

# “Language is in its January”: Dada and William Carlos Williams’s Early Prose

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**ABSTRACT** | This article explores connections between Dadaism and William Carlos Williams. Williams’s attitude toward Dadaism was ambivalent. However, Williams made ample use of the radical strategies of Dadaism to compose four of his more experimental and less studied texts, namely: *Kora in Hell* (1920), *Spring and All* (1923), *The Great American Novel* (1923), and the purely Dadaist *A Novelette* (1932). Dadaism provided Williams with the techniques (illogicality, collage, parody, contradiction, playfulness, confrontation, automatic writing, chaos) and the conceptual scaffolding he needed to pursue his self-appointed—and intrinsically Dadaist—mission to both wipe out and revive American literature.

**KEYWORDS** | William Carlos Williams, Dadaism, Dada, modern American fiction

William Carlos Williams was well acquainted with New York Dada. Marcel Duchamp arrived in Manhattan in 1915, amidst publicity generated by his participation in the Armory Show two years earlier. In his *Autobiography*, Williams recounts how, on seeing Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* for the first time, he “laughed out loud [. . .], happily, with relief.” He also enjoyed Duchamp’s urinal, which he describes as “magnificent” while lamenting the “silly” committee’s decision to reject it, “asses that they were” (134). Williams and Duchamp met regularly at Walter Arensberg’s studio where, together with Francis Picabia, Man Ray, Mina Loy, Arthur Cravan and others, they would engage in ardent discussions on art and poetry. Thus Williams, who otherwise led a rather conventional life as a

doctor and family man in nearby Rutherford, New Jersey, was caught up in the "loose network of friends and acquaintances that comprised New York Dada during the decade of the First World War" (Tashjian *Scene* 56).

In 1921 Duchamp, Picabia and Man Ray left New York for Paris and immediately joined the ranks of *Broom*, *Secession* and Paris Dada. Williams subscribed and contributed to both magazines and was eager to meet the Dadaists in Paris three years later, on his 1924 sabbatical. Robert McAlmon, his friend and editor, had the connections but "didn't consider the Dadaists particularly significant" (Tashjian *Scene* 57), so he was lukewarm to Williams's request. As a consequence of his friend's misjudgment, Williams did not have extensive personal contact with the Paris Dadaists until the outbreak of European hostilities in the late 1930s, when a number of the group's members were forced to come to New York.

Williams's attitude towards Dadaism was complex and ambivalent. The essays he published in *Contact* during the early 1920s were dotted with depreciating references to it. He regarded it as a sign of a dying culture, an irrelevant European phenomenon that should be ignored by American artists. Three decades later, while discussing with Edith Heal his 1929 translation of Philippe Soupault's novel *Last Nights of Paris*, he candidly portrayed the French author as "a very amusing person, really amusing, all wound up in Dadaism," and immediately went on to clarify: "I didn't understand what Dadaism was but I liked Soupault" (IWWP 47). In another conversation with Heal, however, Williams seemed to have no trouble admitting that the pieces included in his *A Novelle and Other Prose* show the influence of Dada: "I didn't originate Dadaism," he conceded, "but I had it in my soul to write it. *Spring and All* [also] shows that. Paris had influenced me; there is a French feeling in this work" (48). So much so, it may be added, that at the end of *Spring and All*, as he discusses the necessity to "free the world of fact from the impositions of 'art'," he directs his readers to "see Hartley's last chapter" (I 150), which refers to an essay by Marsden Hartley entitled "The Importance of Being Dada" (Hartley 247). In *The Great American Novel*, Williams not only employs a full array of Dadaist techniques but goes as far as to mention the movement by name. After stating in a quite Dada-like manner that Expressionism in America "has a water attachment to be released with a button," he concludes: "That is art. Everyone agrees that that is art. Just as one uses a handkerchief. It is the apotheosis of relief. Dadaism in one of its prettiest modes: *rien, rien, rien*. —But wait a bit. Maybe Dadaism is not so weak as one might imagine" (173). On the one

hand, Williams belittled Dada. On the other, he openly acknowledged his debt to the movement and gave the impression that he “couldn’t take his eyes off it” (*Tashjian Scene* 58).

Williams, who in a 1920 letter to the mid-west poet Alva Turner confesses that disgust, the predominant Dadaist feeling, is his “most moving emotion” (SL 46), was naturally inclined towards Dadaism because it cut across the arts and made writing easier for someone who saw literature within the context of the visual arts. In this sense Peter Halter, citing James E. Breslin’s expression, says that Williams “may well be the paradigmatic case of a writer whose poetics are the result of a ‘cross-fertilization’ in the arts” (1). As Webster Schott insightfully points out in his introduction to *A Novelette*, the presence of painters as paragons of Williams’s aesthetic aims, his free-flowing phrasing and his constant insistence on the power of instinct and the inability of science to achieve any sort of wisdom are an indication that he was taking Dadaism “more seriously than history would” (I 271). Also, and much to Williams’s approval—in almost everything he wrote, affirms Halter, there is “more than a grain of the *épater le bourgeois* attitude of Dada” (24)—New York Dada attacked American smugness and cultural apathy with radical wit and gusto. Like Williams, who in *Spring and All* overtly decries the “TRADITIONALISTS OF PLAGIARISM” (CP1 182), Dadaism advocated the destruction of the past and, through free experimentation and the use, among other techniques, of automatic writing, grammatical wordplay, improvisation and parody, aimed at creating shocking, purely imaginative works hitherto unrecognized as art by society and culture. Like Dadaism, Williams believed in the inefficacy of language as a means of human communication and repeatedly proclaimed the supremacy of novelty: “Nothing is good save the new,” he announces in *Kora in Hell* (I 23). Like Dadaism, also, his work was internally contradictory, “as rational and irrational as life itself,” says Schott of *A Novelette* (271). Viewed in this light, Williams’s dismissing comments on Dadaism can only be construed as “downright confusing [. . .] subterfuges” (*Tashjian Skyscraper* 91) intended to conceal his true appreciation of the movement and, more importantly, its indisputable impact on his work.

Since very early in his career, Williams had made it his business to create a wholly American poetic language and to liberate American writing from the threat of what several decades later Harold Bloom would denominate the “anxiety of influence.” In the past, Williams argues in *A Novelette*, the excellence of literature had been “conceived upon a borrowed basis” (I 293).

Europe's enemy was its past and, in turn, America's enemy was Europe, "a thing unrelated to us in any way," he states in *The Great American Novel*, where everything that was done was "a repetition of the past with a difference" (209, 210). Americans did not need to learn from anyone but themselves. Critics should begin to look at American work from an American perspective. "What I conceive," he proposes in chapter VII of *A Novelette*, appropriately entitled "Fierce Singleness," "is writing as an actual creation. It is the birth of another cycle" (293).

Firm as his intentions may be, however, Williams cannot avoid falling into contradictions. He has no use for the past, but his writing is replete with references to it. According to his own account, the method he employed to structure *Kora in Hell* was taken from an 18th-century poetry book, *Varie Poesie dell' Abate Pietro Metastasio*, which Ezra Pound had left in Williams's house in Rutherford after one of his visits (IWWP 27). The title of the book is also indebted to the past, since Kore is another name for Persephone. In *Spring and All* Williams emphatically celebrates the imagination as the only force capable of refining, clarifying and intensifying the present. "The only realism in art is of the imagination," he affirms. "It is only thus that the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes a creation" (CP1 198). Tradition is a burden but, paradoxically, *Spring and All* is full of references to masters of the past such as Shakespeare, Samuel Butler, Homer, Goya, Holbein or Velázquez. This is also true of *The Great American Novel*, which contains allusions to Wagner, Rimbaud, Chekhov, Chaucer, Monet, and Richard Coeur de Lion among many others. For all his desire to do away with the past, Williams, who considered the appearance of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* the "great catastrophe" of American letters (A 146), remained closely attached to his artistic predecessors, composing a number of early fiction and poetry texts that may be legitimately construed as derivative and, consequently, as fair illustrations of Julia Kristeva's "mosaic of quotations" (37).

This apparent inconsistency—his wish to abolish tradition and, in the same breath, his conspicuous dependence on it—is only one of a number of contradictions to be found in Williams's early work. In his prologue to *Kora in Hell*, he flippantly declares that there is nothing sacred about literature and that it is "damned from one end to the other" (I 13). The brassy spirit of this remark is revalidated in the 1950s, when he confides to Edith Heal that he would rather have been a painter than to "bother with these god-damn words" (IWWP 29). This iconoclastic and rather despondent attitude towards literature is in direct conflict with Williams's enthusiastic life-long engagement not only

with writing but with writing about writing. “This is the theme of all I do,” he candidly acknowledges in *A Novelette*: “It is the writing” (I 291).

In Williams’s view—as in Dada’s—conventional language had proven impotent to generate beauty, communication and knowledge. Logic made no sense anymore. There was work to be done, he felt, in the creation of “new forms, new names for experience” (CP1 203). In order to achieve this, he pushed language beyond its semantic and formal limits, well aware that in doing so he was bound to lose his already slim American readership—which, it may be argued, is still another contradiction in that his overall aim was, in his own words, to “sound like an American” (I 295). Radical as his intentions were, however, he did not dare take them to their final consequences. In one of his interviews with Heal, Williams provides illuminating details on the writing process of *Kora in Hell*. For a year he would come home after visiting his patients and, no matter how late it was, even if he had nothing in mind, he would put something down before going to bed. As may be expected, he recognizes, “some of the entries were pure nonsense and were rejected when the time of publication came” (IWWP 27). Despite his plan to revolutionize language, he couldn’t bring himself to include “pure nonsense” in his work and decided instead to add interpretations of his improvisations.

Williams’s contradictions are consistent with the Dada Spirit—which was very much akin to his natural artistic restiveness—and with his long-sustained ambition to create an autochthonous literary expression in America—which ultimately stopped him from embracing Dadaism fully and openly. According to Tzara, Dada is “the interweaving of contraries and of all contradictions” (13). To Dada, order equals disorder, ego is the same as non-ego, and there is no difference between right and wrong. True to Dada’s creed, Tzara flamboyantly affirms that he is “by principle against manifestos,” even though he wrote seven of them, and that he is “also against principles” (3). Many artists, including Williams, gladly adhered to this anarchic doctrine because in doing away with the stifling rules of the past—and with all rules, for that matter—it established a universal *tabula rasa* that allowed them absolute freedom to pursue their creative and vital interests as they saw fit.

It would be an overstatement to say that Williams saw eye to eye with Dadaism. As mentioned above, during the 1920s and early 1930s, when he composed his experimental fiction and poetry pieces, he led a busy, ordinary life as a doctor and family man in Rutherford, with little or no time for writing and artistic socialization. He had no taste—nor leisure—for Dada’s histrionics and riotous antics. Also, as April Boone has rightly pointed out,

he never came to agree with the sector of Dadaism that would disparage art as a whole and he "resisted the term 'anti-art' sometimes applied to his own writing" (4). In fact, his brief introduction to *Spring and All* is, in essence, an attempt to defend his work against those who consider it "antipoetry."

It does not cease to perplex critics how vehemently—and how in the vein of Dada—Williams urged destruction in the early stages of his career. "The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world," he triumphantly announces in *Spring and All*. "Let it rage, let it kill. The imagination is supreme [. . .]. To it now we come to dedicate our secret project: the annihilation of every human creature on the face of the earth" (CP1 179). Williams's brand of destruction, however, differs from Dada's in that it is not to be practiced for its own sake. In this sense, Williams's poems and prose pieces are "basically acts of affirmation, while the Dada creations were often born of nihilistic despair" (Halter 24). Far from being gratuitous, the wreckage he advocates can only be justified inasmuch as it clears the way for a new type of creation. As Joshua Schuster has suggested, Williams adopted "the tactic of calling for the destruction of the past as a way to generate the future" (124). Williams himself confirms this view by implicitly rejecting Dada's predictions of the end of art in Book Five of *Paterson*:

Paterson, from the air  
                                   above the low range of its hills  
   across the river  
 on a rock-ridge  
                                   has returned to the old scenes  
   to witness  
 What has happened  
                                   since Soupault gave him the novel  
   the Dadaist novel  
 to translate—  
                                   *The Last Nights of Paris*.  
   "What has happened to Paris  
 since that time?  
                                   and to myself"?

A WORLD OF ART  
 THAT THROUGH THE YEARS HAS

*SURVIVED!* (P 207)

All in all, however, Dadaism offered Williams the conceptual framework and the tools he needed to fight the “traditionalists of plagiarism,” eradicate the cultural past and create a brand new, tradition-free American literary language. If he didn’t take full advantage of them it was, precisely, because he feared losing his American identity to a largely foreign cause. He didn’t see the logic of building America’s new alphabet—“Language is in its January,” he claims in *A Novelette* (I 280)—upon an extraneous foundation. Much as he relished—and shared—Dada’s programmatic inconsistencies, he refused to fall into that one contradiction. To allow Americanness to prevail called for a “subversion worthy of Dada,” says Tashjian (*Scene* 58). Surrealism “does not lie. It is the single truth,” admits Williams in *A Novelette*, in a statement that could equally apply to Dada. “But it is French. It is *their* invention” (I 281).

Despite Williams’s caution towards Dadaism, it is impossible not to perceive the movement’s imprint in his early prose and hybrid works. *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* has mystified its readers since its publication by Boston-based Four Seas Company in 1920. Antonio Ruiz has gone as far as to claim that the book is “the fruit of Dadaist improvisation techniques in which hazard and chance are motors to the creative process” (103). Such a claim, which assigns a Dadaist “methodology” and intent to the book as a whole, may seem slightly farfetched when one stops to consider Williams’s own reminiscences on the work’s inception. The improvisations, he explained to Heal, were “a reflection of the day’s happenings more or less.” Since many of them were “unintelligible to a stranger,” he knew that he would also have to write an interpretation. It was while he was “groping around” to find a way to fit the interpretations into the book that he came upon Metastasio’s volume of poetry in his Rutherford home (IWWP 27). This recollection evidences that the book’s structure—unlike its content, as will be analyzed below—is not the result of a spontaneous creative impulse. On the contrary, Williams worked hard to achieve a rational, well-balanced format for his writing, organizing the improvisations in groups, “somewhat after the A.B.A. formula,” he explains in the prologue, “that one may support the other, clarifying or enforcing perhaps the other’s intention” (I 28).

The original edition of *Kora in Hell* includes the abovementioned prologue by Williams, entitled “The Return of the Sun,” and twenty-seven chapters headed by Roman numerals. Each chapter, in turn, contains improvised prose texts numbered in Arabic, followed after a dividing line by their corresponding interpretations in italic type. The different sections, jotted down,

as explained above, during the scarce moments of calm that Williams's stressful medical practice and family duties allowed him, do not follow any discernible order nor have a central unifying theme. The improvisations are quickly scribbled, free-flowing, unrevised pieces in which Williams employs many of the tools provided by Dadaism—absurdity, nihilism, black humor, linguistic playfulness, idealism—and whose ultimate goal is to glorify the primacy of the imagination as a creative force and to undermine the conventions imposed by literary tradition. As to the interpretations, Williams admits in his prologue to the 1957 *City Lights* edition of the book that they are often "more dense" than the pieces they are meant to elucidate (I 29).

In "The Return of the Sun," amid references to Duchamp, Man Ray, Charles Demuth, Alfred Kreymborg, and others, Williams responds to negative critiques by fellow poets Ezra Pound—who considered the work incoherent—Hilda Doolittle—who thought it flippant—and Wallace Stevens—who lamented the book's lack of a fixed point of view. "I'll write whatever I damn please, whenever I damn please and as I damn please," retorts Williams, "and it'll be good if the authentic spirit of change is on it" (13). He goes on to express his aversion to what he terms America's "prize poems," which are "especially to be damned" not because they are badly written or aesthetically displeasing, but because they are mere rehash, repetition, just as Eliot's best poetry is rehash and repetition "in another way" of Verlaine, Baudelaire, or Maeterlinck (24). Then, in what reads like a full-blown Dadaist manifesto, he declares:

I praise those who have the wit and courage, and the conventionality, to go direct toward their vision of perfection in an objective world where the signposts are clearly marked, viz., to London. But confine them in hell for their parietic assumption that there is no alternative but their own groove. (27)

The alternative Williams proposes entails leveling the past and generating a brand-new American language that affirms life through annihilation and freedom. In *Kora in Hell*, a seminal vitality emerges from the debris of tradition and inherited values. The texts follow one another spontaneously, fluctuating between opacity and meaning, destruction and creation, interiority and exteriority, calm and violence, in a dynamism akin to Dada's radical contradictions.



The opening improvisation sets the tone of the book:

Fools have big wombs. For the rest?—here is penny-royal if one knows to use it. But time is only another liar, so go along the wall a little further: if blackberries prove bitter there'll be mushrooms, fairy-ring mushrooms, in the grass, sweetest of all fungi. (31)

Forty-four pages later, near the end of the book, we find this characteristically cryptic piece:

This song is to Phyllis! By this deep snow I know it's springtime, not ring time! Good God no! The screaming brat's a sheep bleating, the rattling crib-side sheep shaking a bush. We are young! We are happy! says Colin. What's an icy room and the sun not up? This song is to Phyllis. Reproduction lets death in, says Joyce. Rot, say I. To Phyllis this song is! (74)

Next comes Williams's note of explanation, just as opaque and deeply imbued by Dada's contradictory spirit as the improvisation itself:

*That which is known has value only by virtue of the dark. This cannot be otherwise. A thing known passes out of the mind into the muscles, the will is quit of it, save only when set into vibration by the forces of darkness opposed to it.* (74)

Williams's admission in his 1957 *City Lights* prologue that, due to its obscurity and experimental nature, *Kora in Hell* "would mean nothing to a casual reader" (29) has led some critics to regard the book as the untoward public surfacing of a strictly personal language marked by darkness of meaning and extreme egocentrism. In response to this adverse line of interpretation—which, it must be noted, is as accurate a definition of Dada writing as any—Mitchum Huehls argues that the book is a "negotiation of the personal and objective" (62). William Q. Malcuit takes Huehls's point further by suggesting that *Kora in Hell* is really a continuation of the series of "my townspeople" poems—"Invitation," "Tract," "Gulls" and others—which Williams wrote around 1914–1915. In this sense, Malcuit contends, Williams is still "attempting to discover (or create) the poet's place in modernity, and to fathom the relation between poet and audience" (64).

What has changed, according to Malcuit, is the "pedagogy" employed by Williams. In *Kora*, as opposed to earlier townspeople pieces such as "Tract," where the poet assumes the role of teacher leading the audience to make use of the legacy of the past in an aesthetically satisfying way, he "turns unreservedly to the manifesto to accomplish his goal of both critiquing and addressing the public" (64). The subtle animosity to be found in "Gulls," for example, becomes much more acute in *Kora*:

*Some fools once were listening to a poet reading his poem. [. . .] But they getting the whole matter sadly muddled in their minds made such a confused business of listening that not only were they not pleased at the poet's exertions but no sooner had he done than they burst out against him with violent imprecations.* (56)

The role of the poet in modernity is no longer to address his "townspeople" directly but to cleanse and recreate language. His new, self-appointed mission is not to educate his audience but to destroy the stale, tradition-laden literature of the past and prepare the way for a fresh form of expression. In order to do that, and despite all his reservations towards the movement, Williams availed himself of the radical tactics of Dadaism, which he had admired since he first met Duchamp in 1915. Beginning with *Kora in Hell*, Williams set off on a journey of intense formal and conceptual experimentation that during the next twelve years would engender three of his more audacious and, unaccountably, less studied works: *Spring and All*, *The Great American Novel* and *A Novelette*.

A "fooling-around book that became a crucial book" (I 85), as Webster Schott describes it in his prologue to its 1970 edition, *Spring and All* was printed in Dijon and first published in Paris in 1923 by Robert McAlmon's Contact Publishing Co., which at the time was also bringing out early books by Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and others. It is a "beautiful, misshapen box" (85) that contains, among other things, Williams's most ardent and thoroughly Dadaistic statements against contemporary civilization—"This is not civilization but stupidity" (CP1 225)—and in defense of the imagination—"[t]he imagination is an actual force comparable to electricity or steam" (207)—numerous manifesto-like remarks on modern poetry—"Whitman's proposals are of the same piece with the modern trend toward imaginative understanding of life" (199)—and some of his more celebrated short poems, including "The Red Wheelbarrow" and "By

the Road to the Contagious Hospital.” Commenting on it in *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, Williams describes the book as follows:

Nobody ever saw it—it had no circulation at all—but I had a lot of fun with it. It consists of poems interspersed with prose, the same idea as *Improvisations*. It was written when all the world was going crazy about typographical form and is really a travesty on the idea. Chapter headings are printed upside down on purpose, the chapters are numbered all out of order, sometimes with a Roman numeral, sometimes with an Arabic, anything that came in handy. The prose is a mixture of philosophy and nonsense. It made sense to me, at least to my disturbed mind—because it *was* disturbed at that time—but I doubt if it made any sense to anyone else. (36–37)

As in *Kora in Hell*, Williams begins the book by responding—on this occasion humorously—to those who believe there is “nothing appealing” in his work and consider it “positively repellent” because it lacks rhyme and rhythm, is “heartless” and derides humanity. Although he loves his fellow creatures “endways, sideways, frontways and all the other ways,” he declares mockingly, the truth is they do not exist. “To whom then am I addressed?” he asks himself: “To the imagination. [. . .] This is its book” (178).

The prose sections of *Spring and All* are as random as the improvisations of *Kora*. Oracular in tone—“Yes, hope has awakened once more in men’s hearts. It is the NEW! Let us go forward!” (185)—they jump erratically from one topic to the next. Ideas are not followed through. Syntax is often disjointed and many sentences end in midair: “Crude symbolism is to associate emotions with natural phenomena such as anger with lightning, flowers with love it goes further and associates certain textures with” (188). Argumentation is as emphatic as contradictory. Williams holds, for instance, that prose and poetry “are not by any means the same thing.” The purpose of prose, he claims, is “to clarify and enlighten the understanding,” a notion which appears to be in direct opposition to his own prose work, whereas poetry “has to do with the crystallization of the imagination” (226). Four pages later, however, he gainsays himself by arguing that “since there is according to [his] proposal no discoverable difference between prose and verse, that in all probability none exists and that both are phases of the same thing” (230).

Although it is unknown whether or not Williams ever read Tzara's Dadaist manifestos, there are striking similarities between the ideas enunciated and the semantics employed in *Spring and All* and those commonly associated with Dada (Jaussen 18). In his writing, Tzara calls for a climatic emotional moment when "beauty and life itself, brought into high tension on a wire, ascend towards a flashpoint; the blue tremor linked to the ground by our magnetized gaze which covers the peak with snow. The miracle. I open my heart to creation" (55). In the same vein, Williams celebrates the metaphorical advent of spring and the cleansing, life-generating power of the imagination:

Now at last that process of miraculous verisimilitude, that great copying which evolution has followed, repeating move for move every move it made in the past—is approaching the end.

Suddenly it is at an end. THE WORLD IS NEW. (CP1 182)

The fragmentary nature of *Spring and All*, its overall patchwork format, the unfathomable obliqueness of most of its postulations, its self-absorption and utter disregard for the reader, its playful use of typography and syntax, the technical and conceptual parallels it bears, as William Marling has aptly pointed out, with the work of coetaneous visual artists ("The Red Wheelbarrow," one of the book's more celebrated poems, has often been construed as a verse interpretation of Duchamp's *readymades*), its contradictory essence, its declamatory tone, its "openness to conventionally unaesthetic and irredeemable subjects and objects" (Ralph 1), and, of course, Williams's own remark in *I Wanted to Write a Poem* on the way Paris had influenced him are evidence of to what extent he was writing under the spell of Dadaism in the early stages of his career.

Williams's concern for the future of American literature not only had to do with poetry but with the novel also. He was unsettled by the lack of originality of most American fiction of the time. In his view, American novelists—particularly those engaged in historical and detective fiction—made use of an exhausted, cliché-ridden language, heavily dependent on European models, and had a tendency to oversimplify or misrepresent the American experience. *The Great American Novel*, Williams's first extended work of prose, was published in 1923 in Paris—like *Spring and All*—in an edition of three hundred copies. More than three decades later Williams would describe the book as a parody of what he regarded as commonplace

American writing. “People were always talking about the Great American Novel,” he explains, “so I thought I’d write it. The heroine is a little Ford car—she was very passionate—a hot little baby” (IWWP 38–39). A few years later, in his *Autobiography*, he insists on the mocking nature of the book by affirming that it was “a satire on the novel form in which a little (female) Ford car falls more or less in love with a Mack truck” (237).

Williams’s recollections, however, as Schott suggests in the introduction to the book’s 1970 edition—the first, it must be acknowledged, since its original publication—should be taken with a grain of salt. It is true that a couple of paragraphs deal with the automotive love story mentioned by Williams. It is also true that the book contains some full-fledged satirical passages. But *The Great American Novel* is, above all else, “an attempt to write a serious novel” (I 155). Under the disconcerting surface of the text runs an inflamed commentary on the futility of attempting to write a novel within America’s literary conventions. In order to achieve a minimum degree of originality, American writers must break the chains of tradition and emulation. “Are we doomed?” cries Williams. “Must we be another Europe or another Japan with our coats copied from China, another bastard country in a world of bastards?” (176). The book is also a sustained exploration of American life as Williams was experiencing it, and of its history.

Formally speaking, *The Great American Novel* is an anti-novel in that it contravenes all the rules of traditional fiction writing. Despite Williams’s allusions to the romance of the female Ford and the Mack truck, the book has no characters as such and, consequently, no plot. Instead it contains a motley, collage-like selection of materials, including bills, excerpts from book reviews, advertisements for women’s clothing, letters from imaginary readers, newspaper clippings, ruminations on American history, and fragments from Williams’s domestic and professional life. The text is indifferent to the attention span of its readers—“It requires functional devotion to Williams to read the book once,” says Schott (155)—and vehemently hostile to America’s European heritage and bleak contemporary culture. It is, like *Kora in Hell* and *Spring and All*, a self-conscious work whose main purpose seems to be to brood over its own construction and, ultimately, over the nature of fiction. Page after page, Williams fumbles for answers to elusive questions such as what exactly makes a novel, where are its sources, how does a novel become American, and what is the function of language. In this sense—the text’s drawing attention to its own status as a literary

artifact—*The Great American Novel* can be regarded as one of America's earlier metafictional projects. Furthermore, its parodic intent and paradoxical dependence on tradition to make a case for a fresh American literature convert it also into a paradigmatic intertextual device and, as a result, into a distinguished precursor of American postmodern fiction.

In discussing the book's facetious underside, April Boone has likened Williams's writing to Man Ray's Dadaist sculpture *The Gift* (1921). The piece looks like an iron that one would typically use to remove wrinkles from clothing, but the iron also has fourteen nails sticking out of the ironing face, which makes Boone wonder how seriously we are to take such a work of art. "The same is true of *The Great American Novel*," she claims (2). She is not alone in detecting Dadaist features in the book. Tashjian affirms it is "an exercise complementary to European Dada" and notes that Dada has never been sufficiently explored in relation to Williams's writing in general (*Skyscraper* 109, 251). Peter Schmidt has acknowledged the need for more critical attention to the work, which he includes among Williams's "own versions of Dadaist 'automatic' writing" (8, 91). In his turn, Ruiz argues that Williams's interest in Dadaism was mainly motivated by his interest in painting, and highlights the fact that he was less conservative and, as a result, more inclined to Dadaist experimentation in his prose than in his poems (112). Along the same lines, Lisa Siraganian contends that Williams's interjection in *The Great American Novel*: "One word: Bing! One accurate word and a shower of colored glass following it" (170), is not only a literary illustration but also an implicit endorsement of Duchamp's claim, as recounted to Williams by Walter Arensberg, that "a stained glass window that had fallen out and lay more or less together on the ground was of far greater interest than the thing conventionally composed *in situ*" (I 8). Duchamp, Siraganian elaborates, understood Dadaism as a way to avoid being influenced by one's immediate environment, or by the past (122). The same could be said of Williams.

The experimental journey Williams had started in 1920 with *Kora in Hell* led him, through *Spring and All* and *The Great American Novel*, to the writing in 1932 of his more purely Dadaist work: *A Novelette*. Published in Toulon in an edition of five hundred copies along with an assortment of miscellaneous prose pieces, the book had virtually no readers and remained unexplored by criticism until 2011, when Ruiz's "The Dadaist Prose of Williams and Cummings: *A Novelette* and [*No title*]" appeared in the *William Carlos*

*Williams Review*. It is no coincidence that *A Novelette* came out only three years after the publication of Williams's English translation of Philippe Soupault's Dada novel *Last Nights of Paris*. Williams had read the original in 1928 and had "admired it" (IWWP 47). This remark, together with the translation itself and Williams's explicit admission that, although he hadn't originated Dadaism, he had it in his soul to "write" it are indications of how present the movement was in his mind at the time.

Written, again in a Dada style, "for personal satisfaction" during a particularly hectic time of his life, Williams considered *A Novelette* "a tremendous leap ahead of conventional prose," similar in method to *Kora in Hell* but "more sophisticated" (IWWP 49). The book deals partly—and obliquely—with the influenza epidemic that hit the United States in the late 1920s and the pressures that, as a physician practicing both pediatrics and general medicine, Williams felt as a result. It deals also with difficulties that had arisen—and were solved—in Williams's marriage with Florence Herman. He and his wife are, in fact, the book's only true characters, developed exclusively through conversation. "The plot, if it's a plot," says Schott in the introduction, "is their relationship" (I 269).

A number of passages in *A Novelette* convey Williams's anxiety at not having enough time to write due to his medical practice. "There is no time to stop the car to write when only the writing that comes of an intense simplification would be actual," he complains at the end of chapter I (275). "RING, RING, RING, RING!" begins chapter II, meaningfully entitled "The Simplicity of Disorder." "There's no end to the ringing of the damned—The bell rings to announce the illness of someone else. It rings today intimately in the warm house. That's your bread and butter" (275–76). On occasions, weariness and the constant pressure to attend to his patients make him despondent: "The hundred pages have become twenty five," he frets in chapter VI. "I can do no more just now. I simply cannot. [. . .] I am alone only while I am in the car. What then? Take a pad in the car with me and write while running" (290). These and other references to the stress he was under may have led some readers—and critics—to interpret the disorder and overall irrationality of *A Novelette* as an effect of Williams's fatigue after his long working days and of his urge to get some writing done before going to bed. This interpretation, however, is rendered implausible by the seriousness with which Williams took writing.

Some dialogues in the book seem to indicate that his need to write had become a cause of friction with his wife. "At forty-five there is no quitting,

Now especially must the thing be driven through," he argues as he tries to justify his late night writing:

It is, sweetheart, a culmination of effort. Can you not see?  
What I conceive is writing as an actual creation. It is the birth of  
another cycle.

In the past the excellence of literature has been conceived  
upon a borrowed basis. In this you have no existence. I am broken  
apart, not so much with various desire—but with the inability to  
conceive desire upon a basis that is satisfactory to either.

The common resort is to divorce. What is that? It is for the  
police. (293)

Writing is, in fact, of much more importance to him than his own life. Should he be taken with the flu and die, he speculates, it would have no significance at all. That he write "actually—and well,—overweighs all the rest" (291). This last remark is illuminating because it shows that Williams's compulsion was not to write per se, but to write "well." At a high personal cost, he had taken it upon himself to do away with stale American literary tradition and, through the agency of the imagination, create language anew. Bearing that in mind, it would be a simplification to see the disjointedness and opacity of *A Novelette* as an accidental consequence of Williams's life circumstances. More appropriately, Ruiz suggests that they are "the result of Williams's conscious and determined assumption of several Dadaist premises" (104).

As in Williams's previous prose works, the chaotic nature of *A Novelette* is emphasized by the use of the Dadaist collage, which differs from the Cubist in that the associations it evokes are "schizophrenic and cryptic," with no sense of order or design emerging from its juxtaposed fragments (Schmidt 146). Accordingly, *A Novelette* has no plot and no apparent central topic. One needs to be acquainted with Williams's biography—not to mention a perspicacious reader—to be able to identify and relate the various thematic threads in the narration: his marital troubles—"So believe in me, dear. It's the only thing I've ever asked of you" (1277); the influenza epidemic—"It has the same effect—the epidemic—as clear thought" (279); dialogues with his patients—"This morning, eh, will you stop in to see Mamie Jefferson, eh, she's having pains, eh, quite often" (279), and with his wife—"How are you? I'm all right. Sleeping? A hm" (289–90); descriptions of landscapes—"The



snow lies on the branches in patches, as in an old drawing” (302), and everyday scenes—“[T]hey have added a new brick front to the old brick house, coming out to the sidewalk edge for a store” (279); reflections on art—“Van Gogh would paint the light” (302), and literature—“Most literature is now silent” (282); and comments on the writing process itself—“This sounds transcendental. One must come to the point. I begin, finally, to sound like an American” (295).

These thematic threads intersect erratically throughout the text, weaving an unplanned mesh of disjointed sentences and non sequiturs. Williams’s phrasing is urgent and spontaneous, which validates his subsequent recollection in *I Wanted to Write a Poem* as regards the automatic nature of the writing: “I sat and faced the paper and wrote” (49). As a result, *A Novelette*, like the collages of Hans Arp, Max Ernst, and Kurt Schwitters, seems to be governed by chaos and Dadaist contradiction.

As pointed out above, almost since the start of his writing career Williams had been embarked on a one-man crusade to liberate American culture from the stifling deadweight of the past—the past being mostly Europe—and bring forth a fresh, autochthonous literary idiom. In *A Novelette* he unaccountably puts that goal aside. Disregarding his audience, he writes solely—and Dadaistically—“for personal satisfaction,” and admits, it is unclear whether proudly or wistfully, that he has “abandoned all hope of getting American readers” because, should they read the book, they would be “lost entirely” (IWWP 49). He yearns to “sound like an American,” but his prose is deliberately unintelligible to American readers. He wishes above all to write, and to write “well,” but instead of carefully composing the text, he fires away with the typewriter and leaves the results unrevised. One of the book’s leitmotifs is the vitality of instinct and the impotence of science as a vehicle of enlightenment. Williams’s enthusiasm, argues Schott astutely, “didn’t stop to inquire whether there was anything illogical in a physician’s knocking science because it couldn’t write poetry” (I 271). In this sense—the book’s self-conflicting core—*A Novelette* is, as Tzara said of Dada, “the interweaving of contraries and of all contradictions.” In it, more than in any other of his previous works, Williams veers away from conventional writing and his self-imposed quest for an American idiom, openly embracing Dadaist experimentation in order to “create, to advance the concept of the real” (271).

To be sure, Dadaism is not the only ingredient in *A Novelette*. In his determined quest for the new, Williams availed himself freely of a wide

array of innovative techniques made available to him by both literature and the arts, including, among others, the fragmentation of Synthetic Cubism, the metafictional practices of Laurence Sterne, and the wordplay of Gertrude Stein, whose writing Williams applauded because, as he explains in "The Work of Gertrude Stein," it remained "art, not seeking to be science, philosophy, history, the humanities, or anything else [art] has been made to carry in the past" (I 353). However, it is doubtful he would have written *A Novelette*—nor any of the works analyzed in this article—had Dadaism not existed. Dada, more than any other avant-garde movement of the time, offered him the freedom, the tools and the intellectual framework to pursue his endeavor to destroy and renovate American literature. In a way, it sanctioned his disdain for American philistinism as well as his distrust for the denotative power of language. It allowed him, so to speak, to take full advantage of nonsense, collage, parody, contradiction, playfulness, confrontation, chaos, vehemence and automatic writing. Dada, it may be argued, gave him a voice or, at least, helped him fine-tune his tone as a writer. Seen in this light, *Kora in Hell*, *Spring and All*, *The Great American Novel* and *A Novelette* should be regarded as qualified fictions that employ Dadaist tools to probe the idea of fiction. They are, in Schott's words, "books of primary belief" (I xii), seminal prose efforts that boldly—and paradoxically—chart the course Williams would later take towards *Paterson* and the masterly poems for which he is universally celebrated.

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