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Review Of "William Carlos Williams And The American Poem" By C. Doyle

Peter Schmidt

Swarthmore College, pschmid1@swarthmore.edu

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Charles Doyle, *William Carlos Williams and the American poem*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982. 209 pp.

Despite his problems with academics, William Carlos Williams has been luckier than most poets of his generation in the quality of book-length critical introductions his work has received. James Guimond's, Thomas Whitaker's, and James Breslin's books, to mention only a few, were published less than a decade after Williams' death, and all quickly became standard field guides to the Williams territory.

Charles Doyle's *William Carlos Williams and the American Poem* seeks to be added to such a list, by virtue of its range and succinctness. The book has the disadvantage of following those earlier introductory volumes without substantially altering the sense they gave us of the texture or shape of Williams' career, though Doyle does take issue with earlier criticisms when he feels it appropriate. (A representative example is the following sentence: "While it is perhaps an overstatement to speak of 'his [Williams'] wholehearted adoption of American vernacular speech' (as Guimond does), Williams certainly bases his line [in "The Wanderer"] on conversational sentence structure, managing it with great ease" [5-6]). Doyle's book does not offer as thorough a reinterpretation of Williams' work as, say, Paul Mariani's biography or Carl Rapp's book on Williams' romanticism. But an introductory volume of criticism can have other virtues, such as cogency and adroitness in using source materials, and these Doyle's book often has.

Doyle's resourcefulness is evident from the first page, where he reveals that he used some notes Williams made for organizing *Complete Collected Poems* as a basis for structuring *Williams and the American Poem*. Williams' table of contents was as follows: "The River," *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*, *Spring and All*, *The Wedge*, "The Poem as a Machine," "A New Way of Measuring." Many of these categories are used in Doyle's book as well, both as chapter titles and as underlying methods of organization.

It is in the chapters on *Paterson* that Doyle's use of Williams archives becomes most prominent. There is, for example, a discussion of the relevance of Joyce's epics to Williams' project, demonstrating a connection between the Anna Livia Plurabelle passage in *Finnegan's Wake* and Williams' personification of Garrett Mountain and the Passaic's west bank as a woman. This Joycean connection has a fascinating history: it was first explored when Williams recorded in his diary in 1928 the heroic story of Dolores Marie Pischak (1 241-244), "counterpart of Anna Livia Plurabelle." Eventually assigned to *The Descent of Winter*, this diary entry, Doyle tells us, "is either excerpt or summary of an abortive novel entitled 'Fairfield' [named after Pischak's town in New Jersey], an uncompleted work which appears to be a specific forerunner of *Paterson*" (Doyle, 51, 91-2). Joyce was also a source for the poem's epic comprehensiveness: one draft of the table of soil substrata in *Paterson* 3, Doyle notes, "concludes with a single local geographical reference 'Dublin spring!', which (besides connecting Paterson to Joyce's Dublin) would have afforded the clue that the deep descent is to 'spring,' rebirth, return to the beginning of a new civilization with new energy and a newfound language, the pattern indicated by Brooks Adams [in *The Law of Civilization and Decay*]" (125).

There is also a brief but useful look at the poem's alchemical terminology and (the highlight of the *Paterson* chapters for me) a fascinating comparison of *Paterson* with the sociological studies of Muncie, Indiana, by R.S. and H.M. Lynd—

Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929) and *Middletown: A Study in Cultural Conflict* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1937). As Doyle points out, David Lyle, a correspondent who was of great importance to Williams at the time, praised the Lynds' work in one of his letters to Williams, and Williams refers cryptically to "*Muncie*" early in the epic (P 10). Doyle suggests several possible points of contact between the *Middletown* volumes and *Paterson*, including the role the pastime of walking plays in both, and their goal of making a "case" study of a single city (in the Lynds' words) "as representative as possible of contemporary American life." "Williams wanted to give *Paterson* a sociological presence and...[h]is whole view of its value was one of social usefulness," Doyle comments. He draws our attention in particular to the following passage by the Lynds about divorce and education in Muncie: "a value divorced from current, tangible existence in the world all about men and largely without commerce with those concrete existential realities has become an ideal to which independent existence is attributed. Hence the anomaly of Muncie's regard for the symbol of education and its disregard for the concrete procedure of the schoolroom" (94). (Not noted by Doyle, however, is the delightful way Williams establishes this connection between Muncie and Paterson: in a tall-tale feat topping any of Sam Patch's, "PISS-AGH! the giant [Paterson] lets fly!"—apparently peeing or spitting all the way from the Passaic to Muncie (P 10). Some things can be done as well as others! Or perhaps *better* than others: *Paterson*, Williams secretly boasts, will outdo *Middletown*. Does any other modern American epic have such Melvillean and Whitmanian highjinks? Someone ought to do an essay on Williams and American humor....)

Other highlights of Doyle's book include a comparison and contrast of the Venus and Kora motifs throughout Williams' work, a discussion of the possible influence on *Spring and All* of Virgil Jordan (Viola Baxter Jordan's husband) and his ideas about energy, a look at Fernand Leger's possible influence on the Objectivist's credo, and a survey of references to rebirth in *Pictures from Brueghel*. Some of Virgil Jordan's ideas appeared in a severely edited form of *Contact 4* (1922), and should certainly be better known; they are relevant to most of Williams' work, not just *Spring and All*. I quote a part of Doyle's discussion: "Herein the individual is seen as a transformer of 'energy.' In a creative discharge of power, 'resistance is overcome, and the individual is in actual contact with the obstacle.' Creative discharge is the discovery of new patterns. In 'free' (truly creative) art 'patterns...are moulded to the material' " (36).

My praise for Doyle's book as a useful introduction to Williams' work is tempered by some regrets for its faults. Principal among these is Doyle's tendency to paraphrase rather than analyze, and to quote Williams' own dictums as if they were the last words on the subject. (His discussion of "At the Faucet of June" in *Spring and All* exemplifies these problems: commenting on the poem's last two stanzas, Doyle says only that "the importance of *what happens* is stressed...The co-presence of these details is a discovery of *order* among them, detached 'from ordinary experience to the imagination' " [33-34]). It is also unfortunate that Doyle has no qualms about calling Marcia Nardi a "poetess" (yes, I know Williams used that word, but that hardly means we should); that he misleadingly implies that the title poem of *The Desert Music and Other Poems* was written later than the others in that volume (156); and that his concluding chapter repeats one of the hoariest misconceptions of previous Williams scholarship, that Williams' breakthrough came when he rejected simile, analogy, and metaphor, in order "to assert the necessity of keeping one's eye on the object recognizing...that peculiarity which gives an object a character by itself" (169). (How can any critic who knows how to read as well as Doyle really believe that tropes are less important than subject matter in, say, *Al Que Quiere!* or *Kora in Hell!* We may call this cliché the "transparent eyeball" fallacy in Williams studies, for its ultimate source

probably lies in a misreading of that famous passage in Emerson's *Nature*.)

Despite these caveats, I feel that *William Carlos Williams and the American Poem* has virtues to offer both the specialist and the novice, and it should be a part of any collection of Williams scholarship that seeks to be comprehensive.

Peter Schmidt
Swarthmore College