Chapter 1

Introduction

William Carlos Williams is a very significant poet of the modernist – post modernist era of American poetry. In the heyday of the modernist movement, under the radiant halo of Eliot and Pound, Williams was considered a second-tier figure. Now time has foregrounded Williams’ role in shaping and channelising American poetry into its present position. If American poetry has ‘come of age,’ Williams has had a major share in the making of it. Indeed, it was not until the waning years of the Modernist era – 1937, to be exact – that James Laughlin and New Directions showed Williams in the limelight with the publication of his works. With that the world began to take notice of Williams and his seminal impact on American poetry. The younger generation of the succeeding period partook of Williams’ ‘unobtrusive radiance’ that suffused their horizons, and were inspired to take to new routes. Williams now has won the allegiance of a widely influential younger generation of poets and critics who unquestioningly place him in the pantheon of first rank American poets.

For Williams the doctor-poet, writing offered enough scope for growth, change and development. The moments he stole out of his medical profession were the moments when his poetic self awakened through the ‘word’ to accept and acknowledge the ‘world’ that offered itself (‘no ideas but in things’). The voyage between experience and expression constitutes his poetic oeuvre and he learns many things on the way. The early poems are heavily influenced by romantic poetry and by the poetry of Walt Whitman. Though some of these poems are derivative in nature, they anticipate the issues and concerns of his later works. The modern
phase of Williams’ work at first follows the lines of advance marked out by Ezra Pound’s ‘modern work.’ But even in this Poundian phase of his work, Williams exercised critical caution, emphasizing America as the basis of his poetic roots whereas Pound had opted for European roots. Williams’ efforts were to keep pace with the contemporary modernity – "how shall I be a mirror to this modernity?" (CPI 108).

The focus of this dissertation is the later poetics of William Carlos Williams highlighting the long poem Paterson. This is the phase where modernist and post modernist trends meet and merge into each other. The same polarized alternatives of order and disorder confronted the moderns and the postmoderns. These opposed choices are but inverted mirror images of each other, mutually dependent binary opposites. While the moderns opt for structure, order and myth, the postmoderns revel in disorder, antimetaphor and antmyth. The new sensibility is incomprehensible without the old. The long poem Paterson discloses how the very modernist preoccupations of coherence and arbitrary closure sound problematic leading to a praxis where endings become difficult if not impossible. With the shadow of the past masquerading as the present on one side, and the teeming layers of the contingent opening up on the other side, Williams’ effort is to engage the moment in a willed, willing participation of life. Thus Paterson starts from order to shift into an unanticipated disorder, putting the poet at great hazards to retrieve and redeem. This is a study of the later phase of Williams’ poetic development contextualising the origin of its problematic in the problem faced by the modernist poetics, discovering in its preoccupations and attitudes, concerns definitive of the post modern.
The modernist concept of art which creates a world of autonomous, self-referential, internally coherent aesthetic units was the dominant mark of Williams' early poetics. Towards the later phase, there is an increasing awareness in Williams that the tendency to impose arbitrary paradigms of closure upon heterogeneous materials destroys creativity. The teeming, recalcitrant layers of contemporaneity elude any categorical ordering and Paterson shows how the set agenda of containing it in Book IV is nullified when it exceeds into Book V and spills over to the unfinished fragments of Book VI. For Williams who believed that there are no ideas before things and no 'things' without relation, this process on the axis of chance and 'irreducible plurality' (to borrow a term from Roland Barthes), opens up the idea of the text as a seamless venue for participation and performance in the postmodern sense.

Nevertheless, by indulging in a kind of selection, by localizing Paterson on the American soil, and also by going back to the past in Book V, not to cling to it with a nostalgia, but to learn the way to cut the path, William seeks a balance between the pressure of opposites. For the modernists, the long poem was the one final form through which to enforce coherence, to demonstrate the unity of culture and the human self. Eliot’s poem The Waste Land concludes with the fisher king resolving to salvage fragments and at least to put his lands in order. Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Comedian As The Letter C” seeks to center the human self in the activity of the imagination. Pounds’ Cantos set out to rejuvenate western culture and to endow western man with the power to live creatively.

Williams’ long poem Paterson is also engaged in a similar project. He makes this poem open to real life; in celebrating one place, Paterson, Williams wishes to
celebrate all places. He does not prohibit any kind of material from entering the
criticism. Apparently unconnected events and objects are juxtaposed against each
other. Poetry is interspersed with prose, which varies in style and register, at times
resembling a personal letter, and at other times a journal, a news item, or a historical
narrative. As it proceeds the poet finds himself engaging a process – a willed
(Neitzschean), willing compliance to the flux of life. This long poem thus appears to
grow out of the ordering hands of the poet into the promiscuous panorama of the post
modern. But this openness of the poem is not an openness free of all control. The task
of the poet is to amalgamate and thus to redeem the formless universe of contingency.
In the author’s note the poet emphasizes that Paterson in four parts revolves round the
central theme – man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding
his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody. Paterson thus rejoins
modernism at the very instant that it seems to question its values. Similarly the
“variable foot” which Williams sought out as a non-prescriptive open and flexible
metrical form offers the contradictory lures of restraint and excess, limits and freedom,
tradition and individual talent. Thus a study of the long poem Paterson is an interesting
study of the interface between modernism and post-modernism. The post-modern
poets found Williams’ attempt to accept the contingent and aleatory as a measure of his
commitment to art, to life and to artistic freedom.

Paterson comprises of five books which present the inter-penetrating cyclic
fusions of past and present, nature and art, ends and beginnings of variation and
repetition. Originally the poet had in mind only four books:

From the beginning I decided there will be four books following
the course of the river whose life seemed more and more to resemble my own life as I more and more thought of it; the river above the falls, the catastrophe of the falls itself, the river below the falls and the entrance at the end into the great sea.\(^2\)

It seems *Paterson* grew out of the poet's hands into Book V which overcomes the territorial winding up and discontinuity set up by Book IV. It continues the Paterson story as a living continuum of man and city, art and culture. Indicating that the presence of Book V is a denial of the internal unity of Paterson's first four books, Walter Sutton in "Dr. Williams' Paterson and the Quest for form" comes to a like position: "The search for form and a quest for identity are the same. Neither the city nor the poet, nor the poem, is a self-sufficient entity. They are inter-dependent elements of a cultural complex, and the definition of any one involves interaction."\(^3\)

Although Book V bears no apparent surface relation to the previous one, an overall unity is embedded in it. An elusive identity is established by the dynamic union of opposites (satyr – tragedy, virgin – whore), and at the end of five books the 'rained down' river having started above falls, crashed downward, and wandered towards its source in the ocean, is finally drawn back up, ending, however, not where it began, in the air, but rather in the boundless world of imagination. Williams wrote to a friend shortly after finishing the fourth book (SL292):

> A man wonders why he bothers to continue to write. And yet it is precisely then that to write is most imperative for us. That, if I can do it, will be the end of Paterson, Book IV. The ocean of savage lusts in which the wounded shark gnashes at its own tail is not our home.
It is the seed that floats to shore, one word, one tiny, even microscopic word, is that which can alone save us.

Each book is characterized by the dominant specific locations and subject-matter. The first book called "The Delineaments of Giants," vividly portrays the giant city, valley, the Passaic Falls and the mountain. The details are repeated with variation to establish the reality and rootedness of things. Local legends and curiosities crop up and fragments from local history books serve as credentials. The mythical halo of Paterson, the city merges into the personified Noah Faitoute Paterson, the myth maker who later wanes in and out as a voyaging consciousness. This book dwells on the 'language' that is 'divorced' from the minds ("the loss of the word incarnate"), 'a mass of detail / to interrelate on the ground' ("the influx of the indeterminate"), and 'the surface' ("the visible flux of the present").

Book II is a microcosm of fragmented reality. "Sunday in the Park," is basically a narrative dealing with Paterson's ascent and descent of a mountain in the park, with what he sees and hears and with his responses. The dual metaphors, the giant Paterson the man, the city, and the feminine principle the park, Miss C the letter writer, and the relationship between them reverberates with failure, divorce and discord. A large portion of the book is devoted to the garrulous sermon of Klaus Ehreus, an itinerant evangelist. This part of Paterson deals with 'multiple voices' to strike "a spatio-temporal standpoint", dwells on 'blocked' ("stasis and ek-stasis") and makes a bold experimentation on 'variable foot' ("a mediation of order and disorder").

Book III set in "The Library" has as its central concerns the fire, flood and typhoon that ravaged Paterson early in the 20th century. The protagonist searches
through old books to unveil the 'elemental character' and the 'modern replicas'
described in the first two books. The adventure of crossing the falls on a tight rope
and the natural disasters are thematically fused with the poet's search for redeeming
the language. Such death 'incommunicado' might have been prevented if language
had been restored to its proper place. In this section failure of language slowly
merges into the poet's failure of love. The rhetoric in this part involves "the reader and
writer within the act of perception", deals with "writing as a process" and forms a
"Paterson 'palimtext'".

The setting for section I Book IV is an expensive apartment above the East river
in New York city. This section "The Run to the Sea" is like Book II, a narrative, most of
the action being in the form of a dialogue between an aging woman and a young nurse.
Yet Williams introduces new motifs and restates others. There is Dr. Paterson, the
painful unsuccessful lover of the young virgin. Section 2 centers on science,
economics and service. There is the small Polish baby nurse, and there are subjects
like the discovering of uranium by Madam Curie and the need for the discovery of a new
credit system against the economic cancer. The third section returns to Paterson the
city and is 'reminiscent of episodes.' It introduces personal details, repeats motifs of
earlier books and ties up several thematic threads. Thus Book IV is "an experiment with
different registers", deals with "dissonance and decomposition as an art of particularising
the general" and offers a "closure with nascent openings."

The final section, like an afterword, outlives the eternal close, the final somersault
the end of Book IV. Death is not an end: every end is a beginning. It is an attempt to
give the world of Paterson an 'imaginative validity.' 'The world of art through the years
have survived.' The unifying symbol is the series of unicorn tapestries in The Cloisters, a museum on the Hudson river in New York city. 'The past' grows into "an enriching present," there is "a search for self outside the self" by "going beyond pluralism." Dr. Paterson grown older, contemplates the world of art and flowers and ends with the assertion:

We know nothing and can know nothing

but

the dance, to dance to a measure

contrapunctually

satirically, the tragic foot.  

Dance is thus an amalgam of multiple centers mirroring each other, a venue for participation and performance.

Like the postmodern perforated sheet with a hole in the middle, the imagination escapes through the hole of death and Paterson story has to continue from the fringes of Paterson V. The fragments of a projected sixth part of Paterson were found among Dr. Williams’ papers after death. In fact the poet found it difficult to confine Paterson, the world within the word, into the microchip of a long poem. With metonymic concentration on the multiple objects around him, Williams finds it difficult to work out coherent structures. Aesthetic closure is complex, and Williams defers it by refusing to allow conclusion to seem in retrospect required by the beginning, and by denying endings which offer a fulfillment of our expectations of the Paterson epic. Yet, within the ambivalent stance of this epic between the modern-postmodern aesthetic, there is the shadow of 'considered aesthetic choices' embedded in the 'illusion of free play.' This is
typical of the postmodern wherein we find it difficult to distinguish process and product in an art object. As Charles Altieri puts it in Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry: “Many poems that give the appearance of relying on the processes of the writing mind are actually carefully wrought products in which the illusion of free play depends ultimately on considered aesthetic choices not foregrounded by the poem’s surface.”

**The Far reaching impact of Williams’ Poetics.**

The lasting influence that William Carlos Williams exerted on the younger generation of American poets is at work even in contemporary poetry. The focus on the conversational idiom and the breath-paced slow and natural metrical structure are still in vogue (as in contemporary mainstream conversational poetry). Williams’ pioneering efforts to shake off the gripping formal and metrical hold of English poetry over the American poetry struck a note which later generation of poets took up to full advantage. They joined him in celebrating the indigenous American form and idiom. When James Dickey asks, “has any other poet in American history been so actually useful, usable, and influential?” and David Ignatow comments, “he was useful in his being present, on the scene – in this country as a person. Without him, American poetry was impoverished for me,” it shows how by the later fifties Williams had become an icon, which availed access to subsequent poets from different angles, to worship, break or recast. Williams’ formative role in moulding American poetry is openly acknowledged by Jack Myres and David Wojahan in the Preface to the book A Profile of Twentieth Century American Poetry. They establish that American poetry has come of age and that in form and idiom it can no longer be considered merely an adjunct to
English literature. In this book, Ed Folsom ("Introduction: Recruiting the American Past") comments:

The poet who makes the most explicit challenge for American poets to ground themselves here in the soil and in this tradition is William Carlos Williams. In The American Grain, one of the finest books of American cultural criticism ever written, is Williams' attempt to find, or more precisely to construct or to invent the ground of his being.  

With Walt Whitman, the poet who told the 'tale of the tribe' starting this trend, Williams becomes the powerful exponent of the American idiom and his impact on the later generation of American poets is seminal. John Lowney in his book The American Avant Garde Tradition discusses how Williams' commitment to experimentation and the destruction of traditional forms allies his poetics with the critical stance of the international avant-garde. Williams' appeal to experimental poets as diverse as Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, Diane Wakoski and Denise Levertov can be attributed to his Americanist avant-garde rhetorical stance. His sustained opposition to the elitist assumptions of high modernism, especially to its insistence on preserving the autonomy of art in a canonical tradition, became increasingly relevant as the new sensibility emerged in tandem with the unpredictable, aleatory aspects of life. The Black Mountain Poets, the New York Poets, the San Francisco Poets, and the earlier generation of Objectivist Poets cited Williams' poetic theory and practice in their polemical writings to challenge the New Critical doctrines.

Thus the post modern poets in responding to Williams emphasize not only the
cultural politics of constructing literary reputations, but also question a more fundamental assumption that governs canon-formation, the assumption that poetic language excludes speech types marking social difference. In his Author's Introduction to his 1944 volume The Wedge, Williams asserts that "there is no poetry of distinction without formal invention, for it is in the intimate form that works of art achieve their exact meaning, in which they most resemble the machine, to give language its highest dignity, its illumination in the environment to which it is native." (SE 257)

Donald Allen's landmark anthology The New American Poetry (1960) includes poems that affirm the extraordinary impact of William's poetics on postmodernist open form poetry. Promoted as "our avant-garde, the true continuers of the modern movement in American poetry," the new American poets challenged the dominant aesthetic premises of the New Critical canon and positioned Williams along with Pound as a central figure in the counter-hegemonic American avant-garde tradition.

Ron Silliman in "Language, Realism, Poetry," introduction to In The American Tree (XV), writes that the only points of agreement that unite the heterogeneous poetics of The New American Poetry are "an insistence on the centrality of the influence of William Carlos Williams and a preference for poetry that read aloud sounded spoken." Williams' emphasis on the spoken idiom as the life-breath of 'measure' attracted many poets in the 1950's and 60's who cited him often to validate their views. For them Williams was an energizing vortex to counter the conservative views on set poetic diction. Denis Levertov in her commemoration of Williams in the Nation spoke of Williams’ most important legacy, that of opening “the
whole range of the language, the recognition of wide resources." When asked in a 1960 interview about Williams' poetics, Le Roi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) noted that Williams had taught him, "how to write in my own language – how to write in the way I speak rather than the way I think a poem ought to be written." Allen Ginsberg recalls that after hearing Williams read, he experienced a "revelation of absolute common sense." He found Williams' poetry to have a "meaning which is identical with its form, with a rhythm identical with the arrangement of the words on the page, and the words on the page arranged identically with what you want to say and how you want to say it." Robert Creeley also follows Williams in explaining the integration of his form and content as the embodiment of the historical conditions distinguishing American speech from "English." The act of discovering form in process is analogous to American speech because Americans "have had both to imagine and thereby to make that reality which they are given to live in. It is as though they had to realize the world." Williams' characteristic fragmented syntax with enjambed lines whose break defamiliarise dramatic relations, and the rhythmic variation that aim to visually represent speech patterns, had a definitive impact on the New American poets.

According to Lowney Williams' writing answers both the shared 'international' experience of modernity (the unprecedented experience of the ephemerality, fragmentation and contingency of every day life) and the specifically 'national' experience of extra ordinary demographic change resulting from the growth of industrialism and urbanization. His commitment to experimentation and destruction of traditional forms allied his poetics with the critical stance of European avant-garde. He partakes of the shared goals of Dada, Surrealism and Futurism which reintegrate art
with social praxis in challenging the function of art’s autonomy. What distinguishes his project from Duchamp’s Dadaist anti-aesthetics and Eliot’s high modernist aesthetics is his insistence on a localist avant-gardism which correlates indigenous diction and forms, with the rejection of European aesthetic models (Lowney 17-18).

Williams’ dissatisfaction with free verse and his bold exploration of a new foot, keeping pace with the new relativistic world, had a seminal influence on poets like Charles Olson, Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley. Williams designed the ‘variable foot’ that in itself contained spontaneity and order. He explains how this is made possible in his *I Wanted To Write A Poem* (82): “The foot not being fixed is only to be described as variable. If the foot itself is variable it allows order in the so called free verse. Thus the verse becomes not free at all but just simply variable, as all things in life properly are.”

The variation occurred when the breath units of the speaker matched with his speech rhythm. Kenneth Rexroth while reviewing Williams’ *Desert Music* attested to Williams’ achievement in metrics, describing his poetic line welded to American speech like ‘muscle to bone.’ There is a strong affinity between Williams’ variable foot and Charles Olson’s conception of breath unit or cadence unit published in his *Projective Verse* (1950).

The central tenet of Projectivism is Charles Olson’s rejection of a poetry of formal closed patterns based on metre and stanza in favour of a free verse that pushes ahead line by line as the poet’s breath brings the poem out of the heart into a natural form on the page. Such a theory clearly values the art of writing, the spontaneous creative process, as against the previous trend of strait-jacketing
creativity into stiff formal patterns. The foundation of this living speech is built on the syllable. Like Williams' poetics, Olson's poetics opens the idea of a text to performance. As explained by Riddle, in "Decentering The Image: The Project of American Poetics" (Boundary 2), "For Olson's poet, the first act is to displace the fiction of origins, to reintroduce "intention" as Desire: [. . .]. In this Special View of History, chance and accident precede and displace the fiction of original unity, generating "history " as space of play." Robert Creeley also adhered to this view of Charles Olson treating the form as nothing more than an extension of content. The Post modernists like the Projectivists are in strong opposition to the poetics of the New Critics. They share the Williamsian antipathy towards reifying the poem by transforming it into a luminous entity detached from an independent of human existence. Allen Ginsberg's "Empty Mirror" eschews traditional metrics in favour of Williams' example of a relative footed American speech that is vibrant with the immediate day to day reality.

Peter Whigham in his essay in Agenda, the distinguished British magazine of modern poetry and poetics, pays glowing tribute to Williams for his formative influence on the succeeding generation of American poets:

. . . Currently, Williams' monument outside his work, lies in the last twenty years of American poetry from Olson onwards. It is an influence more like Pound's than Eliot's. Practising poets discharge their debts as they write. He is a gentle, pervasive exemplar, interested in all things, committed to none but his life craft." Williams' attitude towards the place of the fantastic and irrational in life and art
was established earlier than the arrival of a literary movement like Surrealism in America. The characters of Paterson, Mrs. Cummings, Marcia Nardi (the woman correspondent) and Alva Turner are neurotic, thwarted human beings who indulge in actions of distorted vigour like jumping off from the top of the cliff or giving expression to perverted thinking. The variable foot and the juxtaposed prose poetic collage in Paterson accentuate a mood of aggression, anxiety and primitive spontaneity. Mike Weaver in William Carlos Williams: The American Background, explains how Williams’ notion of the variable foot bears a straightforward relation to the metrical organization of jazz:

The great rhythmic variety of the Blues depends entirely upon the varying syllabic quantity compressed or expanded within the strictly temporal feet of its classic stanza. Its variety depends entirely upon verbal improvisations which in turn depends on performative flexibility within the vocal phrasing. [...] Where such easy rhythmic variability is present, the poem may be said to swing, or in Williams’ terms to possess the quality of measure. But the swing or measure as a perceptive phenomenon depends upon the relation between the phrasing and a steady beat, whether sounded or merely sensed. It defies notation, or scansion, because it is derived not from a time-signature but from performance.19

The Problematic of the Long poem

The task of accomplishing a long poem in epic terms has been the aspiration and attempt of many a poet in England and America. There were attempts at colonial England to treat of God’s way with his chosen people in epic terms, the greatest of
these, though not a poem, is Cotton Mather's *Magnalia*. No wonder the idea of a long poem became the dream of the colonial American writer also who explored the possibility of order and control within the frame of a truly national culture and literature. By the time Williams started working on these lines (the first two books of *Paterson* appeared during 1946-48), Pound had already finished his *Cantos* by 1940, Hart Crane who died in 1933 had written *The Bridge*, Stevens had just received acclaim for *Parts of a World* and Eliot had published *Four Quartets* in 1943.

Mike Weaver traces Williams' indebtedness in creating *Paterson* to a tradition of poems on the Passaic region (which Williams nowhere acknowledged). The traditional perch for Williams' long poem, Weaver traces out to that of Thomas Ward, a Newark doctor-poet's *Passaic*, and the table contents of *Passaic* and *Paterson* are juxtaposed to bring out an interesting comparison. The difference arises when Ward's mottos are drawn consistently from models of English literary tradition -- from Denham, Dryden, Byron and Spenser -- whereas Williams' are taken from J. A. Symonds on the Greeks, Santayana, and the example of Toulouse-Lautrec.

Weaver complements Williams for his bold approach to the theme:

*The materials of* Paterson *were already to hand, the perch in the tradition of the regional poem established; it remained Williams' life long task to evolve an indigenous method by which he could build a new bridge over the Passaic. To succeed would be to replace the effigy of Europe with the living image of a local culture.* (16)

*Paterson* thus is a successful modern epic and it is different from the traditional epic which is a celebration in narrative verse of great deeds performed by a single hero.
or a set of heroes. Its development is not narrative and it tends to become a continual present. There is a wandering consciousness of an intellectual hero rather than an action hero, one seeking to evoke and enter the meaning of the landscape around him which merges into his inscape.

In his book *The Continuity of American Poetry*, Roy Harvey Pearce analyses Joel Barlowe’s *Columbiad* (1807), Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos*, Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* and Williams’ *Paterson* as poems with the ‘long view.’ He is of the view that Barlowe seems to have had “a curiously vague sense of one of the preconditions to a new kind of epic poem.” The precondition was a new poetics, deriving in turn from a new use of language. He had enough conviction and ability to run the risks involved in striving to use traditional means and forms to break away from tradition itself.

Whitman celebrated the truly American culture, and out of his exquisite feeling for the terrible need of his culture to find an adequate poetic image, he wrote *The Song of Myself*. According to Pearce, it is “the clearest, surest, most self-contained and complete and most widely gauged product of Whitman’s desire to create an American epic” (72). In this Whitman surveys the world as he wills and interprets it as he wills. The movement derives from the motion of the protagonist’s sensibility.

The long poem of Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* also sets out to create a modern epic. While *The Song of Myself* is phased according to the movement of a creative expressive sensibility, there is an arbitrary ordering and control of the exacting sensibility of Pound in *The Cantos*. Roy Harvey Pearce observes:

As Whitman’s love for himself would drive him to transforming all other
selves into aspects of himself in order that he might love them, so Pound’s love for himself would drive him to destroy all other selves whose existence his idea of love will prevent from loving. Whitman’s and Pound’s means to making an American epic are thus diametrically opposed, but they have at least this in common: they ask that their poetry lead to a totally unifying sacramentalism. To know, is for Whitman, to become; for Pound, to become or be destroyed. (100-01)

Hart Crane wrote The Bridge seeking a bridge or passage to another world to enunciate a new cultural synthesis of values in terms of America. He envisioned a world renewed in the true American way, but he could envision it only in his own terms. Daniel Morris in “A Return to the Self in Paterson,” William Carlos Williams and the Publicity for the Self, looks at the elements of Paterson which are presented as extensions and publicity for the poet’s mind and body. The project of the long poem precipitated rivalry and unhealthy competition among poets, especially between Williams and Crane. Daniel Morris (152), explains how Williams felt threatened by The Bridge because it was an attempt to make ‘living history’ out of documents and legends regarding the foundation of U.S including the diary of Christopher Columbus which Williams accused Crane of stealing from a sample of explorer’s diaries that appeared in 1925 as a chapter of In the American Grain, Williams’ own work. Crane said that the poem rises out of a past, and it is not subservient to the present, as Williams claims it is, in The Library, Paterson Book III. Crane like Williams believed that a poem must make a difference in the actual world outside the world but he tended to disavow or not to see the inherent value or ‘radiant gist’ in the nativist material he represented. The reference
in Paterson to Timothy Crane who had the charge of the bridge and the one who risked his life to ‘pull the clumsy bridge in to position’ connotes a negative criticism of Hart Crane’s design for a long American poem. Daniel Morris observes, “the Patch Crane incident in Book I becomes charged with metaphorical significance when understood as representative of Williams’ struggle to reach his audience in competition with designs such as The Bridge.”

T.S. Eliot grounded his idea of poetry in myth which he believed would work out a parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity. The Wasteland, the long poem reverberates the mythical undertones on which the variegated fractions of contemporary reality are fabricated. Disparate materials — fragments of folk-lore, belles-letters, myth, cultural history and the like — fill up the canvas of The Wasteland. Tiresias the fisher king, Phlebas, The Thames maidens, and the rest participate in the life of the other, thus contributing to the single minded effect of the poem. The spaces the poem opens up, can accommodate the personae of the poet, the protagonist or any other character of the Wasteland locale or the reader himself. This offers scope for the enormous range of allusiveness and the necessary exegesis. The final part of The Wasteland “What the thunder said,” postulates the existence of the single transcendental participatory ritual (Dutta, Dayadhvam, Damyata). Thus the central technique of The Wasteland is to shift perspectives constantly on the contingent and insubstantial through the use of allusive materials. For Eliot, the distinctive quality of a poetic sensibility is its capacity to form new wholes, to fuse seemingly disparate experiences in to an organic unity.

The American long poem shows a marked deviation from the traditional epic in the concept of the hero of epic dimensions. Instead of the pivotal figure of the
In Paterson, the subject and object are not rigidly separate; man, things, and events that constitute the flux of life make their random entry and exit in moments that carry spontaneity and unpredictability. In fact, focus on this aspect has led critics like Paul Bove' ("The World and Earth of William Carlos Williams: Paterson as a "Long Poem."), to look at Paterson as the ‘subversion’ of the idea of a long poem. Using Heideggerian dimensions, treating the poem as a space for ‘dwelling,’ the analysis takes these lines:

That is, since the poem’s movement is metonymic, not metaphorical, "space" cannot mean plastic rest, but dispersal and gathering — a process of things [...]. [...] the spaces of dwelling must always be new-measured in history and cannot be found ready-at-hand as a pre-existent form or genre abstracted from history and imposed on "culture." Williams' poem announces the end both to the simple form-content dichotomy of classical and modernist poetics as well as to the Modern division between the realms of living and art.23

The long poem Paterson by allowing heterogeneity, a realistic perspective of presenting distortion as distortion and by giving way to a world that cannot be understood or controlled, seeks to reduce the tension of irreconcilable opposites. It privileges spatialisation as well as temporalisation. In his study "The Vanity of Length: The long poem as a problem in Pound’s Cantos and Williams’ Paterson," Victor P. H. Li, studies these long poems as ‘an interminable digression, rather than as an inexorable progression’ to truth, and writes:

The length becomes an index of hope and despair; a demonstration of
difference, a protracted deferring which leads to an unbridgeable difference. The long poem is therefore both possible and impossible, and in the unending vacillation between these two poles, the long poem exists and endures, lengthened precisely by its own undecidability. Thus *Paterson*, the long poem stretches out through time towards “hordes unrealized” opening up “spaces” which are “new places” (P 96).

The Postmodern Critical Scenario and Critical Responses to Williams.

John Johnson in his essay, “Postmodern Theory / Postmodern Fiction” (*Clio* 16), opens up a clear vista of the postmodern critical scenario. Critics like Patricia Waugh and Brian McHale in England and Jerome Klinowitz and Ihab Hassan in United States advance the familiar version of literary or aesthetic postmodernism. What is important for them is the foregrounding of literary artifice, the presentation of the work as metafiction or fabulation, and above all the writer’s self-conscious awareness of the fictionality of literature and its status as a construction of language. The writers associated with the periodical *Boundary 2* include such critics as Williams Spanos, Paul Bove and Joseph N. Riddel. Drawing particularly on the work of Heidegger and Derrida, they opposed T.S. Eliot’s modernism with the postmodernism of Pound’s *Cantos*, William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson* and Charles Olson’s *Projective Verse*. Joseph N. Riddel, the most Derridean of this group, argues that these poets must be understood in terms of a double deconstruction both of their immediate predecessors and themselves, undertaken in order to problematise a poetry of the word (Logos) and such notions as ‘tradition,’ ‘origin’ and ‘citation.’ Following the Derrida of “Structure, Sign and Play,” Riddel argues that moderns are haunted by a nostalgia for origins whereas post
modems make what Derrida describes as "the Nietzschean affirmation – the joyous affirmation of the free play of the world, and without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation." The problem with this approach as J. Hillis Miller points out in a review of Ridel's book on Williams, is that it is too easily reversible, and fails to account for the heterogeneity within in a text or body of texts. Both Williams' poems 'Ashphodel and Paterson V.' Miller asserts, are modernist and post modernist at once and can be shown to be so. "The problem is to show," Miller continues, that "periods differ from one another because they are different forms of heterogeneity, not because each period held a single coherent view of the world." John Johnson is of the view that something similar could be said, about Spanos' claim that modernist poetics privileges spatialisation whereas post modern poetics privileges temporalisation.

A brief survey of the critical responses to Williams' work would be quite relevant. As early as 1946, Vivienne Koch noted that the "cultural roots of Williams' upbringing were closer to Emerson's transcendentally oriented Unitarianism than to any other tradition." In 1960's, critics like Kenneth Burke, Richard Macksey formulated the dominant image of Williams as a thoroughly anti romantic empirisist and democratic celebrant of the world keeping away from transcendence. Joseph Hillis Miller treats Williams as anti Platonic, anti transcendent. Miller construes Williams as a nominalist, one who believes that only particular things and particular moments of perception are real, and thus ignores the universal essences that Williams' local embody. He writes: "Since there is no 'behind' or 'beyond' in Williams' world, no depth or transcendence, there can be no symbolic meaning in things, no reference to a secret heaven of ideal values" (Poets of Reality 307).
In 1968, Hyatt Waggoner's American Poets: The Puritans to the Present presented Williams as a poet divided by the anti romantic modernism of Pound and Eliot and strong affinities with Emerson and Whitman. In 1982 Waggoner wrote American Visionary Poetry including a small portion of Williams' poems as belonging to the visionary mode.\(^{34}\) James E. B. Breslin in William Carlos Williams: An American Artist declares Williams to be part of the "modernist repudiation of the romantic ego and the idealistic philosophy that supports it."\(^{35}\) In his other book, From Modern to Contemporary American Poetry, 1945 – 1965, Breslin refers to Williams' influence on the later generation of American poets and believes that a sacred principle clearly resides at the centre of Williams' poetics.\(^{36}\)

Carl Rapp in William Carlos Williams and Romantic Idealism places Williams in idealist tradition that includes Hegel, Coleridge, and Emerson and reaches back to Plato and to aspects of Christianity. Williams' closeness to things is the result not of abandoning ego (as Miller believes) but of expanding ego\(^*\) to the point where it now contains every thing within it.\(^{37}\) Rapp's central insight is that, for both Emerson and Williams, the soul has priority over things and he claims that Williams "did come to believe in the existence of something like a universal spirit or a universal mind in which all finite minds necessarily participate" (24). He calls Williams a subjective idealist and comments that in Williams' case the objective co-relative becomes subjective co-relative, "object-ive" in that objects are used (89).

Bram Dijkstra who studies the influence of Cubism on Williams' poetry, asserts that Williams' development from a derivative poet to a radically innovative one is the result of his moving away from literary precedents and inspiration and reformulating his
art according to the stylist concepts of the new painters. Similarly Jerome Mazzaro in *William Carlos Williams: The Later poems* (1973), regards his use of prose and poetry as two different facet planes as analogous to the dimensionality of analytic Cubism. Walter Sutton and Stephen Cushman have made indepth studies of Williams' notions of measure and the use of the 'variable foot,' Ralph Nash and Linda Welshimer Wagner have studied Williams' prose. Joseph N. Riddel has established his position as a powerful critic through his deconstructionist reading of Williams. He has inspired a host of critics along this line and among them Paul Bove occupies a prominent position. *The Inverted Bell* (1974) is essentially a reading of *Paterson* in five chapters, each roughly corresponding to a poem of the book. Heidegger and Derrida are brought in to interpret and reinterpret Williams. Riddle's topic in reading *Paterson* is the problematics of origins and beginnings in poetry. A rich lore of critical work has been built up from the Williamsian collections of short stories, novel and poems which include works like Brian A. Bremen's *William Carlos Williams and the Diagnostics of Culture* (1993). Barry Aheam's *William Carlos Williams and Alterity: The Early Poetry* (1994), and Daniel Morris' *The Writings of William Carlos Williams: Publicity for the Self* (1995) are the two recent works on Williams. Barry Aheam studies the early poems as expressions of Williams' personal struggles within himself, his parents, his domestic role and his social position. These tensions which constitute "necessary conditions of creativity," he argues, "made him a vehicle of contending voices and became the defining features of his early poetry" (*Introduction* 3).

Williams, the doctor-poet, has now become the doyen of critical attention through his unassuming liberal humanism that extended not only to human beings, but
to all objects around, for his earnest efforts to rejuvenate language, and for his inspiring guidance to later generations of younger poets. Choosing to stick on to his native soil, spacing out his time between his patients and his poetry, both of which he attended to with utmost sincerity and care, his was a meaningful life lived with an unobtrusive significance. As Paul Mariani puts it in the biography of Williams, A New World Naked: "He was a man of rare honesty, easy on others but extremely hard on himself, a man who had made mistakes, who had faltered or run up blind 'alleys' in 'his single minded' selfish pursuit of poetry."38 He was far ahead of the times, which perhaps made it difficult for others to give him due recognition and regard in his time. Mariani's winding up of his monumental work on Williams is worth quoting:

What made it difficult for many Americans, let alone others less centrally concerned, to accept this estimation of Williams was that the major poet could happen here, here in the prolapsarian, gritty yet burgeoning world of America. It was Williams' genius to have seen -- seventy years ago -- that it could happen here... and that it did. His was, then, a representative life and he was himself a representative man as Whitman had been in Emerson's sense of that phrase: a figure who in his actions and his words had raised his particular world to the level of art with a single-mindedness and persistence approaching the heroic. (770)

This study of Williams is on the contradictory impulses of Williams' later poetics that straddle between modernism and postmodernism. The long poem Paterson stretches and recoils, winds and unwinds itself on the modern-postmodern fringes. What makes this study interesting is the poem's tendency to mediate these opposing
poles to strike a middle point between order and disorder, experience and expression, potential and fulfillment. Chapter II traces the prominent modernist trends especially the American modernism with a chronological survey of the American poetic lineage up to the present. Chapter III focuses on the postmodern aesthetics and Williams formative role in it. Williams' innovative ideas on 'measure' also form part of this chapter since these ideas are far ahead of his times. These two chapters are meant to be propaedeutic to the central critique of the long poem Paterson. As an instantiation of what it critiques, the ensuing chapters are on Paterson Book I and II (Chapter IV) and Book III, IV and V (Chapter V). Williams' efforts to retrieve and reassemble continue even in the fragments of Book VI and it is left unfinished, although Williams continued writing even after Paterson. These post Paterson works as well as the fag ends of Paterson with the immense weight of absolute infinitude are bathed in a fine humane, mellowed world view. Chapter VI makes Book VI the focal point to sum up: to explore how the experiencing self of Williams anchors itself on a fine humanism (Zen like), that places him on a balanced footing to gather the dust that has been stirred: it spreads around like the twilight, a mellowed radiance that envelops the setting sun of his life and poetry.
Notes

1Early in his career, in an article "America, Whitman and the Art of Poetry," The Poetry Journal 8.1 (November 1917): 31, Williams had shrewdly observed that "the only way to be like Whitman is to write unlike Whitman." The message is clear; by learning to write unlike Williams, the poetic progeny of Williams could be like him. So by the late fifties Williams had become an icon, whom the subsequent generation of American poets have been free to worship, break or recast. James E. Breslin in "The Presence of Williams in Contemporary poetry," introduction to Something to Say: William Carlos Williams on Younger Poets (New York: New Directions, 1985) 23, writes: "Williams affected younger writers simply by being there - as well as by his practical assistance, critical advice, and psychological support."


Another book *Act and Quality: A Theory of Literary Meaning and Human Understanding* by Altieri is a highly theoretical argument for locating meaning in literary texts by viewing them not as thematic constructs but as performed actions.


Jack Myers and David Wojahan, preface, *A Profile of Twentieth Century Poetry*, eds. Jack Myers and David Wojahan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1991) x. They write: “Recently for example, the reputation of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams have taken precedence over that of T. S Eliot, the most lionized modern poet of the first half of the twentieth century.”


John Lowney, *The American Avant Garde Tradition* (London: Associated University Presses, 1977) 20. This book is a brilliant analysis of the discontinuity within continuity or the continuity of discontinuity within the American avant-garde tradition starting from Williams. Lowney makes a study of three poets, Denis Levertov, Frank O’Hara and George Oppen who influentially extend Williams’ principles of poetic language and form. These poets respond to the historical conditions of post modernity by inverting Williams’ modernist dictum, the only way to write unlike Williams is to write like Williams but to foreground the intertextual act of doing so. Lowney is of
the view that poets like Robert Creeley, Charles Olson and Allen Ginsberg raise
significant questions about a cultural politics of situating Williams in the center of the
American avant garde tradition.


Critics who have been influential in defining Williams’ significance for Post modernism
include Charles Altieri, David Antin, Burton Hatleu, Marjorie Perloff, Joseph N. Riddle
and William Spanos.

10Ron Silliman, “Language, Realism, Poetry,” introduction to *In The American


Magazine in America: A Modern Documentary History*, eds. Elliot Anderson, Mary
Kinzie (Yonkers, N.Y. Pushcart, 1978) 322.

13Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, “Early Poetic Community,” *Allen Verbatim:
Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness*, ed. Gordon Ball (New York: Mac Graw Hill,
1974) 144.

14Robert Creeley, “I’m given to write poems. “*Quick Graph: Collected Notes and

15Kenneth Rexroth, *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (New York:
Seabury Press, Herder, 1971) 75-83.

17Joseph N. Riddel, “Decentering the Image: The “Project” of “American” Poetics?” Boundary 2.8 (Fall 1979): 179. Riddel argues that Williams’ long poem Paterson puts the question of ‘American crisis’ most directly: how can a new beginning be original? To exist, American poetry will have to situate itself in a tradition that would not close or repeat an opening that had already begun.


19Mike Weaver, William Carlos Williams: The American Background (London: Cambridge UP, 1971) 76-77. This book focuses on the local side of Williams’ personal, literary, aesthetic, intellectual and social background and is a fine prolegomena to the study of Williams.

20Roy Harvey Pearce, “The Long View,” The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961) 67. A clear account of the similar and dissimilar aspects of long poems is given. Talking about continuity Pearce writes that the continuity of one phase of American poetry ends with Stevens’s last poems and their complement in Eliot’s. He conceives of the future American poetry as ‘new international poetry,’ deriving from a sense of the do-or-die universal community of men and writes: “Whatever American poetry looks to be in the future, it will be something essentially different from what it has been in the past” (433).

21Daniel Morris, The Writings of William Carlos Williams: The Publicity for the Self
(Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995) 156.


23 Paul Bove', "The World and Earth of William Carlos Williams: Paterson as a "Long Poem," *Genre* XI (Winter 1978): 594-95. By approving of Riddel who frees Williams from universalist and immanentalist critics like Pearce and Miller, Bove' also restores attention to language as the site or location of meaning freed from the supposed extra linguistic "priorities" of genre ( upheld by Pearce) and objects ( by Dijkstra).

24 Victor P. H. Li, "The Vanity of Length: The Long poem as a problem in Pound's Cantos and Williams' Paterson," *Genre* XIX (Spring 1986): 20. Li quotes George Santayana (*Pioneer* 92): "The length of things is vanity, only their height is joy," and recasts the remark for the modern long poem (of Pound and Williams): "The length of things is vanity, but their height turns out also to be merely the vanity of length."


26 Joseph N. Riddel, *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counter Poetics of William Carlos Williams* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1974)257. He argues that Williams wants to strike through modernist deconstruction of the classical with another effort at deconstruction.


38 Paul Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (London: McGraw, 1981) 770. This monumental work on Williams is an exhaustive study of Williams at close quarters, a fine reading of Williams' self, characterized by deep understanding and endearing narration.