

William Carlos Williams' *Endymion* Poem: "Philip and Oradie" · Ann W. Fisher

DURING THE YEARS around 1905—while studying medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, and later, while interning at the French and Child's Hospitals in New York City—William Carlos Williams worked on his first long poem. This poem, which was never completed and never entitled, I will call after the names of its hero and heroine "Philip and Oradie." In his *Autobiography*, written more than forty years later, Williams describes both the poem and its fate. The poem, he writes, was modeled on Keats' *Endymion*, and "recounted in blank verse a tragic story." When the narrative "Induction" begins, the young prince Philip has just married Oradie, the "chaste and lovely lady" of his desire, but while the wedding party is still at its celebrations, before marriage can be consummated, someone adds poison to the communal cup and all the celebrants except Philip die. He is rescued by his old faithful nurse, who discovers an antidote to the poison; then, while still in a trance, he is abducted to a "foreign country."

In Williams' remembered account, the poem properly begins at this point, when the prince awakens from his slumber. He finds himself "alone, lying in a comfortable place among the trees, quite in the open, with torn branches on all sides of him and leaves, ripped from their hold, plastered in fragments upon the rocks about him. Unfortunately, though, he didn't recognize the place. No one was there to inform him of his whereabouts and when he did begin to encounter passers-by, they didn't even understand, let alone speak his language. He could recall nothing of the past." Then, to compound the confusion, the narrative shifts to a secondary dream, the inspiration for which was Boecklin's *Insel des Todes*. The prince envisions himself "transported to that dire place in a boat—" and "at this point the poem bogged down." Despairing at treating the dismal scene in his chosen medium, heroic couplets, Williams retreated to the main story line, which, he says, meandered off into landscape descriptions and segments of adventure, and recounted in endless detail "the aimless wandering . . . of the young prince in his effort to get back home again as well as to discover what had happened to him."

In 1905, Williams gathered up his courage and took his manuscript of the poem to Arlo Bates, his brother Ed's English professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wanting to know "whether or not, to his mind, I should quit medicine and write. . . ." Bates' reactions were mixed: he praised Williams' "sensitive appreciation of the work of John Keats' line and form," and concluded that perhaps in twenty years, given persistent effort, Williams' writing might amount to something. Kindest of all—and most depressing—was Bates' suggestion that he and Williams were imaginatively akin. He too

wrote poems, he said; when he had finished them he put them in a drawer, and closed it. But despite Bates' reactions, or perhaps in part because of Bates' reactions, Williams continued to work passionately on his poem during weekends and into the night, over the next few years. Then, as he tells it, "in disgust, one day, perhaps through my impatience with my 'heroics,'" he tossed the manuscript into the furnace.

At this point in the story, however, mysteries arise. Williams may well have tossed part, or most of, "Philip and Oradie" into the furnace, but he did not destroy the whole poem. Eventually the poem went to his friend Viola Baxter, and thence to the Beinecke Library at Yale. What remains of the poem (approximately twenty handwritten pages, uncatalogued) does not weigh three pounds, as Williams writes the manuscript did, and could not have taken years to write. On first thought one might assume that Williams destroyed the long, meandering account of Philip's travels that he speaks of in the *Autobiography* as the poem proper, but neglected to burn the "Induction." It is true that "Philip and Oradie" covers much the same ground as Williams' description of the "Induction": Philip's arrival back home with Oradie, the marriage, the poisoning, Philip's rescue by his nurse. But one problem with this assumption is that the extant "Philip and Oradie" begins before Philip's birth and ends, as far as I can tell, with his death in a "foreign country"; in plot, tone, and psychological development, it seems to be complete in its few pages. Another problem is simply that the extant poem differs significantly from Williams' remembrance of it in the *Autobiography*. There seem to be two poems, in fact: the poem Williams wrote while he was in his twenties, just deciding to be a writer, and the poem he recalled forty years later.

Although these two poems overlap, yet they are different. "Philip and Oradie" itself begs to be read as the veiled autobiography of the potential artist. It was inspired by *Endymion*, Keats' own early poetic autobiography; like *Endymion*, it investigates in symbolic terms the nature of poethood and the sources of the poet's Imagination. Like *Endymion*, too—indeed, like practically all Keats' poems—it struggles with a conflict nearly every artist since the advent of Romanticism has perceived: the conflict between a life of art, or thought, and a life of action, and the opposed claims of each. Though Williams nowhere states this, I think "Philip and Oradie" was also inspired by *Hamlet*, which spoke so strongly to the Romantics (as it speaks to us still) as the archetypal dramatic expression of this conflict, both as the conflict exists within a single soul and as it is divided and externalized among antagonists.

But the striking thing about "Philip and Oradie"—and the thing entirely lacking in Williams' recollections—is its strong element of autobiographical family drama, which its conventional literariness cannot obscure. Williams' description of the poem in the *Autobiography* implies that the "Induction," which takes Philip through the wedding and poisoning and up to the point

of his awakening in a foreign country, is insignificant—is background merely—and that the poem truly begins with his adventures while finding his way back home. But no matter how much of the poem may have been destroyed or never written, the fact remains that the material covered in the extant “Philip and Oradie” (which is approximately the material in the “Induction,” as it is described in the *Autobiography*) is by no means insignificant, even though Williams may later have felt it was. Instead, it represents his first major attempt to arrive at a sense of his identity through writing. Transposed, Philip’s world is Williams’, as Williams experienced it in his twenties: there is a prince, intrinsically a poet, who lives misunderstood in dreams and solitude; there is a father, a man of action, who denies and fears his son because he envies him; there is a mother, herself an artist but held captive by her husband; there are woods into which the prince escapes, in which he wanders alone with his own nature; and somewhere beyond the woods, or within the woods perhaps, as a reward for the lonely quest there is a bride.

The autobiographical nature of these equations becomes apparent, of course, only when one knows both the poem and the context in which it was written. And even given such knowledge, the poem tends to obscure the equations, in part because it is so conventional, so entirely imitative of popular nineteenth-century derivations from the Romantics, particularly Keats. It is awkwardly written, shamelessly poetical, and hopelessly derivative, as its first few lines make abundantly clear:

When chivalry like summer’s crimson fruit
From blossom, April’s flimsy pride and all
The ripening seasons, burst at length full frocked
Resplendant on her prime, when kings were young
And liegemen bold ambitious and full oft
Of equal blood with sovrans lived a knight
Don Pedro was he clept, Prince of Navarre. . . .
[Here, and henceforward, I follow the original
in spelling and punctuation.]

The language itself strengthens one’s inevitable and incorrect impression that the characters and situations are not felt, but come undigested from Keats, Shakespeare, and a thousand melodramas. Prince Philip, for instance, reads like an inadvertent caricature of the Romantic poet. He is a mama’s boy, whose birth plunges his mother, Beatrix, into a “flooding-o’er wild ecstasy.” As he grows up, he learns to care little for his father’s world of doughty action; instead, he prefers to wander in nature breathing “the strength of freedom from a hill” or to sit and listen to stories. His father, Don Pedro of Navarre (otherwise called Agramont), is every adolescent’s Oedipal dream of a father;

he is too stupid to be evil, but heavy enough to do a lot of damage. Primarily he loves

in eager toil,
Defiant, still to bruise those heraldries,
Though forty years of heyday wasting war
Had grated up his front.

When not grating up his front, he spends his time plotting against Philip; his “pate” has “grown dull from frequent cudgelings,” and he is easily persuaded to believe Philip wants to seize his power (whereas all Philip really wants to do is flee to Italy with his bride and his mother). Married to such a man, Beatrix languishes in “grief and loneliness”; she is a woman of gentler climes who whiles away the hours telling stories of her past happiness to Philip:

She told of foreign kingdoms o’er the sea,
Of sands that shone like sheeted gold—of waves
And calm, of auzure skies so pure and deep
No clown so low but sang in witless praise
At magic morn’s uncloaking. . . .

Philip’s father is the “warp of history”; his mother, the “woof of faery dreams.” Like Philip, she is intrinsically a poet, held captive in the world of action. And though Oradie is present as a symbol in the poem, as are the woods in which Philip wanders for more than a year and a day when he is forced to leave his mother, as a character she is practically nonexistent. She is

. . . such a maid as truth alone can tell
More seemly on this world hath never breathed,

and at one point Philip announces rather rudely to his father that he has found “A bride too pure for Agramont, I ween,” but that is all we learn about Oradie. Next thing we know, she is murdered.

The murder scene is the high point in the poem. Philip knows full well that Don Pedro wants to kill him and Oradie at their wedding celebration; consequently, he keeps “fing’ring at/His blade” and pouring Oradie’s wine out on the floor. Thwarted again and again in his wicked machinations, Don Pedro at last has a moment of genius:

“To Agramont ye’ll drink.
Ye all, then all shall drink to Agramont!”

This is Williams' cleverest stroke; Philip has no choice but to commit suicide, in effect, swearing fealty to his father. It is also unintentionally funny; so boundless are Don Pedro's idiocy and ire that in order to kill one son he has to poison sixty people. Beatrix sinks, Oradie sinks, and since he has drunk the toast Don Pedro sinks, too. The room fills up with "guttural gurgles, groans and sighs," and the party is over.

Such life as remains continues eventful after the murders. Servants dash off "with mouths of cronicle" and are never seen again. Philip's faithful nurse, who has been on the lookout for just such an opportunity, lugs him away to a silken couch and labors to save him with the antidote; then, at midnight, she despairs of his life and totters "with a single moan quick dead." At this point Philip begins to dream. His dreams seem important—this may be the passage inspired by the *Insel des Todes*, though it is not in heroic couplets—but their symbolic content is obscure. The universe turns phantasmagorical: at first Philip sees "Cleft Heaven. . . with earth and Hell conjoined," and "fumes upon the nauseous stinking air"; then calm returns, with "zephyrs sweet and dapper pixies"; then hell returns once more. This vision gives way to a sort of aerial travel; Philip floats above his couch while "hush lipped forms" press round "to gaze at him." This in its turn gives way to normalcy:

. . . night still it seemed
Was just a simple night in May and dawn
Not yet by many a dusky hour near.

Again he experiences astral travel:

Then rising on his elbow up, in awe,
He looked if he could fathom the intent
Of this aerial journey and beheld
A veil of filmy gold, a quivering mist
Hung on the east before him into which
He entered suddenly and black closed round.

Whereupon, he sleeps.

The poem ends quickly thereafter. Philip awakens, rides off on his "palphrey," and begins to wander. Neither he nor Williams seems to know quite where he is going:

North and to east and enless steady course
He pointed out and followed fervently.
But his black eyes told nothing w[h]ere he went
Nor knew he by whatever other sense
But journeyed like a tufted seed upon
Controlling summer winds.

His horse dies, but “shoeless” he continues to wander. Then at last, he sinks down one morning “within a pleasant leafy nook” and, to all appearance, dies:

He lay him down and soon how soundly slept
A dreamless loutish slumber and the day
Climbed up and up in wondrous garb and birds
Sang near about and he alone was dead.
Ah! what a year long journey had he come
Poor youth, how sore a way meets here it's end.

Philip would seem at this point to be dead as dead, and the story would seem to be over. This is not, however, quite the end of the poem:

For fully day was spread when there out rang
An eager treble-chaunting roundelay,
Lightly sounded forth the country song
And quivering in the wanderers heavy ear
Forbad more sleep and brought his night to close.

One way to account for this perplexing double ending would be to conclude that Williams had so thoroughly lost control of his poem that he was no longer paying attention to the ordinary meanings of words. This may well be true, but there is, I think, another explanation, an explanation that shows how, working in solitude, with neither program nor guide, Williams began to become a Modernist poet.

Williams wrote “Philip and Oradie” during a difficult period of transition in his life, a period he later described as “heart-breaking” in many ways. He had only the vaguest notion of what he wanted to do, or what he could accomplish, and the conflicting pressures upon him and within him were severe. To begin with, though he was studying medicine as a special student at the University of Pennsylvania, having entered the medical program immediately after he left Horace Mann, he was by no means convinced that medicine was what he wanted. He did want to please his family, however—wanted that very much—and his family pushed him in that direction. His father, English by birth and temperament, and a practical businessman, expected both Williams and his younger brother Edgar to become financially stable and to remember (or possibly to repay) the sacrifices he had made for their education both at private schools in Europe and later at Horace Mann. His mother’s motives were different: she had had an adored older brother, Carlos Hoheb, a surgeon in Puerto Rico, and she expected at least one of her sons to honor him by becoming a doctor. Williams followed the family’s plans for

him, but it was not easy. Though he lived on campus, he had little time to meet the other students, to take the humanities courses that might benefit him as a poet, or to read the books that those whom he most admired—Ezra Pound in particular—urged incessantly upon him.

Then too, Williams was full of highflown ideas regarding moral behavior. He internalized his puritanical, middle-class upbringing with a nearly religious fervor: as he reports in the *Autobiography*, he decided “in late childhood or early adolescence . . . to be perfect.” Perfection, as he then conceived it, was a highly visible grace; essentially it meant being so good inside that he would not have to be dishonest. Above all, it meant making his parents proud of him by doing what they wanted and by fighting off the lust that threatened to burn him “to a cinder.” Neither was easy to do. Keatsian poethood called him; he longed to succumb gloriously both to poetry and to passion; but something held him back. In the case of poetry, the impediment was medicine; in the case of passion, it was the grand nebulous plan. “Dear Ed,” he wrote his brother in November, 1906:

I am not even remotely cynical. The truth is I am troubled with dreams, dreams that merely to mention is too daring, yet I'll tell you that any man can do anything he will if he persists in daring to follow his dreams. To do what I mean to do and to be what I must be in order to satisfy my own self I must discipline my affections, and until a fit opportunity affords, like no one in particular except you, Ed, and my nearest family. From nature, Ed, I have a weakness wherever passion is concerned. No matter how well I may reason and no matter how clearly I can see the terrible results of yielding up to desire, if certain conditions are present I might as well never have arrived at a consecutive conclusion for good in all my life, for I cannot control myself. As a result, in order to persevere myself as I must, girls cannot be my friends.

At the time he wrote “Philip and Oradie,” then, Williams knew very little about women. He had plenty of experience with Venus—with his dreams of romantic love—and medicine was teaching him the tough real world of the venereal, where unwed mothers cat-fought on the hospital floor and he fell in love once “with the corpse of a young negress, a ‘high yaller,’ lying stripped on the dissecting table.” But the middle world was lacking, the world of sexual love with real women. He joined Ezra Pound on a few lascivious college rambles, at Pound’s instigation, but nothing ever came of them; the girls they ogled were frightened, and Williams was too gentle to persist. He became friends with Hilda Doolittle, but she was “just one of the guys,” “no hips, no nothing, just Hilda.” He fell for a girl “of French descent and a college

graduate, which is a combination hard to beat," gazed into her eyes one night, and wrote her a dreadful sonnet. He tried to squire a few girls around, but something always went wrong, especially, he felt, because he had no money. Most important of all, he went home to Rutherford on weekends. There he made one of a court gathered around Charlotte Herman, the brilliant young pianist of whom I believe he was thinking when he made Philip ride out of the woods with his bride.

Charlotte Herman was not herself beautiful—unlike her sister Flossie, whom Williams eventually married, Charlotte had legs like beanpoles—but she was an artist, passionate and strange, the unattainable *princesse lointaine* whom all the young men worshiped for her devotion to Beauty. *The Build-Up*, an autobiographical novel written late in Williams' life, tells the story. Both Williams and his brother (Charlie and Fred Bishop, in the novel) fell in love with Charlotte. For a time they were content to admire her in silence, but then Edgar (Fred) won the Prix de Rome. The parents had promised that if he won, both brothers should study in Europe; therefore, "holy and pure, as their natures demanded their thoughts to be, buoyed aloft on wings of song, nevertheless they were practical enough to find themselves on the brink of action." They discussed the dilemma, and agreed that Edgar (Fred) should go and propose for them both. He did, and his own suit was accepted:

"Fine," said Charlie and then, disgracefully, he flung his arms about his brother's neck and went mad. Fred was embarrassed, loosened himself from his brother's hold and fled.

Charlie thought the earth had dissolved under his feet. He hadn't foreseen the sweep of his emotional reaction or the wreckage it would cause. Had Fred been decent enough about it? He had. He had done everything one man could do for another, under the circumstances. In fact the perfection of his behavior only added to the effect. And yet something had come to an end. It was a deeper wound than he should ever thereafter in his life be able to sound. It was bottomless.

A great deal came to an end when Charlotte rejected Williams. For one thing, his naive belief in filial solidarity was shattered—as, I imagine, was his equally naive belief in the happy consequences of self-abnegation. But deeper things still were broken. Charlotte was nearly the only one to admire his early poems; she thought they were beautiful, and that a poem "should be beautiful." She understood his passion, which was, like hers, to "show the world something more beautiful than it has ever seen." She felt, as he did, that in Rutherford the people were small—"they see their little neighborhood"—and shared his desire to see the world, "to contemplate and, in all humbleness of mind,

wonder at even greater things.” For her to accept his offer of marriage would have seemed only natural; it would have been a powerful validation of his “Keatsian” image of both himself and his poetry.

It might have been a dreadful marriage. The last thing Williams needed, to develop as a man or as a poet, was a marriage conceived in the realms of faery. He needed what he got: Flossie, the kid sister, to whom he proposed about three days after Charlotte’s rejection. Unlike Charlotte, Flossie was “hard as nails,” a “rock” on whom he could build; unlike Charlotte, she was both practical and enamored. She had been in love with him, had watched him paying court to her sister, and had felt rejected. Now, “having found out what love is, having been rejected, and what it could do, with their eyes open, [they] could and would face it together.” He did not love her, but he would will himself to love her, not with a “romantic love, but a love that with daring can be made difficultly to blossom. It is founded on passion, a dark sort of passion, but it is founded on passion, a passion of despair, as all life is despair.” However complicated this sounds, it worked beautifully for Williams. It was not what he thought he wanted—but then again, perhaps it was what he really did want; otherwise, why had he sent Edgar to propose to Charlotte for him? Flossie accepted him in 1909; they were married at last in 1912, and blossomed “difficultly” until his death more than fifty years later.

When Williams was working on “Philip and Oradie,” of course, all this lay in the future. Then, he was still rushing home on weekends to listen to Charlotte’s piano. It is wish fulfillment, not history, that impels his account of Philip’s marriage with Oradie—and wish fulfillment perhaps, or a dark and sure self-knowledge, that makes him kill Oradie off before the consummation. For the parallels are there: Oradie, like Charlotte, is the poet’s dream, the Romantic image, the quest for which spelled death for Philip and a kind of death for Williams. After Oradie’s murder, and after Charlotte’s rejection, the poem truly begins. It begins, however, in a memory of loss: “April’s flimsy pride” becomes “a passion of despair, as all life is despair.” For Oradie, like Charlotte, is the *princesse lointaine*, the still unravished bride.

Medicine and morality, poetry and passion: these warred within Williams when he was in his twenties. They correspond closely to the conflicting temperaments of his father and his mother—conflicting temperaments which troubled Williams and which, together, formed him. Williams’ father was morality, English to the bone. Though she insisted fiercely on morality in bringing up her children, Williams’ mother was passion.

Williams’ father, William George Williams, was born in England to Emily Dickinson Wellcome, of a man whose identity remains uncertain. At the age of five he sailed with his mother to New York; when she married (or married again) he went to live with his parents in Puerto Rico. There he grew up, “by

father, the dastardly Don Pedro of Navarre. In fact, he *was* unlike Don Pedro; this Williams recognized in later life. Nevertheless, Don Pedro is a portrait of Williams' father, as Williams saw him at the time. A curious anecdote in the *Autobiography* helps to establish the connection; that the incident described took place ten years after "Philip and Oradie" was written, and that Williams remembered it even in his sixties, indicate the depth of the conflict and its power to disturb him:

I'll never forget the dream I had a few days after he died, after a wasting illness, on Christmas Day; 1918. I saw him coming down a peculiar flight of exposed steps, steps I have since identified as those before the dais of Pontius Pilate in some well-known painting. But this was in a New York office building, Pop's office. He was bare-headed and had some business letters in his hand on which he was concentrating as he descended. I noticed him and with joy cried out, "Pop! So, you're *not* dead!" But he only looked up at me over his right shoulder and commented severely, "You know all that poetry you're writing. Well, it's no good."

This is a dream merely; in real life Williams' father seems to have been pleasant about his son's poetry, at least if the poetry remained an avocation. He welcomed Ezra Pound into the home and corrected all the printing mistakes in Williams' first book, the Keatsian *Poems* of 1909. But by 1918 Williams was writing poems his father would not perhaps have liked—the experimental poems of *Al Que Quiere!*—and besides, dreams speak truth to the dreamer. The thing Don Pedro in "Philip and Oradie" shares most strongly with the father in this dream is a lack of imagination. Both the knight, who finds his identity in waging war, and the English businessman, who finds his in doing his duty, live according to their stations; they have no sense of poetic passion, of an inner self that must challenge the world of action in its need for self-expression. Consequently, both men misunderstand and reject their sons; and as a consequence of this, metaphorically speaking, both men die. The story of Philip's childhood is sketchy; we may conjecture, however, that Philip proves himself soon after birth to be an unwilling knight: he

gave no heed
To wars account, refused all tutors and
Instead would bide a live long summer's day
A fawning milk-sop by his mother's side.

A rupture takes place; apparently the father orders the son to leave his mother, for "From that time forth these boon friends met no more." Instead of pining

away, however, or hanging around his father, Philip goes off to the woods, where he wanders long alone and whence he returns with his bride. He follows his own path, enters the woods of his own nature, and in doing so attains a state of wholeness that enables him to return to the world of action. But the father cannot release him; though Philip asks specifically to be allowed to live in Italy (a conventional symbol for the world of art) with his wife and mother, Don Pedro believes that Philip will overthrow him. Viewed in this context, these melodramatic lines take on a poignant significance:

Throughout the castle burst the news! the news!
How Philip had returned and how, Good God!
Audacity did eat himself with rage
At thought of this unthroning; at his side
A lady, thing unknown . . .

Don Pedro has a “lady”—Beatrix, named perhaps for the Beatrice in Dante, and an adequate muse for any man—but he does not know his lady. He has no recourse but to kill the son who threatens his own power; in the event, he also dies.

In *Spring and All*, published in 1923, Williams wrote, “poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it. . . .” It stands “between man and nature as saints [or Christ] once stood between man and the sky. . . .” That is to say, poetry does not change life, it does not come to bully or usurp the world of action, as Don Pedro fears Philip will; rather, it redeems life, “by showing the individual, depressed before [his experience], that his life is valuable—when completed by the imagination. And then only.” There is sorrow then, as well as anger, in Williams’ dream that his father stood on the steps before the dais of Pontius Pilate, on the Christmas Day he died. For, in Williams’ view, his father thought of art as divorced from action, as culture and tradition, not passion and life; he read Shakespeare and did his duty. He did not see the truth when it stood before him; therefore, though his son cried, “You’re *not* dead!” like Don Pedro he did die.

. . . he was driven
out of Paradise—to taste
the death that duty brings
so daintily, so mincingly,
with such a noble air—
that enslaved him all his life
thereafter—

(“Adam”)

But though Elena was tougher than Beatrix, she was no less lonely. Both she and Beatrix were born in “foreign kingdoms o’er the sea” and came as brides to live in a cold and alien country. Both she and Beatrix lived through their sons—and here the likeness between them becomes prescient and uncanny. For Williams as a child was not primarily in his mother’s charge; she took care of Edgar, and he was taken over by Grandma Wellcome, who had followed her son to Rutherford from Puerto Rico. Williams was always close to his mother, alternately tormented and delighted by her, but the bond between them deepened as they grew older. Between 1924 and her death in 1949, Elena lived with Williams and Flossie; for much of this time she was bedridden, and to keep her occupied Williams began working with her on a translation from the Spanish. While they worked, he jotted down things she would say, along with his own thoughts about her; this mass of notes gradually took form as *Yes, Mrs. Williams* (1959), Williams’ moving attempt to retrieve his mother from silence and show the difficult beauty of her life. Had he been able to express his sense of Beatrix when he was in his twenties, he might have described her plight as he later describes his mother’s:

... [S]he stands bridging two cultures, three regions of the world, almost without speech—her life spent in that place completely out of her choice. . . . So gross, so foreign, so dreadful, to her obstinate spirit, that has neither submitted nor mastered, leaving her in a *néant* of sounds and sense—Only her son, the bridge between herself and a vacancy as of the sky at night, the terrifying emptiness of non-entity.

“How mad to have thrown him over,” Williams’ mother would say again and again, referring to her Spanish lover. Both she and Beatrix should, perhaps, have married somebody else—someone, as Hamlet says,

so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly.

Elena seemed made, as was Beatrix,

For unrestrained clear mirth, for all the world
To gaze upon and turn refreshed away
As they had drunken of a crystal spring . . .

But instead, it remained for the sons to try to rescue their mothers, Philip by planning to take Beatrix far from the alien country, and Williams by writing

again and again for and about Elena, becoming the bridge that stood between her and silence, until, at the age of 93 or 102, she died.

In a letter to Marianne Moore, written in 1934, Williams describes the inner changes that made possible what she saw as an “inner security” in his work:

It is something which occurred once when I was about twenty, a sudden resignation to existence, a despair—if you wish to call it that, but a despair which made everything a unit and at the same time a part of myself. I suppose it might be called a sort of nameless religious experience. I resigned, I gave up. I decided there was nothing else in life for me but to work. . . . I won't follow causes. I can't. The reason is that it seems so much more important to me that I *am*. Where shall one go? What shall one do? Things have no names for me and places have no significance. As a reward for this anonymity I feel as much a part of things as trees and stones. Heaven seems frankly impossible. I am damned as I succeed. I have no particular hope save to repair, to rescue, to complete.

“I won't follow causes. I can't.” Williams never says much more about this “sudden resignation to existence”; he does not try to find its wellsprings in certain events of his life. Even if he found them, such causal connections would be too simple—and searching the past again and again would merely usurp the presentness in his life. The heart-murmur doctors discovered when he was in his teens probably had something to do with it; it put an end to his dreams of excellence in sports and made him start to turn inward, toward books, toward art, away from the world of action. Surely Charlotte Herman had much to do with it: her rejection meant his failure, the failure of both what he was and what he most wanted to be. His only way out of that failure was to resign, suddenly, to his existence—to dry his tears and go propose to Flossie, who, loving him as she did, would help him “blossom” in a “passion of despair.” And then there were the tensions with his parents, and the wars within himself. As it turned out, Williams was the son of both his father and his mother: he wanted *both* medicine and morality, and poetry and passion, and realized fairly early that in order to fulfill all the needs of his own nature “there was nothing else in life for me but to work. . . .”

I think, too, that “Philip and Oradie” had a great deal to do with this “nameless religious experience” that gave birth to an inner security. The most important thing about “Philip and Oradie” is that it was a failure, and showed its poet to be a failure, in a fundamental way. Williams recognized this, and either literally or figuratively tossed the poem into the furnace. Had he not done so, had he held on to “Philip and Oradie,” there would never have been

what we know as William Carlos Williams. For "Philip and Oradie" is not just a poem with autobiographical elements, a poem in which one can recognize certain real people and events in the poet's life. It is Williams' first attempt to write his autobiography, to come by means of art to a sense of his inner standing. Philip is Williams, as Williams perceived himself to be during this early state of his life.

If we look at Philip as Williams, and at "Philip and Oradie" as autobiography, we can see that, at the beginning of his career, Williams was trying to write out of a defunct conception of selfhood and, in consequence, of the function of poetry and the nature of the poetic. In "Philip and Oradie" he strikes a posture of loss and longing borrowed from the Romantics, who in turn had borrowed it from medieval Christianity. He equates the attainment of wholeness, or true selfhood, with the possession of an unpossessable *princesse lointaine*, and represents himself as wandering prince in search of the ideal. Like the boy in Joyce's story "Araby"—and indeed like many Romantic poets and autobiographers—he envisions himself as bearing the "chalice" of the self through an inimical universe (represented by Don Pedro and his cohorts), a "throng of foes," toward a holy consummation. And because of this self-dramatization, like the boy, he arranges for himself a double kind of failure: failure both to attain fulfillment and to make contact with reality, with the flawed but possible sources of selfhood that lie everywhere at hand.

Williams' description of the poem in his *Autobiography* seems to indicate that the failure of "Philip and Oradie" enabled him, in time, to see the causes of that failure. No longer is the poem primarily an Oedipal family drama, nor even a story of the persecuted prince. Instead, it becomes in Williams' recollection a poem about language—specifically, about "poetic" or what he called "Keatsian" language and its corresponding vision, and about the failure of that language and that vision. Williams' description of the poem in the *Autobiography* emphasizes what happens to Philip *after* rather than before he awakens in a "foreign country"; what he describes is quite unlike what seems to happen in the extant poem. Essentially, in Williams' recollection, he has lost his language because he has lost the world that would answer to that language. After the cataclysmic loss of all that would serve to define him, the prince awakens to his naked condition. He has neither family, bride, nor social estate to help him answer the questions, How did I get here? Where is my home? and Who am I? Like the child in Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," he has suffered a birth which is a "sleep and a forgetting"; and, though Williams first says that the prince can "recall nothing of the past," he then refines the point to allow for the quest for identity: "—he had not been able to recall the details, merely 'sensed' them: That there has been a beautiful bride, a father, a mother; that a disastrous event of some sort had occurred. . . ." And so, like Wordsworth's child "trailing clouds of glory," he sets off through the woods, "homeward or seeking a home that was his own. . . ."

“The language . . . the language!” Williams implores in *Paterson*. If the prince in “Philip and Oradie” is doomed after his awakening by the absence of a true language, Williams as poet is doomed throughout “Philip and Oradie” by the presence of a false language. In the simplest sense this is true; as I have remarked, the poem is full of archaisms, inversions, bombast, stock conceits, every sort of “poetical” diction:

—then her child! He came!
He came, he came! Ye faint ribbed mid-May skies
Whence, whence this flooding-o’er wild ecstasy,
That we may sip, we too, of that deep well?

It is true in a deeper sense as well. To adopt a “poetical” language he must adopt a “poetical” vision, and this vision closes the poem up, again and again, just where it should open. Nothing has a chance to strike fire, to come to life, to surprise the poet, for he has already determined where his alter-ego stands in relation to it all and, consequently, what it all means and must accomplish. Don Pedro, for instance, threatens to become interesting:

Oh I could sing
Of his brave deeds until the barking throng
Cloyed with flat peace would fly like midnight birds
Into the sudden flame and hell of passion
Heedless of torment toppling kingdoms down—

But the poet pulls back at once:

But to what end? For they were impious all
Nor fit a tongue’s report. . . .

Philip’s birth, too, might have been interesting; birth was certainly something the young intern knew plenty about. “But no,” he writes, just as he starts to wonder about Beatrix’s ecstasy:

. . . for now imagination flings
With puzzling Beatrix through that infancy
When here, in short, there grew an upright boy. . . .

Again and again this happens; Williams must keep cranking up the story and propelling it along, for he must keep Philip on his quest—first for the selfhood he briefly attains when he falls in love with Oradie, then (as implied in the *Autobiography*, at least) for the selfhood he would have regained had he got back

home to his castle. There is no time, given this vision of the self and of the nature of the “poetic,” to look at things, take pleasure in things, make contact with experience. Kipp’s woods, for instance, which Williams describes so lovingly in the *Autobiography*, are here, all right—transmuted, they are the woods in which young Philip wanders—but we do not see what Williams saw, for he could not see it either, not in his guise as Philip. And everyone but the poet must die along the way—even Oradie, even the faithful old nurse—for selfhood, in such a vision, is solipsistic. It can never be found in surrender “to existence.”

In 1917, Williams published *Al Que Quiere!* One of its poems, “The Wanderer,” had been written before the others; Williams had worked on it for several years. “It is actually a reconstruction from memory of my early Keatsian *Endymion* imitation that I destroyed, burned in a furnace,” he reports in *I Wanted to Write a Poem*. “It is the story of growing up.” “The Wanderer” is indeed a reconstruction from memory of the “*Endymion* imitation,” but the remembering self has undergone seachanges. For, if “Philip and Oradie” may be called Williams’ venture into the Keatsian realms of the egotistical sublime, in “The Wanderer” the poet dies into life; he is baptized into “knowledge enormous” in the filthy Passaic River:

Then the river began to enter my heart,
Eddying back cool and limpid
Into the crystal beginning of its days.
But with the rebound it leaped forward:
Muddy, then black and shrunken
Till I felt the utter depth of its rottenness
The vile breadth of its degradation
And dropped down knowing this was me now.
But she lifted me and the water took a new tide
Again into the older experiences,
And so, backward and forward,
It tortured itself within me
Until time had been washed finally under
And the river had found its level
And its last motion had ceased
And I knew all—it became me.
And I knew this for double certain
For there, whitely, I saw myself
Being borne off under the water!

“The Wanderer” is Williams’ first important poem; it is generally described

as ushering in the concepts of the self, the function of poetry and the nature of the poetic which, for Williams, were to endure. But it is "Philip and Oradie" that ushers in "The Wanderer," and this is the meaning at last of that perplexing double ending. Philip is dead and stays dead, and along with him dies Williams' early self-conception. But, as always in Williams' career, "A/ world lost. . .beckons to new places." For, from this defeat a song arises, a simple "country song," a "treble-chanting roundelay," and this song, about which nothing more is said, is something new in the poem. It arises only *after* the prince has died and is the sound of life going on, the sound of other voices. And the song awakens a new man, a man who will learn to listen. This man, "the wanderer," will learn that while there are no answers to the riddle of the self, the self is not the only thing that matters. He will seek his self-reflection not by gazing into a pool but by polishing his language, so that, over a lifetime of endeavor, it may become strong enough to serve as a bridge between people and their silence, and clear enough and clean enough to answer the wanderer's question: "How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?"

There is a happy ending, therefore, to "Philip and Oradie." It is not unusual for young people to want to get rid of their parents; some people say that one is never fully adult, never fully autonomous, until both parents have died. The deaths of Beatrix and Don Pedro may have been essential in this respect; Oradie's death as well, and even the death of the faithful nurse, seem to speak to a need for solitude and longing on the part of the young poet. But the happy thing in Williams' case is that he was able to kill off Philip. And once Philip is gone, the other characters, who have been sacrificed to his quest, come intensely back to life. The faithful old nurse appears first; she metamorphoses at once into the Muse of "The Wanderer,"

. . . old
 Forgiveness, unreconcilable;
 That high wanderer of by-ways
 Walking imperious in beggary!

and appears in several poems as Grandma Wellcome. Beatrix and Don Pedro go through many changes in the course of fifty years; when we last see them, they are the dying old woman of *Yes, Mrs. Williams*, the "father" on the subway in "Asphodel," and the "dried wafer only" of "The Sparrow." Oradie is everywhere; she becomes Beautiful Thing, Williams' name for the "thing of beauty" which is

. . . a joy for ever:
 Its loveliness increases; it will never
 Pass into nothingness. . . .

And the woods, Kipp's woods, or the woods of his own nature, especially their flowers, and what they taught Williams to know of flowers—Williams wanders through these woods in a hundred poems, for the rest of his life.