

William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked.
By Paul Mariani. Illustrated. New York:
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Better are the sins of commission than the sins of omission might well have served as the guiding proverb for Paul Mariani as he wrote his bountifully detailed and plain-spoken new biography of William Carlos Williams. Nineteen years after the death of this major American poet, here at last is a biography inclusive enough to portray the multi-faceted cut of Williams' life as physician, family man, citizen of Rutherford, New Jersey, and, most important, writer. It is the writer, after all, the life of the man that went into the books which have made so much difference to American literature, in which we are most interested, and Mariani pursues Williams' literary development with the careful attention to particulars that Williams demanded of himself in his own books (though without Williams' mastery of style). The two previous biographies, Mike Weaver's penetrating and closely researched *William Carlos Williams: The American Background* (1971) and Reed Whittemore's self-interested *William Carlos Williams: Poet from Jersey* (1975), are far less than half the length of Mariani's. Mariani at once expands the scholarship of Weaver and lifts his work above the smug condescension, the urge to be scandalous and spottiness of Whittemore.

Much of Mariani's achievement lies in the sheer quantity of previously scattered information that he has brought under one cover, especially from the wealth of still unpublished letters, in which more than anywhere else we can see the man who, for Marsden Hartley, "was more people at once than anyone [he had] ever known." "One of the major problems facing the biographer of Williams today," Mariani tells us, "is the gathering of the thousands of still unpublished letters that [Williams] wrote and scattered all over the face of the earth." But Mariani has done a remarkable job of gleaning the letters for the life that has lain hidden within them.

The letters prove especially important in furnishing new information on Williams' relationships with his friends. Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens have all received considerable attention from Williams' biographers and critics, and Mariani does not add substantially to those relationships; but Williams' famous animosity toward

Eliot, the pathos he felt for Robert McAlmon, his competitiveness with Hart Crane and the disappointment he suffered when Crane's *The Bridge* momentarily eclipsed his own poetry, the respect that he had for Kenneth Burke's intellect, his indebtedness to James Laughlin for publishing and distributing his works in commercial editions which gained him a readership, to cite a few of the outstanding relationships with men, are all more fully developed and clarified than ever before. But unquestionably Mariani's greatest contribution to what we know about Williams' friendships is his fleshing-out of the relationship with Louis Zukofsky, which is so conspicuously absent from *The Autobiography* and so sketchy in Weaver and Whittemore.

Anyone aware at all of American modernism knows of Williams' closeness to Zukofsky, and that Zukofsky contributed a great deal to Williams' work (reading it, commenting on it, editing it, publishing it); but nowhere is the relationship laid out day-by-day, month-by-month, year-by-year, so that we can see Williams again and again entrusting his manuscripts to Zukofsky, or envying the purity of Zukofsky's form, or even for a period turning away from his friend (as he did from Pound and Burke) when Zukofsky began "to symbolize for him a certain kind of critical restraint." Perhaps after the strain of trying to work cooperatively for years with both Zukofsky and a friend of his (Tibor Serly) whom Zukofsky recommended to compose the music for Williams' opera, *The First President*, the friendship never regained its early enthusiasm. In "A Commemorative Evening for Louis Zukofsky" (*American Poetry Review*, 1980), Celia Zukofsky indicates that her husband and Williams could not "quite see eye to eye . . . about what books to read, what books not to read and so on"; Zukofsky could not feel a "philosophical and metaphysical closeness" with Williams, she says. The touching letter from Williams to Zukofsky with which Mariani ends his book, however, certainly suggests a depth of feeling that remained alive in Williams to the end. In the letter he wrote of a picture postcard on his desk

sent to me by a friend, a woman living in Brasil now, whom I met in the nut house when I was there [Williams spent eight weeks in Hillside Hospital in Queens, late winter, 1953, for severe depression after suffering a series of strokes]. It shows four old musicians walking poorly clad in the snow from left to right between—or approaching a village no doubt some-

where in Europe. They are all scrunched together their instruments in their hands trudging along. I mean to keep the card there a long time as a reminder of our probable fate as artists. I know just what is going on in the minds of those white haired musicians.

Considering that Zukofsky was much less well off than Williams and strove his whole life to approximate the conditions of music in his verse, one would assume that Williams comes very close indeed to Zukofsky here.

These musicians also fittingly image the essential character of Williams' heroes from *In the American Grain* (his modern classic on the American background published in 1925) to his last poems in *Pictures from Brueghel* (1961) like "A Negro Woman," the self-portrait of Brueghel, and "The Sparrow." And it is the character in Williams (intensified) that Mariani draws from almost every source. What Williams shared with the musicians is an unshakable perseverance in his art and the contemptible absence of an audience until he was well into his sixties, which in part was due to the woodenheadedness of his critics who too often quite simply were stumped by the form and offended by the indecorous honesty of content in his poems. Mariani came to the biography prepared to chart the "uphill solo fight of Williams" for recognition, for a readership, for a sensitive and perspicacious criticism of his works, by virtue of the three years he spent writing *William Carlos Williams: The Poet and His Critics* (1975), which he describes in his "Preface" as "an attempt to determine why the critics had for so long either dismissed or tried actually to destroy Williams' poetic reputation." By the time Williams received his deserved *éclat* in his old age, distinguished with honors by the literary world and paid tribute even in the nonliterary world of *Time*, we feel that we have trudged up that long path, maneuvered every switchback, every obstructive boulder of criticism and ignorance, every washed-out bridge of failed publications. It is a slow, painstaking account of Williams' insistence that he be recognized for what he knew all along was his contribution to American literature.

When Mariani bills Williams' critics for "profoundly disturbing costs" that damaged "the man's own physical health," however, he overindulges his usually admirable sympathy with Williams, reminding one a little of those passionate friends of Keats (Williams' favorite poet

in his youth) who blamed the vitriolic attacks on *Endymion* in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and *The Quarterly Review* for Keats' premature death. In contrast, "A Public Letter for William Carlos Williams' Seventy-fifth Birthday" by Kenneth Rexroth expresses astonishment that Williams was still "gay and bright and full of life and ideas" when "A busy doctor, especially a baby doctor, has a life expectancy of about fifty-five years." And so many American poets, Rexroth continues, "have died of drink, or by suicide, or gone crazy before they were forty." In fact Williams seems to have thrived on his randy combat with his enemies and his rallying of friends and sympathizers. Mariani's tendency to write as an ally leads him periodically to bark out in Williams' own voice—"To hell with Pound," "To hell with the critics and other intellectuals who sat on their pedestals and dictated what poetry . . . should be," "Oh, to hell with all stodgy well-meaning readers anyway!"—as if he has slipped into the role of *kagemusha* (a general's double, or "shadow") rather than biographer. As his shadow warrior Mariani gets caught in the spell of Williams' subjective poetics and slides into the poet's own terms in an attempt to explain them: "Poetry was neither philosophy nor religion [for Williams], nor was it a handmaid to these things. In poetry words were set free to dance over the condition of reality. Then the imagination could take the most inert materials and stir them radioactively into life." One might just as easily attempt to follow the reasoning of a medieval alchemist whose objective is to transmute lead into gold.

One suspects here and there that Mariani is also covering for Williams, as when he remarks that "Williams simply did not care for [Matthew Josephson] any more than McAlmon had," and that there were no anti-Semitic feelings involved. Yet, in *Contact 3* (edited by McAlmon and Williams) one finds anti-Semitic attacks on Waldo Frank, and, as Mike Weaver tells us, McAlmon "continued to jibe at 'Jew-York' " after he moved to France in the early 1920's. In a number of his earlier books, Williams is quite capable of lapsing into anti-Semitism. But he never fell into a sustained prejudice, he had many life-long Jewish friends, and he came to terms with whatever "wrong assumptions" he had about Jews in his moving story "A Face of Stone" (1935), in which a doctor (presumably Williams) is ultimately touched by the humanity of a Jewish couple whom he types in his first encounter with them as "the presuming poor whose looks change the minute cash is mentioned."

In his attempt to commit as much substance as possible to his narra-

tive, Mariani will on occasion be found to move from a canter to a gallop through details that are not given the time and attention necessary to develop clarity; the scene blurs; he constructs a sentence shabbily—"Williams was so angry he could hardly bring himself to even talk about the subject with Pound"; or by pulling out one profane quotation after another (perhaps this is an excessive correction of the primly edited *Selected Letters*) he makes Williams sound too much and too often like the old drunk screeching obscenities at the young sailor in his late poem "The Drunk and the Sailor." But these are merely lapses, and though his prose may falter at times, Mariani writes unpretentiously and succeeds in his primary purpose of getting "Williams the man . . . to walk . . . across the pages of [his] text."

One very important side of that man comes much more to life under Mariani's pen than under either of Williams' previous biographers. Rather than to concern himself with the theoretical background of Williams' sexual attitudes (like Weaver) or to assume a smug and off-handed tone as a way to slide slimily through Williams' sexual life (like Whitemore), Mariani unabashedly follows Williams the man into his actual encounters with women, and in the great deal that he tells us seems to substantiate that often quoted sentence in Williams' autobiography: "Men have given the direction to my life and women have always supplied the energy." Foremost among them, of course, is Floss, his wife. Mariani admirably conveys an impression of Floss' quiet intelligence and strength, and he is satisfied not to resolve but to suggest the complexity of their marriage, which fueled painful and humorous and extremely moving poems and pieces of prose. This is the fullest portrait of their marriage to date, though there is still more to be written.

No biographer could omit Williams' experiences with the tragicomic figure of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, or the Baroness, "a celebrated phenomenon in and around the Village" in the late 1910's, who equaled if not surpassed the most outrageous New Wave attire: "she dressed in purple and yellow clothes with a coal scuttle on her head or a tam-o'-shanter complete with feathers and ice cream spoons, or black vest and kilts, with brass teaballs suspended from her nipples." Apparently, she excited Williams' imagination, until she "offered him a covenant: make love with her, let her give him the flowering gift of syphilis, and let his inhibitions melt away, leaving only the flame of his art. He eased away to the door and made it down the stairs." It is more the contrast

of the Baroness with the small-town doctor in sportscoat and bow tie than the Baroness herself that makes this episode so interesting. It has already had plenty of circulation. But Mariani's rule of thumb is to leave nothing out, and the Baroness is an arresting example of the kind of woman to whom Williams might be attracted, who might, given the peculiarity of his imagination, inspire him, just as that very plain woman in *Paterson* 5 who "would attract no/adolescent" inspires him.

There were many other women in Williams' life—Viola Baxter, Nancy Cunard (who because of "her own cleanliness of mind, her open sexuality, the white flame of her existence, her tough honesty," was "always the type of the exceptional woman" for Williams), H. D., Gertrude Stein, Marcia Nardi (the author of the volatile letters, signed, "C," which are so important to *Paterson* 2), Williams' own mother and grandmother, his daughters-in-law (who aroused him in his old age to write "To Daphne and Virginia"), and more—but for all the wanderings of his desire and imagination, one senses in Mariani's portrayal a steadiness in the husband and wife as of the two candles in "The Lady Speaks" which the storm outside cannot touch: "Two candles we had lit/side by side/before us/so solidly had our house been built/kept their tall flames/unmoved."

It may be that Mariani has performed a timely service to American poetry that he could not have intended for his book when he began it more than ten years ago. He does as he purposed present us with the greatness of Williams' struggle "to remake American poetry for a wider audience" and achieve a place for himself among the best American poets. But it is no secret that recently the form of poem which Williams created by a fierce and uncompromising artistic intelligence (often long and complicated sentences, broken into short lines, which accentuate the angles of his syntax, and are the basic unit of attention) has degenerated into arbitrarily broken sentences of subjective prose, much of which has about the kick of an uncorked champagne bottle left out behind the garage for twenty years. The result is that in the last few years poets have been returning to traditional closed forms (even Charles Tomlinson, who got the English interested in Williams, is now writing in symmetrical rhyme and meter). This is fine and well, except that the trend is shaping up a little like a reaction. So we need books like Mariani's, not to revive Williams' war with English verse but to maintain a balance between opposite poles in the world of poetry. Whoever reads Mariani's biography of Williams, unless an implacable foe for one

reason or another, should realize how much energy and mind and life it takes to write excellent poetry in open forms and the value of having it written.