

William Carlos Williams's *Rome* · Edited by
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INTRODUCTION

FOR WILLIAMS at mid-career, violence was the word: writing dragged the known up from the unknown, thrust the self out of the self, ripped freshness and clarity free from dullness. Reciprocally, the word was also contact: writing touched the real, embraced immediate experience, named things. Discontinuity and continuity, explosiveness and in-gathering, destruction and renewal—these qualities informed Williams's books as well as his life. For a respectable man who, according to Robert McAlmon, had been "trained in childhood to staid and tried acceptances and moralities" (*Poetry*, XVIII, 1), writing itself was a violation—time and energy stolen from his office, wife, and children, from civic and social responsibilities.

But the necessity to write, to live intensely and freely above his own rigidities and conventions, compelled Williams to create willfully, and at times dramatically, the enabling conditions for writing. The approach to his fortieth birthday was one such critical occasion when he broke all the routines of his medical practice and family life in order to write. From the summer of 1923 to the summer of 1924, Williams and Flossie took a year's leave from Rutherford, first to New York City for six months, and then to Europe. This sabbatical did produce significant writing—the major work on *In The American Grain*, and a manuscript titled *Rome*, published here for the first time. Three years later Williams wrote *A Voyage to Pagany*, which describes in fictional terms the European half of that year.

In order to leave Rutherford, Williams and Flossie put the practice in the hands of a young cousin and his wife, both just out of internships; they put the two boys and the house in charge of a friend, the local football coach; and they took up residence in the city, seeing the boys on weekends. Despite Flossie's complicity and encouragement, the break was stressful. The neighbors disapproved, money was tight, and the practice was threatened. Williams also felt guilty enough; his nerves, he wrote, seemed "ragged over leaving the children" (*Selected Letters*, p. 57). But ragged nerves produced writing, and writing was a form of intense living that seemed impossible in Rutherford at that time.

A poem published in the spring of 1923 called "Cornucopia," later retitled "Flight to the City," reveals how much Williams invested in New York's possibilities. Looking east to the Easter stars over the lights of the city, he dreams of violent consummation and rebirth through writing.

Thither I would carry her
among the lights—

Burst it asunder
break through to the fifty words
necessary—

(*Collected Earlier Poems*, p. 244)

We know that in the fall of 1923 Williams and Flossie worked hard together on *In The American Grain*, doing research at the New York Public Library, but very few other details of their activities in the city are known. Besides the theater, restaurants and galleries which must have entertained them, the first half of their sabbatical seems to have been devoted to the work for which they had disrupted their lives. But since Williams was a nervous and resistant man, as well as a daring and compulsive one, he paid dearly for his intensities. In 1921 he had written to Marianne Moore that “each must free himself from the bonds of banality as best he can; you or another may turn into a lively field of intelligent activity quite easily, but I, being perhaps more timid or unstable at heart, must free myself by more violent methods. . . . I am dead when I cannot write and when I am at it I burn with a fever till one would think me mad” (*SL*, pp. 52-3).

The Williamses sailed from New York City on the Rochambeau on Wednesday, January 9, 1924, landing in France on Friday, January 18, and went directly to Paris to rendezvous with Robert McAlmon. Williams and McAlmon had become close friends in New York in 1920. Their friendship led to collaboration on the magazine *Contact*; they co-edited its five issues, which appeared between 1920 and 1923. But they had not seen each other in three years—since McAlmon married Hilda Doolittle’s wealthy friend Bryher, a hasty marriage engineered by the women to obscure their own intimate relationship. In those years McAlmon, now mostly living apart from Bryher, utilized her father’s wealth to support himself and other artists living in Europe, and to establish Contact Publishing Company, a house devoted to young and experimental writers, including McAlmon himself. He brought out two of Williams’s books in 1923, *The Great American Novel* and *Spring and All*, and later published, among other important texts, Hemingway’s *in our time*, Pound’s *Indiscretions*, Anthiel and the *Treatise on Harmony*, and *A Draft of XVI Cantos*, and Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans*.

McAlmon’s status as a patron and publisher made him a key member of the expatriate community in Paris, and he introduced Williams and Flossie all around. During their initial ten day stay they met many of the major artists of the age, as well as a crowd of patrons, would-be artists, and cultural hangers-on. McAlmon’s introductions included Brancusi, James and Nora Joyce, Man Ray, William Bird (whose Three Mountains Press

printed many of the *Contact* Editions), Sylvia Beach, Adrienne Monnier, George and Bierska Anthiel, Kitty Cannell, Harold Loeb, Ford Madox Ford, Mina Loy, Louis Aragon, Valery Larbaud, and others. Williams thoroughly enjoyed these hectic days in Paris which he described as an injection of the "Europe virus" (*SL*, p. 59).

McAlmon provided contacts that at least bolstered Williams's sense of himself as a serious and respected writer in an international community of artists. This confirmation helped justify his break with family and practice. But McAlmon offered something even more significant, namely the possibility of being an American artist in Europe. This possibility, a seeming contradiction in terms, was theoretically implicit in the program for American writing Williams and McAlmon had expressed in *Contact*, and McAlmon supplied a model that lent credence to Williams's own six month expatriatism.

Contact magazine existed to espouse and publish a literature growing out of the artist's perceptions of "the sensual accidents of his immediate contacts" (No. 4, p. 18). Three major issues preoccupied Williams and McAlmon in their pronouncements: the nature of such an art of "contactual realizations" (No. 1, p. 1), the techniques by which the local artist works, and the relations between the "indigenous art" of one country and another, particularly with regard to literary influence, reading, and criticism (No. 2, p. 12).

"Art which attains," they stated in the opening manifesto, "is indigenous of experience and relations, and . . . the artist works to express perceptions rather than to attain standards of achievement" (No. 1, p. 1). Writing thus results from "the essential contact between words and the locality that breeds them" (No. 1, p. 10). Good writing not only reveals what the writer perceives, but takes its form from the processes of perception, and its quality from the depth and accuracy of the writer's contact: "it is the degree of understanding about [situations], and not situations themselves, which is of prime importance." Thus, "reality as the artist senses it . . . in contradistinction to standards of social, moral or scholastic value," provides the basis of aesthetic form and the standard of aesthetic judgment (No. 1, p. 1). "Writing that reveals a high type of discovery is literature," and Marianne Moore, who "definitely established a form . . . based on perceptivity," stands as the paragon poet of contact (No. 2, p. 1). Clearly, the program for American poetry Charles Olson declared nearly 30 years later in "Projective Verse," drew upon many of the central *Contact* ideas.

Williams and McAlmon intended to promote "new vigors of artistic perception, invention and expression in the United States," but their program was not chauvinistic (No. 2, p. 12). They espoused the essential identity of self, place, and epoch in writing, and insisted that local expression was the only possible form of universal statement. Thus they proceeded from a basically phenomenological sense of human existence and from a

deep concern for America's failure to produce a thriving art appropriate to that philosophy. But they seem to have been widely misunderstood, particularly and obstinately by Pound, and they repeatedly found it necessary to defend themselves against charges of jingoism. "*Contact* has never in the least intimated that the American artist in preparing his position 'should forget all about Europe'" (No. 4, p. 18). On the contrary, they hoped to invest American art with precisely the quality that made European art successful, since "America [was] far behind France or Ireland in an indigenous art" (No. 2, p. 12).

The poverty they hoped to alleviate in American literary life had to do with the American writer's dependence on foreign subjects and structural bases. Williams attacked the Dada movement in New York not because it was French, but because he felt it was irrelevant to the American experience and because American writers who imitated Dada failed thereby to express their own uniquely personal relations in the culture. Indeed, Williams's long hostility to Eliot stems from Eliot's powerfully attractive repudiation of the whole set of *Contact* premises. (See the Prologue to *Kora in Hell*.) It was an argument between the local and the universal, between experience and ideology, between immediate relations and traditional values, not an argument between America and Europe.

The problem of international literary relations expressed itself in the question, "How then are we to love France?" and the answer was simply that genuine indigenous art communicates, more than anything else, the principle of indigenesness. "If we are to love or to know France, or any France, or any country it will be through the mature expression of these men in whom France has physically realized herself for better or worse. In their mastery of the art of expression France is expressed. There alone France exists in a mode capable of serving for international exchange." Writing that makes successful contact renders writer, text, age, and place identical. To know the text is to know the man and his locale. But only a reader accurately attuned to his own "indigenous experience and relations" can properly apprehend this significance in successful foreign writing. "In proportion as a man has bestirred himself to become awake to his own locality he will perceive more and more of what is disclosed and find himself in a position to make the necessary translations. . . . But he who does not know his own world, in whatever confused form it may be, must either stupidly fail to learn from foreign work or stupidly swallow it without knowing how to judge of its essential value" (No. 2, pp. 11-12).

Finally, literary criticism dealing with foreign material, exemplified by Kenneth Burke's article on Jules LaForgue in the third issue of *Contact*, takes its stance and its issues from the critic's locale. "Criticism must originate in the environment it is intended for if it is to be of fullest value. LaForgue in America is not the same man he is in France. Our appreciation recreates him for our special world if it is genuine" (No. 3, p. 15).

Williams took the manuscript of *In The American Grain* with him to Europe and worked on it throughout February in a pension at Villefranche on the French Riviera where he, Flossie, and McAlmon stayed the month. He finished the Columbus and DeSoto pieces on February 13, the Voyage of the Mayflower chapter on the 20th, and worked on the Daniel Boone piece on the 23rd. Meanwhile, he started to read Joyce's *Portrait* and read through McAlmon's recent writing. Work remained at the center of Williams's attention; he took the notion of a sabbatical quite seriously and demonstrated that indigenous writing has little to do with where one happened to be living. We might even speculate that *In The American Grain* could not have been written in Rutherford, that he required this separation to look carefully at the texture of American culture resident in him. Williams suggested this possibility when he wrote on February 21 that "all values have grown much simpler for me since I have hit Paris. America gives too much violence in exchange for her mutilations" (*SL*, p. 60). It does seem significant that the only book Williams ever composed outside the United States was *In The American Grain*.

The relatively quiet and productive month at Villefranche permitted Williams to test how it felt to be a practicing, expatriate writer. McAlmon spent the entire month with them, doing his own work and exciting Williams by proposing a new *Contact* magazine, but that project never materialized. Flossie read, rested, shopped. They toured the local sights, walked the countryside, swam in the Mediterranean, met Nancy Cunard and her cousin Victor, and later Djuna Barnes.

When work on *In The American Grain* was substantially complete, their stay at Villefranche ended. McAlmon and Bill Bird, who had joined them briefly, headed toward Marseilles, and on March 3, 1924, Williams and Flossie left for Rome. They reached Pisa and Florence on March 4, Rome on the 6th, took the train to Naples on the 8th, then saw Pompeii, Amalfi, and Tarantella, and returned to Rome on March 13, where they remained for two weeks. Italy was hardly new territory for Williams. He had toured there in 1910 guided by his brother Edgar, who was studying architecture on a *Prix de Rome*. Probably as a result of that visit, Williams had a set of ideas about the significance of Roman culture which he had formulated in his Prologue to *Kora in Hell*; these ideas now controlled his responses. The Prologue opens with a description of Williams's mother getting lost in Rome, confused by "the strangeness of every new vista." Later in the essay he compares the Greek with the Roman temperament, rejecting Greek symmetry and balance in favor of Rome where "the ferment was always richer. . . the dispersive explosion was always nearer, the influence carried further and remained hot longer." Williams thought of Rome as a center of dangerous but fertile chaos where one might as easily be lost as dazzled, where one might shed "staid and tried acceptances and moralities" and emerge changed, refreshed, in repossession of one's self.

Rome clearly signified a source equivalent to the American wilderness in *In The American Grain*, or the "hell" of *Kora in Hell*, though with its own unique emphases. In a letter to Kenneth Burke written from Rome, he called it "this ripe center of everything" (*SL*, p. 60). Like the explorers and woodsmen of the new world, Rome's archaeologists, sculptors, and even its sexual deviates, burst through to that which was hidden, inchoate, or repressed, revealing something fresh that gave pleasure and release. Unlike Greece and France, whose orderliness repulsed him, Italy was a sympathetic environment because it so effectively suggested a tradition of the violent freedoms Williams desired.

In his thinking about Italy, Williams brought his local understanding to bear and revealed the uniqueness of that locale. In Rome too, one made contact by violence, and in Rome's particular history and geography lay its own modes of extravagance and satisfaction. The structure of relations to foreign materials that Williams had praised in Burke's discussion of La-Forge now determined his own approach to Italy. Williams understood Italian experience from his perception of his own Americanness.

The product of these reflections, the *Rome* manuscript, belongs together with an extensive list of writings Williams called "improvisations," composed between 1917 and the early 1930s. The major improvisational texts in print are *Kora in Hell* (written in 1917-18), "The Descent of Winter" (1928), and "January, A Novelette" (1929). Substantial sections of *The Great American Novel*, *Spring and All*, *In The American Grain*, and *The Embodiment of Knowledge* (1928-30) are also improvisational. In addition, thirteen short improvisations appeared in periodicals in this period, six of which, plus two previously unpublished ones, appeared recently in *Antaeus* (30/31). The *Rome* manuscript can now be added to this list.

Rome is a collection of improvisational notes composed in Italy and Vienna, *en route* to a second stay in Paris, and then later in the United States just after his return. It records Williams's immediate response to Europe and to himself in Europe, and the sections written back home test the changes wrought upon him. *Rome* constitutes his voyage to pagany, a descent into antiquity and peasantry, obscenity and art, disease and medicine, and into his own deepest conflicts. Like the other improvisations, *Rome* receives its impetus from conflicting insistences; he is hostile to Rome, threatened by it, and yet deeply attracted to it. The manuscript enacts his struggle to contact an alien and yet familiar (because sympathetic) environment. He performs on himself in and after Europe a kind of procedure he had enacted previously in writing *Kora in Hell*—the act of dis-covering what could be found to be meaningful, useful, vital, and extraordinary amid a welter of responses to a challenging environment. Williams describes this complexity of response and the writing it produced in the chapter titled "To Rome" in *A Voyage to Pagany*. It seems safe to say this passage explains the genesis of the *Rome* manuscript.

At home, in the pension, sullen and lonely—beaten by his oppressive thoughts—he sat down and began to write. It was in Rome, in fact, during these days, that he most made a wife of his writing, his writing—that desire to free himself from his besetting reactions—by transcribing them—thus driving off his torments and going often quietly to sleep thereafter. But today all day into the night he was especially tormented. He wrote blindly, instinctively for several hours, a steady flow of incomprehensible words and phrases, until he was exhausted and stopped perforce.

He wrote what? that Rome filled him to overflowing with riotous emotions seeking intelligent expression one above the other. . . .

. . . In his desire to be explicit he avoids no word, confuses his least important thrill of the moment with permanence, wants to omit no word, no small itch—in his desire to be explicit, to catch it—fleeting past (thus he writes in a fever of impatience). Reality he sees under the lacquer of to-day. (pp. 108-9)

The text of *Rome*, like Williams's other improvisations, documents Williams inhabiting his world in the present moment. It is not merely his means of contact. The text is that contact, his achieved mirroring of self and world. Accordingly, Rome, the city, like Vienna, or America, or any genuine "place," signifies for Williams the locale of his engagement with his environment, and with language also; for Rome is that vibrant place in the mind where self and circumstance breed intense living in writing.

Williams and Flossie left Rome on March 27, taking the train to Venice and then to Vienna, arriving on March 30. They were moving north, following the spring. In many ways the month in Vienna recapitulated the focus and effort of the time at Villefranche. Now Williams studied medicine by attending the lectures and clinics of several famous physicians. (The experience is well documented in *A Voyage to Pagany*.) In Vienna he counterbalanced the life of the tourist with the life of the student, and the life of the writer with that of the physician. But he also continued to compose his notes, and in these he confronted the crucial issue of the relationship between his two vocations. Though he hardly resolved the matter, his image of the physicians as heroes equal to the artists and peasants of Rome suggests that he envisioned a possible unity in his divided life. He recognized in Vienna, as he could not in Rutherford, the aesthetic dimension of medicine. This synthesis, which is central to *A Voyage to Pagany* and to the short stories, seems to originate in the sections of *Rome* composed in Vienna.

The Williamses left Vienna for Salzburg on April 30, taking three weeks returning to Paris, with stops at Lancy in Switzerland to see the school Williams had attended as a boy, and in France at Verny to see Voltaire's home. Bill Bird and his wife Sally met them for a tour of the vineyards at Dijon and Baune and escorted them back to Paris for a final spree even more hectic than the first. Besides the old crowd, the Paris contacts now included Hemingway, whose baby son Williams treated, Philippe and

Mme. Soupault, John Rodker, Clotilde Vail, Peggy Guggenheim Vail, Bryher and H. D., and finally Ezra and Dorothy Pound. The sheer exuberance of these final days in Paris reveals itself in how much Williams was tempted to stay there. He had written to Burke from Vienna on April 14, "Paris would be wonderful if I could be French and *Vieux*; it would be still more wonderful if I could only want to forget everything on earth. Since I can't do that, only America remains where at least I was born" (*SL*, p. 64). But according to his *Autobiography*, on June 4, eight days before sailing for home, Williams wrote, "Paris has gotten violently into our blood in one way or another. I wonder if I could be happy here as a child specialist" (p. 227). Still they sailed from Cherbourg on the S.S. Zeeland on June 12 and arrived home on Friday, June 20, 1924.

The manuscript of *Rome* consists of 46 typed pages, largely uncorrected, numbered consecutively by hand up to page 38, and one page of handwritten draft material. The first 25 pages carry the running title "Rome." Pages 26 through 37 change that title to "Violence." A series of fragments completes the manuscript: one page titled "White Mule," four pages titled "Notes," two pages titled "(continuation : the American Municipality)," and two pages dated May 7, 1924. The manuscript seems to be a mosaic of notes composed at different times, transcribed and most likely elaborated at some later date. A letter to Kenneth Burke, dated September 6, 1924 (partially reproduced in *SL*), suggests that the manuscript had been compiled by then.

Several factors suggest that Williams once intended to publish the *Rome* manuscript. The consecutive page numbering of the two large sections, and their assembly with the fragments appended, indicates an attempt to create a textual whole. In addition, the hand written lines in the left margin of the first page, "Dev came in & started to write:" make it seem likely that Williams considered using all or part of this manuscript in *A Voyage to Paganry* as an example of Dev Evans's tormented writing. This possible inclusion in the novel may also explain why Williams started to eliminate the obscene language from the manuscript. (His excisions are indicated in this edition.) But the major bowdlerizing stops after the second manuscript page, probably because it was obvious that such an effort would destroy the authenticity of the text.

Though Williams may have later considered using the improvisations he wrote in 1924, he did not compose this material with publication in mind. He wrote to Kenneth Burke at the end of the month in Rome, "Everything I am doing now is unprintable. To hell with printing and selling work" (*SL*, p. 61). Certainly the obscene language throughout the manuscript made it thoroughly unpublishable in 1924. Williams violated respectable language just as he attacked genteel values and institutions. That violation may be seen as part of his probing the sources of language, Anglo-Saxon

sources as well as vernacular speech rhythms, and it corresponds to his probing the sources of all human behavior: significant action, verbal or otherwise, springs from a generative rawness that must be encountered.

But the intention not to publish serves a larger purpose. Williams announces to himself on the first page of *Rome* that he will “no longer write to be read.” The improvisations aim to achieve something quite different from marketable products. They violate public standards of taste, form, and style, and in so doing they violate the standard relation between author and audience. The self-creating act of writing matters here, not its rhetorical effect. Williams states, again on the first manuscript page, “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.” This dislocation of the reader in order to replace the act of the writer in writing, invites us to consider reading *Rome* as a form of witness. We are tourists, so to speak, like Williams himself in Europe, outsiders for whom the task of understanding is strenuous, personal, and perhaps quite agitating. Like the city itself, *Rome* was not designed with us in mind. If it is to be of value, we must discover those loci of correspondence between ourselves and this text—those places where the deep rhythms that drive Williams correspond to our own and can be recognized as essentially human. Unlike most “literature” we read, *Rome* is no fiction. It is the self-creating experience of William Carlos Williams—the man/his writing.

The only manuscript of *Rome* is the original typescript among the William Carlos Williams papers in the Poetry Collection of the Lockwood Memorial Library, SUNY at Buffalo. Since it is important to keep in mind that Williams never prepared *Rome* for publication, I have attempted in this edition to retain the roughness of the manuscript, while at the same time making it readable and practical to publish. I supply textual clarification wherever accuracy and good sense require it; I have tried to be faithful to the text as it stands. But I have tried not to let scholarly apparatus prevent ready access to the writing. I respect the canon Williams chose to create in his lifetime under his own supervision, and I feel strongly that *Rome* should enter his canon with the status of a manuscript. I hope to give the reader a sense of the text as an uncut and unpolished composition that commands our attention nevertheless.

I have taken liberties with the manuscript only by correcting obvious spelling and typographical errors (except in proper nouns) and by regularizing two of Williams’s typographical idiosyncracies. He habitually typed the combination of space-hyphen-space to indicate a dash; this edition transcribes that combination as simply a dash, without space on either side. Also, Williams often left one or two spaces before a colon, comma, period, or question mark. I do not reproduce this idiosyncrasy unless it has

particular visual function, though I do reproduce all other irregular spacings as faithfully as possible. Williams often neglected to place a period at the end of a sentence or fragment; I do not supply the missing punctuation.

One of Williams's typographical habits causes occasional syntactic ambiguity that will be unavoidably compounded by publication. He often ignored punctuation at the end of a typed line, as if, in the rush of typing, the cast of the carriage were punctuation enough. Generally the sense of the line makes the intended punctuation obvious and therefore unnecessary. But I do supply missing line-end punctuation, in square brackets, when the proper mark can be determined without question *and* when the sense would be confusing without it. However, when multiple readings are possible, I reproduce the lines as is, without punctuation.

I do not correct the spelling of any proper names, whether the error seems to be from ignorance or merely typographical, and though I do correct other obvious spelling and typographical errors without indicating these to the reader—there are approximately 110 such errors—I do so only when the correct word is quite clear. I indicate with [sic] all spellings or typographical irregularities that have questionable intention, and occasionally I supply possible interpretations within the square brackets. Grammatical errors remain as originally typed. All excisions are shown, and emendations made by hand are indicated with italics, except for simple corrections of typographical errors. Punctuation marks and underscores, whether typed or added by hand, are reproduced as if they had been typed.

The following list ought to make my textual apparatus clear:

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|-------------------|--|
| <i>italics</i> | Handwritten interpolations, corrections, and marginal notations are printed in italics. |
| <u>underscore</u> | Words Williams underscored, both hand- and typewritten, are underscored in the text. |
| words | Significant excisions are retained in the text and crossed out. Handwritten emendations follow in italics. |
| [square brackets] | Editor's additions, notations, and corrections appear in square brackets. |
| ***** | A row of asterisks separates the six sections of the manuscript. |

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