us," clearly anthropomorphizes them by ascribing to them a human-like sentimentality that the revised version of the poem lacks. In his letter suggesting that Stevens cut those quoted lines (the original final couplet), Williams called them "a sentimental catch at the end."<sup>202</sup> Williams's suggestion further cements that, relative to Stevens, he is the one more naturally inclined to a biocentric apprehension of the world and to favor poetry that reflects that perspective.

Williams offers us his own explicit view of the composting of humanity in his short poem from the early 1930s, "The A, B, and C of It":

Love's very fleas are mine. Enter  
 Me, worms and all till I crumble  
 And steam with it, pullulate  
 To be sucked into an orchid<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Martz, Louis. "Manuscripts of Wallace Stevens," *Yale University Library Gazette*, LIV (October, 1979) 52, quoted in George Lensing's *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth*. New Orleans: Louisiana State University Press, 1991, 110.

<sup>202</sup> Lensing. 135.

<sup>203</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 2*. 83.

Williams echoes Stevens's use of the worms' active role in aiding in human decomposition. Eschewing the third-person, and adding specificity to the organisms that enact the stages of decomposition (fleas and worms, crumbling and steaming the body), Williams's version of decay is markedly productive. It "pullulates" (breeds, germinates) the orchid, bringing new life in the wake of love's death. As we'll see in a later reading of Stevens's "The Snow Man," Williams's sense of the biocentric, in compost poems as well as other works, is strikingly more positive in nature than Stevens's in that it results in new life, a filling of the earth rather than an emptying of the self/human.

Another of Stevens's compost poems, also from *Harmonium*, understands the process of the biological afterlife with an even more markedly biocentric and ecological sensibility than "The Worms at Heaven's Gate." The voice of "The Anatomy of Monotony" is also based in human experience, but it does more to acknowledge humanity's role within a larger ecosystem, positing humankind as part and parcel of a broader earthly cycle. In two stanzas, Stevens more successfully brings together humanity and the earth upon which we live:

If from the earth we came, it was an earth

That bore us as a part of all things

It breeds and that was lewder than it is.

*Our nature is her nature.* Hence it comes,

Since by our nature we grow old, earth grows

The same. We parallel the mother's death. (1-6, emphasis mine)<sup>204</sup>

By making a parallel between the earth from whence we (may) come, and the mutual death of nature and humanity, Stevens exhibits themes that are deeply eco-poetic. If "The

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<sup>204</sup> Stevens. *Collected Poems*. 107-108.

Worms at Heaven's Gate" was meant to remind the reader of his or her inevitably humble end, when "fewder than it was," this latter poem works to at least remind us of some of the scale and grandeur of which we are a part when "[w]e parallel the mother's death," equal players to the earth of our own origin.

Critic George Lensing, in *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*, usefully points out that "The Anatomy of Monotony" touches upon Stevens's "recurrent nostalgia for a shadowy, primordial time when humans, in their evolutionary progress, were still *one with the world*."<sup>205</sup> Similarly, Henry Weinfield, writing in a 2007 issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, implicitly describes the relatively more biocentric viewpoint in his article, "Stevens' Anatomy," when he points out that Stevens is "beginning from the assumption that we came from the earth, develop[ing] an anti-dualistic conception of the cosmos that poses our relationship to the earth in evolutionary terms."<sup>206</sup> This long "evolutionary" view of natural history reveals Stevens's awareness of decomposition not as a singularly human experience but as a constant and continual natural process. Lensing and Weinfield speak directly to the "evolutionary" nature of Stevens's understanding. According to my study, implicit in this historical view is an awareness of "[o]ur nature as her nature," a fundamentally non-anthropocentric, biocentric standpoint, clearly identifying Stevens as an ecological poet. In describing "an earth / That bore us as a part of all things," Stevens (like Williams) acknowledges the interpenetrative relationship between all forms of life, even, and especially, in death. Such integration is the fundamental premise, indeed the very definition, of ecology.

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<sup>205</sup> Lensing, George. *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2004. 334. Emphasis mine.

<sup>206</sup> Weinfield, Henry. "Stevens's Anatomy." *Wallace Stevens Journal*. 31:2 (Fall 2007). 175.

However, Stevens's ecopoetic mode is rarely capable of standing in isolation from his typically ironic and Modernist perspective. In "The Anatomy of Monotony," for example, a lot hinges on the "If" of that first line. While it goes on to bring (like Williams's poem) a unity to earth and the human race through a parallelism of their deaths, from its first syllable, the poem questions whether, indeed, we really do come from the earth, undercutting the poem's eventual conclusion. This conditional subject is never given full resolution in the poem, implying that the ambiguity of our relationship to the planet we inhabit is a given and our origins essentially unknown. Wienfield notes the ambivalence as a tension between biocentrism and anthropocentrism:

On one hand, if indeed we came from the earth, then it follows that *we could not as a species be different in kind from the other species that inhabit the world*. On the other hand, insofar as we are the most advanced or refined species—the least “earthy,” one might say—then this means that before we came into existence the earth was “lewder”—i.e., cruder and more sexual—than it now is.<sup>207</sup>

Wienfield's suggestion that we are the “most advanced and refined species” betrays some of his own anthropocentric views, but Stevens's use of the conditional “If” is ultimately less deterministic than Wienfield's interpretation in that it leaves the conditional subject open-ended. Even in a poem that ostensibly offers an analog between civilization and nature, Stevens is purposefully ambivalent in maintaining his awareness of the possible gulf between humanity and the world that surrounds us. In considering the extent of Stevens's biocentricity, this ambivalence is a constant challenge. My readings of Williams in previous chapters reveal a more persistent mindset of humanity and nature as one unified system. This is not to say that Stevens's ambiguity demands resolution. It's

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid. 175. Emphasis mine.

perhaps more accurate, in fact, to suggest that he actively seeks such an ambivalence and ambiguity in his use of the biocentric voice. But it does show us that, taking the trait of biocentric perspective alone, Williams's work, such as "Spring and All" and parts of *Paterson*, suggests less ambiguity and instead operates from a more clearly biocentric place. Thus, Stevens's ambiguity, or ambivalence, helps us better appreciate Williams's ecologically-minded work.

Like Williams, Lorine Niedecker is less conditional than Stevens's sometime "If" clauses and markedly more certain in both her sensitivity to ecological symbiosis and in her exercise of a biocentric poetic voice. In an unpublished poem from 1945, she presents her own perspective on the spiritual gulf between humanity and the earth, her own "compost poem." "She was a mourner too," the narrator notes, "Now she's gone / to the earth's core," under a formal church fanfare "with organ notes."<sup>208</sup> Notably, the woman does not pass to a spiritual afterlife, as we see in the following lines. Her interment is irrevocably bound "to the earth's core." That core is no spiritual destination, but instead the woman is quite literally *grounded* by death. Ironically, the woman had remarked before her passing,

[...] half smiling: Heaven?

No, restore

my matter, never free from motion,

to the soil's roar. (6-9)

Niedecker's contrast between the human need for a blissful but false paradise in the afterlife and the biological reality of death falls strictly in favor of the latter view. To the

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<sup>208</sup> Niedecker. "[untitled 'She was a mourner too.']" *Collected Works*, 111

speaker, we are all “mourners” in life, in churches “intoning: That torture called by men delight / touches her no more” (4-5); but the subject of the poem is gone now, returned both “to the earth’s core” and the “soil’s roar.” The explicit reference to the soil calls to mind Stevens’s “O Florida, Venereal Soil” which expresses part of its biocentrism through its literal, physical invocation of the heart of the immediate local, the earth itself. The eloquent treatment of the subject’s “matter” as “never free from motion” calls to mind the processes and energy animating our bodies. “If from the earth we come,” Wallace Stevens mused in “The Anatomy of Monotony,” and much is made of that “If.” But Niedecker is certain that we come from the earth, hence the poem’s speaker’s call to be “restore[d],” feeding this energy back into the earth. Biologically, this ties directly to the laws of thermodynamics, including the law of the conservation of energy, which states that energy (in everything from pendulums to biomasses) can neither be created nor destroyed, but is a constant. According to SUNY professor of physics Michael McDarby, “This means that, as energy works through living systems, it gets transferred, changes, and lost as random molecular motion, but it doesn't disappear. It also came from somewhere.”<sup>209</sup> The “soil’s roar,” while not a literal sound, is by association like the roar of the ‘earth’s’ inherent counterpart, the sea. It’s a natural constant and member of an eternal cycle of organic interplay. The roar is also not unlike William’s voices in that hilltop cemetery of “A Unison.” It represents a similarly transcendent and ecologically-minded unison between human and natural.

By returning the woman’s body to the immediate “soil’s roar” of the cemetery, presumably in Niedecker’s own milieu in Wisconsin, we find her again basing the human experience in her own locals. We see here that Niedecker’s biocentrism is in some ways

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<sup>209</sup> McDarby, Michael. “Cells and Molecules,” *Introduction to Biology*, suny.edu, Web, 3/14/2014.

more explicit than Williams's or Whitman's, and certainly more than Stevens's. As opposed to using a poetic perspective for a subtler sense of the landscape as voice, she more frequently offers up literal scientific fact and the geological record of nature's elemental presence in humanity, to reflect an intimate knowledge of her local nature, bringing to the fore a sense of interconnectedness between its disparate elements. The interconnectedness has its practice in the "restore"-ation of the woman's "matter" to the soil, to the earth.

Her emphasis is again on those actual periodic earth "elements" in the first lines of her 1968 collection *North Central*. The previously mentioned long poem "Lake Superior" opens:

In every part of every living thing

is stuff that once was rock.

In blood the minerals

of the rock

Iron the common element of earth

In rocks and freighters (1-6)

Whether on the earth's uppermost layers of soil (as in the previous poem) or in the deeper crust of the earth's "rock" and "minerals" (here), Niedecker is making an explicit connection between humanity, its death, its blood, and the natural and geologic earth it inhabits. The stage is then set for the rest of the poem which goes on to chronicle the lake's human, historical, and natural, past. The lines link together the "blood" that runs through "every living thing," human and animal alike, with the earth ("rock") beneath our

feet, as well as our own powerful manipulation of the ores of that same earth into the powerful “freighters” that now carry people and products (natural as well as manmade) across the great lakes. The unequivocal nature of her assertions—“in *every* part of *every* living thing”—gives a Williamsian power to the strength of the ecological interconnectedness of the poem’s players.

For Stevens, on the other hand, the unity of nature and humanity frequently takes the form of less active union and is instead achieved via an emptying of the human. An example of him performing a biocentric perspective can be readily found in one of Stevens’s most anthologized poems, “The Snow Man.” Published in *Harmonium*, the title of “The Snow Man” refers not to an anthropomorphized pile of frozen water, but instead a conflation of the human and the natural, in a winter setting. In order to observe the earth’s natural wintry beauty, “and not [...] think / of any misery in the sound of the wind,” Stevens tell us in the first line that “[o]ne must have a mind of winter” (7-8).<sup>210</sup> In order to hear the cold wind and not fear the misery it inevitably inflicts upon the human body, one must have a “mind of winter,” a consciousness that embodies the earth’s dormant season. We recall Feo’s claim that Stevens “said [in Florida] you live with your senses more than when you live in a cold place,” calling to mind the idea of an inverse of this poem, a “mind of summer.” Additionally, from a seasonal perspective, it’s useful to note that Williams’s aforementioned preface to *Paterson*, wherein he felt that a “*local pride; spring, summer, fall, and the sea*” eschewed mention of precisely the season Stevens uses as his platform for ecocentricity, winter. This marks another divergence in the active-vs.-passive way in which these respective poets see humanity eliding itself with, or finding itself already a part of, nature. The end result, for Williams, of the

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<sup>210</sup> Stevens. *Collected Poems*, 9-10.

collecting together of the seasons, is one of nature's most powerful forces: the sea.

Notably, the fourth, and originally final, book of *Paterson*, the intended summing up of his personal epic, is titled "The Run to the Sea," as, for Williams, this is the inevitable goal of life. In another biocentric union, that book finds the central character, Dr. Paterson, running with his dog into the sea, to indeterminate end.

Stevens's sense of the ecological in "The Snow Man," however, is differently tuned in that he understands the path toward a unity with nature beginning with an emptying of the self. In the poem's final stanza he refers to the "listener," to this wind who may be able to achieve that unity by becoming "*nothing himself, behold[ing] / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is*" (14-15, emphasis mine). Stevens said of the poem, in a letter to scholar and poet Hi Simons, that it was "an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand and enjoy it."<sup>211</sup> By so attaining objectivity and hearing the wind as a meteorological force, without ascribing to it qualities such as "misery" that betray human origins, Stevens's "listener" would be able to achieve something akin to an ecological perspective in which s/he can "identify with reality." This perspective completely eschews the anthropocentrism (the "misery" of the wind) so common in the human imagination as it is typically defined. The end result of such an achievement is a Zen-like "beholding" of both "[n]othing that is not there and the nothing that is." That is, not only would the human inclination toward commentary or judgment be forestalled, but it would reveal to the listener the "nothing that is," reflecting back to the self the same objectivity one finds in the ecological processes of nature, including, but not limited to, death. Stevens scholar and ecocritic Gyorgyi Voros, in his ecostudy of Stevens, *Notations of the Wild*, describes the "nothing that is" as "fertile,

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<sup>211</sup> *Letters of Wallace Stevens* 464.

revenant Nature” and “the nothing of Buddhism, a fructive void from which the world springs.”<sup>212</sup>

There is an echo of both the snow and its frozen detachment in Stevens’s later poem, “A Quiet Normal Life.” The persona of that poem similarly seeks a snow man-like state of consciousness to occupy a “place,” “a world in which, like snow / He became an inhabitant, obedient” (4-5).<sup>213</sup> This subjugation of the self to the environment is the first step toward a biocentric perspective. The next step is to become not just not-human, but to re-enter the world as an active member, as Stevens has it in “Chocura to Its Neighbor”: “to be part of sea, large earth, large air” and, at his most biocentric, “[i]t is / To perceive men without reference to their form” (3-5).<sup>214</sup> This notion of being “part of the sea, large earth, large air” nods toward an ecological understanding of the human “without reference” to the human form but instead as a subsumed part of nature. Stevens’s persona finds further union in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” when he notes “A man walked living among the forms of thought / To see their lustre truly as it is / And in harmonious prodigy to be / [...] a likeness of the earth” (26-32).<sup>215</sup> The poet’s language brings him to “a likeness of the earth,” a mutual, ecological, interpenetrative relation between the human and the natural.

Voros notes of these types of lyrics: “in the poems affirming earth and its natural presences and processes...Stevens more and more sang a song of self subsumed under a greater natural order.”<sup>216</sup> He neglects to go so far as to describe the rhetorical move as inherently biocentric, but this is precisely the argument that I am making in favor of

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<sup>212</sup> Voros. *Notations of the Wild*. 140.

<sup>213</sup> Stevens. *Collected Poems*. 523.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.* 296.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.* 432-3.

<sup>216</sup> Voros. 151-152.

describing this tendency in Stevens as reflecting the biocentric, and therefore ecological poetic, qualities of his work. Typical of Stevens, however, we find a distinct ambivalence about what the end result of a biocentric union can be. While in “The Snow Man” he clearly counsels toward seeking (“one must have”) an objectivity (“a mind of winter”) that would help humanity achieve harmony with nature, such a union is not posited as an inherent *ideal*, to the extent that we find it so in Williams. The attitude we see in Williams, in “Spring and All” and *Paterson* specifically, is not simply that humanity and nature are part of the same ecological system but that this interconnectedness is mutually beneficial.

To this point, most of the examples cited of Williams’s biocentricity are centered in the positive, life-giving moments of those shared cycles, such as the burgeoning buds of “Spring and All.” When (as in the Unios mussels incident in Book 1 of *Paterson*) there is a darker side to humanity’s interplay with the environment, it comes at the hands of humans who are unaware of their own ecosystem’s delicate balance, resulting specifically in the near decimation of a local animal species. Stevens, on the other hand, spends “The Snow Man” *describing* how one may achieve a nature-like objectivity, but he does not clearly privilege such a unison. Ecologically speaking, Voros makes the claim that “Stevens’s ‘self’ needed fulfillment in terms of a processive world in which *systems and wholes were more important than any individual member.*”<sup>217</sup> Williams’s poetry seems more compellingly convinced, and convincing, that humanity plays an equal, and important, role within those larger systems. To apply Voros’s quote about Stevens, Williams’s ‘self’ finds fulfillment in a world in which the individual members of

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid. 153. Emphasis mine.

those systems and wholes are vital parts of the systems and are as important as the systems themselves.

#### 4) Conclusion

In a charming short idyll from the immediate post-war period, Niedecker achieves a union with her Modernist contemporaries through the conduit of the natural world, specifically the flight path and pattern of a feathered fowl. “If I were a bird”<sup>218</sup> (the title imagines), “I’d flitter and feed and delouse myself” she says, “close to Williams’s house / and his kind eyes”; and two stanzas later: “On Stevens’ fictive sibilant hibiscus flower / I’d poise myself, a cuckoo, flamingo pink.” (5-7, 10-11). Her journey goes on to take her to the homes and respective *oikoi* of H.D., Marianne Moore, Louis Zukofsky, e.e. Cummings, and Charles Reznikoff. In this playful piece of deceptively light-hearted verse, Niedecker literally soars on the wings of her imagination, taking the form of the nature she sees around her. Tellingly, she highlights aspects of each poet that tie them to her own creative work and in terms that even invoke aspects of their collective ecopoetics. Her bird-self lands “close to Williams’s house,” in his native, local New Jersey, like his poetry, finding her footing right in his own backyard. His “kind eyes,” which see the natural world so much like she does, are the attraction for her. A bird herself, she sees his local as he does—through a biocentric lens.

In visiting Stevens, Niedecker imagines herself “poised” upon a hibiscus flower, making direct reference to “Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores,” one of Stevens’s early poems upon the native fauna of Florida. There, Niedecker’s bird-spirit finds itself transformed into “a cuckoo, flamingo-pink,” tying her affinity to Stevens with his

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<sup>218</sup> Niedecker. *Collected Works*, 130

environmental fascination (like Williams and herself) with the local natural environment. Seemingly, Stevens's poems help Niedecker envision herself in his form and vision of nature. Rhetorically, her poetic flight reveals to us the affinity she felt with Stevens in his perspective of nature and humanity's interaction with it.

What end does Niedecker's imaginative flight serve? I argue that it is to bring her closer to the community of artists that her own dedication to the local prevented her, in her own lifetime, from joining with more regularity. Though the three poets were separated by geography (as well as by age, Niedecker being the younger, second-generation modernist, and by gender) and used sometimes disparate poetic forms to express their natural themes, they all achieve, to varying degrees, what contemporary critics and poets would recognize as ecological poetry. In their successes and failures, we can come to some conclusions about how they're engaging with broader ecocritical themes that we are still, in our own time, striving to define.

As noted in the Introduction to this study, the critical definition of what comprises ecopoetics has not been set in stone. I have chosen in this chapter to focus on the ways Williams, Stevens, and Niedecker perform such ecopoetic qualities as dedication to the local (both as "residents" and as "tourists"), and biocentric perspectives which elide humanity with its natural environs, both within and apart from the wider tradition of compost poetry. The comparative study this chapter has laid out reveals the varying extents to which all three achieve these ends in their most ecologically-minded works. Taken as a whole, they offer a useful survey of three modernists breaking from the urban/rural dichotomy so often associated with that literary movement and move beyond it in their treatment of reality and ecology as material for artistic expression. In doing so,

I think it gives greater “clarity, outline of leaf” (as Williams says in “Spring and All”), and greater distinction to what Williams was able to achieve in his lifelong body of poetry.

Clearly grounded in his local milieu, Williams is overt in bringing nature and human together in his own positive poetic voice and is frank in his statement of the poet’s imagination as a force centered in actual, physical nature. To Williams, the environment that surrounds him is not merely a subject for a few certain nature-centered poems, but he in fact feels

*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 .<sup>219</sup>

That is, the poem acts as nature does, and nature informs the art to the extent that the two are one. Daily cycles of sunlight and night illuminate more than our collective environment; they also enlighten the poet, the poem, and, ultimately, the reader, to a new and clearer awareness of their role within in a larger ecological context.

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<sup>219</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 100, emphasis mine.

## VI. CONCLUSION

### 1) “but what the hell does it mean?”<sup>220</sup>

In the earliest published and collected statement of his own poetics, *Spring and All*, William Carlos Williams argues “the work of the imagination [is] not ‘like’ anything but transfused with the same forces which transfuse the earth.”<sup>221</sup> Art, then, is not simile, and the artist’s work is not to create parallels or imitations of what the artist sees but to create new aspects of that world. This project has argued that this is (in Williams’s case as well as in the case of other poets of his time) especially true of ecopoetry, as nature poetry, environmental poetry, and especially as ecological poetry. These readings have sought to reveal how Williams, Stevens, and Niedecker, like ecopoets in our own time, provide both implicit and explicit insight into the role art can play in humanity’s relationship with its environment.

In the coming pages, my goal is to emphasize the value of the overarching thematic arguments that come out of such an understanding and that I have put forth in this dissertation. After reflecting upon their implications for our understanding of Williams, I will delineate where such an understanding can lead for future work. Reading Williams’s poetry through an ecological lens can improve the understanding of ecopoetics in our own contemporary context, which I plan to show in part by highlighting Williams’s relationship to current practitioners of ecopoetry such as Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder. Finally, in addressing the contrast between Williams and especially Snyder, I will reveal the extent to which Williams seems reflexively aware of the inevitability of

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<sup>220</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 114.

<sup>221</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 1*. 207.

his poetry's effect on modernity. In a close reading of one of his short lyrics of explicit poetics, "A Sort of Song," I'll argue for a concise but clear self-portrait of his ecopoetics at work on the page, echoing into the future, including our own time.

Simply stated, the goal of this work has been to offer up a new ecologically-centered paradigm by which to read Williams's poetry. While an awareness of presence of the natural world in his work is not new, what is original is the idea that nature is just as frequently the active *subject* of his writing as it is passive object and that, for Williams especially, poetry did more than affect the reader. At times, it literally enacted the physical reality of the world, via the artist's imagination. Such a view helps clearly identify Williams as an ecopoet working in an otherwise pre-environmentalist era. Whether it be in his persona's speaking as a puppet-like voice for nature (such as the anthropomorphization of "The Trees" discussed in Chapter II), or in enacting on the page the physical performance of nature (as in the rebirth of *Spring and All* in Chapter III), Williams frequently allowed his close, personal affinity for the natural world to manifest itself in *speaking nature* through his poetry.

Williams seems to anticipate poetics as contemporary environmentalist and ecopoet Gary Snyder describes it when he says, "Our work as writers and scholars is not just 'about' the environment, not just 'speaking for' nature, but manifesting in ourselves and our work the integrity of the world."<sup>222</sup> The three main themes by which I have read Williams doing this, and a few of the traits which help us to view him as an ecological poet are: his treatment of the imagination as a natural force, his intense lifelong focus upon his local environment in Rutherford, New Jersey, and the rejection of the traditional

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<sup>222</sup> From his essay "Ecology, Literature, and the New World Disorder" in *Back on the Fire: Essays*. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2008. 32.

anthropocentric view, in favor of a biocentric sensibility—a trait he shares with other poets in his own time, and our own.

### *Imagination*

Nearly a century ago, Williams laid out in the prose sections of *Spring and All* an explicit argument that poetry is more than a representation of nature but is in fact nature itself. Further, as pointed out in Chapter III, he believes that the imagination which helps to produce poetry and put it on the page, entering our own natural world, comes not from the acculturated mind of the human poet but, in fact, from the same energy as those elements we consider a part of nature. When Williams calls imagination an “actual force comparable to electricity or steam,” he could as easily call it gravity, wind, or any other force of nature that carries an inherent energy. Such an understanding of poetry was revolutionary, especially for its time and for coming so early in Williams’s career (1921).

But as I argue in Chapter IV, Williams carried this personal conception of the imagination forward, especially through the nearly lifelong creative process and twelve-year publication history that produced *Paterson*, Books 1-5 (1946-1958). The imagination in *Paterson* manifests itself in broader natural forces such as the potential for life in the nascent seed in Book 1, and the destructive renewal of flood water, and the simultaneously destructive and transformative power of fire in Book 3. Unlike the explicit prose of *Spring and All*, *Paterson* puts his ideas about the imagination into practical application in the poem. He sees imagination as the solution to the primary conundrum of that epic work. The opening of *Paterson*, Book 1, poses the problem:

“Rigor of beauty is the quest. But how will you find beauty when / It is locked in the mind past all remonstrance?”<sup>223</sup> to which he replies later in Book 5:

The flower dies down

and rots away .

But there is a hole

in the bottom of the bag

It is the imagination

which cannot be fathomed.

It is through this hole we escape<sup>224</sup>

The imagination, then, while as destructive as flood waters and transformative as fire, retains its potential in the seed, and allows the artist and the reader an escape and the ability to, as he queried in the beginning, “find beauty” and unlock it from its prison in the mind.

Combining the at once destructive and creative powers of the imagination that we find in *Spring and All* and *Paterson*, nature itself provides that escape and unlocks that beauty in the form of human imagination. The “[r]igor of beauty” is “locked away in the mind,” but the key to its unlocking is the imagination, the creative force born naturally within humanity itself. Such a paradox shows us Williams arguing for an ecological understanding of poetry, while simultaneously acknowledging that, contrary to the dichotomous nature-vs.-culture formulation by which people often view nature, humanity is itself a part of nature, out of which comes the biocentric perspective which later contributes to my argument for reading Williams as an ecological poet.

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<sup>223</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 3.

<sup>224</sup> Williams. *Paterson*. 210.

*The Local*

In addition, running throughout his poetic body of work, all through this study, and implicitly undergirding Williams's conception of the imagination's performance of immediate, concrete reality is a strict sense of focus upon his area: his local, and his *locale*, in the Passaic River valley of northern New Jersey. It is here we see Williams again foreshadowing modern environmental and ecological philosophy, both socially and artistically. In Chapters II, III, and IV, I've argued that while Williams's artistic philosophy of the local as "the only universal" is based for him in the geography of New Jersey, it finds its praxis in his poetry in decidedly ecological terms. The ecosystems of flora and fauna in his poems are, like the transformation of reality via the imagination, a gesture that explicitly marks him as an intentional ecopoet, albeit without the terminology in his time to so declare it.

An intentional focus upon one's immediate community (social, ecological, and artistic) is commonplace in our culture. Even in poetry, we have the contemporary example of someone like ecopoet Wendell Berry, who famously lives on his fifth-generation family farm in Henry County, Kentucky, raises much of his own food, and corresponds exclusively by "snail mail." But once again, it behooves us to recall Williams's historical context, when most of his fellows and colleagues in American poetry were emigrating to Europe. Even socially, Williams came of age and grew old in an American context that saw the migration of most of the middle class from rural communities into the cities, and finally back out to the suburbs, with the development of transportation popularizing travel by air to distant locales. Against this background, we have the contrasting case of Williams, who (like an East coast version of Wendell Berry)

lived out his entire life in the house in which he grew up and spent his life calling on the people of his direct community in their homes as a doctor. And this was no mere accident of his circumstance; it was a conscious choice on the part of Williams: to serve, to study, and to *write* his environment (natural, ecological, and social). It is not merely the setting for his work, it is his work itself.

In Chapter III, I read the first poem of *Spring and All*, “By the road to the contagious hospital,” as a primary example of how Williams’s poetry can go beyond describing the burgeoning buds of a spring landscape to enacting that landscape, through its grammar and punctuation, in its delayed verbs and repeated em dashes. In Chapter IV, I show him taking his poetic use of the local a step further by using the landscape of Paterson, New Jersey, not just as backdrop to the poem’s action, but as a character and active player in the poem. In Chapter V, I point out Williams’s ability to inhabit his local in a way described by ecocritic Neil Evernden as being a “resident” rather than a tourist. I also tie Williams to fellow ecological “resident” Lorine Niedecker in her native Wisconsin and set them both against their contemporary Wallace Stevens, who is at once tourist and resident in his poems about his geographic home in Connecticut and his poetic/spiritual home in Florida.

### *Biocentrism*

Another ecologically poetic trait these three contemporaries share, as I go on to argue in Chapter V, is the one that is, perhaps, to me one of the most vital eco-poetic qualities of all: a biocentric perspective. As I’ve argued in nearly every chapter of this work, the traditional, inherited understanding of nature’s role in our world is usually as

separate from us, set apart, and Other. This is most readily seen in the observational nature poetry of the Romantic period, which most frequently uses the natural world as an object to be viewed, rather than as a subject in the poem, playing a part in its action. In Chapter II, my reading of Walt Whitman's "Song of the Redwood Tree" highlights that even when speaking for the species of trees, Whitman remains in an anthropocentric mode, viewing humanity as the better, "superber race." I contrasted this with Williams's poem "The Trees" which while still anthropomorphizing the species, nonetheless does so from a more subtly ecologically aware place, and acknowledges such natural things as plants as being on an equal footing with humanity. That kind of awareness of the earth as a unified ecosystem, not just as a place of residence for a single species above others, was unique for his time, and, while more mainstream today, is still under-appreciated by many.

Such a biocentric voice is pervasive throughout Williams's oeuvre, as I argue in Chapters III and IV, through the plant buds springing up from the landscape in "By the road to the contagious hospital" and in the flora and fauna of *Paterson*. In Chapter V, I provide another, more nuanced way of understanding this perspective in a discussion of Williams, Niedecker, and Stevens's poems about death and interment, by considering a genre I refer to as *compost poetry*. Providing close readings of poems of death and interment by all three, I contrast their respective awarenesses of that most eco-poetic moment when the human body (already an organic matter) is subsumed back into the molecular world from which it comes. In Chapter II, I similarly look at Walt Whitman's "This Compost" and the way it (unlike the other three poets' compost poems) maintains the dichotomous anthropocentrism of his time, most notably in the poem's final line,

when Whitman reflects upon how the earth “gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last.” The contrast with Whitman brings the achievement of biocentricity by Williams, Niedecker, and Stevens into starker distinction. Ultimately, whether in compost poetry or more implicitly in the personae of their other poems, the three modernists discussed in Chapter V all reflect an evolution out of the narrow anthropocentricity of previous forms and provide a useful critical position for better understanding the ecopoetry of our own time.

Though Williams’s uses of the imagination, his focus on the local, and his biocentric perspective are not the only ecologically poetic practices at work in his poetry, they do offer a valuable shorthand for appreciating his innovations as an American ecopoet and offer us some insight into his relationship to contemporary ecopoets. In the field of Williams studies, a high value is placed on work that offers us a new understanding not just of the poetry as objective reality on the page but of the doctor-poet who produced it. To this end, the theoretical reading of Williams as an ecopoet brings to the fore a heretofore overlooked quality of his own personality and personal history—that of his ecological inclinations. The evidence is all there in his historical biography, from a childhood desire to be a forester, his years spent in a rural environment that gradually urbanized as he grew older within it, the intellectually considered choice to remain not just in America but in his hometown, even with the call of the metropolitan a mere half hour away, and his lifelong interest in flowers, gardening, and exposing his sons to the natural world. These are facts that separately describe William Carlos Williams the man. But utilizing the relatively new theoretical field of ecocriticism to discover a reflection of

the philosophical extension of this aspect of him in his art gives greater depth to our critical perspective on Williams as an amateur ecologist of sorts, and a man in touch not just with his social “community” generally but with his biotic community and the ecosystem of his geographic region.

When we come to appreciate the emphasis Williams the person (and the poet) put on the ecology of the world, it commensurately improves our understanding of one of the most significant figures in American modernist poetry and how that naturalist perspective informs his work in its context in American letters, to wit, the overdue recognition of Williams as an ecopoet provides us a jumping-off point for (re)evaluating other modernists through a similar perspective. Williams’s ecological poetry doesn’t limit itself to just “speaking” the nature of his community. As I argue in my reading of *Paterson*, and of the poem “To Elsie” in Chapter III, Williams sometimes viewed the ecological element of imagination as a possible solution to the ills so often expressed by other modernists (cf. T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”). While there is (as that poem says) “No one / to witness and adjust, / no one to drive the car,” nonetheless the “imagination strains / after deer,” and still the all-important “isolate flecks” are “given off.”<sup>225</sup> In *Paterson*, Williams sees the imagination as the “hole / in the bottom of the bag” through which modernity could “escape.” What might ecopoetry, and its messages, offer not just modernity, then, but post-modernity and the contemporary world?

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<sup>225</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 1*. 218-219.

2) **“O marvelous! what new configuration will come next?”**<sup>226</sup>

Part of the answer to such a question lies in considering what specific possibilities this study might have opened up for future work. Williams’s poetry is fertile ground for ecocritical reading and, naturally, limits of space and time dictate that I focus on a rather narrow field of it. However, in my research, I came across analysis of Williams’s poetry through the subfield ecofeminism (specifically in his poem “Queen Anne’s Lace”), and it would seem that the field of Williams’s studies is due for an update on work that addresses his attitudes toward (and artistic appropriation of) women.<sup>227</sup> Images such as Williams’s frequent feminization of flowers (as he says in *Paterson*, “a man like a city and a woman like a flower...Innumerable women, each like a flower”), and the “low [Garrett] mountain” that acts as the city Paterson’s female counterpart in the epic work offer ready inroads for ecofeminist readings.

Ecocriticism also has a long relationship with Marxist criticism, and there’s ample material in Williams’s poetry available for scholars looking to build upon how ecology is used to reflect or undermine class power struggles. Further work has been opened up here, for example, by my reading of the Unios mussels and Lakeview passages in Book 1 (discussed in Chapter IV), or the ways in which Williams treats the urban and rural dichotomy in certain of his short lyrics, with reference to economic disparity.

Thinking more broadly, as noted in the Introduction, there has been some, but not enough, ecocritical work on the modern poets in general, and I’ve sought to offer in this study some perspective and tools by which to further that. Compost poetry, for example,

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<sup>226</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 1*. 36.

<sup>227</sup> The last major work on Williams and women, Audrey Rogers’s *Virgin and Whore: The Image of Women in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company Press) was published in 1987.

while a rather specific subgenre of ecopoetry, may be a good basis of comparison for future work on how poets of nearly any period have treated that very specific, scientific, inherently ecological moment when humanity re-enters the rest of its biotic community.

Further, thinking beyond the modern period, and given the profound influence Williams has had upon contemporary poetry, I think it behooves future scholars to consider the relationship between Williams's work and that of eco-poets writing today. Throughout this study, I've suggested that Williams should be understood as a poet ahead of his time. In my discussion in Chapter IV, I claim him as a proto-environmentalist, and in each of the other chapters I have suggested that the eco-poetic qualities in Williams's work show his form and themes calling forward to an ecologically aware sensibility that, at least on a social level, has only begun to enter the mainstream culture in the last 30 to 40 years.

One artist who has been dedicatedly active and engaged in the environmental movement almost since its inception (and has likewise applied that to his art in the composition of ecopoetry) is Wendell Berry. As noted in the discussion of Williams's sense of the local, Berry has lived out a similar dedication to his native Kentucky and has been explicitly aware of the communion between his own lifestyle and art, and that of Williams. In 2011, he published *The Poetry of William Carlos Williams of Rutherford*, in the prologue of which Berry refers to the book as "a payment or at least an acknowledgment of a personal debt" to Williams.<sup>228</sup> One of the fundamental arguments of the book itself is that Williams deliberately used his poetry as a place of "local adaptation" in which Berry sees Williams's "lifelong effort to come to terms with, to imagine, and to be of use to his native and chosen place" and that "from his example I

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<sup>228</sup> Berry, 3.

learned to put my own work under that heading.”<sup>229</sup> As such, future scholarship on the ecocritical Williams could be well served by addressing some of the artistic commiseration that comes out of such a harmony of interests and lifestyle.

Another living ecopoet whose work could easily enlighten our understanding of Williams, especially in relation to contemporary ecological poetry, is Gary Snyder. In an interview from 1977, Snyder explicitly mentions Williams among a group of poets (along with Whitman, Pound, Eliot, and Stevens) to whom he “read and listened to closely.”<sup>230</sup> In poems whose content finds Snyder addressing his own artistic heritage, such as the frequently-studied “Axe Handles,” the poet pays homage especially to how much he draws from Ezra Pound, and especially from the Japanese and Chinese Zen poets, coming out of his experience studying and practicing Buddhism.<sup>231</sup> While the connections between Snyder and Williams are not as explicit as those between Williams and Berry, like many contemporary poets, Snyder owes much to Williams in terms of both his poetic form and his treatment of the quotidian in a direct, stripped-bare style. Take, for example, this selection from Snyder’s early poem, “Riprap:”

Lay down these words  
 Before your mind like rocks.  
     Placed solid, by hands  
 In choice of place, set  
 Before the body of the mind  
     in space and time:  
 Solidarity of bark, leaf, or wall

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>230</sup> Snyder, Gary. *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks 1964-1979*. New York: New Directions, 1980. 58.

<sup>231</sup> Snyder. *No Nature*. New York: Pantheon Book, 1983. 266.

Riprap of things:<sup>232</sup>

Like Williams, Snyder treats his immediate reality, and especially its natural features, in an unvarnished way that seems to mirror Williams's sense of the poetic and natural as directly related, as described in *Spring and All* and elsewhere. In fact, Snyder's lines, "Solidarity of bark, leaf, or wall / Riprap of things," call to mind the vital lines from Williams's "By the road to the contagious hospital" which similarly brings the reader to a paused moment of intense focus upon this tiny, natural corner of the world, a kind of microscopic attention to the thing at hand: "One by one objects are defined— / It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf."<sup>233</sup>

Even more fittingly for this conclusive discussion on Williams's ecological poetics, Snyder's ordering of rocks and words into that poetic moment sounds strikingly similar to a short Williams poem whose content and form offer a nice praxis for his ecopoetics. From his 1944 collection *The Wedge*, and coming (like "By the road to the contagious hospital") after stirring introductory prose on the role and power of poetry in the modern world, "A Sort of Song" reads:

Let the snake wait under  
 his weed  
 and the writing  
 be of words, slow and quick, sharp  
 to strike, quiet to wait,  
 sleepless.

—through metaphor to reconcile

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<sup>232</sup> Snyder. *No Nature*. 21.

<sup>233</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 1*. 183.

the people and the stones.

Compose. (No ideas

but in things) Invent!

Saxifrage is my flower that splits

the rocks.<sup>234</sup>

The phrase, “No ideas but in things,” has come to be closely identified with Williams’s poetics as an Imagist as well as in his simple and direct treatment of the people, places and things of daily life. Though better known for its appearance in *Paterson* Book 1, the phrase’s origins here in “A Sort of Song” show us how this mantra-like concept relates directly to Williams’s sense of nature in poetry, and the role ecopoetry can play in his thinking and in his work.

The poem is a compact reflexive contemplation on writing. Williams calls for “the writing / [to] be of words,” which are paradoxically “slow and quick, sharp / to strike, quiet to wait” and “sleepless,” like the snake attending beneath its weed. A poem like a reptile, and a poet like a flower—like Saxifrage, whose Latin-roots name literally translates to stone breaker (and which, as Williams likely knew, is medicinally used in the treatment of kidney stones). According to Williams’s comments on the poem during a reading of it at Kenneth Burke’s home, its idea is “that the poet and all that he stands for is absolutely insistent and will prevail in the end...it is the poet’s intention to be completely revolutionary...if it takes him forever. He’s going to win in the end, and it’s a celebration of that.”<sup>235</sup> “Saxifrage is my flower,” the poem and the poet proclaim. In a biocentric and ecologically poetic move that brings together a number of the traits I’ve

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<sup>234</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 2*. 55.

<sup>235</sup> Williams. *Collected Poems, Volume 1*. n455.

argued throughout this study, Williams identifies himself with another floral species from the ecosystem of his local New Jersey; and saxifrage is a hearty perennial, capable of enduring even the resistance of the stone itself. If Snyder's poem's words are stones set in place, Williams's flower is capable of breaking through the words, of insisting on his eco-poetic project, and, finally, no matter how long it takes, succeeding even in a future beyond his own lifetime. Through his poetry's "metaphor [he can] reconcile / the people" with the earth.

This study has sought to perform something similar—to reconcile Williams's ecopoetics with contemporary ideas about what ecopoetry looks like. Like the saxifrage, those ecopoetics have broken through decades of oversight to come to light in an era when they can now be better understood, thanks in part to the modern critical theory of ecocriticism. More work remains to be done, but like the snake of Williams's poem, these ideas are slow to wait and quick to strike. Williams "Invented"ed and "Compose"d, and the imagination that made those inventions possible is, according to his poetics and my arguments here, sleepless.

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