

Preamble

The text below reproduces, more or less, a talk I gave during the college's Research Week in Spring 2003. Although the talk was scripted for the most part, there were a few improvised 'passages' – the major one occasioned by a latecomer's tussle with the door, as I recall. Literally, 'error' means wandering and I used the word not just to create a link with William Carlos Williams' unruly and roaming improvisation, *Rome* but also to signal my own sense of dissatisfaction, which was the goad for the talk in the first place. Dissatisfaction with the critical 'voice' in which I seemed to find myself ensnared after seventeen years purposeful writing and thinking in academia. A voice so clinical – or so it seemed to me – so anodyne and remote from the texts it was speaking about. The nature of these texts is very much to the point, since in working with 'improvisations' I was engaging with texts whose impetus and *modus operandi* fly in the face of many of the traditional pieties of academic discourse. Improvisations – those of Williams, at least – are not considered or consistent. They are often not finished, let alone polished. Subjectivity courses through them with an urgency that bursts syntax like a flash flood will snap a drain. So, should I rein back, refrain from engagements this kind of text altogether? As far as I know, only one other scholar has written in detail about *Rome*, although a published facsimile edition has been available now for over thirty years. What follows are my first real efforts to address the improvisations in a way that does not routinely betray their poetics but also traverses the communal space that is critical inquiry.

David Arnold
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Research Err/or How I Came to be Where I am Not

These talks (mine) are given under
the sign of Janus –
the god of all doorways
the god of departure and
the god of return
the god of all means of communication,
the origin of whose name is uncertain,
be it '*ire*' – to go, or '*div*' – 'divide/split', 'divine'?
or *Jana* occasional epithet of Diana,
evoking the luminous sky.

(I write THIS beneath the attic skylight.
Above my head a local pigeon preens
securely perched on tv
aerial and glazed
with rain. Our airs
divided by transparent pane.)

Ovid, not sticking to any other bugger's script,

Relates that Janus was once called *Chaos*,
when air, fire, water and earth
formless mass were.

Formless mass were – I'm interested in improvisation – tumble out and tumbledown stuff, what Gerald Bruns has described as a “species of unforeseen discourse”. (Bruns 66) ‘Unforeseen’ signaling the inextricability of visual and verbal culture.

Specifically, particularly, the improvisations of William Carlos Williams. Williams, the ‘other’ modernist poet, contemporary of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot but, in contrast with their European hankerings, a self-declared ‘United Stateser’, who worked most of his adult life as a GP and paediatrician, writing poems on prescription pads, hunched over the passenger seat waiting for the city lights to change– bringing forth, bringing forth, bringing forth.

Williams *bifrons*, Williams the two-faced icon. Looking to the inside and to the outside of American literary history. No neutral space from which to compare these contrasting profiles. From the outside – perspective here voiced by Ron Silliman, ‘language writer’ and author of influential essay “The New Sentence” – the Williams of the interior retains only “surface features”: his apparent simplicity of voice, and his commitment to the American idiom. (135f) Likewise Bob Perelman, who has suggested that, in the US, writing workshops and creative writing departments have worked with a compact and serviceable modernism in which was to be found “an attenuated version of Williams as poet of the quotidian”. (12) From the outside looking in, this Williams has suffered a kind of inverse tracheotomy – in training his voice for the “neo-academic verse” that followed the New American poetry (Silliman 130ff) – big body sonics of Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg seeding revolutionary syllables from yogic roots of breath – Williams has had his upper air passage blocked. No conduit, no access for the “critical element of oppositionality” that shapes the grain of his facing outwards fizzog. (Silliman 132)

At least as far as most Language writers can see – motley crew, commodity crunchers, Marxist inflected, bedfellows of Barthes. For whom an oppositional poetics is one that tends to “the identification of method with content”. (Silliman 135)

Beefing up praxis, the poet comes puffing and prolix but with eyes wide open. Ain't ever gonna fall for the sniveling stunt of the commercial wordsmiths, pushing their mythy mush that the word can carry the world...

Not sure where I'm heading with this or where it's heading with me – dizzy and anxious at the same time – half tempted to return indoors, to the reassuring furniture of quotation. Oh, Williams, oh Silliman, furnish this creaking critic's squeak with the lineaments of your authority (so I can have my croak and eat it):

Progress is to get. But how can words get. – let them get drunk. Bah words are words. Fog of words. The car runs through it. The words make up the smell of the car. Petrol. Face powder, arm pits, food-grease in the hair, foul breath, clean musk. Words. Words cannot progress. There cannot be a novel. Break the words. Words are indivisible crystals. One cannot break them – awu tsst grang splith gra pragh og bm – Yes, one can break them.

(Williams, *Imaginations* 159f)

Genres form a kind of prior restraint, segmenting the real into the discrete. In the same moment that the devices which yield identifiability relieve authors of certain decisions and responsibilities, they strip them also of the freedom inherent in responsibility itself.

(McCaffery 158)

Silliman has here in his sights the prose poem, at least as far as it is possible to get a bead on writing that leaps along “a fundamentally anti-generic impulse” (McCaffery 160). His description of the prose poem reminds me of Bruns’s description of improvisation as ‘ungeneric precisely to the extent that it confounds those signals that we normally use to complete the text we have not finished reading’ (Bruns 69). The rigour of analysis wants to put the brakes on here, suspecting an elision of the differences between ‘anti’ and ‘un’. Is to be ‘anti-generic’ always to be engaged in an act of negation and, thereby, trouncing identity even as you trace its angry shadow? While ‘ungene’ is simply unaware of its relation to genre – Bruns elsewhere in his essay talks about improvisation as “intransitive discourse” – I ain’t doin’ nothin’ to nobody, jes my own thing in my own time my own time my own time... (Bruns 66)

I’ve been heading, it seems, to a threshold of my own, threshold bordered and ordered by two questions, albeit two questions that are verse and obverse of the same coin:

1. How to interpret improvisation when, according to Bruns, “interpretation performs the duty that revision declines: namely the silent removal of incongruities” ? (Bruns 72) [improviser’s watchwords: ‘Don’t look back’!]
2. How to pursue the freedom of responsibility in one’s – no I mean my – own writing?

To live outside the law of the generic objectivity that insulates my throat when I speak in the critical idiom, must I be honest? Admit as much to association with the text as to interpretation of the text? And where there is interpretation, accept that it is in the embodied experience of this living being who sits and sifts and shifts before you.

I could have said that differently; I am no longer sure of my ground.

To be honest, it's taken me more or less ten years to divine what it is that draws me always back to Williams. I've been reading and studying his writing for about that length of time. His was the longest chapter in my doctoral thesis on uses of the poetic image in twentieth century American poetry. His poetry and poetics shape many of the contours that inform the book I am currently writing on the literary genealogy of Language writing.

But it's really only been in the last few months, while working on an essay on his 1920s improvisation, *Rome*, that I found the fullness of his significance for me. I can give you what I think are sound critical reasons for my scholarly interest in this wandering and wayward, this roaming and recalcitrant text. Indeed, I can quote directly from my essay, which will form part of a collection of commemorative essays on Williams, coming out later this year.¹

I could have said that differently; I am no longer sure of my ground.

Williams started *Rome* as a journal while on sabbatical in Europe in 1923, continuing with it when he returned to the States in 1924. It was a piece of writing that he found hard to manage. Although begun as a personal document, there is evidence in his correspondence with Kenneth Burke that Williams had an eye on publication but was worried that what he was writing was 'unprintable'. Once back in the States he tried to turn the material into a novel but without success (Mariani 229). Consequently, *Rome* remained unpublished until 1978, when it appeared in *The Iowa Review*, accompanied by the essay by Bruns to which I've already referred. Recall Bruns's claim that improvisation is 'ungeneric precisely to the extent that it confounds those signals that we normally use to complete the text we have not finished reading' (Bruns 69). Well, *Rome* is peculiar in this respect, since it also confounded the signals Williams needed to complete the text he had not finished *writing*. *Rome*, then, totters potently at the extremity of Williams' improvisatory mode; it 'roams' in the margin of the margins of his writing practice and is one of the least incorporated limbs of his poetic corpus. In this connection, an irony also attends the belated publication of *Rome*. On the one hand, the improvisation goes public at a lengthy remove from the contingencies amidst which it was generated. On the other hand, its published form retains the traces of what Norman Bryson calls 'the[...]sequence of local inspirations' that characterise improvisation (Bryson 93). Sensibly, perhaps, the *Iowa Review* did not publish its version of *Rome* on the same thin newspaper as Williams used for the original but it did reproduce suggestions of excision and handwritten notes.² Indeed, In the face of

¹ This essay is now published. See David Arnold, "Wanderings with Janus: Situating *Rome*", in Ian D. Copestake (ed.), *Rigor of Beauty: Essays in Commemoration of William Carlos Williams* (Peter Lang 2004), pp. 123 – 149.

² *The Iowa Review* version does include a xerox of one of the original pages of the manuscript, complete with fraying edges. The manuscript resides in the Poetry/Rare Books Collection at the State University of New York at Buffalo. I am grateful to the staff

whole chunks struck through, the reader of *Rome* encounters material that both is and is not 'included.' Words that appear on the threshold of a text.

(Arnold 123f)

Croak croak croak, hereby fulfilling the responsibility of original and analytical enquiry that marks one boundary of my disciplinary plot.

Off on the other side is the personal, the parochial history, of my First degree in Classics; all my shiniest credentials hang on the walls of that temple. My good fortune to have spent three weeks working on an excavation in the Roman Forum (Summer 1987), during which I kept my own 'Roman journal', recorded in a tatty green notebook and showing the influence of Kerouac and strong coffee. The calculated errings of youth but the writing still strikes me as fresh –

So, when I come to look at this text, it's as if I have a cushion of unique experience from which to frame my reading of it. But herein lies the irony: I've taken as my talismanic text a 'work' that both does and does not exist, that flies in the face of classical proprieties, that fucked up Williams as *homo faber* – the man who makes:

For him, aged 38 – one year older than me – Rome did not stand side by side with Greece in some transcendental realm of abstract purity and excellence. In fact, he repeatedly contrasts the pagan and material mess of Rome with Hellenic idealism on the one hand and Christian hypocrisy on the other:

Roma, is –

sweeter than its fragrant ruins its odor of violets, a violet whose petals sweep beyond the horizon, whose center is yellow the sun is always full of the world – the gods of apple and buggery – welled up out of its rocks – giving themselves men to build and to steal, storming to every horizon as the slender Attic fountain was split and as still the gods rule its trick is the [sic, there?] have been many ways Saturn, Jove, Mercury – the women and life darting off in fifty ways

and today the nations flock there still it is the god –

Fucking, bitches look and moon over the river

Feed, feed – it is the free gods that eat artichokes

Feel the grass, love blood and horses and sacrifice

Drunk they were displaced – by themselves walking backward they played human too eagerly – Nero, Heliogaballus, Agrippa, Caracalla – these pace now the streets – the jazzy stress has split the rhythm – but the

(Williams, *Rome* 17)

[could make here additional observations about the parallel between Roman and US writing – Roman writers always still in the lists with Homer, Sappho, Theocritus et al – blunting the nibs of their invention against canonical monoliths of verse both thick and thin – comparison is almost explicit in William’s words: Callimachus (299 – 210 BC), poet and head of the Alexandrian Library, answered the weight of Homer’s authority with a neat and clipped poetic: namely that a bright and slender stream is better than a wide and muddy river – periodically, in William’s manuscript are glimpses down into the *cloaca maxima* – the main sewer that runs beneath the city, parts of which are still in use and name of which means ‘bloody big hole’ (memory from 4th form Biology: cloaca also applies to naughty bits of frogs). As Rome is to Greece, then, US is to Europe, jazz playing the model for writing that must always come up from below?]

in danger of sinking here, sick of my own authority, dragged down by a pudding over-egged. Children squealing in the bath on the floor below – aquatic and salutary distraction. “I’ve got your milk here – come and have stories”.

I can never again write anything to be a certain shape. But there is a kind of thing I could do: to have out of me the hell of a life I will not understand. And to have myself for a work of the will –
clean

Williams, *Rome* 12

Wandering, circling, closing in and storming away
Closer and closer to home:

The sabbatical during which Williams wrote his journal was, for him, an aberration, a ‘wandering from’.

The editor of the published version describes writing itself as “a violation” for doctor/writer, “time and energy stolen from his office, wife, and children, from civic and social responsibilities” (Loevy 1). He was anxious leaving his sons, even though he and Flossie saw them at weekends during the first six months. He noted the disapproval expressed by his neighbours.

In 1921 Williams wrote to poet Marianne Moore, suggesting that ‘each must free himself from the bonds of banality as best he can’, suggesting that his own timidity or instability of heart calls for ‘more violent methods’ (Loevy 2).

Not surprising, then, that much of *Rome* careers under the running title, “Violence”.

Don’t know if Williams would have gone to Europe at all if Ezra Pound hadn’t badgered him to do it.

But I don't really believe you want to leave the U.S. permanently. I think you are suffering from nerve; that you are really afraid to leave Rutherford. I think you ought to have a year off or a six month's vacation in Europe. I think you are afraid to take it, for fear of destroying some illusions which you think necessary to your illusions. I don't think you ought to leave permanently, your job gives you too real a contact, too valuable to give up. But you ought to see a human being now and again.

(Pound 173)

Pound to Williams, March 1922

Rome rarely finds its way back to Rutherford explicitly but Williams' nervousness did not dissipate the moment he took ship.

I know that I am here by the grace of a few dollars invested in a house, I know that they see money in it because it's on a good corner. They'd steal it in a minute if I gave them a chance.
(Williams, *Rome* 15)

In the end, and as Pound's letter recognizes, Williams just wasn't at home enough with the identity of the disinterested and disaffiliated artist to live his life according to its lights alone. Which is why, perhaps, the 'disinterestness' of the imagination is a recurring feature of *Rome*. This is to say that Williams looks to achieve in his poetics and in his poetry the freedom of attention that is so hard to attain in his day-to-day life. The full force of the pun on *Rome* is realized in this context and nicely expressed in the following refusal of Greek priorities:

wisdom would be more Greek but the wandering interest browses and forgets the last—it has no interest— this unlike trying to fasten the words runs on and on under the apple tree too idly—or idly, in legs that carry , heads. It is a body—it is difficult—too far (Williams, *Rome* 20)

If the attention is allowed this freedom that it craves, it does not matter how one makes one's way in the world:

What do? Do anything. Medicine. It is all capable of organization.

There is nothing—then anything. All tend to one thing—the emergence through — poetry, law, art—religion (Williams, *Rome* 36)³

³ A letter written by Malcolm Cowley in 1923 from France, to Kenneth Burke, notes of the dadaists that 'their love of literature is surprisingly disinterested'. In the same vein, he characterizes Dada as 'negation of all motives for writing'. The end of the letter might have interested Williams, since it confirms that the European dadaists had the disinterested life-style to go with a disinterested poetics, 'They are over-stimulated, living in a perpetual weekend.' (Cowley 471f)

'if the attention is allowed this freedom that it craves, it does not matter how one makes one's way in the world' [when I was cutting and pasting, I thought these words were those of Williams, when in fact they were my own]

In Silliman's terms, such freedom is responsible, sincere to the extent that it is not afraid to go against the grain of legitimated genres and forms. But what of the critic's voice, and what of my voice? Is a responsible criticism one that shows the teethmarks of the discursive protocols that sometimes, sometimes bite it back? Can I confess, in abstract or foreword that I'm sick to my own back teeth with the whirligig of multi-tasking (without biting the hand that feeds me?) And how far can I let my attention wander before I lose all claim to the public sphere?

We planted peas today
In sun-ruffled soil
Tender to rake and hoe,
At the edge of our allotment,
Tending west to the concrete
Of Car Park,
University College Worcester
March 2003

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