



# **“Earth, the chatterer father of all speech”: from Shakespeare’s brave new world! to William Carlos Williams’ Nuevo mundo!**

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## ABSTRACT

As D.H. Lawrence wrote about Shakespeare's *Tempest* in 1923: "whatever else you are, be masterless"<sup>1</sup>, he somehow found the perfect motto for William Carlos Williams' own poetic art. Embarking upon his (con)quest for "THE word"<sup>2</sup> to be the fertile humus on which to found all American literature, William Carlos Williams states: "Oh to hell with Masters and the rest of them. To hell with everything I have myself ever written"<sup>3</sup>. He thus attempts to take Whitman's "barbaric yawp" further and get rid of the old allegiance to the Crown once and for all.

Much like Caliban's voice in *The Tempest*, the poet's speech is unstable, it fumbles around the wilderness and stutters thus mimicking the very babbling of a new continent. Language is therefore mutable in that British words have to be grafted onto a new land, but they are also mutable for they are very often silenced and hesitant. The poetry born in such a land is thus wild and wanders outside the confines of the old world. The words and verses are dented and extravagant in the first acceptance of the term, they are vagabonds attempting to define the contours of an ever-morphing ground whose first mutation was its name, from India to America, so that in the words of Tony Tanner, « if anything, it is the instability of language and society which has more often made itself felt to the American writer » (Tanner, *City of Words*, 27)

Shakespeare's play provides a fertile ground in the analysis of Williams' modernist approach to language since it is itself set in a liminal space constantly drifting across many countries and continents. Miranda's expression of bewilderment is somehow mirrored by Williams' sailors in *The Great American Novel* (1923) as they first get visual contact with the shores of the new continent.

I propose to observe in this paper the processes by which the poet manages to claim ownership of his land through language in spite of its "nearly universal lack of scale"<sup>4</sup>. I intend to use Shakespeare's play and particularly the figure of Caliban, not as the Native American enslaved by the colons like it has already been done, but as the allegory of the pilgrimage for THE word sought after by Williams. Like Ahab boarding for the hunt of his life, Williams sets off to capture and tame the brave new American word using his sense of bewilderment in lieu of a harpoon.

### KEYWORDS:

William Carlos Williams, William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Caliban, New World, Heterotopia, Language (Langwedge), American Poetry, Fluidity, Fluency, Liminal, Dialect, Wilderness, Stutter.

### MOTS CLES

William Carlos Williams, William Shakespeare, *La Tempête*, Caliban, Nouveau Monde, Hétérotopie, Langue, Poésie américaine, Fluidité, Liminaire, Dialecte, Sauvage, Balbutiement.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence, David Herbert, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, chap. 1 « The Spirit of the place », 1923

<sup>2</sup> Williams, William Carlos, *The Great American Novel*. New Directions Publishing, 1923, 165

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 176

<sup>4</sup> Williams, William Carlos, *In the American Grain*. New Directions Publishing, 1956, 75. The observation echoes Tocqueville's assessment that there is no intermediary space in America, no middle ground: "l'espace intermédiaire est vide"

## RESUME

“Whatever else you are be masterless”<sup>5</sup>, alors que D.H. Lawrence écrivait au sujet de *La Tempête* de Shakespeare en 1923, sa formule s’applique particulièrement bien à l’art poétique de William Carlos Williams qui publia la même année son *Grand Roman Américain*. En quête du mot “THE word”<sup>6</sup> sur lequel fonder une nouvelle littérature américaine, Williams s’exclame : “Oh to hell with Masters and the rest of them. To hell with everything I have myself ever written”<sup>7</sup>. Sa poésie est traversée par la volonté de poursuivre le travail inauguré par Whitman et prolonger son cri barbare sur les toits de l’Amérique afin de dépoussiérer les vieilles grammaires qui enchaînaient encore l’Amérique à l’Angleterre.

La langue balbutiante de Caliban dans *La Tempête* se fait le miroir de la voix trébuchante et des bégaiements du poète qui tente de définir les contours d’un territoire aux mouvements ondulatoires. La langue même subit une mutation alors que le verbe britannique vient se greffer sur une terre nouvelle et provoquer l’efflorescence d’une poésie elle-même sauvage et vagabonde (étymologiquement « brave » comme le nouveau monde de Miranda). Les vers et vocables se heurtent aux contours du nouveau monde et reviennent écornés de leurs extra-vagances en même temps qu’ils définissent le délinéament d’une terre en constante métamorphose dont la première mutation fut le nom qui la désigne : de l’Inde à l’Amérique.

La pièce de Shakespeare se révèle un terreau fertile à l’analyse de l’approche du langage de William Carlos Williams puisqu’elle se déroule dans un espace intermédiaire, liminaire, en déplacement continu à travers le monde. L’étonnement dans la célèbre exclamation de Miranda trouve un écho dans celle des marins du *Grand Roman Américain* (1923) de Williams en apercevant les côtes du continent.

Nous nous proposons ici d’observer comment le poète parvient à prendre possession de sa terre par le langage malgré la « pénurie quasi-universelle d’échelle »<sup>8</sup> qui caractérise selon lui le continent. L’œuvre de Shakespeare et en particulier la figure de Caliban nous livre une version riche du pèlerinage pour LE mot dans lequel nous entraîne Williams. Tel Achab embarquant pour la quête d’une vie, Williams se jette à corps perdu dans l’immensité pour capturer à mains nues<sup>9</sup> l’idiome américain.

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<sup>5</sup> Lawrence, David Herbert, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, chap. 1 « The Spirit of the place », 1923

<sup>6</sup> Williams, William Carlos, *The Great American Novel*. New Directions Publishing, 1923, 165.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 176

<sup>8</sup> “nearly universal lack of scale” William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain*. New York, New Directions Publishing, 1956, 75 (je traduis). Cette observation rappelle celle de Tocqueville lorsqu’il affirme qu’il n’y a pas d’espace intermédiaire en Amérique, pas de canton ou paroisse : « l’espace intermédiaire est vide ».

<sup>9</sup> “with the bare hands”, William Carlos Williams in *Paterson (Revised Edition)*. New York, New Directions Publishing, 1995, 2. (Je traduis)

**“Earth, the chatterer father of all speech”: from Shakespeare’s *brave new world!*  
to William Carlos Williams’ *Nuevo mundo!***

Anna Aublet

“America, that is I should say a place like Paterson always reminds a good deal of Shakespeare. You know how Americans are about Shakespeare: dies in 1616 or so—the pilgrims land in 1620.”<sup>10</sup> In these notes, briefly jotted down on a rumpled prescription sheet, William Carlos Williams ironizes on the discrepancy separating his America from Shakespeare’s England only to ultimately reclaim the playwright’s legacy concluding: “he is like us”. By “us” Williams refers to Americans, a people whose task is to recover an indigenous idiom like Shakespeare in his own time and place.

From Shakespeare’s *Tempest* (1611) to Williams’ *Tempers* (1913) I would like here to propound a common quest for and consideration of language. As Williams depicts the contact of Columbus’ sailors or the first pilgrims with the new world, we are reminded of the shipwreck at the opening of *The Tempest* that leads the characters of the play to reconsider the old hierarchy as they strive to adapt to an ever-changing ground.

***They enter the new world naked (Spring and All, 95)***

***Nuevo Mundo!***

William Carlos Williams’ poetry endeavours to break free from the shackles of the colonizer and the verbal and mental vassalage to the crown that outlived 1776. After Emerson’s cry for independence in *The American Scholar* (1837) and Whitman’s autochthonous yawp (1855), it was Williams’ turn to howl for sovereignty, followed by Allen Ginsberg exactly one century after Whitman’s own declaration of independence.

Looking into the remnants of the past, through the sterile layers of prehistoric bark covering the soil, Williams chooses to sail back up in time—“a rebours”<sup>11</sup>—to tell the history of his continent and thus invents his own mythology:

Through conquest and struggle of all imaginable sorts through periods of success and decline, through ages of walkings to and fro in the fields and woods and the streets of cities that were without walls and had walls and burst their walls and became ruins again; through the changes of speech: Sanscrit, Greek, Latin growing crooked in the mouths of peasants who would rise and impose their speech on their masters, and on divisions in the state and savage colonial influences, words accurate to the country, Italian, French and Spanish itself not to speak of Portuguese. Words! Yes this party of sailors, men of the sea, brothers of a most ancient guild, ambassadors of all the ages that had gone before them, had indeed found a new world, a world, that is, that knew nothing about them, on which the foot of a white man had never made a mark such as theirs were then making on the white sand under the palms. *Nuevo Mundo!* (*The Great American Novel*, 181-182)

As the poet tells his reader about the discovery of the Americas by Columbus, he highlights the importance of speech and its various phases through time, its mutability and capacity to journey from one land to another and to transcend social classes. Words were indeed the “mark” the white man was about to print on the “white sand”. The word becomes figure, *figura* and letter, *litera* printed on the untouched soil. The whiteness of the sand recalls the notorious blankness of an untouched wilderness, a pastoral garden given to men to cultivate where all hierarchy is forgotten. The concept of blankness is already an allusion to the figure of Caliban whose “inaccessible blankness”—much like Moby Dick’s—“[is] circumscribed by

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<sup>10</sup> SUNYBUF A298

<sup>11</sup> In *The Great American Novel*, Williams is quoting Huysmans’ book, 170.

an interpretable text”<sup>12</sup>. Spivak’s excellent remarks on Caliban in her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, help us to understand the character as a corporeal variant of the continent itself<sup>13</sup>.

In this context of “New World blankness”, the possibilities for invention and creation are endless, and the crosspollination of different cultures and languages, a chance to create anew. In her article on Williams and his “New World encounters”, Gabriele Hayden emphasizes the poetic fertility of the new ground: “Williams based his New World poetics on a primitivist model in which the Americas and Americans—native, mestizo, and even creole—represent not only sexual deviance but also artistic innovation.” (177) The hybridity borne by the land is a *leitmotiv* in Williams’ work and is not without recalling Shakespeare’s pastoral in *The Winter’s Tale* for instance, in which Polixenes (true to his name) argues that hybridity “is an art/That nature makes” in response to Perdita’s calling carnations and gillyflowers “nature’s bastards”<sup>14</sup>. We would like here to put forth the idea that the genetic instability and hybridity of the language in both works, is contingent to the extreme mutability of the land itself.

Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* opens on a shipwreck thus implementing and staging the blurring and effacement of the old hierarchy and the shift from civilization to nature. In Williams’s work and in Shakespeare’s play, the characters are stranded on the shore like the reader/audience on the edge of their seat. We must indeed listen to the sounds and follow the traces and signs to distinguish reality from illusion: “we are such stuff/As dreams are made on” (IV.i.156-7). Who are the savages and who are the civilized people? The Natives become the true heroes, creators of an autochthonous language, the readers of signs and undecipherable glyphs. All forms of preconceived and prehistoric hermeneutic grids are challenged in both works.

Moreover, the masque-like interlude in act IV—orchestrated by Prospero—reveals in the middle of the wilderness a British countryside with agricultural fields. Prospero thus becomes the epitome of the cultured Englishman in the wilderness, although according to Leo Marx, “both the wild and the cultivated versions of the garden image embody something of that timeless impulse to cut loose from the constraints of a complex society” (42-43). The masque somewhat prophetically depicts a Jeffersonian utopian vision of society, a balance between art and nature with which Williams identified. In this seemingly primitive pastoral garden that is the isle—and the America of Williams’ sailors—a cultured (and cultural) garden appears, mutating the identity and geographic situation of the island and making it what Michel Foucault calls a heterotopia. The relationships of the play are thus easily reversible since in a heterotopia the common rules of society do not apply:

The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another; [...] (Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, 6)

Shakespeare’s island transforms into a microscopic scale of the world and provides a solid ground on which to base our analysis of Williams’ New World. Beyond the many parallels that can be drawn between the island and the discovery of the Americas in terms of relationships between the inhabitants of the isle (which I will come back to), the doubling and

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<sup>12</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Cambridge, Harvard university press, 1999, 118.

<sup>13</sup> This idea will be further developed in the last part “(Lang)wedge”.

<sup>14</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, IV.4 81-84, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, 172.

two-folded aspect of the land itself is the first comparable trope<sup>15</sup>: the New World is an echo chamber of the old on a microscopic level. Once on this new soil, the characters of the play are faced with a past that returns to haunt the present much like the first sailors depicted by Williams. The pilgrims and mythical figures of his novel *In the American Grain* (1923) are constantly faced with the instability of hierarchical order and the mutability of the land itself, in constant metamorphosis. The idyllic *locus amoenus* is penetrated by a perverted market economy provoking a shift of power that Williams denounces throughout his work. This variability is also true of Williams' own work, its generic porosity and metamorphic aspects, which, in turn, also reflect what is sometimes perceived as the poet's own ambivalence towards the bloody *conquista* of Latin America and his fascination for the Spanish Golden Age. However, this interpretation of Williams' work seems very restrictive since it somehow tends to ignore the notion that *any* text, narrativization or staging of history is a form of colonization in itself. Let us bear in mind that, if Williams as a Latin American had claimed to *be* a Caliban<sup>16</sup>, had identified with the victimized people against the pressures of the colonizer, he would also have "legitimise[d] the very individualism that we must persistently attempt to undermine from within" as argued by G.C. Spivak in her essay (118). The contradictions within the poet's work account for the very complexity of his history and it is those gaps and crevices which suffuse more poetry to the text and to some extent, more veracity, not truthfulness to the facts, but authenticity. *In the American Grain* should not be read as a secondary source, a record and examination of historical facts. Instead, it should be construed as a primary source, as a resolutely modern and modernist poetic work of art, a work of its time, reflecting the anti-puritan *zeitgeist* of the 1920s in America.

The general mutability and instability of Williams' work is what Vera Kutzinski famously called "New World" aesthetics in her essay *Against the American Grain*. Williams' project in this partial history of America is not historical accuracy, it is not intended as an account of colonization but rather as a poetic project meant to transform the soil of America into a fertile poetic land, it is to ground the American language into the country's *Sub Terra*<sup>17</sup>.

### *Be not afeard* (III.2.130)

In his unfolding of America's mythical map in the novel *In the American Grain*, Williams suggests that one of the possible causes for the over-capitalistic American society was the puritans' first reaction to the wilderness. In a chapter entitled "Benjamin Franklin" the poet doesn't conceal his reproach: he blames the Puritans for what he sees as their complete lack of sensuousness and absolute fear of the wilderness. Refusing any kind of extravagance, to Williams, they also reject their potential sense of wonder. The angst and uneasiness towards the land is what would have scared them into *signs*—divine intimations and manifestations in nature that the writers of the American Renaissance also sought after centuries later.

Because if there is 'only earth', 'just America', and no sacred mission, no manifest destiny, no chosen people, no promised land, then there is indeed only 'the wilderness' and an 'errand' on nobody's behalf going nowhere, carrying and signifying nothing. (Tanner, *Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men*, 22)

In his reference to Macbeth's monologue, T. Tanner sheds light on the importance of divine immanence in the development of American history.

<sup>15</sup> This doubling effect and the ghostly present Old World within the new is to Mayoux a key feature of America's identity: « Et peut-être est-ce là un caractère fondamental de la vision américaine, depuis l'installation dans ce pays vide où tout représente des doubles. » (Mayoux, 75)

<sup>16</sup> See Roberto Fernandez Retamar, "Caliban : Notes towards a Discussion of Culture in our America" tr. Lynn Garafola et al., in *Massachusetts Review* 15 (Winter-Spring 1974) : 7-72.

<sup>17</sup> "Sub Terra" is the opening poem of Williams' collection *Al Que Quiere* (1917)

It is necessary in appraising our history to realize that the nation was the offspring of the desire to huddle, to protect—of terror—superadded to a new world of great beauty and ripest blossom that well-nigh no man of distinction saw save Boone. (Williams, *In the American Grain*, 155)

Daniel Boone, the woodsman—who also morphed into John Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo—epitomizes the continuous dilation of the continent to the West, an escape from the old European grids, cartographic remnants of the past. He is also filled with wonder as he discovers the wilderness beyond the edge of the Appalachians. *In the American Grain* goes on to praise his merits and those of a French catholic priest, Père Rasles, who displays a real sensibility to the world's sensuality and touch contrary to the exacerbated puritanism of Franklin and his obsession with profitability and rationalization. In his epigraph to *Paterson I*, Williams presents his poem as “a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands” (2). The contact and touch of his “bare hands” is the chosen tool for Williams, the itinerant physician, to read, examine and decipher the world. This is also D.H Lawrence's assessment in his review of Williams' work:

There are two ways of being American; and the chief, says Mr Williams, is by recoiling into individual smallness and insentience, and gutting the great continent in frenzies of mean fear. It is the puritan way. The other is by *touch*; touch America as she is; dare to touch her! And this is the heroic way. (Doyle, 91)

“Fear” is a recurring word in Shakespeare's play<sup>18</sup> from the moment the characters set foot on the isle:

GON. All torment, trouble, wonder and amazement  
Inhabits here: some heavenly power guide us  
Out of this fearful country! (V,1, 104-106)

Gonzalo here acknowledges the complex sensuousness and tempers of the isle but his first instinct is to flee. Caliban keeps reassuring Trinculo and Stephano about the safety of the island. In Lawrence's words, he somehow choses “the heroic way” in his approach to the wilderness as he tells his partners in crime in an attempt to put their minds at rest:

CAL: Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,  
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,  
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,  
The clouds methought would open, and show riches  
Ready to drop upon me; that, when I waked,  
I cried to dream again. (III,2, 130-138)

Caliban here depicts the sounds and noises surrounding him thus emphasizing his ability to embrace the sensuous qualities of the isle in a poetic way. For Williams, the new language to fit the American soil can only be retrieved through the ears, “by listening to the minutest variations of speech” (*The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*, 362) and by deciphering “the roar of the river forever in our ears” (*Paterson*, 17), which accounts for the acousmatic aspects of his poetic work. He attempts to act as a “Caliban” pricking up his ears at the humming of nature. The other characters of the play's first reaction being indeed to “huddle” and “protect”, they are more likely to fall under Lawrence's first category. The striking point here remains the most complex quality of the New World, a land that accepts and fosters “radically opposed interpretations” (Marx, 45) and reactions. These oppositions also corroborate the well-known interpretation of the play, which would set it in America emphasizing the dualities between master and slave, colonizer and colonized.<sup>19</sup> The characters

<sup>18</sup> An automatic search showed eighteen occurrences of the root-word “fear” in the play.

<sup>19</sup> The parallel between the setting of the play and the American settlement was first made by Malone in his “Essay on the Chronological Order of Shakespeare's Plays,” published in 1790. For a detailed argument about



of the play, native of the island, are indeed often paralleled with the indigenous peoples of North and South America.

### *Eppur Si Muove*

The “burial” of Ariel in the pine by Sycorax is what makes him a real native of the land, an “Indian” in Williams’ sense of the term. The identification with the land, the “primal and continuous identity with ground itself” (IAG, 33) is what establishes him as an indigenous inhabitant of the island. The Indian is to Williams a metonymic continuation of the land itself. For the poet, by being buried within the soil, the Native Americans *became* the land. If anyone was to begin the quest to possess the American territory they should go about it “as the Indian possessed it” (IAG, 137)<sup>20</sup>. D.H. Lawrence found a formula that well expresses the end of the allegiance to the Old Continent as he states: “Whatever else you are, be masterless” (1923). For Williams, Indian signified newness and independence, as he exclaims in *The Great American Novel* “Oh to hell with Masters and the rest of them. To hell with everything I have myself ever written” (176), he condemns his contemporaries and mainly T.S. Eliot for being “content with the connotations of their masters”<sup>21</sup> (IAG, 24) whereas being “indianlike” (IAG, 137) was to him the real and “new” way of being American. In Barthesian terms, it is as though Williams aimed at scraping the connotation off the word in order to put an end to the lexical allegiance to the Crown. The poet wedges the word open to reveal its multiple meanings. In his book *La Réinvention de Shakespeare sur la Scène Littéraire Américaine*, Ronan Ludot-Vlasak mentions the obsessive Shakespearian motives that haunt Melville’s *Pierre* the novel and Pierre the character, foregrounding his entrapment in the intertextual web of the past. To some extent, these remarks fit extremely well within the discussion on Shakespeare and Williams. Indeed, “the obsessive past” haunting the present, the “anxiety of repetition” and iteration, and the dedication to invent “new models”<sup>22</sup> are tenacious and unrelenting Shakespearian motives ghostly present throughout Williams’ work. The conflagration of the library<sup>23</sup> in the third book of *Paterson* performs this cathartic process, burning all the connotations and freeing the word from its fetters, handing it back to the land. Likewise, *In the American Grain* seeks to wash the words clean and articulate the lexical chaos of old grammars:

In these studies I have sought to re-name the things seen, now lost in a chaos of borrowed titles, many of them inappropriate, under which the true character lies hidden. In letters, in journals, reports of happening I have recognized new contours suggested by old words, so that new names were constituted. (IAG, 5)

To paraphrase Miranda’s famous call—which itself mutated a few centuries later into Huxley’s well-known dystopia—Williams sets off to find and tame the brave new American word. The Old Italian for “brave”, *braido*, *brado* originally signified “savage” and “wild” and I would like to use the word in this acceptance here. With “the bare hands”, Williams’ task is

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Elizabethan travel literature and the fascination for the New World, see Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, “Shakespeare’s American Fable”, 1964.

<sup>20</sup> On the topic of the election of a primitive “Indian” figure over the highbrow British model, see Paul Giles’ article about Thoreau and Emerson “By emphasizing the Indian rather than the English provenance of names like ‘Yankee,’ from the Indian ‘Yengeese,’ Thoreau lays stress on what he takes to be a nearer, more authentic matching of location to language” (69) in *Nationalism and Classic American Literature*, PMLA, Vol. 118, No. 1, Special Topic: America: The Idea, the Literature (Jan., 2003), pp. 62-77.

<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, Williams admires his contemporary Gertrude Stein for “smashing every connotation that words have ever had” (*Selected Essays*, 163)

<sup>22</sup> « Un passé obsessionnel, un système aristocratique qui périclite, l’angoisse de la répétition, [...]: *Pierre* est un ouvrage qui cherche à réinventer ses modèles » (Ludot-Vlasak, 316)

<sup>23</sup> « Pour lui, la littérature canonique n’est rien de plus qu’une couche morte du palimpseste littéraire qui recouvre le sol et le rend infertile » (Aji, 88)

to try and capture the outlines of the continent with wild words that keep bouncing off them, wandering outside of their confines to become *extra-vagant*. These words cannot be imported and arbitrarily grafted onto the new continent: they have to be excavated from the ore<sup>24</sup>.

The “profound cleft”, the “cavern” Williams refers to in *Paterson I* is where the imagination can be found. It is in the heart of his *locus* that the poet will dig up the words for a new poetry. Native Americans, buried deep within the soil, thus turn into living remnants of the past, corpses haunting the *hic et nunc* of the poet, like “airy spirits” freed from the very heart of their locality.

Besides the Natives’ capacity to live organically and in all sensuousness with the land, Williams admired their ability to integrate the fluxes and refluxes of an ever-changing ground into their daily life.

(Shakespeare) a man stirred alive, all round not minus the intelligence but the intelligence subjugated—by misfortune in this case maybe—subjugated to the instinctive whole as it must be, but not minus it as in almost everything— not by cupidity that blights an island literature—but round, round, a round world *E pur si muove*. That has never sunk into literature as it has into geography, cosmology. Literature is still mediaeval, formal, dogmatic, the scholars, the obstinate rationalists— (*Imaginations*, The Descent of Winter, 258-259)

Williams seeks to integrate into literature that mutability of the world, the fluid texture of the American map so impossible to fix and whose legend (in all its senses) can only be told by American words. The new world, *terra incognita*, extends into a gigantic wilderness, blank and without glyphs or scriptures, where the writer can ultimately free himself from the old bonds and finally “save the words from themselves” (GAN, 172).

Williams praises Boone for seeking “to grow close to [the ground], to understand it and to be part of its mysterious movements[.] Like an Indian” (IAG, 137). In the first book of *Paterson*, the unstable state of the continent is inextricably linked to the question of a mutable American identity.

the ground has undergone  
a subtle transformation, its identity altered.

Indians! (*Paterson*, 18)

The transformation experienced by the continent is first and foremost lexical: from India to America, Indians to Americans. Through the figure of the Indian, Williams reconciles his Latin Puerto Rican roots with his Americanness: Carlos and Bill are only united through poetry. The Indian inhabits a liminal space with which Williams identifies<sup>25</sup>. The Native American becomes, like Iris in Shakespeare’s masque, an arc binding two different *loci* together<sup>26</sup>.

**‘Ban, ‘Ban, Ca-caliban / Has a new master: -get a new man. (II.2.173-174)**

*It is the American idiom. (Paterson, 222)*

William Carlos Williams tells his reader in *The Descent of Winter* (1928) that one of the qualities he most admired in William Shakespeare was his “mean ability to fuse himself

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<sup>24</sup> I am here paraphrasing Williams’ famous assessment: “[...] the essence which is hidden in the very words from which we must recover underlying meaning as realistically as we recover metal out of ore.” (*Autobiography*, 362). For Williams, the “underlying meaning” the essence of language can only be retrieved through archaeological exhumation.

<sup>25</sup> On this topic see J. Darras’ article on the Great American Poem in which he identifies Williams’ eccentricity (in its first original acceptance) with the Indians’ in his poem *Desert Music*: « La musique est indienne, comme l’Indien, bénéficie de cette situation frontalière. » (Darras, 356)

<sup>26</sup> In Greek Mythology, Iris personifies the rainbow uniting heaven and hell, the sea and the sky. See Ann Lecercle’s article “Religion and the Decline of Magic in the Tempest”.

with everyone which nobodies have, to be anything at any time, fluid, a nameless fellow whom nobody noticed much—and that is what made him the great dramatist. Because he was nobody and was fluid and accessible.” (*Imaginations*, 253) In Williams’ observation of the playwright, it appears as though the very name ‘SHAKESPEARE’ was in itself unstable and mutable, an empty receptacle that readers would fill with their own connotations and imagination.<sup>27</sup> While offering his reader this definition, Williams is implicitly identifying with his master.

Against these larger pressures Williams places his own hero: William Shakespeare. This Shakespeare was a figure molded very much after Williams’ myth of himself: the figure of the unlearned “natural” brought into high relief against the classical scholar, Francis Bacon. [...] Shakespeare was—finally—a figure of the artist par excellence: a force, an anomaly, a man outside the new learning, a man without a history, like Ulysses a man with no name, a person realized most fully in the act of creating other figures [...]. (Mariani, 284)

Indeed, William Carlos Williams, M.D. never gave up his medical practice and remained a family doctor in Rutherford, N.J. all his life. This position in society provided him with a peculiar vantage point from which to write his poetry. Because he was a doctor, and because he was of Boricua origins, Williams believed he could find a language for diversity—a democratic language accessible to all classes and layers of the population with which he got acquainted in his daily tasks. Therefore, the epithets “fluid and accessible” also fit him rather nicely. By choosing not to leave the country for the Old Continent and run away “after the rabbits” (*Paterson*, 3) like his friend Ezra Pound, Williams elected his local Garden State as the setting for his poems. If Shakespeare was the “natural” man as opposed to Bacon, Williams was the ordinary man as opposed to the High Church Eliot.

Another feature of Shakespeare’s plays that was appealing to Williams was the quality and texture of the language, or as he calls it “dialect”: that unstable and progressive form of English given to the writers to shape.

But the dialect is the mobile phase, the changing phase, the productive phase, —as it was to Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dante, Rabelais. [...] Language is changing and growing new means for extended possibilities in literary expression and I add basic structure, the most important of all.<sup>28</sup>

These qualities of the language is what he finds in American English, an “idiom” with which to play, adaptable and malleable that needs to be stretched out to fit the swellings and crevices of the continent and the starts and jolts of its history. The search is for an extending fabric of language to fit the map and espouse its asperities.

### *Ta Panta Rei*

The mutability and changeability of the continent is well highlighted in *Paterson* through the ghostly present Passaic River as it is in the *The Tempest* by the sea surrounding the isle. Water is not only an allotropic and labile element emphasizing instability; it is also an agent of transformation and mutation.

The river slides and sloughs to the ocean and yearns towards fluency and fluidity of language. *Paterson* somehow becomes a succession of disorienting tales, and rhapsodic fragments which create a city that rises and falls following the vagaries, fluxes and refluxes of the Passaic River. Interestingly, Williams several times invokes snake-like shapes throughout his long poem whether to refer to the river or a cavern in the rocks thus implicitly recalling

<sup>27</sup> The idea of Shakespeare’s character as a projection is a point developed by Ludot-Vlasak in his book on Shakespeare and the American stage: « Il semble donc que la réalité de l’homme décrit comme étant Shakespeare réside souvent davantage dans les désirs ou les attentes que les biographes, amateurs ou professionnels, projettent sur lui. » in *La Réinvention de Shakespeare sur la Scène Littéraire Américaine (1798-1857)*, 19.

<sup>28</sup> SUNYBUF D7: Notebook B. 1948, p. 64

the process of exuviation, the ability of the snake to find new life and get rid of the old. The sloughing which is both “the collapse of soil or rock into a hole or down a bank” (OED) leading up to fluency and the exuviation of the snake further emphasizes the inextricable link between the beginning and the end of life.

In the introductory lines of the poem, the poet follows the itinerary of the river:

From above, higher than the spires, higher  
even than the office towers, from oozy fields  
abandoned to grey beds of dead grass,  
black sumac, withered weed-stalks,  
mud and thickets cluttered with dead leaves—  
the river comes pouring in above the city  
and crashes from the edge of the gorge  
in a recoil of spray and rainbow mists—

(What common language to unravel? . .  
combed into straight lines from that rafter of a rock’s  
lip).

(Paterson, 7)

The narrator traces the poetic movement of the river. The ricocheting and backwashing effects of the waves are also those of the poetic imagination running away to the open sea and diving into the bleak and muddy waters of the Passaic. The poet declares in the preface as if to provide us with a definition of his poetic art:

(the multiple seed,  
packed tight with detail, soured,  
is lost in the flux and the mind,  
distracted, floats off in the same  
scum.)

Rolling up, rolling up heavy with  
numbers.

It is the ignorant sun  
rising in the slot of  
hollow suns risen, so that never in this  
world will a man live well in his body  
save dying— and not know himself  
dying; yet that is the design. Renews himself  
thereby, in addition and subtraction,  
walking up and down.

and the craft,  
subverted by thought, rolling up, let  
him beware lest he turn to no more than  
the writing of stale poems . . .

Minds like beds always made up,  
(more stony than a shore)  
unwilling or unable.

Rolling in, top up,  
under, thrust and recoil, a great clatter:  
lifted as air, boated, multicolored, a  
wash of seas—  
(Paterson, 4)

The poetic spirit, the imagination finds itself floating *ab hoc et ab hac* in the same dregs as the fertile germ swept away by the seesaw of the river. The poet’s task is to fish it out and take possession of this potential language to help it bud.

In the poem's inaugural descent, the poet sketches what will become the ceaseless undulating back and forth movement ("walking up and down") between the inside and the outside, between Paterson the poet and Paterson the city. The fluidity and lability of water enable the oscillation and invite the reader to embark upon a quest reminiscent of Ishmael's spiritual vagrancies. The continuous fluvial current, the heraclitian *ta panta rei*, stands in contradiction to the stasis that Williams saw in words and in a poetry he strived to renew. To the omnipresence of spatial prepositions expressing movement ("from mathematics to particulars", "into a river", "rolling in", "top up", "rolling up", "walking up and down") the poet opposes the ancient scriptures, full of overwrought and overused words: "the writing of stale poems" (4).

It is the stasis, the mineral fixity of tuff that the root *sta* of *stale* comes to signify. "Stale" is stagnation, at the other end of the spectrum is fluidity of imagination, of language, and river. In order to break away from what he perceives as the static character of conventional poetry, the narrator goes as far as immersing himself in the river as the conclusion of his poem "the Wanderer", like a prelude to the epic *Paterson*.

Then she, leaping up with a fierce cry:  
 "Enter, youth, into this bulk!  
 Enter, river, into this young man!"  
 Then the river began to enter my heart,  
 Eddying back cool and limpid  
 Into the crystal beginning of its days. (*Collected Poems I*, 35)

Originally symbol of the wedding between men and god, the baptism actualizes the "new marriage" desired by Williams through a perfect organic exchange, a real *contact* between the Passaic and the poet. The muddy waters of the Passaic are like the "prehistoric ooze" (25) at the birth of Flossie in *White Mule*, they enable renewal. In *The Tempest*, Alonso laments that his son "i' th' ooze is bedded", the sea is hereby turned into the ever-absent maternal figure of the play.

For Williams, the waters are also a "prehistoric" matrix since they carry out Paterson's immemorial history. The river's current and the poem's flow suggest the "lines of flight"<sup>29</sup> of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome (12) those of a language that "evolves by subterranean steps and flows, along river valleys or train tracks . . ." (7). Likewise, a few pages after the previous passage, Williams again links aquatic fluxes and thought:

Jostled as are the waters approaching  
 the brink, his thoughts  
 interlace, repel and cut under,  
 rise rock-thwarted and turn aside,  
 but forever strain forward—or strike  
 an eddy and whirl, marked by a  
 leaf or curdy spume, seeming  
 to forget (*Paterson* 7-8)

Imagination itself becomes a moving fluid enabling the reader to find contact and the poem becomes rhizome itself, it functions as a subterranean brook (in the words of Prospero "the veins of the earth" so often travelled across by Ariel) irrigating thought and leading to newness and creation. The subterranean tracks taken by the imagination to create a network of signifiers enables the poet to sidestep any obstacle. In the words of A. Newman, "the flexibility of the mind, however, moving by liquid, subterreanean paths, eludes these strictures, allowing for invention and revelation." (67) Words keep streaming and dripping on each other thus creating a network of signifiers and signifieds, their value changes depending on the co-text and surrounding words. According to Claude Richard, this is what enables the

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<sup>29</sup> French « ligne de fuite »

poet to emphasize and circumvent the gap, between word and meaning, signifier and signified, connotation and denotation and to play with this shedding (sloughing?) process<sup>30</sup>. Words are thus unstable and mutable for their meaning is never fully set and they keep bouncing off each other.

## (Lang)WEDGE

### *Earth the chatterer, father of all speech*

As Williams unfolds the last lines of *Paterson I*, his words are reminiscent of his British master:

Thought clammers up,  
snail like, upon the wet rocks  
hidden from sun and sight—

hedged in by the pouring torrent—  
and has its birth and death there  
in that moist chamber, shut from  
the world— and unknown to the world,  
cloaks itself in mystery—

And the myth  
that holds up the rock,  
that holds up the water thrives there—  
in that cavern, that profound cleft,  
a flickering green  
inspiring terror, watching . .

And standing, shrouded there, in that din,  
Earth, the chatterer, father of all  
speech . . . . . (Paterson, 34)

Interestingly, Williams calls earth the “father of all speech”, when in Shakespeare’s play, the character most identified with earth is Caliban, the stutterer whose mouth spits vile profanities and curses: “What, ho! slave! Caliban! Thou earth, thou! speak” (I.2.312-313). In this way, Caliban would be the father of a new speech, the language of the isle that isn’t yet fully developed, and is thus morphing and metamorphosing along with the very territory that supports it, the heterotopia therefore also applies to him and his language<sup>31</sup>. Much like the relationship between Williams and the British language, Caliban holds a peculiar relationship to language—that Prospero taught him—both liberating and enslaving whose constraints he strives to escape. As he bids Prospero to free him from his bonds, those chains are not only material, they are mainly verbal:

CAL: You taught me language; and my profit on ’t  
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you  
For learning me your language! (I.2.362-364)

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<sup>30</sup> The association between fluid textures and the unveiling of gaps and cracks within language, between signifiers and signifieds is discussed at length in C. Richard’s essay on H.D. Thoreau « l’hydrodynamique de la lettre » : « la loi du flux mène donc, par la logique de la lettre, à la reconnaissance de l’écart comme erreur » (Richard, 136)

<sup>31</sup> “In the so-called primitive societies, there is a certain form of heterotopia that I would call crisis heterotopias, i.e., there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.” (Foucault, 4)

Fire, air and water are also present in both Shakespeare's and Williams' works thus amounting—with earth—to Pythagoras's *tetractys*—number four being symbolical of the cosmos. In *The Tempest*, “the remnants of a cosmos [...] finally flounders amidst the overwhelming chaos” (Lecerle, 339) while Williams's poetry is an attempt at articulating chaos in all its significance: articulating as the bridging together of particulars to create a new significant entity, verbal or otherwise. With expert healing hands, the doctor-poet is thus stitching clauses, words and particulars together. The poet's task in his case is to try and decipher the illegible chatter of the earth (the word ‘chatter’ itself being of onomatopoeic origins acts as a primitive act of language as well as sound) and the “roar of the river forever in our ears (arrear)” (*Paterson*, 17).

The state of “in-betweenness” of the language is in essence—if we take Bakhtin's definition of the term in Rabelais and his World—grotesque. That transitional phase of the language is very well represented in the play by the character of Caliban. Like the yet unformed and ever-morphing isle, Caliban's language is unstable, it fumbles and struggles to find the contours of the ground. In many aspects, Caliban is equated to the figure of a teenager in the play, his language and body are thus according to Bakhtin “in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created [...]” (Bakhtin, 517). Cursing and stuttering become verbal symptoms of a grotesque body. The stuttering in particular underlines the gaps the poet comes to stitch. What Matthew Hart calls “synthetic vernacular poetries” is a particularly relevant concept in this context, since it defines the discrepancy and the very hybridity of American poetry on the edge “between vernacular self-ownership and the willful appropriation of languages that will be forever foreign”<sup>32</sup>. The poet is thus weaving different cultures, *loci* and languages together while at the same time stitching and mending the words after their brutal transplantation into the American ground. To Julio Marzán in his 1994 essay on Williams' Spanish American roots, “the bridge between two cultures was an image that Williams surely heard often” because his mother was standing with one foot in Porto Rico and the other on the continent: ‘she stands bridging two cultures, three regions of the world, almost without speech’.<sup>33</sup> To Bakhtin, the incapacity of expressing words also engenders a process of inflation of the body as in pregnancy: some inarticulate entity is retained by the body that cannot be expressed and comes out with all the ejaculatory manifestations of a body giving birth, stammering and spluttering. In the gap, the silence of the stutterer between two words or syllables, is enshrouded the potential for an authentic and autochthonous poetry.

Not only is the isle a double of the American continent, but the very character of Caliban also acts as such. More than the embodiment of the colonized and representative of indigenous people, I would argue that Caliban is also—and perhaps mainly—a double of the land itself. Beyond the figure of the indigenous character, the native of the isle, Caliban's body with all its crevices and swellings becomes the very map of the territory itself, of a ground also pregnant with words experiencing a “mobile phase, changing phase” and ultimately “a productive phase” much like Williams' definition of Shakespeare's dialect.

If Caliban strives to stake the limits of his territory, spatial, physical and verbal, the other characters of the play also fumble and scramble through the wilderness and their language is constantly disrupted, interrupted and muted.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew Hart, in *Nations of Nothing but Poetry*, 7.

The author later elaborates on the notion of gap and unstable state as the womb, the *locus* of vernacular languages: “Like Homi K. Bhabha's rooted-but-cosmopolitan subjects, synthetic vernacular poems live in the interstices among the “modernist (and nationalist) insistence on territorialized imaginations of identity”, the “minoritarian modernity” experience of those who are exiled from or within metropolitan nations, and the increasingly transnational nature of human culture and political economy. The poems forged in those gaps therefore strive to be “both-cosmopolitan-and-vernacular”” (9)

<sup>33</sup> Julio Marzán, *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams*, 52-53

*Locus excambius*

Williams, like Shakespeare, makes great use of puns. Gonzalo's conception of an idyllic commonwealth has been greatly commented in relation to Montaigne's essay *Des Cannibales*, but in this very scene language is also repeatedly suspended and muffled by Antonio and Sebastian's constant punning:

GON. When every grief is entertain'd that 's offer'd,  
Comes to the entertainer—  
SEB. A dollar.  
GON. Dolour comes to him, indeed: you have spoken truer than you purposed.  
SEB. You have taken it wiselier than I meant you should.  
GON. Therefore, my lord,—  
ANT. Fie, what a spendthrift is he of his tongue!  
ALON. I prithee, spare. (II.1.16-19)

The dashes indicate the interruptions in the flow of a language which becomes mutable in every sense of the term as the characters are often being silenced. The asteismus serves to emphasize the porous phonetic frontier between “dollar” and “dolour” thus linking the two nouns together and highlighting the pejorative effects of inorganic and a-natural business exchanges, the *locus amoenus* is corrupted and becomes a *locus* of artificial exchange. Here again, the paronomasia comes to flesh out the error, the split in the naming process. Words are fluid and they mute depending on the characters uttering them.

A comparable process occurs in the opening of Williams' *Paterson III*, “The Library”:

I.  
I love the locust tree  
the sweet white locust  
How much?  
How much?  
How much does it cost  
to love the locust tree  
in bloom?  
A fortune bigger than  
Avery could muster  
So much  
So much  
the shelving green  
locust  
whose bright small leaves  
in June  
lean among flowers  
sweet and white at  
heavy cost.  
(Paterson, 90)

The pun on “locust” / “low cost” comes to signify their phonetic closeness. The choice of the locust tree is thus an oral, phonetic choice on Williams' part. What the poet seems to be most interested in is not so much the meaning of the signified as the value of the spoken sign. The pun somehow advocates for a close listening to the sound of the American language<sup>34</sup>.

In both instances, words are tokens circulating to define the contours and currency of a new verbal economy. Ultimately, *low cost*, muted homophone of *locust* led to the possibility of a possible inexpensive love and is confronted to the final *heavy cost* to love the things of the world.

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<sup>34</sup> “I say this once again to emphasize what I have often said – that we here must listen to the language for the discoveries we hope to make.” SUNYBUF C150: “What is the use of Poetry?”



*The pine and cedar: graves at my command* (V.1.48)

William Carlos Williams sometimes alludes to the meanderings and wanderings of the imagination through the image of a crevice in the bark of a tree. In this sense, poetry and art are forces that bore a hole in the trunk to reveal a different perception.

So also, poetry is that force which may revivify common living at various moments of depression blasting aside lifeless anatomies of past-usage, putting sense in that which is senseless—*splitting the wood and letting up a green interest*.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, it is Prospero's art "that made gape / The pine" (I.2.292-293) and let out the airy spirit Ariel in *The Tempest*. "By writing he [Shakespeare] escaped from the world into the natural world of his mind." (*Imaginations*, 258). The fissure in the bark is the *locus* through which the poet can access his poetic imagination. From the hole in the tree, Ariel is reborn. Again, the word *locus*<sup>36</sup> echoes the locust, and "low cost" of the poem, placing the words in a complex economic network of signifiers. In williamsian terms, the trunk of the tree is the *locus* of thought, a microcosm of the "profound cleft", the "cavern" he mentions at the end of *Paterson I* and again—as a resounding echo—in *Paterson V*: through this hole / at the bottom of the cavern / of death, the imagination / escapes intact (205). The hole in the pine becomes the hole in the ground, a ditch, or excavation. It becomes an allusion to the womb and the ooze the embryo lives in before birth, a place "hidden from sun and sight" (*Paterson*, 33). As Ariel begs for his freedom, Prospero clearly asserts the spirit's knowledge of the deepest inner Eleusinian mysteries of the earth:

Thou dost; and think'st it much to tread the ooze  
Of the salt deep,  
To run upon the sharp wind of the north,  
To do me business in the veins o' the earth  
When it is baked with frost. (I.2.252-256)

The pine tree comprises the beginning and the end of life: womb and tomb. What knowledge is concealed within the tree can only be accessible and retrieved through myth in Williams' poetry. Myth becomes the intermediary between the known and the unknown, a heuristic tool.

In both these cases, the performative power of language is foregrounded and unleashes unknown and unknowable imaginative powers: the aforementioned and enigmatic "green interest". It is words that perform the splitting of the pine's trunk, a magic spell. The opening lines for Williams's collection *The Wedge* (1944) put into poetic practice both the incantatory performative aspects of language and the splitting up of the wood he mentions in his notebook, like Prospero, the poet unleashes the poetic spirit:

With the tip of my tongue  
I wedge you open  
My tongue!

Interestingly, Louis Zukofsky who helped Williams with the editing of the volume did not like its original title: (lang)WEDGE and Williams agreed to the switch. Be that as it may, this first name suggests that Williams had in mind the idea that language has the power to both cleave and stabilize. The wedge etymologically supports the transformative aspect of a tool that breaks and splits in two and the stabilizing effect of the peg that keeps the crack open. *Langwedge* thus becomes the device capable of splitting the atom and the mechanical device leading up to a possible opening and widening of the imagination, which the poets leave open for future generations. Williams here advocates an archaeological strategy in his approach to

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, my italics

<sup>36</sup> "Say I am the *locus* where two women meet", *Paterson*, 106. My italics.

the past in which he does not stand passive but exhumes, pulls out and like the obstetrician he is, gives birth to his own history.

As Williams describes his writing process as iconoclastic<sup>37</sup> in his *Autobiography*, he advocates the peeling off, the “stripping” of the layers covering the body of the novel asserting that beneath the strata lies a cipher. To some extent, his assertion applies to the body of the continent as well. Etymologically, the cipher is both a zero and a figure, a blank matter that needs to be *transfigured* and *deciphered* (figure and cipher both amounting to numerical worth) and which can take any value at all depending on its context and co-text. The language should thereby take the print of a flickering and staggering continent: “America is a mass of pulp, a jelly, a sensitive plate ready to take whatever print you want to put on it—” (GAN, 175). This idea somehow echoes Thoreau’s appraisal in *Walden* that before starting anything anew “the walls must be stripped, and our lives must be stripped, and beautiful housekeeping and beautiful living be laid for a foundation: now, a taste for the beautiful is most cultivated out of doors, where there is no house and no housekeeper.” (31)

The new American identity can thus only be found under the layers of dead leaves that cover its body. Like Williams’ patients, it must “strip” to reveal the cipher on which to start building “a house to last two hundred years” (*The Buildup*, 334), or in this case, three.

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<sup>37</sup> “So that the novel is most at home and occupies its greatest esteem when nothing but the clothes remain, which, when stripped off reveal—a cipher. *The iconoclast at work.*” My italics. (William Carlos Williams, *Autobiography*, 369)

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#### ABBREVIATIONS

IAG: *In the American Grain*  
 GAN: *The Great American Novel*