THE ART OF POETRY NO. 6

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

Rutherford, New Jersey: Number nine stands on a terrace at the foot of Ridge Road, just where it angles into Park Avenue and the stores along the main street. For fifty years the sign beside the walk read *William C. Williams, M.D.* Now it carries the name of his son, with an arrow pointing to the side entrance and the new office wing. In his last years, Dr. Williams's health suffered from a series of strokes that made it difficult for him to speak and impaired his physical vigor, so that there would often be a delay before he appeared, pushing out the aluminum storm door and retreating a step or two, extending welcome with a kind of hesitant warmth. On the occasion of the interview, he moved more deliberately than ever, but his greeting was still at pains to be personal. A leisurely progress brought us upstairs past a huge, two-story painting of Williamsburg Bridge filling the stairwell, to the study, a room at the back of the house, overlooking the yard. An electric typewriter, which Dr. Williams could no longer use, was at the desk, and, though he could scarcely read, a copy of *The Desert Music and Other Poems*, opened to "The Descent," was propped up in the open drawer. In a corner of the room, over a metal filing cabinet, was an oil painting hung against a wallpaper of geometric

simplicity. We sat a little away from the desk, toward the window, with the microphone lying on a stack of small magazines between us.

At the time of these talks, in April 1962, William Carlos Williams was in his seventy-ninth year, author of forty published volumes from *Poems*, 1909, a collection so rare that Mrs. Williams has had trouble holding on to a copy, down through various collected editions and the successive books of *Paterson* to *The Desert Music* and *Journey to Love*. Both of these last volumes were written in an unusual recovery of creative power after Dr. Williams's first serious illness in 1952. Now, with customary impatience, he was fretting to see his latest collection, *Pictures from Brueghel*, scheduled for publication in June. The doorbell never rang but he expected some word from New Directions, though it was still early in spring.

Because it was so hard for Dr. Williams to talk, there was no question of discoursing on topics suggested in advance, and the conversation went on informally, for an hour or two at a time, over several days. The effort it took the poet to find and pronounce words can hardly be indicated here. Many of the sentences ended in no more than a wave of the hand when Mrs. Williams was not present to finish them. But whatever the topic, the poet's mind kept coming back to the technical matters that interested him in his later years. One of these was his concern with "idiom," the movements of speech that he felt to be especially American, as opposed to English. A rival interest was the "variable foot," a metrical device that was to resolve the conflict between form and freedom in verse. The question whether one had not to assume a fixed element in the foot as the basis for meter drew only a typical Williams negative, slightly profane, and no effort was made to pursue this much further. As a result, the notion of some mysterious "measure" runs through the interview like an unlaid ghost, promising enough pattern for shapeliness, enough flexibility for all the subtleties of idiom. No wonder a copy of "The Descent" was in evidence as we began; for however much one may argue over the theory of this verse, it is hard to resist the performance.

On March 4, 1963, William Carlos Williams died in his sleep, at home, of a cerebral hemorrhage that was not unexpected. Two months later, *Pictures from Brueghel* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, and Mrs. Williams accepted, in his name, the Gold Medal for Poetry from the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Though he did not see this interview in print, he approved it in its final stages. Mrs. Williams reports him as having been much entertained by her part in the second half of it.

—Stanley Koehler, 1964

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

Well, what's to be done?

INTERVIEWER

I would like to ask you about this new measure that I see here—

WILLIAMS

If I could only talk.

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps we might begin with Rutherford, whether you thought it was a good environment for you.

WILLIAMS

A very bad environment for poets. We didn't take anything seriously—in Ruth—in Rutherford. We didn't take poetry very seriously. As far as recording my voice in Rutherford—I read before the ladies, mostly.

INTERVIEWER

You mean the Women's Club? How did they like it?

WILLIAMS

Very much: they applauded. I was quite a hero. [*Picking up a volume*] I remember "By the Road to the Contagious Hospital" was one of the ones I read. The hospital was up in Clifton. I was always intent on saying what I had to say in the accents that were native to me. But I didn't know what I was doing. I knew that the measure was intended to record—something. But I didn't know what the measure was. I stumbled all over the place in these earlier poems. For instance, in this one here ["*Queen-Ann's Lace*"]. I would divide those lines differently now. It's just like the later line, only not opened up in the same way.

INTERVIEWER

You were saying that Rutherford was a bad environment for poets.

WILLIAMS

Yes. But except for my casual conversations about the town, I didn't think anything of it at all. I had a great amount of patience with artisans.

INTERVIEWER

Did you mean it when you said medicine was an interference which you resented?

WILLIAMS

I didn't resent it at all. I just wanted to go straight ahead.

INTERVIEWER

And medicine was not on the way?

WILLIAMS

I don't know whether it would be. I used to give readings at the high school and Fairleigh Dickinson. I was sympathetic with these audiences. I was talking about the same people that I had to

do with as patients, and trying to interest them. I was not pretending: I was speaking to them as if they were interested in the same sort of thing.

INTERVIEWER

But were they? Perhaps they felt the double nature of your role, as both poet and doctor, was something of a barrier.

WILLIAMS

No, no. The language itself was what intrigued me. I thought that we were on common territory there.

INTERVIEWER

Did you write the short stories on a different "level" than the poems—as a kind of interlude to them?

WILLIAMS

No, as an alternative. They were written in the form of a conversation which I was partaking in. We were in it together.

INTERVIEWER

Then the composition of them was just as casual and spontaneous as you have suggested. You would come home in the evening and write twelve pages or so without revising?

WILLIAMS

I think so. I was coming *home*. I was placing myself in continuation of a common conversation.

INTERVIEWER

You have insisted that there cannot be a seeking for words in literature. Were you speaking of prose as well as poetry?

WILLIAMS

I think so. Not to choose between words.

INTERVIEWER

Certainly the word does matter though.

WILLIAMS

It does matter, very definitely. Strange that I could say that.

INTERVIEWER

But when you had come home, and were continuing the experience of reality—

WILLIAMS

Reality. Reality. My vocabulary was chosen out of the intensity of my concern. When I was talking in front of a group, I wasn't interested in impressing them with my power of speech, but only with the seriousness of my intentions toward them. I had to make them come alive.

INTERVIEWER

You have said you felt trapped in Rutherford, that you couldn't get out, never had any contact with anyone here. Do you still feel that Rutherford hasn't provided enough of the contact you managed to find during the twenties, in New York, with the Others group? Was that a genuine contribution to your development?

WILLIAMS

That was not a literary thing exactly. But it was about writing—intensely so. We were speaking straight ahead about what concerned us, and if I could have overheard what I was saying then, that would have given me a hint of how to phrase myself, to say what I had to say. Not after the establishment, but speaking straight ahead. I would gladly have traded what I have tried to say for what came off my tongue, naturally.

INTERVIEWER

Which was not the same?

WILLIAMS

Not free enough. What came off in this writing, finally—*this* writing [*pointing to "The Descent"*]—that was pretty much what I wanted to say, in the way I wanted to say it, then. I was searching in this congeries. I wanted to say something in a certain tone of my voice which would be exactly how I wanted to say it, to measure it in a certain way.

INTERVIEWER

Was this in line with what the others in the group were trying to do?

WILLIAMS

I don't think they knew what they were trying to do; but in effect it was. I couldn't speak like the academy. It had to be modified by the conversation about me. As Marianne Moore used to say, a language dogs and cats could understand. So I think she agrees with me fundamentally. Not the speech of English country people, which would have something artificial about it; not that, but language modified by *our* environment; the American environment.

INTERVIEWER

Your own background is pretty much a mixture of English and Spanish, isn't it? Do you think the Spanish has had any influence on your work?

WILLIAMS

There might have been a permanent impression on my mind. It was certainly different from the French. French is too formal; the Spanish language isn't. They were broad men, as in *El Cid*, very much broader than the French. My relation to language was a curious thing. My father was English, but Spanish was spoken in my home. I didn't speak it, but I was read to in Spanish. My mother's relatives used to come up and stay two or three months.

INTERVIEWER

You have said you equated Spanish with the "romantic." Is that a designation you would shrink from?

WILLIAMS

No, not shrink from.

INTERVIEWER

What I was getting at is that you have kept the name "Carlos."

WILLIAMS

I had no choice but to keep the "Carlos."

INTERVIEWER

I understand Solomon Hoheb, your mother's father, was Dutch.

WILLIAMS

Maybe. The Spanish came from the Sephardic Jews. Though the English was strong indeed, through my grandfather.

INTERVIEWER

You've been more conscious of the Spanish, then, than of the other.

WILLIAMS

Yes! I've insisted on breaking with my brother's memory of the Williamses as English. All one needs to do is look at my nose. Flossie says, "I love your nose." And the hell with my nose, after all. The thing that concerns me is the theory of what I was determined to do with measure, what you encounter on the page. It must be transcribed to the page from the lips of the poet, as it was with such a master as Sappho. "The Descent" was very important to me in that way.

As Weehawken is to Hamilton

is to Provence we'll say, he hated it

of which he knew nothing and cared less

and used it inhis scheems - so

founding the country which was to

increase to be the wonder of the world
in its day

which was to exceed his London on which he patterened it

(A key figure in the development)

If any one is important more important

- point of a dagger -
than the edge of a knife or a poem is: or an irrelevance

in the life of a people: see Da Da or the murders of a

Staline

or a Li Po

or an obscre Montezuma

or a forgotten Socrates or Aristotle before the destruction

of the library of Alexandria (as note derisively by Berad Shaw)

by fire in which the poes of Sappho were lost

and brings us (Alex was born out of wedlock)

illegitimately perversion righed though that alone

does not a make a poet or a statesman

- Wahington was a six foot four man with a wakk voice and a slow
mind which made it inconvenient for him to move fast - and so he
stayed. He had a will bred in the slow woods so that when he
moved the world moved out of has way.

Fragment of the continuation of *Paterson*

INTERVIEWER

You mean that is where it finally happened?

WILLIAMS

Yes, there it happened; and before that it didn't. I remember writing this (*trying to read*):

The descent beckons
as the ascent beckoned.
Memory is a kind . . .

INTERVIEWER

. . . of accomplishment.

WILLIAMS

A sort of renewal
even
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places.

You see how I run that line? I was very much excited when I wrote this. I had to do something. I was sitting there with the typewriter in front of me. I was attempting to imitate myself (I think I can't even see it at all) but it didn't come alive to me.

INTERVIEWER

It seems to me you were reading it just now.

WILLIAMS

More or less. But something went wrong with me. I can't make it out any more. I can't type.

INTERVIEWER

Would a tape recorder or a dictaphone be uncongenial?

WILLIAMS

No, anything that would serve me I'd gladly adopt.

INTERVIEWER

The appearance of this poem on the page suggests you were conscious of it as a thing—something for the eye.

WILLIAMS

Yes, very good. I was conscious of making it even. I wanted it to read regularly.

INTERVIEWER

Not just to please the eye?

WILLIAMS

The total effect is very important.

INTERVIEWER

But the care in placing the words—did you ever feel you would be as happy painting?

WILLIAMS

I'd like to have been a painter, and it would have given me at least as great a satisfaction as being a poet.

INTERVIEWER

But you say you are a "word man."

WILLIAMS

Yes, that took place early in my development. I was early inducted into my father's habit of reading—that made me a poet, not a painter. My mother was a painter. Her brother Carlos won the Grand Prix—the Gros Lot it was called—then he financed her to go to Paris, to study painting. Then the money ran out.

INTERVIEWER

And she met your father through Carlos, whom he knew in—

WILLIAMS

Puerto Plata. My father was a businessman, interested in South America. But he always loved books. He used to read poetry to me. Shakespeare. He had a group who used to come to our house, a Shakespeare club. They did dramatic readings. So I was always interested in Shakespeare, and Grandmother was interested in the stage—my father's mother. Emily Dickinson, her name was. Isn't that amazing?

INTERVIEWER

Quite a coincidence: I notice a picture of her namesake over the desk.

WILLIAMS

Emily was my patron saint. She was also an American, seeking to divide the line in some respectable way. We were all of us Americans.

INTERVIEWER

Then you did read a good bit of her at some stage, with your father?

WILLIAMS

My father didn't know anything about Emily Dickinson. He was sold on Shakespeare. [*Doorbell rings. WCW makes his way downstairs to answer it.*]

INTERVIEWER [AS HE RETURNS]

You say you were hoping it might be the new volume?

WILLIAMS

Yes. I am keenly disappointed. But that's always the way it is

with me—my life's blood dripping away. Laughlin has been a wonderful friend, but it's always so goddamn *slow*! I have still the illusion that I will be able to talk when I make these connections. It's possible, because I am an emotional creature, and if I could only talk, to you for instance. Here is a person well-intentioned toward me, meaning yourself, and I can't talk to him. It makes me furious.

INTERVIEWER

It's good of you to put up with this business at all. We were talking about painting and the theater and poetry. Was that a natural progression for you?

WILLIAMS

More or less; stemming from frustration. I was wondering—I was seeking to be articulate.

INTERVIEWER

At one point you wanted to be an actor.

WILLIAMS

I had no skill as an actor. But through Dad's reading, the plays of Shakespeare made an impression on me. He didn't *want* them to necessarily, just to read them—as words, that came off as speech.

INTERVIEWER

How did this interest in words make you interested in poetry as opposed, say, to writing novels?

WILLIAMS

That didn't have any connection.

INTERVIEWER

The words weren't sufficiently important in prose?

WILLIAMS

No. I never thought I was a very good prose writer anyway. But when I speak of Emily Dickinson—she was an independent spirit. She did her best to get away from too strict an interpretation. And she didn't want to be confined to rhyme or reason. (Even in Shakespeare, the speech of the players: it was annoying to him to have to rhyme, for God's sake.) And she followed the American idiom. She didn't know it, but she followed it nonetheless. I was a better poet.

INTERVIEWER

You are speaking about language now, not form.

WILLIAMS

Yes; her native speech. She was a wild girl. She chafed against restraint. But she speaks the spoken language, the idiom, which would be deformed by Oxford English.

INTERVIEWER

This new measure of yours, in the later poems, is meant then to accommodate the American speech rhythms.

WILLIAMS

Yes. It's a strange phenomenon, my writing. I think what I have been searching for—

INTERVIEWER

You were suggesting that Emily Dickinson had something to do with it; and her objection to rhyme. But that you were a better poet.

WILLIAMS

Oh, yes [*laughing*]. She was a real good guy. I thought I was a better poet because the American idiom was so close to me, and she didn't get what the poets were doing at that time—writing

according to a new method, not the English method, which wouldn't have made much sense to an American. Whitman was on the right track, but when he switched to the English intonation, and followed the English method of recording the feet, he didn't realize it was a different method, which was not satisfactory to an American. Everything started with Shakespeare.

INTERVIEWER

Because it was meant to be spoken?

WILLIAMS

Yes. But when the Shakespearean line was recorded, it was meant to be a formal thing, divided in the English method according to what was written on the page. The Americans shouldn't tolerate that. An Englishman—an English rhetorician, an actor—will speak like Shakespeare, but it's only rhetorical. He can't be true to his own speech. He has to change it in order to conform.

INTERVIEWER

You think it is easier for the English to conform, in poetry, to their kind of speech pattern than it is for an American? You don't think for example that Frost is as true to the American idiom as you are trying to be?

WILLIAMS

No, I don't think so. Eliot, on the other hand, was trying to find a way to record the speech and he didn't find it. He wanted to be regular, to be true to the American idiom, but he didn't find a way to do it. One has to bow down finally, either to the English or to the American.

INTERVIEWER

Eliot went to England; you stayed here.

WILLIAMS

To my sorrow.

INTERVIEWER

To your sorrow? What do you mean by that?

WILLIAMS *[yielding, perhaps]*

It is always better to stick to something.

INTERVIEWER

It's rare to find someone who has. Eliot says he would not be the same if he had stayed. You have said there was a great virtue in the kind of isolation you experienced here.

WILLIAMS

A key question.

INTERVIEWER

And you have been called our most valuable homespun sensitivity.

WILLIAMS

"Homespun sensitivity." Very good.

INTERVIEWER

But you still feel it was a bad environment.

WILLIAMS

It was native, but I doubt that it was very satisfactory to me personally. Though it did provide the accent, which satisfied me.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you could have picked a better one? Do you think you would have been happier in Boston, or Hartford, or New York, or Paris?

WILLIAMS

I might have picked a better one, if I had wanted to—which I did. But if I lived there—if its language was familiar to me, if that was the kind of conversation which I heard, which I grew up with—I could tolerate the vulgarity because it forced me to speak in a particular manner. Not the English intonation.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still feel that the English influence on Eliot set us back twenty years?

WILLIAMS

Very definitely. He was a conformist. He wanted to go back to the iambic pentameter; and he did go back to it, very well; but he didn't acknowledge it.

INTERVIEWER

You say that you could never be a calm speaker, so that this unit you use, which isn't either a foot or a line necessarily, and which works by speech impulses, this is meant to reflect also your own nervous habit of speech—in which things come more or less in a rush.

WILLIAMS

Common sense would force me to work out some such method.

INTERVIEWER

You do pause, though, in the midst of these lines.

WILLIAMS

Very definitely.

INTERVIEWER

Then what is the integrity of the line?

WILLIAMS

If I was consistent in myself it would be very much more effective than it is now. I would have followed much closer to the indicated divisions of the line than I did. It's too haphazard.

INTERVIEWER

The poetry? You admit that in prose, but—

WILLIAMS

In poetry also. I think I was too haphazard.

INTERVIEWER

In the later poems—like "The Orchestra" here—you think there is still some work to do?

WILLIAMS

It's not successful. It would be classical if it had the proper division of lines. "Reluctant mood," "stretches and yawns." What the devil is that? It isn't firmly enough stated. It's all very complicated—but I can't go on.

INTERVIEWER

You mean you can't find a theory to explain what you do naturally.

WILLIAMS

Yes. It's all in the ear. I wanted to be regular. To continue that—

INTERVIEWER [*picking up a copy of Paterson V, from which some clippings fall to the floor*]

These opening lines—they make an image on the page.

WILLIAMS

Yes, I was imitating the flight of the bird.

INTERVIEWER

Then it's directed—

WILLIAMS

To the eyes. Read it.

INTERVIEWER

"In old age the mind casts off . . ."

WILLIAMS

In old age
the mind
casts off
rebelliously
an eagle
from its crag

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever think of using any other city as subject for a poem?

WILLIAMS

I didn't dare any mention of it in *Paterson*, but I thought strongly of Manhattan when I was looking about for a city to celebrate. I thought it was not particularized enough for me, not American in the sense I wanted. It was near enough, God knows, and I was familiar enough with it for all my purposes—but so was Leipzig, where I lived for a year when I was young, or Paris. Or even Vienna or even Frascati. But Manhattan escaped me.

INTERVIEWER

Someone remarks in one of these clippings that there is no reason the poem should ever end. Part Four completes the cycle, Five renews it. Then what?

WILLIAMS [*Laughing*]

Go on repeating it. At the end—the last part, the dance—

INTERVIEWER

"We can know nothing and can know nothing but the dance . . ."

WILLIAMS

The dance, to dance to a measure
contrapuntally,
satyrically, the tragic foot.

That has to be interpreted; but how are you going to interpret it?

INTERVIEWER

I don't presume to interpret it; but perhaps the satyrs represent the element of freedom, of energy within the form.

WILLIAMS

Yes. The satyrs are understood as action, a dance. I always think of the Indians there.

INTERVIEWER

Is anything implied, in "contrapuntally," about the nature of the foot?

WILLIAMS

It means "musically"—it's a musical image. The Indians had a beat in their own music, which they beat with their feet. It isn't an image exactly, a poetic image. Or perhaps it is. The beat goes according to the image. It should all be so simple; but with my damaged brain—

INTERVIEWER

We probably shouldn't be trying to reduce a poetic statement to prose, when we have *The Desert Music* here: "Only the poem . . . "

WILLIAMS

"The counted poem, to an exact measure."

INTERVIEWER

You think it should be more exact then, than you have yet made it.

WILLIAMS

Yes, it should be more exact, in Milton's sense. Milton counted the syllables.

INTERVIEWER

"And I could not help thinking of the wonders of the brain that hears that music."

WILLIAMS

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

"And of our skill *sometimes* to record it." Do you still feel that such modesty is in order?

WILLIAMS

Modesty is in order, God knows—facing the universe of sound.

INTERVIEWER

At least you are not talking about painting now.

WILLIAMS

No. I'm more or less committed to poetry.

[*Talking with Mrs. Williams—the Flossie of* White Mule—*is like going on with a conversation with Dr. Williams: the same honesty, the same warmth, mixed perhaps with briskness and reserve. The*

living room of their house reflects the interests they have had in common—the paintings, the flowers, the poetry. For fifty years the daily mail brought letters, books, journals, to accumulate in corners and cupboards and on tables around the edges of the room: books from authors and publishers, books with dedications to WCW, or titles borrowed from his poems; and the whole lot of those almost anonymous little magazines that he encouraged with contributions: poems, articles, the inevitable "visit with WCW." On the first day of these particular interviews, a new hi-fi set still in its crate stood in the middle of the room, a gift from the second son, Paul. Now, while waiting for Dr. Williams to come in, Mrs. Williams put on a record, and we listened to the poet's voice for a while, recorded in this same room with occasional sounds of local traffic coming through. It was an aging voice, unmodulated and didactic, but curiously effective in reading the late poems. Mrs. Williams talked about the town of Rutherford, and the poet's brother Edgar, an architect with plans for improving life along the Passaic. She talked of the house when they first moved into it, and of her early impressions of Bill Williams as a young man, at a stage of their life when he was generally off in New York at the clinics, or at various literary gatherings.]

INTERVIEWER

Did you have to be converted to poetry, in those early days?

MRS. WILLIAMS

No, I was sympathetic. Of course, Bill never paid much attention to me. He used to come to see my sister, who was quite a bit older. She played the piano, and Bill played the violin—not very well. And Edgar sang. Bill didn't read his poetry to me then. He read some to my sister, but she didn't think much of it. Bill's early verse was pretty bad.

INTERVIEWER

I understand Dr. Williams wrote a sonnet a day for a year, when he was at Pennsylvania. Edgar says he called it brainwash, or something worse.

MRS. WILLIAMS

Meeting Ezra Pound seemed to make a difference. It was not really a literary relationship at first. They were too wholly different, but I think that was the turning point. From that time Bill began seriously to want to write poetry. But he realized he couldn't make a living at it.

INTERVIEWER

How did he happen to become a doctor?

MRS. WILLIAMS

His father wanted him to be a dentist. Bill was willing to try. But he hated it. Bill was just too nervous to stand in one spot. But he loved being a doctor, making house calls, and talking to people.

INTERVIEWER

He didn't care to be a surgeon?

MRS. WILLIAMS

He didn't have the long fingers he thought a surgeon should have. That's why he was never a good violinist. But he and Edgar both had ability with their hands. Edgar was a master at drawing, and Bill used to paint. And of course he loves to garden. Two years ago he turned over that whole garden for me when he could scarcely use his right arm. Things would really grow for him.

INTERVIEWER

Was there much literary life in Rutherford?

WILLIAMS

Not until much later. We had no literary contacts in Rutherford at all: except for Miss Owen, who taught the sixth grade. She knew what Bill was trying to do.

INTERVIEWER

I had the feeling Dr. Williams felt there was no real response to his poetry, even when he read to local groups.

MRS. WILLIAMS

They took what they could get, and ignored the rest—it just wasn't for them. I think to this day very few people in Rutherford know anything about Bill's writing.

INTERVIEWER

Is that a comment on the town or the writing?

MRS. WILLIAMS

I think both. It's a lower-middle-class type of mind, and Bill has never attracted a general audience. My mother used to try to get me to influence him.

INTERVIEWER

To write more conventionally?

MRS. WILLIAMS

Yes. Some of it I didn't like myself, but I never interfered. And I was never blamed for not liking it. [*Telephone rings*] I'll get it, Bill. [*Answering*] Is it an emergency? No, there are no office hours on Friday. [*Returning from phone*] A patient for young Bill. He left the answering service off. That's what happens.

INTERVIEWER

I suppose you are used to that by now.

MRS. WILLIAMS [*groaning*]

Yes, by now, I'm afraid I am.

INTERVIEWER

Is Dr. Williams not writing now?

MRS. WILLIAMS

No, not for over a year; he can't. He just can't find the words.

INTERVIEWER

Was he writing very much when you were first engaged?

MRS. WILLIAMS

No; once in a while he would send me a poem. But he was busy building up his practice. After we were married he wrote more. I saw to it that he had time, and I made it pleasant for people who came here—because I liked them myself. They were much more interesting than most of the local people. Everyone you can think of used to be in and out. We were the only ones who had a permanent address in all that time. For fifty years, this was headquarters for them all. There was Marsden Hartley—that was his only pastel, over the divan there. He was broke and wanted to go to Germany, so he had an auction at Stieglitz's gallery. An American Place. Bill bought another one at the same time, an unfinished oil up in the study. Maxwell Bodenheim came and stayed a couple of weeks once. He almost drove us crazy. (He was supposed to have a broken arm but Bill was never convinced of it.) He was quite dirty and disagreeable. He couldn't eat carrots, though we had to have them, for the children's sake. And he stuttered terribly. One day we received a telegram from him saying: send $200 at once am going to marry a very beautiful girl. maxwell. He was later found murdered in his apartment in New York, with his wife, if she was his wife; probably not the one in the telegram. Then there was Wallace Gould, whom you may not know, a friend of Hartley's from Maine. His mother was an

American Indian. And Marianne Moore used to come out with her mother. Bill's writing developed tremendously in that period. There was a group up at Grantwood, near Fort Lee. Malcolm Cowley was in it; and Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Alfred Kreymborg. Robert Brown had the one solid house; the others all lived around in their little shacks. Later on they used to meet in New York, at Lola Ridge's place. She had a big, barnlike studio. I suppose today you would call her a communist, though I never heard any talk of that kind. She was older than most of the young writers. Then there was John Reed, who wrote *Ten Days That Shook the World*; and Louise Bryant—they were all in that group. And there we were. There were arguments; they were all very serious about their writing. They used to get up and read—they would always read. It used to be deadly sometimes. But then I wasn't *too* interested in the group, and after all I had two small children. And then in the thirties, there were the Friends of William Carlos Williams—Ford Madox Ford's group. Toward the end we had a big party for them out here. But that was rather ridiculous. Bill says it was poor old Ford's last gasp for—you know, a group around him. He was dying on his feet. And he did die a couple of years later.

INTERVIEWER

How did you get along with Ezra Pound?

MRS. WILLIAMS

Pound was never around. Pound came over in . . . I think, 1938 to get an honorary degree at Hamilton. And he spent two days with us when he was released from Saint Elizabeth's in 1958, before he sailed for Italy. I wouldn't know what to say of this last impression. He was self-centered, as always. You couldn't talk to him; it was impossible. The only one he ever talked to nicely was Win Scott. It just happened that Win came out to see us, and they got along beautifully. Ezra always tried to tell Bill off, but they got along as friends over the years. Bill wasn't afraid of him; their letters used to be rather acrimonious, back and forth.

INTERVIEWER [*to WCW looking in*]

Apparently those letters don't represent your final attitude?

WILLIAMS

No; the only thing that I remember was the attitude of Flossie's father—

MRS. WILLIAMS

But that has nothing to do with Ezra's last visit here, dear.

WILLIAMS

Just a passing comment. [*withdraws*]

MRS. WILLIAMS

Bill and Ezra wrote quite a number of letters to each other when the war started; they were on such opposite sides. Ezra was definitely pro-Fascist, much as he may deny it, and Bill was just the opposite. Not pro-Semitic but not anti-Semitic either, by any means.

INTERVIEWER

After the war, wasn't there some local concern about Dr. Williams's so-called communism?

MRS. WILLIAMS

That was in 1952, when Bill was going down to take the chair of poetry. Senator McCarthy was in the news then, and they were frightened to death in Washington. There was a woman who was lobbying for a reform in poetry, who had no use for free verse. She had a little periodical, I've forgotten the name of it, and she wrote a letter saying what an outrage it was that a man like that—

INTERVIEWER

Of course, this was all in the aftermath of the Bollingen award to Pound.

MRS. WILLIAMS

Bill had nothing to do with that. But if he had been a member of the Fellows then, he would certainly have voted for him.

INTERVIEWER

Was Dr. Williams ever asked to testify against Pound?

MRS. WILLIAMS

They questioned him two or three times. They wanted him to listen to some records and swear it was Pound. Bill couldn't do that, but he said he would tell them frankly what he knew. And that was all. Every time we went down to Washington, Bill went to see him.

INTERVIEWER

Going back to the First World War: perhaps this isn't something you want to go into, but there were some local reactions then, weren't there?

MRS. WILLIAMS

Against Germans. Yes; that would involve Bill because he was married to me. Bill's mother made my life one hell because I was partly German. Though she wasn't living with us then.

INTERVIEWER

So with one thing and another—Greenwich Village, communism, and the Germans—

MRS. WILLIAMS

Bill was always in a controversy. But I think he stood his ground very well through it all.

WILLIAMS [*coming in, and with his hands on Mrs. Williams' shoulders*]

Maybe you've had enough.

MRS. WILLIAMS

Oh, Bill, it's all right. Don't worry about me. Go out and take a walk.

INTERVIEWER [*to WCW*]

Do you have any recollection of writing a play for the P.T.A. years ago? It was on some local issue, like putting in a school nurse, on which you took a liberal view.

WILLIAMS

I can't think. I was certainly interested in plays. But the only person I ever worked with was Kitty Hoagland.

MRS. WILLIAMS

That was *Many Loves*, much later. Kitty didn't come until the thirties. But Bill wrote four or five small plays during those early years. One about the Dutch around this area; and a very nice little play called *The Apple Tree* that was going to be done at the Provincetown, but Alfred Kreymborg lost it. And a Puritan play, *Betty Putnam*, that was acted over at the Tennis Club. Do you remember the old tennis courts over on Montross Avenue? There was a very active young group connected with it.

INTERVIEWER

But the town itself didn't quite get all this, I suppose. [*To WCW*] Your brother Edgar says it's a narrow town, and what you have done is in spite of it.

WILLIAMS

Yes. There were some aristocrats back there who would have nothing to do with budding genius.

INTERVIEWER

Not to mention political matters. Edgar says that in the political club which your father started, you were always the liberal.

WILLIAMS

Yes, to my sorrow.

INTERVIEWER

To your sorrow?

MRS. WILLIAMS

He doesn't mean it! I don't see why—

WILLIAMS

Do I mean it? For God's sake, my friends have all been pretty disillusioned friends.

INTERVIEWER

Marianne Moore, who knows you pretty well, says you were always a bit "reckless."

WILLIAMS

I guess she's right. I was a Unitarian. And Unitarians are liberals.

MRS. WILLIAMS

I think Bill has always been willing to be reckless. There was the social credit business for instance, that Bill got involved in in the thirties. They wanted to give a kind of dividend to the people to increase purchasing power. There were large meetings in New York and down at the University of Virginia. But that was about the end of it. In fact many of those involved withdrew from it when they saw how things were going, with the war coming on and all. Some of them were so nervous about that whole episode they wouldn't even speak to Bill. That's the difference. I don't say Bill was naïve; perhaps it was honesty. Bill isn't a radical or a communist or anything else. He's an honest man. And if he gets into it with both feet, it's just too bad. That's the way it's been.

INTERVIEWER [*to WCW*]

Right?

WILLIAMS

[*Agrees, laughing*.]

INTERVIEWER

If we could talk a few more minutes about personal matters—how did you enjoy Saint Thomas? I understand you have just come back from there.

WILLIAMS

I could stay there forever, with reservations, of course. Saint Thomas is the place where my father grew up. I remember a photograph of the blizzard area—oh, for God's sake, I mean the hurricane, in eighty-eight.

MRS. WILLIAMS

Bill, dear, I'm sorry, but it must have been in the seventies. It was when your father was a boy.

WILLIAMS [*with a sigh*]

Yes, yes, yes. [*Laughs*] I remember a story of the hurricane. Thoroughly documented. How first the water went out of the harbor and left it dry, the ships lying on their beams' ends, and then another shudder and an earthquake worse than they ever had in the area. And I have a distinct memory of some photographs of my father, taken at perhaps twenty-one years of age. I was very much interested in making contact with his memory.

MRS. WILLIAMS

It was a good trip, but Bill gets restless. And it's to difficult at our age.

WILLIAMS

I think we'll not go again.

INTERVIEWER

To get back for a minute to the troubles of 1952—do you think you were working too hard at that time?

WILLIAMS

I was interested in the process of composition—in the theory of it. And I *was* working pretty hard at it. But I couldn't make much of it.

MRS. WILLIAMS

Bill had a contract with Random House for three books. There was no hurry; but that's the only way Bill can work. And he doesn't want to look things over, which is his worst fault. *The Build-Up* was written then. I'm afraid Bill garbled that one. It was just impatience. And he didn't want me to read the things either. I wish I had, there were so many errors in the *Autobiography*. That was inexcusable. Then, one night in the winter of forty-eight, Bill felt a pain in his chest, shoveling out the car. He kept going until February. I used to drive around with him on house calls. But it was too much.

WILLIAMS

I had a heart attack. Perhaps it was a good thing. I thought I was God almighty, I guess; in general. But I got over that one.

MRS. WILLIAMS

There wasn't any kind of cerebral trouble until 1950 or so. Bill had given up medicine and we were going down to take the chair of poetry in Washington. But in 1952, when we were up visiting the Abbotts, in New York, Bill had a serious stroke.

WILLIAMS

I tried to play it down. I was conscious, and rational; and I could joke about it. But I was in a strange house, and I needed to get home. I couldn't write—

MRS. WILLIAMS

Then suddenly you could hardly understand him.

WILLIAMS

That was the end. I was through with life.

MRS. WILLIAMS

No, it wasn't the end. You had a lot of life left. You had a whole play running through your mind while you were lying there, *The Cure*. You thought it out and dictated the notes to me. You wrote it when we got home.

INTERVIEWER

That was something of a change in approach.

WILLIAMS

Yes, the novels I just did as I went along, at first; though I tried to think them out as well as I could.

MRS. WILLIAMS

Of course the *White Mule* was about a baby; Bill's favorite subject. But most of the later poems were written after the stroke. Bill used to say things like spelling didn't matter, and he would never correct at all. I think he did much better work after the stroke slowed him down.

WILLIAMS [*perhaps grudgingly*]

The evidence is there.

INTERVIEWER

It was when you were at the Abbotts' that someone read Theocritus to you.

WILLIAMS

Yes, Mrs. Gratwick; I asked her to. Theocritus was always strong in my mind. But I wasn't capable of hearing it in the Greek. I'm in an unfortunate position, because I don't have the original language. For example, I started to take Latin at Horace Mann, but the teacher was withdrawn, to my infinite regret. That was the end of that—all my life, that was the end. And I always regretted too that I didn't know Greek. I don't know, as far as the Theocritus was concerned, whether it came first, or the stroke.

MRS. WILLIAMS

You had talked of doing an adaptation.

INTERVIEWER

Why Theocritus?

WILLIAMS

The pastoral nature of it gave me a chance to spread myself. It was Greek, and it appealed to me; and it was a wonderful chance to record my feeling of respect for the Greek classics.

INTERVIEWER

There was a change in the verse in the fifties. Was this the first time you tried the new measure?

WILLIAMS

"The Descent" was the first. I regard that as an experiment in the variable foot.

INTERVIEWER

You said earlier that you were almost unconscious when you wrote it.

WILLIAMS

Yes, I was. I was very much excited. I wasn't conscious of doing anything unusual but I realized that something had occurred to me, which was a very satisfying conclusion to my poetic process. Something happened to my line that completed it, completed the rhythm, or at least it was satisfying to me. It was still an irregular composition; but not too much so; but I couldn't complete it. I had written that poem to retain the things which *would* have been the completion of the poem. But as for picking the thing up and going on with it, I had to acknowledge I was licked. I didn't dare fool with the poem so that it would have been more rigid; I wouldn't have wanted that.

INTERVIEWER

You felt there was nothing more you could do with it?

WILLIAMS

Nothing more. I felt all that I could do with it had been done, but it was not complete. I returned to it; but the irregularity of that poem could not be repeated by me. It was too . . . I've forgotten.

INTERVIEWER

You feel it wasn't a perfect poem?

WILLIAMS

It was too regular. There were variations of mood which would have led me to make a different poem out of it.

INTERVIEWER

And you don't think anything after "The Descent" goes beyond it?

WILLIAMS

No. I always wanted to do something more with it, but I didn't know how.

MRS. WILLIAMS

There was one written quite a long time before: that was the start of it. Then there was the "Daphne and Virginia"—Virginia, of course, was Paul's wife, and Daphne is Bill's. That poem always makes me sad. "The Orchestra" was written in 1954 or 1955, I think. Bill wrote quite a lot after he had the stroke.

It's really amazing what he has done; and he gave readings, too, in Saint Louis, Chicago, Savannah—

WILLIAMS

I couldn't break through.

MRS. WILLIAMS

Harvard, Brandeis, Brown. We took two trips to the coast after that—to U.C.L.A., the University of California, Washington—

WILLIAMS

I've been going down hill rapidly.

INTERVIEWER

And the *Pictures from Brueghel*?

WILLIAMS

Yes, those are late; very late. But they are too regular.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever grow any fonder of the academic world after your trips around the campuses?

MRS. WILLIAMS

They liked *him*, at least. And the girls' colleges all loved him.

WILLIAMS

The high point was the appearance at Wellesley. It was a very successful impromptu appearance; a reading. I always remember the satisfaction I got pleasing the ladies—the kids.

INTERVIEWER

Beginning with the Women's Club in Rutherford.

WILLIAMS

Always. I was always for the ladies.

MRS. WILLIAMS

Bill has always been fond of women, and terribly disappointed not to have had a sister. And he never had a daughter. But women liked him; they sensed that he was sympathetic, and they could talk to him.

WILLIAMS

Very sympathetic.

INTERVIEWER

Just one or two more questions. Do you think your medical training—your discipline in science—has had any effect on your poetry?

WILLIAMS

The scientist is very important to the poet, because his language is important to him.

INTERVIEWER

To the scientist?

WILLIAMS

Well, and the poet. I don't pretend to go too far. But I have been taught to be accurate in my speech.

INTERVIEWER

But not scholastic. Someone has said you would not make so much of the great American language if you had been judicious about things.

WILLIAMS

It's a point well taken. The writing of English is a great pastime. The only catch to that is when a man adds the specification "English." That is purely accidental and means nothing. Any language could be inserted in its place. But the restrictions that are accepted in the classics of a language enclose it in a corset of mail, which becomes its chief distinction.

MRS. WILLIAMS

Bill has always experimented. He was never satisfied to keep doing the same thing. And he has been severely criticized. But I think some of the younger poets are benefiting from it. Like Charles Tomlinson, and Robert Creeley—they've learned a lot from Bill. David Ignatow—any number of them. Allen Ginsberg was a good friend for many years.

WILLIAMS

I am a little concerned about the form. The art of the poem

nowadays is something unstable; but at least the construction of the poem should make sense; you should know where you stand. Many questions haven't been answered as yet. Our poets may be wrong; but what can any of us do with his talent but try to develop his vision, so that through frequent failures we may learn better what we have missed in the past.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think you yourself have left of special value to the new poets?

WILLIAMS

The variable foot—the division of the line according to a new method that would be satisfactory to an American. It's all right if you are not intent on being national. But an American is forced to try to give the intonation. Either it *is* important or it is not important. It must have occurred to an American that the question of the line *was* important. The American idiom has much to offer us that the English language has never heard of. As for my own elliptic way of approach, it may be baffling, but it is not unfriendly, and not, I think, entirely empty.

MRS. WILLIAMS

All the young people come out to see Bill. Charles Olson has been here a lot. Denise Levertov was out last week. Then there is Robert Wallace, Muriel Rukeyser, Charles Bell, Tram Combs. Charles Tomlinson stopped in on his way back to England.

WILLIAMS

Yes. He is writing in my vein. He's even conscious of copying me. I don't think he is too popular with his contemporaries. But it does look suspiciously like the beginning of something in England. I defer to you. But—do you have an example of his poems there?

INTERVIEWER

He seems to be carrying on the new measure. Do you have any comment?

WILLIAMS

The lines are not as I would have done, not loose enough. Not enough freedom. He didn't ignore the rules enough to make it really satisfactory.

INTERVIEWER

But you think he shows your influence in England, finally. That must be a satisfaction.

WILLIAMS

It is.

MRS. WILLIAMS

I think Bill will shortly be published in England.

INTERVIEWER

You would think they might have appreciated the American idiom.

WILLIAMS

Not *my* American idiom.

MRS. WILLIAMS [*looking about among the books*]

These are some translations of Bill's poems in Italian—the early poems; *Paterson; The Desert Music.*

WILLIAMS

Yes, I was very pleased by those.

MRS. WILLIAMS

Here are some selected poems in German: *Gedichte*, 1962.

WILLIAMS

I'm alive—

MRS. WILLIAMS

There is a selection coming out now in Czechoslovakia. And here is an anthology of "American lyrics" in Norwegian—

WILLIAMS

I'm still alive!

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