

Imagination and Self: The Autonomy of William Carlos Williams

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Literary history is back, as David Perkins points out, but it has returned in a new mode. The old historicism had “three fundamental assumptions: that literary works are formed by their historical context; that change in literature takes place developmentally; and that this change is the unfolding of an idea, principle, or suprapersonal entity” (1-2). This paper is going to examine William Carlos Williams and his improvisational work Kora in Hell. Historicists of the old dispensation tend to read Williams and Kora in terms of their place in some “suprapersonal entity.” Hugh Kenner places Williams in what he calls “The Pound Era,” that grouping of modernists in whose work he sees interesting connections. Kenner writes:

Two boys went to Harvard. One stayed home afterward, and became an insurance executive. The other went abroad, and became a banker and publisher. Both wrote poetry.

Two boys went to Penn. One stayed home afterward and became a physician. The other went abroad, and became Ezra Pound.

Stevens: Eliot. Williams: Pound. It is as neat as a laboratory experiment. (516)

Old historicist Joseph Evans Slate wants to contextualize Williams too, specifically in relation to his work Kora in Hell. Slate sees Kora as the “first dadaist work in American literature,” and thus, he invites us to place Williams and Kora in the historical context of the Dada movement (476).

Perkins recognizes that the revival of literary history has brought with it something new. The new historicism takes many forms, but generally, it “foregrounds the ideological aspects of texts from the past for the purpose of intervening in the social struggles of the present” (10). David Frail writes from such a new historicist perspective. He sees Williams as duped by an ideology of individualism which prevents him from seeing that the self is a social construct (5) and from remaking the world through some sort of engagement of art with that world (197). My intention in this paper is to show that, contrary to Frail’s assessment, Williams in Kora in Hell is aware that individuals are socially constructed, but he believes that an autonomous self can be created in the imagination. This self can

then communicate its social concerns to other active imaginations through works of art. This constitutes the engagement of art with world and is the only effective political engagement possible.

The idea that the self is socially constructed is presented in its most depressingly radical form by Louis Althusser. Althusser believes that the subject is inevitably formed by ideology and “Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISAs) (73). These ISAs, such as churches, schools, families, unions, and so forth, perpetuate the dominant ideology of the State in order to ensure the continuation of the State as constituted. Althusser goes so far as to say that “individuals are always-already subjects” because “ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects,” even before they are born (97). One can ask, then, if our selves are inevitably formed by the dominant capitalist ideology, why do “Repressive State Apparatuses” (73), such as the police and the courts, exist? Do not interpellated subjects freely accept their roles under the dominant ideology as Althusser suggests (101)? Althusser, and I think Frail, might answer that belief in the liberty to act is an essential part of capitalist ideology. Consequently, some subjects may fall into the trap of believing that “liberty” means that individuals have a free choice to act contrary to the dominant ideology. And, of course, such a choice does exist, but the resulting acts are bound to be repressed, so in effect, free choice is negated. One need only contemplate such examples of repressed contradictory ideologues as the Branch Davidians cult, the Black Panthers, and Jeffrey Dahmer to see the truth of this. Where, then, does William Carlos Williams enter into this discussion? Williams, as I will show, knows that ISAs have a powerful influence over individuals, but he believes that the individual self can be free in imagination, that imagination is the field in which free selves communicate. For Williams, this can be a sufficiently free self.

Williams, like all of us, was influenced by social institutions and forces: the Unitarian church, the University of Pennsylvania and its medical school, the union work of his father-in-law Paul Herman, even his British-subject father’s socialism. Frail points out that “all brought him to choose politics of a liberal, democratic service bounded by the ideology of middle-class, American individualism and democracy” (54). But Frail contends that Williams believed in an individual self that was not constituted “by any social force from ‘outside’ him” (5). This may be true, but there is ample evidence that Williams recognized social influences on individuals. Frail himself acknowledges that “Throughout his own writing Williams used ‘church’ as a figure for repression of the individual” (35). In the commentary to *Improvisation XXII.2*, Williams reveals the devastating effect of ISAs, in this case the churches. After praising the spontaneity of his little son’s improvisations, which are superior to his own, Williams

writes: “Never have I heard so crushing a critique as those desolate inventions, involved half-hymns, after his first visit to a Christian Sunday school” (74). When Williams was a school physician in Rutherford in 1910-11, he wrote in his notebook: “Teach to learn to obey—but in truth we teach them not to think, that is it” (qtd. in Frail 42). Furthermore, in 1953 Williams told his friend John Thirlwall that his, (Williams’) mother’s standards were repressive: “My poor mother always taught me the highest ideals: to be an artist—to be pure—to be sexless—and that almost tore me apart . . .” (qtd. in Driscoll 74). Williams was not so naive as to discount social influences on the individual; rather, it was just such forces that he wrote Kora in Hell to counteract.

Peter Schmidt informs us that Williams’s automatic writing, from which Kora was drawn, “was visionary therapy, not ‘art’” (106). Kora in Hell was written in 1917-18. During the period of its composition, Doctor Williams had a severe influenza epidemic to deal with. World War I was in progress, and Williams was suspected of being pro-German. His father was dying of cancer, and rivalries with competing doctors were in full bloom. Finally, he was estranged from his wife, “who was angry with him for chasing other women” (Schmidt 106). In order to cope with the pressure of these outside forces, Williams wrote. He wrote every night after the business of the day was completed. In his autobiography, Williams explains with great feeling the depth of the crisis he was facing and the importance to himself of his response to it—to write.

The third book was Kora in Hell. Damn it, the freshness, the newness of a springtime which I had sensed among the others, a reawakening of letters, all that delight which . . . making a world to match the supremacies of the past could mean was being blotted out by the war. The stupidity, the calculated viciousness of a money-grubbing society such as I knew and violently wrote against; everything I wanted to see live and thrive was being deliberately murdered in the name of church and state.

It was Persephone gone into Hades, into hell. Kora was the springtime of the year; my year, my self was being slaughtered. What was the use of denying it? For relief, to keep myself from planning and thinking at all, I began to write in earnest. (A 158)¹

What, then, is this “self” that Williams felt was being slaughtered?

Schmidt finds that “Most of Kora in Hell can be read as an argument between Williams’

¹ “A” in the citation indicates Williams’s Autobiography. All other citations for Williams are from Imaginations. (See Works Cited)

undiscovered or buried ‘Me myself’ and his blockading ‘duplicate selves’” (126).² This can be most clearly seen in Improvisation XII.2 of *Kora* and its commentary. “The trick is never to touch the world anywhere. Leave yourself at the door, walk in, admire the pictures, talk a few words with the master of the house, question his wife a little, rejoin yourself at the door . . .” (53). The commentary explains that the poet “imagining himself to be two persons he eases his mind by putting his burdens upon one while the other takes what pleasure there is before him” (53). The sense is that there is a real self that others do not see; they see only the socially-constructed self. I think we have all had experiences in which our inner self, our inner thoughts did not match the social face that others were seeing at the time. Improvisation XVI.3 sheds further light on the distinction. The social self indicated by “What I am, why that they made me” is contrasted with the agency of the true self—“What I do, why that I choose for myself” (61). And what does Williams choose to do? The brief quotation from Kandinsky in the Prologue to *Kora* and Williams cryptic comment on it would seem to indicate that Williams, the artist, chooses “to express himself” (26).

What is also interesting to note is Williams’s story of Maxwell Bodenheim. Bodenheim is said to have a “fully developed” “virtue of selfabsorption.” Williams links Bodenheim’s self-involvement to a “fullness of the imagination.” It seems clear from the story that Bodenheim has no socially-constructed self, or at least that he is unconstrained by societal norms, for he imposes himself on the Williams household for a month with no qualms (27-28). Williams, therefore, appears to be indicating that the self we imagine ourselves to be is truer than the self we present to the world. Improvisation II.3 reinforces this conclusion. Here we see the true self chiding Williams’s constructed self, Doctor Williams. “You think you can leap up from your gross caresses of these creatures and at a gesture fling it all off and step out in silver to my finger tips.” The doctor must cleanse himself of the world, put off his social self before he can create. Only the imagination, the true self can “dance with the wind, make my own snow flakes, whistle a contrapuntal melody to my own fugue!” (34).

Schmidt sees Williams the Dadaist as seeking an ahistorical moment, “a moment of absolute spontaneity in which the interferences and repressions taught by history are (however briefly) transcended” (171). Thus, in imagination Williams’s true self resists conventional values. Is this not the point of Improvisation IV.3? The death of an intelligent young woman and the murder of a degenerate

² Schmidt’s words in quotation marks refer to Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” section four, and “Song of the Open Road,” section thirteen.

man are commingled by the poet “without making the usual unhappy moral distinctions” (38). Here Williams refuses to pass the “usual” social judgments and, at the same time, acknowledges that death is a truer democracy than that which exists among the living. Improvisation XVIII.2 speaks at length about the relativity of truth and values, beginning, “After thirty years staring at one true phrase he discovers that its opposite was true also” (65). The doctor “comes to do good,” but it is a “grotesque deed of mercy.” He “guffaws at the impossibility of putting any kind of value” on his patient (65). Yet he persists; he delivers babies, treats the ill—“a ridiculous savior of the poor”—concluding that “We have been a benefactor.” Williams seems to be questioning received values of kindness, mercy, benevolence, and service, but he still performs such acts, even “with fatigue always at his elbow” (66). Furthermore, in the commentary to Improvisation XXIV.2, Williams says that “it is sad to see virtues in those who have not the gift of the imagination to value them” (77), suggesting that only values held in the imagination by the true self have any worth, yet they must then be translated into action because experience is ultimately what feeds the imagination.

The value of experience for Williams cannot be underestimated. In a later reflection on Kora in Hell, in Spring and All, Williams writes: “I let the imagination have its own way to see if it could save itself. Something very definite came of it. I found myself alleviated but most important I began there and then to revalue experience, to understand what I was at—” (116). In the Prologue to Kora, Williams uses his mother to illustrate the relation of experience to imagination. Mrs. Williams sees “the thing itself without forethought or afterthought but with great intensity of perception. . . .” This is experience transcending social constructs. Consequently, she “loses her bearings or associates with some disreputable person or translates a dark mood.” That is, she makes life new; she is not limited to expected values, expected ways of seeing, experiencing life. Thus, “She is a creature of great imagination” (8). The imagination, which distinguishes dissimilarities, which experiences directly, is the true value, for the “true value is that peculiarity which gives an object a character by itself. The associational or sentimental value is the false” (14). The value of experience for the self, for imagination is depicted most startlingly in Improvisation XIV.3. A partial rendering will illuminate the point clearly.

It’s all one. Richard worked years to conquer the descending cadence, idiotic
sentimentalist. Ha, for happiness! This tore the dress in ribbons from her maid’s back and
not spared the nails either; wild anger spit from her pinched eyes! This is the better part.
Or a child under a table to be dragged out coughing and biting, eyes glittering evilly. I’ll

have it my way! Nothing is any pleasure but misery and brokenness. THIS is the only up-cadence. This is where the secret rolls over and opens its eyes. Bitter words spoken to a child ripple in morning light! Boredom from a bedroom doorway thrills with anticipation! . . . Here is dancing! (56-57)

“Here is dancing!” Here is art! Here is imagination’s ambrosia! Experience valued in all its mundane, painful truth feeds the imagination, stimulates the self to shout—I AM!

What, then, does imagination do with experience? Basically, imagination transforms experience. Williams comments that “There is no thing that with a twist of the imagination cannot be something else” (81). It is this transformation of life that enables the true self to overcome or, at least, resist ideology. The value Williams places on this quality of imagination is powerfully revealed in the Prologue to Kora:

The senses witnessing what is immediately before them in detail see a finality which they cling to in despair, not knowing which way to turn. Thus the so-called natural or scientific array becomes fixed, the walking devil of modern life. He who even nicks the solidity of this apparition does a piece of work superior to that of Hercules when he cleaned the Augean stables. (14)

The stable cleaning image is apt because what one “nicks the solidity” of is the fixity of the capitalist ideology. This is done by lifting experience to the imagination, where it can be renewed, made over. Williams feels that those without a powerful imagination are no better than slaves who “cannot even know the full of [their] injury” (18). The commentary to Improvisation III.3 tells us that imagination reverses “the usual order at will.” This “order” is capitalist ideology and those without imagination are dupes of the ideology who not only reproduce the conditions of production but keep the machine well-oiled by mass consumption as well. As Williams points out, “men in the direst poverty of the imagination buy finery and indulge in extravagant moods in order to piece out their lack with other matter” (35). But if the transformation of experience is merely imagined, does not ideology win out after all?

In 1914, Williams wrote the following in one of his notebooks: “Surely there is no country where I am freer to bludgeon any man—hurt him than here. I desire such freedom” (qtd. in Frail 97). Of course, Williams realizes that acting out such a freedom will usually meet with violent repression, but the point is that he desires to be free of social, ideological constraints. Williams, and all of us, can find

such freedom in the imagination, where we are free to bloodily bludgeon anyone we choose. Schmidt contends that “In Kora in Hell, Williams sees the struggle between convention and freedom as primarily an internal, psychological one” (121). Thus, Schmidt is suggesting that for Williams our imaginative bludgeonings serve a psychic need but are not politically potent. Contrarily, I believe that, in Kora, Williams is suggesting a power of imagination that serves a purpose beyond the psychic. Williams sees imagination as an active force. In the commentary to Improvisation XVIII.1, Williams tells us that “The act is disclosed by the imagination of it. But of first importance is to realize that the imagination leads and the deed comes behind” (64). This is certainly true of any act of consequence, and I would suggest that even our most unthinking, habitual acts had to be imagined first, at some point in time, before they became habits. It is of crucial importance, then, to realize that in order to subvert the dominant ideology one must first imagine such subversion. And Williams knows that capitalism can be subverted; he gives us Jacob Louslinger as an example in Improvisation I.2. This old man turned down the physical comforts offered by capitalism, saying, “I would rather feed pigs in Moonachie and chew calamus root and break crab’s claws at an open fire: age’s lust loose” (31). One need only set loose one’s imagined lusts, imagined desires by acting on them. Of course, relatively few people are willing to take Louslinger’s route; Williams did not. But Williams does offer another way to act on imagination. In the Prologue, he writes, “By a mere twist of the imagination, if Prufrock only knew it, the whole world can be inverted (why else are there wars?) and the mermaids be set warbling to whoever will listen to them” (25). The mermaids of imagination do warble, but not aimlessly. There are listeners, so communication occurs, and communication is a form of action.

Williams seems pessimistic about the possibility of communication, but he is not without hope. In the Prologue, he writes, “It is seldom that anything but the most elementary communications can be exchanged one with another.” He does not say that it is impossible, though. He believes that “By action itself almost nothing can be imparted.” This failure of physical actions to communicate is caused by the extreme difficulty of knowing what motives, what values underlie the actions. “Talk is servile that is set to inform,” Williams tells us (17). Didactic discourse communicates no better than actions. Williams does see the possibility of communication by the poet, though, but he must do something drastic: “The stream of things having composed itself into wiry strands that move in one fixed direction, the poet in desperation turns at right angles and cuts across current with startling results to his hangdog mood”(17). The poet must make a sharp turn against the direction of the dominant ideology to “loosen

the attention” (14) of both himself and the reader. Defamiliarizing the commonplace allows one to see life for what it is and to imagine alternatives. Such a poetic strategy may elicit a negative response from a reader, but the poet understands it as a failure of the reader’s imagination:

After all, literature is communication while you, my friend, I am afraid, in attempting to do something striking, are in danger of achieving mere preciosity. —But inasmuch as the fields of the mind are vast and little explored, the poet was inclined only to smile and to take note of that hardening infirmity of the imagination which seems to endow its victim with great solidity and rapidity of judgment. But he thought to himself: And yet of what other thing is greatness composed than a power to annihilate half-truths for a thousandth part of accurate understanding. (21-22)

Margueritte Murphy offers an interpretation for us: “in other words, Williams would refresh our vision in order that we see through conventional, but false appearances, life’s seeming ‘finalities,’ accepted representations of social order” (109).

Of course, there is a dual responsibility involved, if communication is to occur. For Williams, communication is a function of imagination. Thus, in the commentary to *Improvisation XV.3*, he writes: “Nowadays the elements of . . . language are set down as heard and the imagination of the listener and of the poet are left free to mingle in the dance” (59). Fredric Jameson might say that Williams resorts to using a private language “bereft of any public consequences or resonances, so that only symbolic recoding holds out the hope of saying something meaningful to a wider and more heterogeneous public” (185-86). But Williams is not concerned with communicating with the public at large. He is only interested in communicating with other active imaginations because they are the only ones with any hope of resisting the social construction of their selves. Jameson believes that everyone “is equally locked into his or her private language, imprisoned in those serried ranks of monads that are the ultimate result of the social fragmentation inherent in . . . late monopoly capitalism” (186). Williams might seem to agree when he, more poetically, writes, “We live in bags” (17). But when Jameson says, “There are, of course, ways of breaking out of this isolation, but they are not literary ways . . .” (186), Williams must demur. Imagination to imagination communication through the work of art is the hope that Williams holds out because alternative values must be imagined before they can be practiced.

Clearly, William Carlos Williams was not a naive dupe of Romantic subjectivity. He does believe in an autonomous self but realizes that its seat is in the imagination—thus, the weaker the imagination,

the weaker the self. We can see that capitalist ideology plays a strong role in the construction of the self, but the power of the imagination can transcend, if not totally negate, such influences. People with active imaginations can derive much satisfaction from Kora in Hell, whereas those approaching the work with their socialized selves foremost are likely to dismiss it as gibberish. Listeners with ears to hear will come away with an altered vision of the world, and Williams's art will have succeeded by beginning the task of cleaning the Augean stables piled high with capitalist ideology.

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