

## HUGO WILLIAMS, SELF-STYLED ANGLO-AMERICAN POET

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Although his poetry gives every appearance of being pre-eminently 'English', Hugo Williams claims he is an 'Anglo-American' poet. This surprising assertion rests on his enthusiastic embrace of American popular culture as well as the construction of a style out of American Imagist, "Objectivist" and Confessional strategies. Both elements of the epithet *Anglo-American* are examined in relation to the poet's work and in the process Williams' claim is shown to be unsustainable, yet at the same time highly revealing of currents within English literary culture.

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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, 37-38). 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. Italic in the original)

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* (Williams 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 Dunce, leaving as "a feckless youth with four 'O' levels" (Williams 1995: 57), and *Odd Boy*, bored by sport and the Officer Training Corps: "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 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" (2006a: x). Poetry should have the good manners not to bore. It is an ingratiating 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: "the need to make something appealing, witty and entertaining is in the blood" (Lambert 2000: 13). Raised in a family which demanded Wildean repartee, 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.

Williams can legitimately claim an “Etonian charm” (1995: 25), adducing a “toff’s diffidence” (Feay 1995: [33]), 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 encountering “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: his poetic vocation represents “a hobby that got out of hand” (Brookes 1999: 13); his *Selected Poems* should have been entitled, after his “best school report”, *A Slight Improvement* (1995: 42), while *Freelancing* should become *All Over the Place* (xi) and *Dear Room*, which briefly revisits the adulterous affair itemised in *Billy’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, beneath the surface charm, Williams admits, lies “self-deprecating, inverted arrogance” and “conceited modesties” (1995: 194). Moreover, his good manners in literature and life does not seem to extend beyond style to perspective: Brookes argues that by expressing “undiluted love for his [lost] mistress, right under the nose of his wife”, Williams has exhibited “rank behaviour” in *Billy’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 cites “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). His own house provides physical as well as spiritual wholeness: “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 domestic spaces’ 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 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, 28-29, 114-17, 128-32, 155-58),

and creative-writing or self-development holidays (1995: 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, he explains elsewhere, are "both intensely self-centred" (Campbell 2002: 23).

This self-absorption does not enter the poetry, whose objectifying realism falls 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 reference. Typically, his poems present dramatic situations in the narrative present or filtered through memory, achieving form through 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).

His poetry aims for the transparent style which Easthope regards as characteristic of English empiricist prose (1999: 93-96). Indeed Williams 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 Ginsberg was "partly responsible" (1995: 93). A Movement-inspired fondness for extended analogies, which complicates the first volume, 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...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" is 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).

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-proleptic 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 Simon 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 (1995: 24, 2002: 139-42). 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 this escapist impulse as “misplaced adolescent nostalgia” (1995: 24), realising such a response to English post-war life 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* (Rogers and McLeod 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 equally-enriching locations. 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 illuminating multicultural encounters so effortlessly – for instance, “Chinese children” on the tube, making him self-conscious by staring “at [his] nose”, or a Soho cul-de-sac suddenly transforming 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, “crowded.../ With undesirables” from Soho’s rich multicultural mix (2002: 75-76, 169, 274-75).

London’s ethnic inter-layering has produced 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 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 changed all that: “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, declared 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 principal attraction 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 uses geographical disposition to dramatise hybridity. Thus he situates 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 celebration of 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 free of the British Empire’s blind prejudices:

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 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 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 exert (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 sexuality. He is happy to allow two Danish models to create a “drag version” of himself so he can camp it up 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’ progressive, hybrid ‘Englishness’ is further hybridised by his almost-entirely-non-ironic sense of being partly-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*” and New-Orleans records, played in the British Councillor’s garden (1997: 49-50). Jazz and other 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 passions for poetry and pop: "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). He could follow Chuck Berry, whose lyrics were already making him "one of the great poet heroes of America" (1982: [23]), by constructing vernacular pieces around the excitements and frustrations of urban youth culture. 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; Williams 1995: 117). This ambiguously macho appearance, however qualified by 'English' irony, expressed solidarity with American modes of youthful revolt against parental restriction (1995: 190; 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 even earlier 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 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, which encouraged Williams to centre his Home-Counties childhood around games in which he figured as the Cisco Kid to his brother's Pancho (1995: 21, 197).

In his poetry consumer items like Brillo soap pads that Warhol 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 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. 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). Thus in 'Some R&B and Black Pop' 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' identification with American popular culture is not in itself enough to make him 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 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 little 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 characterisation of L.A.'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). However, 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, in contrast, has been more positive about those features of American 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', 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 through tough, yet scrupulous essays and the editing of *The Review* and *New Review*, as well as exemplary poetry, that this authority was exerted. Hamilton's importance lay in the ability to assimilate into English practice two seemingly-disparate American traditions – Pound's Imagist and Lowell's Confessional modes – with such power that "a way out of the Movement" was suggested (Harsent 1999: 56). Although Williams calls this approach minimalism, it was essentially neo-Imagism, as Hamilton himself 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 Pound's earlier disciples, the "Objectivist" Poets (Dembo 1969: 180; Zukofsky 2000: 209): it established the "ground rules", which

every “modern poet” should follow (Hamilton 2003: 56). Hamilton believed he lived in the post-Imagist “age of the short poem”, whose trademark, according to fellow minimalist Falk (Harsent 1999), was that “strange combination of intense feeling and icily controlled craftsmanship” (Hamilton 1973: 108; Harsent 1999: 72-78). This emotional intensity would transform a free verse of prosaic notation into one of powerfully cadenced presentation. Hamilton is here reformulating the “Objectivist” concept of *objectification*: a poem’s “minor units” of precisely rendered particulars achieve an autonomous object’s “rested totality” when feeling imposes onto non-metrical rhythmic patterns a compelling auditory structure (Zukofsky 2000: 194-97, 210).

In the essay ‘Dreams and Responsibilities’, which, Hamilton felt, was “as near a manifesto” as the minimalists achieved (Jacobson 2002a: 8), Falk made the neo-Imagist assertion that in retreating to the narrow certainties of personal experience’s sense data, poetry must become epigrammatic: “the long poem risks” incursions from “poetically unsustainable...discursiveness”, “abstraction”, and “didacticism”; the only permissible form of thinking is “reflection-within-experience” by means of images (Hamilton 1986: 2-9). This narrowing of poetry to the precise, “truth[ful]”, craftsmanlike rendering of sense impressions 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” (MacGowan 1991: 55).

Despite this aesthetic of neo-Imagist terseness, Williams and indeed Zukofsky did attempt epics; but Rakosi and Oppen are surely closer to the Objectivist spirit when they find in modern life little to support epic pretension (Dembo 1969: 170, 180-81). Hamilton himself felt that all modernist epics, with the exception of *The Waste Land*, failed to avoid Falk’s strictures (1973: 47-48, 2003: 42, 57, 128-29, 272-74; Jacobson 2002a: 12). His own anti-epic poems, which, like T.E. 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 non-public subjects. What Harsent calls Hamilton’s poetry of “inference” is categorised by Williams as “emotional symbolism” (Harsent 1999: 56, 78). He contends that Hamilton “more or less invented” the technique, using the poet’s own self-parody as illustration: “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). Thus Reznikoff, quoting an eleventh-century exemplary Chinese poet, can declare: “poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling” (Dembo 1969: 193).

While Pound provided form and technique, the American Confessionals gave the minimalists a new approach to subject-matter which made them “exemplars”: “Roethke, Berryman, Lowell and Plath...seemed much more exciting than anything...in this country” (Jacobson 2002a: 12). Hamilton declared in 1965 that Lowell 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, catching “stabbing detail[s]” 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). His own Confessional material – a father’s death by cancer, a first wife’s descent into madness – is treated with 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: 12-13).

Williams regards his own career as an evolution from Hamilton’s neo-Imagist obliquities to confessional directness, with *Writing Home* (1985), which struggles to accommodate painful memories of his dead father, marking the transition: “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 is ostensibly about a local shop-worker, but really “about marriage”, that enabled his early verse to find “favour” with Hamilton (Harsent 1999: 57). Indeed so impressed was Hamilton that he included the work in *The Modern Poet* (1986: 195), his selection of the best essays and verse from *The Review*. Apart from its indirectness, Hamilton must have appreciated the poem’s Imagist concretion. “I sometimes think there are two separate English languages”, Williams has asserted, “one made up of visible things, the other of invisible, and there is no doubt... the former is better for poetry” (2000: 229). This love of materiality 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 “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 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 and Ziegler 1984: 130-33), Williams admires haiku’s ‘Dinglichkeit’, its struggle for what Basho terms “*wabi*...an appreciation of the commonplace”. Hence he enthusiastically endorses Kavanaugh’s contention that “the things that really matter are...insignificant little things” (2000: 231), a belief cognate

with “Objectivist” reverence for the “little words” (Dembo 1969: 162-63; Hatlen and Mandel 1981: 38; Kenner 1977: 172).

Despite significant overlapping, Williams’ verse cannot finally be viewed as a complete realisation of American Imagist-“Objectivist” principles. For example, although he salutes Hamilton’s pursuit of the “high-intensity lyric” (1995: 11), it is the absence of this quality that characterises his own Images. Indeed some are so inconsequential in 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 characteristic 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 guilty of low-pressure verse. Indeed the poetry of Williams’ namesake, William Carlos, can, as Hamilton remarks, be “thinly documentary”, making sense data “merely available” (1973: 47-50). In this respect William Carlos’ own work, just as much as Hugo’s, exhibits the failing that “Objectivist” Poets were principally reacting against: “formally non extant” *vers-libre* (Williams 1967: 264).

In addition, Hugo Williams does not, as Pound says he must, “go in fear of abstractions” (Jones 1972: 131). 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, for all their talk of machine-hard verse (MacGowan 1991: 54), the “Objectivist” Poets themselves occasionally allowed abstraction to weaken their verse. Hence when Dembo attempts to limit Zukofsky to “thinking with things...and not making abstractions out of them”, he retorts: “but the abstract idea is particular, too” (1969: 209), an approach which earned Bunting’s severest rebuke (Makin 1999: xxiii, 153-54, 211-12, note 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 his adolescent problems, mother’s death and extra-marital affair with Carolyn, they continue to include the same kind of Images as the earlier collections. However, because Lowell, whose *Life Studies* Williams regards as “a touchstone of excellence” (2001: x), has succeeded Hamilton as the dominant influence, these Images now command a greater Confessional urgency, although this can be impeded by ironic self-consciousness:

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)

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 might 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. However, Williams tries to convince himself that by generalising private detail he, like Hamilton (Jacobson 2002a: 12-14), has transcended particular confession. Thus the adulterous affair of *Billie’s Rain* and *Dear Room* “has become archetypal”, “dissolved into general desire” (Cooke 2006: 35). Against this, 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 an absolute concentration on getting “the feeling...right”, on dredging from “memory” the exact “particular”, and it is this ruthless Confessional honesty which, he feels, Hermine and by implication Carolyn, as artists, will understand (Cooke 2006: 35). In his defence it can be said that Williams treats himself as unsentimentally as he treats others: he is, as his editor, Reid, remarks, “unsparing” in “looking at himself” (Campbell 22).

While his verse possesses an ‘American’ candour, it can be distinguished from Confessional poetry in its refusal to treat the self with such seriousness that even irony becomes self-aggrandising. Williams mistakenly over-generalises in seeing all Americans – but especially Californians with their relentless “search...for Selfdom” (1982: 131) – as uncritically devoted to individualism. Although his own poetry is admittedly “self-orientated” in content, it never forgets the High Modernist ideal of getting “rid of the self”, achieving a degree of objectivity by treating the emotive self as an actor adopting roles in confessional dramas, which the analytical self can review critically or quizzically (1982: 82, 1995: 108).

In conclusion, Williams’ attempt to incorporate both neo-Imagist 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 failed grafting, it should be remembered that American culture is itself a site of apparently contradictory hybridity. The “Objectivist” Poets themselves are said to be

both deep-rooted Americans (Kenner 1977) and rootless, alienated European modernists (Nicholls 2002).

Although Williams cannot be called 'Anglo-American', the very fact that he claimed such a status would have won Hamilton's approval. When surveying the English and American poetry scenes in 1996, his mentor 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" (1996: viii). Unfortunately, Hamilton's "pious hope" that his *Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* might "help to rekindle an old spark" between the two countries (viii-ix) fails to take sufficient account of forces, which, as Tuma (1998) demonstrates, are inexorably pushing English and American literature 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 inability to recognise that the declaration of poetic independence, first enunciated by Emerson and Whitman, and ratified by Carlos Williams, is a historical fact (1998: 107-08). 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" Kleinzahler as an affront to his sense of literary self-determination.

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