

Hugo Williams, Self-Styled Anglo-American Poet

It is easy to see why Thom Gunn would be happy to call himself ‘an Anglo-American poet’ (1994: 218). After finding his voice within the Movement, a formally-traditional, self-consciously “English” group, he emigrated permanently to the States, adopting for much of his free verse American subject-matter and an approximation of Carlos Williams’ American idiom (Campbell 2000: 28, 30, 37-8). However, although Hugo Williams was converted to modern poetry through reading Gunn and wrote his first volume, *Symptoms of Loss* (1965), in imitation of Gunn’s ‘tough, confident’ Movement manner (Feay 1995: 32), he would be the last poet in contemporary England – one would have thought – on whom the label ‘Anglo-American’ could be pinned. Yet this is precisely what Williams himself has sought to do. While he would, no doubt, concede that his verse is markedly “English” in tone, values and themes, he would nevertheless point to a simultaneous American dimension, deriving from the way his writing practices have been shaped by that country’s literary and popular culture. However, it is my contention that this belief derives from a creative misreading of American literature and life, which reveals more about England and its poetic affiliations than it does about any actual social or cultural context on the other side of the Atlantic. In

consequence, this essay will reserve the majority of its comments for the English significance of Williams' position.

Approaching the poet by means of his forenames, one can readily grasp why Hugh (Hugo) Mordaunt Vyner Williams might be regarded as a quintessential representative of a certain type of upper-middle-class Englishman. These forenames could have been even more formidable had Laurence Olivier got his wish of having the boy christened Torquemada (Williams 1995: 145). Williams' father, Hugh, gained fame in pre-war 'English drawing-room comedy and...old movies where chaps had stiff lips, stiff moustaches and the upper crust apparatus – from top hats to gardenias in button holes'. This 'suave irascible dandy from Edwardian times' (de Jongh 1985) even tried to maintain the pose in letters home from the desert campaign:

*I dare say I shall be pretty bloody exquisite
for quite some time after the war – silks and lotions
and long sessions at the barber....*

(Williams 2002: 102)

During the 50s he and his wife, the Parisian model-turned-actress Margaret Vyner, co-wrote the kind of frothy upper-middle class comedies Osborne is credited with driving from the London stage (2002: 198-202, 215-17). Williams' younger brother, Simon, is best known for playing Captain Bellamy in ITV's 'saga' on the English 'master/servant divide', *Upstairs Downstairs* (1995: 19), while his sister, Polly, married that actor of gentlemanly roles, Nigel Havers (Cooke 2006: 35). Williams himself spent much of his childhood,

boarding at Locker's Park and Eton College. At the latter he doubled up in the parts of Duncie, leaving as 'a feckless youth with four 'O' levels' (1995: 57), and Odd Boy, bored by sport and the OTC: 'I was quite isolated and had very few friends because I was only interested in rock 'n' roll, jazz and poetry' (Lambert 2000: 13). With such a background it is hardly surprising Williams should have developed such finely-attuned social antennae. When asked to make his choice for Faber's Poet-to-Poet series, he typically selected his 'covert favourite', the laureate of English class-distinctions, John Betjeman, and shaped his anthology around poems of gently-satirical observation like 'How to Get On in Society' (2006a: ix, 61). Williams, however, is not, like Betjeman, a social climber (xi), preferring to characterise himself as a déclassé 'rebel OE' like Heathcote Williams (1995: 25). Just as speakers of Received Pronunciation have attempted to appear less elitist since the war by modifying their vowels, so Williams has aspired downwards by embracing popular culture: R&B - 'I'm a musician manqué...I'd have loved to fit into the whole R&B lifestyle, gigging around' (Walsh 1980: 17) – and TV and cinema – he has been both television critic of the *New Statesman* (1983-88) and film critic of *Harper's & Queen* (1993-98).

Unlike his friend Olivier, Hugh Williams could not adapt to the changed post-war theatrical conditions and eventually declared himself bankrupt, forcing his elder son to live in a succession of dwellings – some grand like the flat in the Earl of Darnley's Cobham Hall (1995: 36) or the house 'on Harold Macmillan's Birch Grove estate' (2002: 197-98), but some considerably less salubrious. He also had to suffer the social indignity of being taken off the Eton list because of the family's financial difficulties only to be put back on when his

father exerted pressure. These experiences alerted him early to status' brittleness and, feeling himself an outsider at school, he has always sympathised with those at the bottom of society. Thus what disgusts him about Carlyle's *Letters* is 'the gloating accents of the powerful speaking to the weak, the rich to the poor, the establishment to the disenfranchised...' (1995: 210). When setting up marital home in 1966, he chose pre-gentrified Islington rather than Primrose Hill: 'Only criminals lived here then. I loved it...The seedy side of life is what turns me on' (Cooke 2006: 36). He alludes to what he calls his 'natural sympathy for winners of the wooden spoon award' (1995: 34) in *Dear Room* by leaving mischievously unanswered the question of why he and his wife chose their present house 'where the school laps our front doorstep/ and 'TERRY LOVES LORRAINE'/ is scratched across a wall' (2006b: 52). This inverted social aspiration can be seen as part of a more general movement by which post-war public-schoolboys expressed their disaffection with the class system by turning towards the democratic informality of jazz (Melly, Lyttelton) and, later, rock (Lambert, Peel) or alternative comedy (Cook, Rushton, Cleese).

Williams fits into sociological descriptions of "Englishness" as neatly as he does into England's evolving class profile. Take, for instance, Fox's study of English behavioural codes that more-or-less transcend region, class and gender (2005), which discerns at the core of national identity a discomfort with socialising, often manifested in excessive reserve or rowdiness. This embarrassment, she argues, is eluded through a series of "default modes": obligatory humour in social interactions; moderation, a hold-all category including qualities like fence-sitting, the avoidance of extremes, cautiousness, the fear of change and the focus on domesticity and security; and, finally, a

hypocrisy, reluctant to ‘say what [it] mean[s]’, valuing ‘polite pretence’ over ‘honest assertiveness’. Beyond this, Fox posits two “clusters”: values (fair play, courtesy and modesty) and outlooks – class-consciousness; an incessant moaning that ‘never... confront[s] the source of [its] discontent’; and, most importantly, empiricism, defined non-technically as a pragmatic preference for the factual, concrete, commonsensical over the abstract, theoretical and obscure (2005: 400-11).

While exhibiting the kind of minor deviations one would expect, Williams does conform closely to this schema. Interviewers invariably note his courteous behaviour – Walsh, for instance, remarked in 1980: ‘dressed with inordinate sports jacket sobriety, polite, aristocratic and eager to help’, the poet looks ‘the image of the public school cricket captain’ (1980: 17). Indeed Williams believes poetry should also observe the ‘rules of good behaviour’ by being neither over-demanding in length, thereby rudely forcing readers to ‘turn...the page’ to finish the poem (1995: 52, 96), nor unintelligible: ‘reading the most respected modern poetry, you are immediately confronted by problems of comprehension which it takes another book to resolve’ (2006: x). Poetry should have the good manners not to bore. It is a witty performance, like the letters home he wrote from boarding school (1995: 98-100; Cooke 2006: 36; 2002: 114-15) or one of his parents’ plays, whose beguiling surface is designed to win over the potentially-resistant. Raised in a family which demanded conversations, full of Wildean epigrams, Williams seems to have spent his youth failing to ‘make [his father] laugh’ (2002: 110, 127, 134, 214). Poetry has, therefore, become a surrogate means of finally holding an audience: ‘the

need to make something appealing, witty and entertaining is in the blood' (Lambert 2000: 13).

Williams can legitimately claim an 'Etonian charm' (1995: 25), adducing a 'toff's diffidence' (Feay 1995: 32), a modest 'public school' dislike of 'claiming anything like success in an enterprise' (Walsh 1980: 17), cool irony and amused self-deprecation. His "English" habit of compulsory flippancy, however, can cause dismay when it encounters 'irony-free environment[s]' like archaeological digs, New-Age self-development holidays (1995: 113-14, 187-89) or America ('Americans,' he erroneously asserts, 'have *no sense of irony...*', Walsh 1980: 17). Certainly, his own writing is no such zone: he talks of his poetic vocation as 'a hobby that got out of hand' (Brockes 1999: 13) and wonders whether his *Selected Poems* should have been entitled, after his 'best school report', 'A Slight Improvement'¹² (1995: 42), while *Freelancing* should become *All Over the Place* (xi) and *Dear Room*, which briefly revisits the adulterous affair itemised in the previous collection, *Billie's Rain*, "*Billy's Rain Lite*" (Cooke 2006: 36). This manner, Hardie declares, appeals greatly to women: 'Hugo was, as he still is, very attractive in an English, ironic, languid way' (Campbell 2002: 22). However, what lies beneath the veneer can be less appealing: Williams admits to 'self-deprecating, inverted arrogance' and 'conceited modesties' (1995: 194). He can also display surprisingly bad manners in literature and life: Brockes argues that by expressing 'undiluted love for his [lost] mistress, right under the nose of his wife', Williams has exhibited 'rank behaviour' in *Billie's Rain* (1999: 16); while Pitt-Kethley, who tried unsuccessfully to have an affair with him, describes the poet as someone who,

though occasionally ‘charming’, could be so ‘rude’ and ‘bitchy’ she would often go ‘back home in tears’ (1993: 33).

The emphasis on irony implies that “English” outlook which, distrusting extremes, welcomes the consensual middle-ground and invests its desire for security in the concept of home. When trying to explain why he did not become English poetry’s ““next thing”” in the 1970s, Williams adduces ‘lack of wildness’, ‘caution...self-preservation’ (1995: 43). He is alternately amused and appalled by the incautious – for instance, the ‘seven heavy-duty... [American] Plath-heads’, whose ratcheted-up extremism destabilises his Creative-Writing workshops: ‘My job is to strip away the layers of pretence and get them to confront the origins of the trouble, which often goes back to something like a burnt cookie in early childhood’ (1995: 53). He locates an understated wholeness in his own house: ‘when I get home, it’s as if I’ve got part of my body back’ (Cooke 2006: 35). As ‘an *aficionado*’ of ‘home’, he adopts as ‘guiding principle’ for *Freelancing*: ‘never to go out looking for material if there [is] any lying around at home’ (1995: xii-xiii). Poetry’s great merit is you can ‘do it...at home’ (Cooke 2006: 36) and his own verse celebrates enclosed spaces and their potential for erotic excitement and creativity. The most recent volume is called *Dear Room* after his ex-mistress’ flat, a ‘tree-house.../ suspended/ half-way’ between the ‘heaven’ of sexual fulfilment and the ‘hell’ of Ladbroke-Grove traffic, and the ‘dear room’ of his study where much of his best poetry has been written (2006b: 4, 49).

Contradicting this, however, is the side of Williams that is adventurous to the point of recklessness. He sets out on a journey around the world ‘without currency or supplies’: ‘I hate landscaping my life as far as the eye can see. I like

arrival to be more than the result of my calculations' (1997: 27). Moreover, tied as he is to home, Williams likes nothing better than to get out and be gregarious at parties (2006b: 9-10), first nights (1995: 210-13), literary festivals (1995: 9-10, 22-23, 28-9, 114-17, 128-32, 155-58), and creative-writing or self-development holidays (7-9, 34-36, 172-74, 187-95, 229-32; 2002: 240-41). So little does he suffer from the "English" unease at social interaction, so skilled is he at networking, that 'in literary London "everybody loves Hugo"' (Feay 1995: [33]). Williams' risk-taking also manifests itself in refusing to compromise, even when this involves breaching what Fox characterises as England's most cherished principle: fair play (2005: 407). Thus while making a BBC travelogue, he is the only one to object to dividing meal bills nine-ways: 'It was as if Judas Iscariot had kissed Christ on the lips.... I went to my room and sulked' (1995: 56). He and his wife, as he explains elsewhere, are 'both intensely self-centred' (Campbell 2002: 23).

This self-absorption does not spill over into the poetry, whose objectifying realism falls comfortably within the dominant empiricist tradition in English verse that so exasperates Easthope (1999: 87-114, 177-99). Williams' writing assumes an external reality with which one can make reliable contact through the evidence of the senses and a language, whose lexis, though arbitrary, nevertheless represents conventional agreement about that reference. His poems tend to present concrete, dramatic situations in the narrative present or filtered through memory, achieving form by means of a structuring of the impressions these situations provoke. This groundedness makes him value the quality in others – Armitage, for example, with his 'unaffected eye-on-the-ball approach' (1995: 158). He occasionally levitates into the surreal – as in the Sonny-Jim

poems – but rarely without first establishing a firm base and the sobering sense that free-floating surrealism is ‘hell, the epitome of self-licensing artiness’ (2000: 230). The poetry, as Potts observes, does not ‘think hard’ (Campbell 2002: 22) and indeed his whole approach to writing and teaching resists abstract theorising. His Creative-Writing workshops are unashamedly arranged around Form-Critical close reading – typically, of very “English” poets: Edward Thomas, Brooke, Larkin, Hughes – rather than any coherent ‘theory of poetics’ (1995: 7-8, 54, 231).

Williams’ poetry aims for the transparent style which Easthope regards as characteristic of English empiricist prose (1999: 93-96). Indeed he believes as strongly as Pound that poetry should exhibit ‘the virtues of prose’ (1995: 208), though he carries the point with the help of Cowper rather than Pound’s ‘Prose Tradition in Verse’: “‘To make verse speak the language of prose...to marshal the words...in such an order as they might naturally take in falling from the lips of an extemporary speaker...is one of the most arduous tasks a poet can undertake’” (2000: 232). In his search for a prose clarity born of not only natural word order, but also uncomplicated, concrete diction, logical sentence-structure and sparse rhetorical trope he obeys the dictum, ‘Keep it simple and make it visual’ (2000: [229]). He has steadily resisted the vogue for ‘disjointed syntax’, for which he holds Ginsberg ‘partly responsible’ (1995: 93). A Movement-inspired fondness for extended analogies, which reduces the first volume’s clarity, soon diminishes as, under the influence of poetry reading, his verse undergoes a simplifying movement ‘from metaphor...towards speech’ (1995: 43). ‘Given that poems themselves are metaphors’, Williams now finds ‘overt metaphors more and more embarrassing’. They either seduce you into

‘lying to make an effect’ or develop ‘a life of their own’, refusing to be ‘upstaged’ (1995: 207; 2000: [229]). Being ‘drunk with words’, he regards as an adolescent preoccupation; maturity demands ‘plainness’ operating ‘without the safety net of the poetical’ (2000: 231-32). Therefore he advises would-be poets to ‘cut back the poetic and nurture the prose...because it is more poetic’ (1995: 209). His own poems might seem as effortless as prose, but they conceal considerable craft, telling their narratives artfully by means of the exact psychological or sociological detail.

Of the three types that Gervais distinguishes in his study of twentieth-century ‘literary Englands’ – ‘natives’, ‘cosmopolitans’ and cosmopolitan natives (1993: 274) – Williams relates most closely to the third. He shares with the cosmopolitans an allegiance, though ambivalent, to modernity and with the natives a paradoxically-retrospective pastoral nostalgia, which he locates not in some pre-modern Edenic countryside, but where Empson (1966) says he can – in childhood:

...the past lies ahead, stretched out in the memory, a place you...will eventually reach. The future is dark and unknown; it must lie behind your back.

(1995: 197)

The future can go and be
bloody terrifying on its own
for all I care. Me and my girl
are stepping out for the past....

(2006b: 54)

Williams keeps returning to key childhood moments like the school holidays when he created with his younger brother a zone of stability and ‘innocence’ in a succession of gardens and seaside resorts where he could forget his father’s decline and his own boarding-school miseries (1995: 21,195-98; 2002: 122, 196-98) and ‘half-holidays’ from rule-bound, sexually-repressed Eton when he could escape to the ‘Bardotesque’ Miss Sullivan’s ‘out-of-bounds’ Record Exchange and the freedom of rock ‘n’ roll (2002: 139-142; 1995: 24). He fantasises about being caught on the site of the burnt-down shop ‘ten years from now’ by a master who tells him ‘the past is out of bounds’: “‘But sir,’ I’ll say, ‘where else is there to go...?’” (2002: 142) He has described the escapist impulse in this and other childhood poems as ‘misplaced adolescent nostalgia’ (1995: 24) and he is certainly aware that as a response to English post-war life the emotion is not only slightly bogus, but also past-its-prime: ‘[Betjeman’s] was the great age of nostalgia....Nowadays everything passes away so quickly...there is no time for Betjeman’s brand of lyricism even to recognise it.’(2006a: xi)

Although tied nostalgically to a lost English childhood, Williams has not, like the natives, ossified his concept of nation, but instead sees England, with the cosmopolitans, as a constantly-evolving, multi-faceted process. He assimilates aspects of modernity into his literary strategies – Pound’s Imagist and Lowell’s Confessional modes – and into his outlook on life – his England is as diverse, outward-looking and progressive as the contributors to *The Revision of Englishness* (2004) might wish and Scruton (2001) might fear. Williams’

region is the South-East and, in particular, London, on which he bestows a Johnsonian devotion – ‘there is only one good reason for ever leaving London’: ‘to go to Brighton’ (1995: 132) – but he is aware London is only one of many locations and has no particular precedence. However, what he does value about the metropolis is its complex embodiment of a diverse and continually-changing England: ‘There used to be a door here./ You could walk straight in off the street’ (2006b: 3). Its intricate multiculturalism can be witnessed not just among his Islington neighbours – Georgie, the Welsh-speaking ‘genius of our street’ or ‘Madame Charmaine’, a French hairdresser – but also on city streets where the women he pursues are as likely to be Malay or Finnish as Anglo-Saxon (2002: 169-70, 172-74, 181-82, 229). London seems to engineer rewarding multicultural encounters so effortlessly – the way, for instance, ‘Chinese children’ on the tube, ‘looking at [his] nose’, makes him self-conscious, but not enough to discover that their nickname for Westerners is ‘Big Noses’, the way a Soho cul-de-sac suddenly transforms itself into ‘Old Kowloon’:

Pig carcasses hanging up,
bug-infested neon, a Chinese cook
who stopped sharpening his knife
and turned to look at us. (2002: 43; 2006: 8)

While ‘In the Seventies’ wittily juxtaposes the poet, ‘delivering copies of *The New Review*’, containing Ian McEwan’s teasingly-entitled ‘In Between the Sheets’, and the ‘Ugandan Asians’ who have taken over North-London

newsagents, sitting ‘under canopies of soft porn’. Williams’s favourite cafe near the *New Review* office where he would later take his mistress Carolyn was the Bar Italia, run by Italians and ‘crowded.../ With undesirables’ from Soho’s rich multicultural mix (2002: 75-76, 169, 274-75).

This ethnic inter-layering has produced within London new forms of hybridity that fascinate Williams because he is himself a hybrid. His great-grandfather was a Welsh nationalist who wrote ‘bloodthirsty anti-English poems’ (Lambert 2000: 13); his father, in contrast, claimed a patriotic devotion to England during the Second World War – ‘*sometimes it seems we love England/ more than each other*’ – although a large post-war tax bill evoked a somewhat different response: ‘I’ll leave this bloody country and never come back’ (2002: 103, 204). His mother was Australian and therefore ‘always more of an outsider than us’ in ‘class-ridden England’, and he himself, when challenged in Kuwait, declares himself ‘half-Australian’ (2002: 198-202; 1995: 199; 1997: 28). His wife, the tightrope-walker and chanteuse Hermine, is French and it is in this cultural otherness that her attraction principally lies: ‘she is [a]... mysterious woman...from a different culture and these two things constantly renew my interest in her’ (Lambert 2000: 13). In his poetry Williams likes to use geographical disposition to dramatise hybridity. Thus he presents himself in a London nightclub, ‘remember[ing]’ his French wife, who is ‘in Germany’, dressed in ‘Portobello weeds’, telling reporters, “‘I remember.../ My little daughter’”, her half-English, half-French child, asleep in London (2002: 52). His post-colonial eulogy on his daughter’s West-Indian inheritance from her ‘mother’s Martinique/ Great-grandmother’ reflects a notion of

England, looking out, humbly and without nostalgia, on a world no longer ruled by a myopic British Empire:

You do not look like me. I'm glad
England failed to colonise
Those black orchid eyes
With blue, the colour of sun-blindness. (2002: 39)

Though crowded with sites of institutional reaction, London is also, for Williams, a city whose incipient radicalism can subvert right-wing ideologies. Thus he satirises Thatcherite chauvinism – and his own self-characterisation as a flâneur – when all he can pick up on the London streets is a homeless bag-lady, dressed in ‘a sheath made of “I’m Backing Britain” shopping bags’ (2002: 228).

Williams, however, tends to show his progressiveness through lifestyle rather than politics. He is one of London’s New Men, proud his wife’s book, *Life Star*, is categorised as ““Women’s Studies”” and supporting, though quizzically, her performance as a huge prehistoric fertility goddess (1995: 58, 62-64). This accommodation with feminism manifests itself, more crucially, in his sorrowful acceptance of her inalienable right to use the money she inherited in 1993 to live apart from him in Picardy. He is also fully prepared to adopt domestic roles traditionally thought of as female (2002: 41-42, 50, 63, 68-70). Murphy herself has said of her father: ‘he was the one who nursed me when I...skinned my knees....He told me about the birds and bees, and...about the pill’ (Campbell 2002: 22). Again as his wife and mistress’ lover he adopts the

traditionally female, passive role: he presents himself as dominated, outwitted and abandoned by them (2002: 48, 50, 81-82, 276-77, 2006b: 12, 25, 32, 41), only to long for their return in a loneliness, productive of nothing but verse (2002: 83-87, 157, 175, 222-23, 225-26, 227, 228, 275-76; 2006b: 24, 31, 33-34, 36-38, 51): ‘And so you cry for her, and the poem falls to the page....’ (2002: 83). A fantasy control when they are sleeping or their photographs are at his mercy is all he can exercise (2006b: 22-23).

Learning early from his ex-model mother that ‘good looks [are] everything’, Williams is, like an unreconstructed woman, obsessed with appearance, but tries to win distance from his ‘vanity’ through irony (2002: 97; 1995: 227). Although as a dandy on a motorbike he is a democratic version of his father, he still retains the gentlemanly code of being unostentatiously, but expensively ‘well-dressed’ with telling choice of ‘carnation’ and ‘cravat’ or tie ‘groove[d]’ in just the right place (1995: 96, 123-25). Even when modelling, Williams can be ‘fussy’ about clothes, but it is an ‘exaggerated interest’ in hair that has been the main source of grief, sending him on a lifetime’s quest for that ‘elusive good haircut’ and dragging him in front of countless mirrors in search of the perfect style or the demoralising grey hair (1995: 137-40, 227-28, 237; 2002: 125-26, 128, 164, 178, 268-69).

Williams is also an English New Man in being relaxed about his sexuality. He is happy to allow two Danish models to create a ‘drag version’ of himself so they can camp it up together on Carnaby Street. He feels proud he is named after a ‘step-grandfather’, Mordaunt Shairp, who wrote ‘the first modern gay play’ and is amused when Spender informs him ‘a certain sector of London life...assumed [his] father was gay’ and when Yevtushenko, after hearing the

youthful Hugo recite his verse, declares poets should be ‘half woman’ (1995: 109, 141, 163).

Williams’ multi-faceted “Englishness”, therefore, includes cosmopolitan elements, not least in its hybridity, a hybridity further complicated by its attempt to incorporate an idiosyncratic sense of what might be involved in being American. As a homesick traveller in Shiraz, Williams is overjoyed to encounter ‘one’s own culture’, by which he means an outdoor screening of ‘*Mark Twain’s America*’ (‘it might have been America I was in’) and New-Orleans records, listened to in the British Councillor’s garden (1997: 49-50). The mention of jazz is significant because popular music has encouraged Williams to believe not simply that he can easily identify with America, but that he can actually become American: ‘John Lennon once said, “I’ve been half American ever since I heard Elvis on the radio and me head turned.” My case exactly’ (1982: [24]). He repeated Lennon’s epiphany when the chance discovery of Gunn’s ‘Elvis Presley’ confirmed and coalesced his twin adolescent passions for poetry and rock ‘n’ roll: ‘my head turned, my future was sealed...the notion that Elvis or the Hell’s Angels could be subjects for poems came as a great revelation’ (1995: 57; 2002: 22). Why should he not write poetry on pop themes when, in his estimation, Chuck Berry’s lyrics were already making him ‘one of the great poet heroes of America’ (1982: [23])? (He did indeed evolve into a poet who, like Berry, constructed vernacular pieces around the excitements and frustrations of urban youth culture and in this sense can be seen as writing versified R&B.) A subsequently-acquired record, featuring Gunn in ‘tight jeans and...leather jacket’, inspired him to replicate the *Wild-Ones* pose, though his Harley Davidson was an ‘East German...

“worker’s bike”’: ‘I had no idea respectable English poets could be like that’ (Campbell 2002: 22; 1995: 117). This macho appearance, however qualified by “English” irony, expressed solidarity with American modes of youthful ‘revolt’ against parental restriction, though carried off with a Gunnian ‘style’ (1995: 190; Gunn 1993: 57; Williams 2001: xi). To explain why he has ‘spent [his] life regarding [America] as home’, Williams remarked: ‘in a way I grew up there; the first ever teen rebellion coincided with my own teenage and I felt completely part of it’ (Walsh 1980: 17). In fact, America’s allure registered at an even earlier age when the republic represented the colour and material abundance that England at war and during the rationed, monochrome 50s lacked. Thus he presents a G.I. lover, who has to move out of the London house when the husband returns from war, bribing the narrator-son into silence by ‘slipp[ing] chewing gum under my pillow’: ‘The smell of spearmint// made my mouth water’ (2002: 106). Equally attractive were American TV-westerns: Williams finds it entirely appropriate that his Home-Counties childhood should have centred around games in which he figured as the Cisco Kid and his brother Pancho (1995: 21, 197).

In his poetry those consumer items like Brillo soap pads that Warhol ambiguously celebrated jostle with pop-culture icons like King Kong, Harpo Marx and Greta Garbo (2002: 93, 178, 239; 2006b: 43). However, it is to black R&B that Williams most consistently turns for context or comparison. His pilgrimage to America was to see Berry as much as Gunn and, although he just failed in the latter, he succeeded in the former, marking the achievement by naming the subsequent travel book and a poem after the same Berry song, ‘No Particular Place to Go’ (1982: 20-24, 88, 108-17; 2002: 142). Indeed the towns

he extols – ‘infinitely sophisticated New York’; the ‘great dark town’, Chicago; Memphis, to which all rock-converts should ‘turn and face...when they pray’; and that ‘mythical city’, New Orleans (Walsh 1980: 17; Williams 1982: 67, 71, 155) – are all associated with Berry, or black music generally, and when he leaves America he is weighed down by 90 cut-price R&B records bought in these towns (155-8). However, whereas Gunn exploits rock music to express revolt’s alternative excitements (1993: 57, 108-09, 211, 33-36, 393-94), Williams, with “English” restraint, distances himself from all the energy by converting it into pastoral: R&B becomes the mood music for remembered affairs, viewed, as Williams does American teenage revolt, with ‘premature nostalgia’ (2002: 175, 272; Walsh 17). In ‘Some R&B and Black Pop’, for instance, the poet remains stoically silent while replaying the tape he and Carolyn used to make love to, but breaks down ‘at the place’ one track ‘suddenly gets ...louder/ and one of us...had to get out of bed/ to turn the volume down’ (2002: 272).

Unfortunately, Williams’ lively identification with American popular culture is not in itself enough to make him semi-American. If it were, most young people born in England since the war would have to be so classified. Similarly, in the literary sphere, more than frequent allusions to American popular culture are needed to make English poets ‘Anglo-American’, as a comparison between Auden and the Liverpool Poets indicates. Indeed when Williams views America from a socio-political perspective he begins to sense how un-“American” he really is. While his travel book can at times celebrate the country’s immensity and diversity with Kerouac’s stoned wonder, it just as frequently gives voice to what Morrison calls ‘the old Etonian, rubbishing American vulgarity as

scathingly as did Evelyn Waugh' (Campbell 2002: 22). In truth, Williams has no time for the American Dream: what he likes is 'B-movie, back-lot America'. His is a country of outsiders (Beats, blacks, poor whites and Latin-Americans). Sitting among a white, teenage audience, he primarily notices how his 'outsider' status as tourist replicates Berry's (1982: 23, 157). This sensitivity to ethnic otherness guides his presentation of LA's Renaissance Fair: while Gunn portrays this largely-white, counter-cultural gathering positively (1993: 209-10), Williams sees it as marginalizing blackness: 'more than anything...I remember the mounted Rastaman in dreadlocks...hovering magnificently on the outskirts like some vestigial image out of *Black Orpheus*' (1982: 134). Latin-Americans, both in and outside the States, are presented as being similarly marginalized and exploited by white capitalism (1989: 79-102). On the other hand, the way poor American whites express their alienation through violence, racism and fundamentalism is seen as taking them beyond sympathy (1982: 62, 68, 74, 79). 'On the Road' shows how far from Kerouac's empathy is Williams' attitude to the white underclass:

A boy came through the door in Opelousas
and stuck two fingers in the air
at a car that was going past
carrying a tourist with nothing better to do
than write down everything he saw....

(2002: 153)

Williams, however, is altogether more positive about those features of American literary culture on which he bases his poetic practice. That influence was mediated by an English mentor, Ian Hamilton. When asked to make his selection for *The Independent's* 'Book-of-a-Lifetime' slot, Williams chose Hamilton's 'first and only' collection, *The Visit*, which 'remains a formative influence for me, as for a... generation of poets' (2006c 27). It was as a tough, yet scrupulous essayist and editor of *The Review* and *New Review*, as well as exemplary poet, that this authority was exerted. His importance for Williams resided in the ability to assimilate the two American traditions of Pound's Imagist and Lowell's Confessional modes into English practice with such power that 'a way out of the Movement' was demonstrated (Harsent 1999: 56). Although Williams follows the fashion of calling this approach minimalism, it was really neo-Imagism, as Hamilton himself readily conceded: 'the early Pound...his theorising' and 'shorter poems, like "The Return" ...[were what] we valued' (Jacobson 2002a: 12). Indeed the group prized 'Three Don'ts by an Imagiste' as highly as did Pound's earlier disciples, the "Objectivist" Poets (Dembo 1969: 180; Zukofsky 2000: 209), because they established the 'ground rules', which every 'modern poet' should follow (Hamilton 2003: 56). Hamilton believed he lived 'in the age of the short poem', whose trademark, according to fellow minimalist Falk, was that 'strange combination of intense feeling and icily controlled craftsmanship' (1975: 108; Harsent 1999: 72-78). This emotional intensity would ensure the minimalists avoided poems that were little more than poorly-crafted assemblies of images: sense data had to be so energised by an urgent feeling, embodied in compelling free-verse cadences, that mere description was transformed into presentation. Hamilton is here

restating in slightly different terms the key “Objectivist” concept of ‘objectification’: a poem’s ‘minor units’ of precisely-rendered particulars achieve the ‘rested totality’ of an autonomous object when feeling imposes onto non-metrical rhythmic patterns a satisfying auditory structure (Zukofsky 2000: 194-97, 210).

In the essay ‘Dreams and Responsibilities’, which, Hamilton felt, was ‘as near a manifesto’ as the minimalists produced (Jacobson 2002a: 8), Falk used Imagist-“Objectivist” reasoning to justify epigrammatic terseness: in the context of a ‘failure of confidence in language and meaning’, poets must retreat to narrow certainties - the sense data of personal experience; ‘the long poem risks’ incursions from ‘poetically unsustainable... discursiveness’, ‘abstraction’, and ‘didacticism’; the only permissible thinking was ‘reflection-within-experience’ by means of images (Hamilton 1986: 2-9). This narrowing of poetry to the exact, ‘truth[ful]’ rendering of sense impressions in crafted free verse is what the “Objectivist Poets” meant by ‘sincerity’ (Zukofsky 2000: 194, 206, 212; Dembo 1969: 160-61). Thought should only intrude as an immediate response to perceived objects or, as Carlos Williams put it, ‘no ideas but in things’. This dictum, which comes from *Paterson*, reminds us that Williams and indeed Zukofsky did attempt epics; but Rakosi and Oppen are surely closer to the “Objectivist” spirit when they find little in modern life to support epic pretension (Dembo 1969: 170, 180-81).

Hamilton felt that all modernist epics, with the exception of *The Waste Land*, failed to resist the temptations Falk outlined (1975: 47-8; 2003: 42, 57, 128-9, 272-4; Jacobson 2002a: 12). His own anti-epic poems, which, like TE Hulme’s, number less than eighty, use small emotions of fraught tenderness and

grief, and a limited repertoire of objective references (hair, heads, flowers, snow), to dramatise small, non-public subjects. What Harsent calls Hamilton's poetry of 'inference', 'the almost said' is categorised by Williams as 'emotional symbolism' (Harsent 1999: 56, 78). He contends that Hamilton 'more or less invented' the technique, illustrating its workings with the help of the poet's own self-parody: "If we were going to write about Vietnam, it would have to do with going into some field and picking a flower that would somehow...remind us of a look...that...might hint of a war in South-East Asia. But the poem would be about walking in a field" (1999: 56). This oblique objectification of intense emotion, however, is exactly what Pound and the "Objectivists" meant by the 'object' always being 'the *adequate* symbol' (Jones 1972: 131; Dembo 1969: 193-95; Rakosi 1983:115), a truth best exemplified by Chinese poetry. Thus Reznikoff explained "Objectivist" practice by quoting an eleventh-century Chinese poet: 'poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling' (Dembo 1969: 193).

While Pound remained the modernist master, the American Confessionals were the contemporary poets who the minimalists regarded as 'exemplars': 'Roethke, Berryman, Lowell and Plath...seemed much more exciting than anything...in this country' (Jacobson 2002a 12). Hamilton declared in 1965 that Lowell, especially, was 'the most important poet writing in English' (1973: 107) and even after his official biography (1983) revealed serious poetic decline and indefensible behaviour he was still able to describe Lowell as 'the only living poet I really revered...a hero' (Jacobson 2002b: 22). This reverence was founded on 'about half a dozen' poems in *Life Studies* where 'the passionate speaking voice and intimate subject-matter' combine and where "stabbing

detail[s]” are caught in ‘a structure tight enough to encompass their full range of connotation without any loss of urgency’ (2002b: 22; 1973: 12). These touchstones exhibited ‘extraordinary candour – intimate family details were assessed without a flicker of inhibition or reserve’ (2003: 239). However, Hamilton felt *For Lizzie and Harriet*, in which ‘Lowell sonnetized [his ex-wife’s] private... letters’, took candour too far (2003: 242; Jacobson 2002b: 22). Hence his own Confessional material – a father’s death by cancer, a first wife’s descent into madness – is treated with an Imagist restraint: ‘There is a difference between giving voice to moments of intensity which have a...general... application ...and airing in public things which are essentially confidences’ (Jacobson 2002a: 12-3).

Williams regards his own career as an evolution from Hamilton’s Imagist-“Objectivist” obliquities to confessional directness, with *Writing Home* (1985), which attempts to accommodate painful memories of his dead father, marking the transitional point: ‘That was the moment...I left behind the desire to write the... Hamilton-type...tip-of-the-iceberg poem....The main influence was...Lowell’s *Life Studies*’ (Campbell 2002: [23]). It was his mastery of indirection in ‘The Butcher’ (2002: 31), which ostensibly describes a local shop-worker, but ‘turn[s] out to be about marriage’, that enabled his early verse to find ‘favour’ with Hamilton ‘as editor’ (Harsent 1999: 57). Indeed so impressed was Hamilton that he included the piece in *The Modern Poet* (1986: 195), his selection of the best essays and verse from *The Review*. What he liked about Williams’ poetry was its Imagist mode of fixing predominantly-visual impressions in economical free-verse structures that preserved speech’s syntax and rhythms. ‘I sometimes think there are two separate English languages,’

Williams asserts, ‘one made up of visible things, the other of invisible, and there is no doubt... the former is better for poetry’ (2000: [229]). This respect for Imagist concretion informs his advice to students to put ‘more images into their work’ (2002: 176). In writing a ‘poetry...about things’, Williams feels he is being self-consciously ‘American’ (1982: 39) and his poetry does indeed follow the “Objectivist” practice of perceiving urban life’s humble objects with ‘nearly a sense of awe’ (Dembo 1969: 164). Thus a memory of all the details of folding sheets with Carolyn ‘in the morning bedroom’ is transformed by the love their minute attention implies into what Dembo would call an ‘objectivist epiphany’ (1966: 70):

the smell of fresh linen
rises like a benediction -
sunlight visible
in the kicked-up dust.

(2006b: 51)

Like Reznikoff (Sternburg 1984: 130-33), Williams admires haiku’s ‘Dinglichkeit’, in particular its struggle for what Basho terms ‘*wabi*...an appreciation of the commonplace’. In this spirit he enthusiastically endorses Kavanaugh’s contention that “‘the things that really matter are...insignificant little things’” (Herbert 2000: 231), a belief cognate with “Objectivist” reverence for the ‘little words’ (Dembo 1969: 162-63; Hatlen 1981: 38; Kenner 1977: 172).

Despite such significant overlapping, Williams' verse cannot finally be viewed as a wholly-achieved realisation of American Imagist-"Objectivist" principles. For example, although he salutes Hamilton's pursuit of the Imagist 'high-intensity lyric' (1995: 11), it is the absence of this essential quality that characterises his own Images. Indeed some are so inconsequential in both substance and auditory structure one's immediate response is, 'So what?':

Walking upstairs after breakfast
I looked round to see if you were following
And caught sight of you
Turning the corner with a tray
As I closed the bathroom door.

(2002: 39)

Falk views this quality existentially as Williams registering 'little more than transient flashes of wonder at the mere fact of existing' (Hamilton 1972: 72). Ironically, the "Objectivist" Poets are themselves sometimes guilty of low-pressure verse. Indeed the poetry of Williams' namesake, William Carlos, can, as Hamilton remarks, be 'thinly documentary', making sensuous impressions 'merely available' without the intensification of 'metaphor', rhythmic animation or 'insight' (1973: 47-50). In this sense William Carlos' own work, just as much as Hugo's, exhibits the very failing that the "Objectivist" Poets were principally reacting against: 'formally non extant' *vers-libre* (Williams 1967: 264).

In addition, Hugo Williams does not, as Pound and the “Objectivists” say he must, ‘go in fear of abstractions’ (Jones 1972: 131; Dembo 1969: 187; 1981: 202-04). Otherwise admirably-concrete Images can contain lines like “don’t fool yourself.../ that you never loved her. /Don’t degrade yourself with empty hopes” (2002: 228). Ironically again, for all their talk of creating machine-hard verse, the “Objectivist” Poets themselves allowed abstractly-expressed thought or feeling to soften their verse surprisingly frequently. Hence when Dembo attempts to limit Zukofsky to ‘thinking with things as they exist and not making abstractions out of them’, the poet retorts: ‘but the abstract idea is particular, too’ (1969: 209). That this attitude contravenes a central “Objectivist” tenet is shown by the way Bunting reserves his severest criticism of Zukofsky for shortcomings in this area (Makin 1999: xxiii, 153-4, 211-12, nb 3).

By making *Writing Home* the cut-off point, Williams oversimplifies his development because although subsequent volumes – *Self-Portrait with a Slide* (1990), *Dock Leaves* (1994), *Billie’s Rain* (1999) and *Dear Room* (2006) – have a Confessional focus on the poet’s adolescent problems, his mother’s death and the extra-marital affair with Carolyn, they continue to include the same kind of Imagist-“Objectivist” lyrics as the earlier collections. Nevertheless it is true to say that after 1985 Lowell, whose *Life Studies* Williams has increasingly regarded as ‘a touchstone of excellence’ (2001: x), succeeds Hamilton as the dominant influence. The Images’ consequent Confessional necessity, together with their greater willingness to entertain and at times extend metaphor, can produce greater intensity, but often the poem’s impact is cushioned by a cool irony and implicit self-deprecation:

Ten, no, five seconds
after coming all
over the place
too soon,

I was lying there
wondering
where to put the
line-breaks in.

(2002: 226)

Indeed Williams has admitted his Confessional persona remains more ‘cold’ than ‘passionate’ (Lambert 2000: 13). However, while this restraint, combined with occasional slightness of subject, distances him from an American Confessional like Plath, it draws him closer to the English Imagist, Flint, a group of whose Images I have elsewhere described as ‘confessional’ (Fulton 1977: 237-43).

Williams would, no doubt, respond to this by arguing that in its ‘determined sense of *honesty*’ his Confessional verse embodies a quality that defines ‘Americans’ (Walsh 1980: 17). Certainly, in being prepared to pursue candour to the point of scandal and hurt, he aligns himself with Lowell rather than Hamilton. The latter addresses unnamed people, who are ‘either dead or [because of madness] unable to make sense’ of his words, avoiding the public exposure of private details by generalising the suffering (Jacobson 2002a: 12-4). Williams also tries to contend that his poetry transcends particular

confession. Thus the adulterous affair, described in *Billie's Rain* and *Dear Room*, 'has become archetypal'; 'it is dissolved into general desire' (Cooke 2006: 35). However, he does give the mistress her real name (Campbell 2002: [23]) and addresses both her and his wife with a cavalier disregard of possible pain: 'when I was writing the poems I didn't care about either Carolyn or Hermine. Hurting people was never one of my considerations...' (Lambert 2000: 13). Instead he trains absolute concentration on getting 'the feeling ...right', on dredging from 'memory' the exact 'particular', and it is this ruthless Confessional "truth" which, he feels, Hermine and by implication Carolyn, as artists, will understand (Cooke 2006: 35). On a less elevated level he declares that since Hermine 'had affairs which caused me pain and in one case jealousy' and Carolyn terminated their relationship because of his refusal to leave his wife, inflicting on him an anguished grief that five years after the break-up was 'still a vague pain' (Lambert 2000: 13), any sorrow caused to them would simply even out an imbalance. In his defence, however, it can be said that Williams treats himself as unsentimentally as he treats others: he is, as Reid, his editor at Faber, remarks, 'unsparing' when 'looking at himself' (Campbell 22).

While his confessions possess an "American" candour, they can be distinguished from Confessional verse in their refusal to treat the self with such seriousness that even irony becomes self-aggrandising. Williams makes the mistake of over-generalising from the Confessional Poets to seeing *all* Americans – but especially Californians with their relentless 'search ...for Selfdom' (1982: 131) – as obsessed with the primacy of the individual. Although he admits his own poetry is ultimately 'self-orientated', he tends to

talk like a High Modernist of getting ‘rid of the self’ and he does achieve a degree of objectivity by treating his emotive self as an actor adopting roles in confessional dramas, which his analytical self can review critically or quizzically (1982: 82; 1995: 108).

In conclusion, Williams’ attempt to incorporate both Imagist-“Objectivist” and Confessional modes into his practice is no more effective than his enthusiastic identification with American popular culture in making him ‘Anglo-American’. However, when viewing Williams’s failure to assimilate America into his hybrid “Englishness”, it should be remembered that America itself is a site of apparently-anomalous, hybrid grafts. The “Objectivist” Poets themselves are said to be both deep-rooted, specifically-American (Kenner 1977) and rootless, alienated European modernists (Nicholls 2002).

Although Williams cannot be called an authentically ‘Anglo-American poet’, the very fact that he has claimed such an a status would have won his mentor’s approval. When surveying the English and American poetry scenes in his introduction to the *Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (1996), Hamilton noticed entrenched positions keeping the two traditions separate and recalled nostalgically a better relationship in the sixties: ‘The Lowell generation was probably the last on either side of the Atlantic to believe in the continuity of the Anglo-American collaboration’ (viii). This ‘transatlantic yearning’ was also felt on these shores: ‘Alvarez’s anthology *The New Poetry*...told English poetry to learn from America or die – in Pound’s words – “piecemeal of a sort of emotional anaemia”’. He himself certainly took up the challenge, his own ‘taste [being] shaped in the early to mid-1960s, when the examples of Europeanised Americans like Lowell, Snodgrass, Berryman,

Roethke, and Plath really did seem to be urging a renegotiated treaty'. Unfortunately, Hamilton's 'pious hope that [his] *Companion* might help to rekindle an old spark' between the two countries (1996: viii-ix) fails to take sufficient account of forces, which, as Tuma (1998) demonstrates, are inexorably pushing England and America further apart. Indeed Tuma implies that the very term 'Anglo-American' is regarded by contemporary American poets, schooled in the native modernist tradition, as a treacherous failure to recognise that the declaration of poetic independence, first enunciated by Emerson and Whitman, and ratified by Carlos Williams, is a historical fact (1998: 107-8). Ironically, then, Hugo Williams is attempting to lay claim to an identity that across the Atlantic would be repudiated by an analogous American poet like the neo-"Objectivist" Klein Zahler as an affront to his sense of literary self-determination.

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