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Europe and the Construction of the American Poet: Positioning of the Literary Self in William Carlos Williams' *The Great American Novel*

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) has come to be recognized as one of the most important American poets of his generation, together with such luminaries as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. This status, however, was far from secure in his lifetime – even the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry came only after his demise. As late as in 1997, John Lowney described Williams' place "in the academic modernist canon" as "disputed until only recently."[1] This belated recognition was felt by Williams and partially explains his fondness for polemics and diatribe; in much of his work, Williams engages in polemics against his contemporaries as well as tradition. Because of his traditional bent, Eliot is one of the favored targets of these harangues and is made to play the role of the literary nemesis in many works, but Williams sometimes incorporates antagonism towards as close a friend as Pound into his work as well. Rather than viewing the antagonism in Williams' work as an expression of envy of more successful colleagues, I want to suggest that it forms part of a literary strategy and is vital to his construction of himself as a literary writer, that is to say a writer of serious – "literary" – work. This is a part which must be constantly performed to be sustained.

The need for Williams to fashion himself as a serious writer should be seen in relation to his chosen location. The outlook for literature in early 20th-century America was bleak and many writers had turned to Europe instead. Situated in Rutherford, New Jersey, Williams experienced the drawbacks of not migrating to the cultural and literary center of Paris in the 1920s, like so many of his contemporaries had done. This peripheral position considered, it is not very surprising that Williams construed himself as the perpetual underdog. What is particularly interesting, however, is how frequently this peripheral or underdog position is dramatized in and brought to bear on Williams' work. In this paper, whose overarching aim is to explore the political implications of Williams' peripheral position, I will demonstrate how, through an inclusion of antagonistic voices in the 1923 anti-novel *The Great American Novel*, Williams dramatizes the forces at work on the literary arena.

Before we direct our focus to the novel in question, we must pay some attention to the situation for Williams. It is important to note that he was affected by censorship and struggled

[1] John Lowney. *The American Avant-Garde Tradition. William Carlos Williams, Postmodern Poetry, and the Politics of Cultural Memory*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1997, p. 14.

to find a readership for his work. He himself knew that his work would not go down well with an American mass-market audience, of course, but the question is whether he would be successful within the small circle of avant-garde readers either. We must not forget that Williams' was a largely suburban lifestyle, not least since his demanding duties as a physician in Rutherford kept him in place and in check. He was well-traveled and visited Europe for long periods of time throughout his life, but he was never interested in living up to the lifestyle of the bohemian artist. In his autobiography, Williams reveals the uneasy relationship he had with much of the intellectual elite in Europe, reporting that Gertrude Stein, for example, said "[b]ut then writing is not, of course, your *métier*" when he visited her for the first and only time in 1927.[2] The fact that Williams would include this information in his autobiography, furthermore, attests to the importance of this underdog position to his literary self.

There is good reason to question the image of Williams as a truly American and truly democratic poet, which is the image that has been perpetuated partially because of the facts of Williams' life, i.e. his commitment to the American location, the American idiom, the poor people who were his patients, and, most importantly, his successful performance as the anti-Eliot, that is to say the opposite of the elitist and Europeanized Modernist. Often portrayed as (and portraying himself as) an adamantly American poet, he nevertheless seems to have found himself having more in common with the exiled crowd in Paris of which he was ostensibly so skeptical than with the American audience whose stories he was trying to tell. Staying in America allowed Williams to remain in continuous contact with the local ground, but it also meant being far from the center of literary power, in this case Paris. The price was steep at times, which we can see in a1921 letter to Pound, for example, in which he exclaims, "I wish I were in Paris with you tonight. I am a damned fool who sees only the light through a knothole."[3] The French capital possessed all the qualities needed for it to be the "capital of the literary world," as Pascale Casanova puts it. In Paris, "literary consecration [was] ordained,"[4] and approval in Paris meant being included in the world of literature in a way not possible just by being an author of a best-seller in America, for example. On the relationship between the US and Paris, Casanova holds that one must view America as "a dominated country" in the

[2] William Carlos Williams. *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams.* 1951. New York: New Directions, 1967, p. 254.
[3] William Carlos Williams. "17. TLS1" WCW to EP, Jan 4. 1921. *Pound/Williams: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams*. Ed. Hugh Witemeyer. New York: New Directions, 1996, p. 52.
[4] Pascale Casanova. *The World Republic of Letters*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004, p. 23.

1920s, since it "looked to Paris in order to try to accumulate resources it lacked."[5] Despite his physical distance from it, then, this center was crucial for Williams' literary career. The peripheral position Williams found himself in thus doubtless had political implications. We can see this not least in the way in which Williams tried to navigate between his conflicting roles, positioning himself on the one hand as an arbiter of American culture and on the other as the daring writer whose allegiance was with the avant-garde in Europe.

In *The Great American Novel*, Williams' precarious position and subsequent balancing act play a formative role as a literary strategy. The work is a literary experiment which makes play with literary conventions in its examination of the role of language in the literary work. It is concerned above all with the difficulty of finding words with which to write a seminal narrative of the kind that any work called the great American novel can be expected to constitute. In the case of this attempt, the poet-speaker, which we will call the voice belonging to the Williams persona in the text, announces that he is stuck already at the beginning. In this sense, this anti-novel, as it is often called, reveals the frailty of the whole American literary project, since it relies so heavily upon a handed-down language and already inhabited words. At the same time, the work does not rule out the possibility of a successful American narrative entirely, but seems to suggest that for now, the most apt narrative is the fragmentary and unstable one that this novel has to offer.

A series of thwarted narratives, rather than a successful novel, *The Great American Novel* highlights some of the political and ideological implications of writing literary texts. For example, the text stages a series of debates between the new-world writer and his old-world critics, where the possibility of American writing is what is at stake. The novel asks some pressing questions concerning language, literature and power, such as whether or not it is possible to write American literature at all when one is using a handed-down language already laden with connotations of the past. The poet-speaker admits that he, like all American writers who use English as their language, must look to Europe for words: "Europe we must–We have no words."[6] The word, then, is, in Bakhtin's phrasing, "half someone else's" and consequently double-voiced.[7] It is important that we bear in mind that the project as such – trying to write the great American novel – has social and political ramifications. It is a project

[5] Ibid., p. 42.
[6] William Carlos Williams. *The Great American Novel.* 1923. In *Imaginations.* Ed. Webster Schott. New Directions: New York, 1970 p. 175.
[7] Mikhail Bakhtin. "Discourse in the Novel." 1934-5. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays.* 1981. In *Literary Theory: An Anthology.* 2nd ed. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Blackwell, Oxford, 2004, p. 677.

connected to nation-building and the self-image of America, not least in relation to Britain. It is a literary project overtly and unquestionably political.

The Great American Novel consists of multiple voices and multiple narratives, most of which are aborted as soon as they have been initiated. The shifts between narratives are often sudden and can be disorienting. John Pizer has noted how Williams makes use of different types of discourse in this work, ranging from "the almost hyperbolically impersonal epistolary style of the financial bureaucrat" to "the railings against Europeanized American writing by the exasperated purist."[8] The novel has been construed, in Charles Doyle's phrasing, as "[a] rejection of Europe."[9] The reason for this is perhaps that the poet-speaker directs his antagonism against various things and establishments that can be characterized as European within the world of the text: "For the moment I hate you, I hate your orchestras, your libraries, your sciences, your yearly salons, your finely tuned intelligences of all sorts. My intelligence is as finely tuned as yours but it lives in hell […]."[10] This diatribe will doubtless give the reader the impression that this work constitutes a statement in which the writer denounces Europe, and especially the notion of European literary superiority, and instead insists on the literary potential of America. While this is certainly a possible and appealing reading, the question of why so much emphasis is put on the notion of Europe in a work supposedly about America is difficult to avoid. In fact, this objection is raised in the work itself, by what has to be viewed as a questioning, perhaps even hostile, voice, when the poet-speaker has addressed the problem of what he calls "[t]he swarming European consciousness": "In any case it all seems to preoccupy you so, and in a book about America, really-."[11] The objection is valid, because there is something undeniably odd with this level of preoccupation with Europe and European culture in a novel which by its assuming title lays claim to being the greatest of the nation. The most stunning aspect of this novel is indeed the large number of allusions and references to what we can recognize as European things, places and names. Their presence in the text may seem out of order, but I argue that it is in these allusions that we can gain insight into the political project which is being performed by the work.

Not only does the speaker turn to Europe for words, he also allows the "swarming European consciousness" to invade his text. This is brought to our attention as an array of allusions to European cultural figures interrupts the narrative, or, rather, becomes the

[8] John Pizer. "Involution in *The Great American Novel:* Reflections on Williams and Walter Benjamin." *The William Carlos Williams Review* Vol. 13, nr. 2, fall 1987, p. 15.
[9] Charles Doyle, *William Carlos Williams and the American Poem,* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982, p. 39.
[10] Williams. *The Great American Novel* p. 175 f.
[11] Ibid., p. 174.

narrative. Aida, Wagner, Strauss and Alexander, for example, are mentioned. The speaker asks, "Where in God's name is our Alexander to cut, cut, cut, through this knot."[12] It is made clear that America needs an Alexander to come to the country's aid in the literary crisis which the text both heightens and enacts, but the interesting thing is that we are made aware of the fact that there is no other way of voicing this need than to refer to a figure from the glory days of European history. In this way, we understand the impossibility of thinking, let alone writing, anything truly novel. European history continues to condition the very text which aspires to free the American writers from the grip of hegemonic power and tradition.

The voice of the American speaker in this text, that of the aspiring American writer, is unable to sustain the narration without interruptions from his critics, who often take the form of discernibly European voices. When Europe and some of its historical figures have been evoked by the main speaker, an opposing and mocking voice enters the narrative. The allusions to and repeated discussions of Europe are deemed by this opposing voice to be improper in a work of this nature. After all a work bearing the title *The Great American Novel* comes with some responsibility and evokes high expectations. Moreover, the talk of Europe is unsuitable because the main speaker reveals his ignorance, such as when he says that "I would like to see some man, some one of the singers step out in the midst of some one of Aida's songs and scream like a puma."[13] The retort from the antagonistic European voice is that "you use such inept figures. Aida has been dead artistically in Munich for fifty years,"[14] so that the speaker is undermined even as he tries to use the figures of Europe to explain his project. This passage brings the power struggle to a heightened intensity. While the European voice demonstrates his superiority in the field of European high culture, he fails to see that all of this is beside the point for the American writer, who, somewhat peeved, adds "Wagner then – Strauss. It is no difference to me."[15] The point for him is of course the puma, not Aida. What the American speaker dreams of is something which will disrupt the performance and reinforcement of European cultural hegemony, in this case the distinctly American puma. At the same time, of course, the antagonistic voice which questions the prevalence of European cultural lore and talk of Europe in a novel about America is not entirely off the mark. The American speaker has wished to break free from tradition by attacking certain European forms of cultural dominance, such as the opera, but when invoking them to attack them -

[12] Ibid., p. 174.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

when bringing them to the stage of the text in order to push them off that very stage - he nevertheless reinforces them by accommodating them in his narrative, to such a high degree that they threaten to take over his work. Alan Sinfield expands on this problem and stresses that dissidence, which we may understand the American voice as engaging in, "has to invoke those [dominant] structures to oppose them, and therefore can always, *ipso facto*, be discovered reinscribing that which it proposes to critique."[16] This is the most obvious danger facing our speaker, the writer of the great American novel, and the precariousness of his method should not be underestimated.

It seems that we are dealing with instances of position-taking occurring throughout the text. Because of the title, we expect to find a writer who challenges his precursors, not least American ones who have failed to write the great American novel. Here, instead we have a poet-speaker who, albeit lashing out against Edgar Lee Masters and Dante among others, early on exclaims "[t]o hell with everything I have myself ever written."[17] The antagonist, it seems, is not only the precursor, but also the poet himself, making it more fruitful to think of this antagonist-slot as one which can be filled by any arbiter of literary tradition – a traditionalist of plagiarism, as Williams would call such writers in *Spring and All* (1923) – as well as by any writer who has failed to explore the capacity of language to mean, and this category, as we see, includes the poet himself. One can, then, be an arbiter of tradition even when one is trying one's best to fight against it, because tradition permeates the literary work through language.

In order to understand Williams' position, we must consider the situation for American writers in the 1920s. *The Great American Novel* was published and printed in France, although by American expatriate Bill Bird and his Three Mountains Press and Robert McAlmon's Contact Editions. This simple fact attests to Williams' dependency on the more permissive literary climate in Europe for his literary endeavors. He had probably learned his lesson in 1917, when parts of what later was to be *Kora in Hell* never reached its readership because that particular number of *The Little Review* was stopped by the US Post Office. Since it was so difficult to get things published in the US, it is no wonder that Paris in itself seemed to endow a literary work with higher status than an American work could reasonably aspire to. We can sense an anxiety or frustration in much of Williams' writing that that which is

[16] Alan Sinfield. "Cultural Materialism, Othello, and the Politics of Plausibility." (Chapter from *Faultlines,* 1992). In *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 2nd ed. Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Blackwell, Oxford: 2004, p. 756.
[17] Williams. *The Great American Novel*, p. 172.

being written will not pass as "literature". In *The Great American Novel* especially, the fear that that which is written is not sophisticated enough recurs, and there is a constant awareness of the literary progress already made in Europe. At one point, the speaker elaborates on the futility of his project: "In other words it comes after Joyce, therefore it is no good, of no use but a secondary local usefulness like the Madison Square Garden tower copied from Seville [...]."[18] Apparently, the speaker doubts his contribution to the world of letters – doubts, in fact, the literariness of his work. It lacks newness, which is essential to a work with modernist ambitions. Its only saving grace is that it might be useful as an American example, just like architectural copies of past European masterpieces adorn the new world. It seems, then, that our poet-speaker has only two choices: either settle for copies of European works already written or refuse to be literary in the same way, i.e. thwart genre expectations entirely. Williams has set out to write the great American novel, a much anticipated and for the nation essential work. Turning it instead into an investigation of language and the inhabited word means that this so called novel is to be viewed as a means of positioning rather than what is advertised. Williams is staking out his territory on the literary field and in doing so is battling with antagonists past and present.

In his discussion of the literary field and position-taking, Pierre Bourdieu points out that "discourse […] about the work of art" is essential to the production of a work of art, because it signals that it is a "worthy object of legitimate discourse."[19] This is true also in cases when polemic is involved, since this "confers participant status on the challengers". In his marginal position on the outskirts of the European set (included in their goings-on primarily by way of correspondence and the reading of literary magazines) and in the equally marginalized world of American little magazines, Williams did not always find that his work was sufficiently taken up by other, more securely positioned, writers, nor was he certain that they would ever reach their American readership. Instead, he incorporates the discourse about his own work into the work itself, thereby, one might argue, elevating it and conferring onto it the status of literary art, of literariness. If the real Turgenev cannot discuss *The Great American Novel*, then he will be inscribed into the novel itself and there positioned in opposition to the poet-speaker's project, creating, in effect, the very the "participant status" of Bourdieu onto

[18] Ibid., p. 168.
[19] Pierre Bourdieu. "The Field of Cultural Production, Or The Economic World Reversed." *The Field of Cultural Production*. 1983. In *Debating the Canon. A Reader from Addison to Nafisi.* Ed. Lee Morrissey. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 108.

Williams, the challenger. This is what the voice later identified as Turgenev's has to say about the poet-speaker's project:

> *Eh bien mon vieux coco*, this stuff that you have been writing today, do you mean that you are attempting to set down the American background? You will go mad. Why? Because you are trying to do nothing at all. The American background? It is Europe. It can be nothing else. Your very method proves what I say. You have no notion what you are going to write from one word to another. It is madness. You call this the background of American life? Madness?[20]

Due attention, then, is given to the poet-speaker's project, and this attention is given by a canonized author whose standing is such that he may endow the challenger's work with participant status and elevate it to the realm of the literary. In this way, we can see how Williams, as Bernard Duffey has pointed out, has to create a context where his "efforts may be seen as writing".[21] The choice of Turgenev as the opposing voice is remarkable, because he falls into so many relevant categories. Dead, he belongs to the tradition which Williams so often antagonizes. Exiled, he has something in common with the contemporary Parisian set to whom the home country will not suffice for literary production. Both radical and part of the aristocracy, furthermore, he occupied a position which required a balancing act which may in some ways echo Williams' own. They shared, in either case, a desire to portray the simple folk of their home countries, despite not themselves belonging to that crowd. Williams has chosen to include antagonistic voices not to destroy the novel or to permanently silence the American speaker, but, rather, to make visible the network of relations which ultimately govern the American writer's fate on the literary stage.

Daniel Morris paints a portrait of Williams as an astute publicist whose image eventually "challenged in importance (and in a sense became) the commodified literary thing itself."[22] Morris argues that Williams had to market himself as something different from the high-modernist poets like T.S. Eliot and therefore found a place instead as, above all, the voice of the poor immigrants in the US. This marketing enterprise, furthermore, is carried out in Williams' fictions, as Morris shows with illuminating examples from works such as *A Voyage to Pagany* (1928). To view Williams as a poet who carefully fashions his own persona in his work is, I would say, fruitful and apt. To say that he constructs an image of which difference with respect to Eliot's position is the key element is equally apt. However, this does not mean that the Williams persona of the more democratic defender and portrayer of the poor and

[20] Williams. *The Great American Novel*, p. 196.
[21] Bernard Duffey. *A Poetry Presence: The Writing of William Carlos Williams.* Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986, p. 5.
[22] Daniel Morris. *The Writings of William Carlos Williams: Publicity for the Self*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995, p. 6.

peripheral is wholly convincing. This is crucial to understanding Williams' place in the modernist enterprise. Apart from Williams' practical involvement with the European or Europe-based modernist scene, for example in matters of publication and printing, there is material which indicates that Williams was in fact more desirous than has been acknowledged of belonging to the European modernist scene and that his position as the most American poet depends specifically on this conflicted relationship to Europe. A 1926 letter to Pound, for example, reveals Williams' American position as something quite different than an unconditionally democratic stance: "I'm really a stick in the sides of the populace here if only you knew it, a kind of outpost that is trying to make it safe for ART in the lousy country."[23] Europe may be the "enemy" according to the poet-speaker in the great American novel, but so too is the inhospitable and unaccommodating literary climate of 1920s America.

"Let us have now a beginning of composition. We have had enough of your improvisations," the antagonistic and skeptical voice in *The Great American Novel* says, right after having pointed out the similarities between Americans and children.[24] Said by the fictitious Turgenev, this comes as a remark on all the fruitless and brief attempts at narration which have constituted the novel thus far. Again, this implies that that which has been written cannot be said to be a novel and not quite literature either; it fails to live up to genre expectations, but also to the additional expectations which its assuming title gives rise to. The critical voice writes the work off as childish "improvisations," first attempts. It does not matter that the poet-speaker has announced himself to be a "United Stateser" and thus "a beginner" – the quality of his work is not excused because of that.[25]

The idea that the American writer comes into the literary field as a beginner is one which Williams pursued also in his essays. Urging American artists to accept the fact that they might not yet have reached the heights of artists of other nations, he instead proposes that one must begin at the beginning if one is to write – much like the poet-speaker in *The Great American Novel* asserts. Casanova relates the idea of literary time to the idea of the modern in literature and suggests that "it is necessary to be old in order to have any chance of being modern or of decreeing what is modern."[26] This means that being "new" or "a beginner" is no real advantage in the world of letters – even if one's entire poetic ambition is to explore new modes of expression. The poet-speaker in *The Great American Novel* realizes this and

[23] Williams. "29. TLS-2." WCW to EP, Feb 20, 1926. *Pound/Williams: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams*, p. 74.
[24] Williams. *The Great American Novel*, p. 197.
[25] Ibid., p. 175.
[26] Casanova, p. 89.

concedes that "[e]verything is judged from this [the European] point of view."[27] So, too, the great American novel. Although its purpose may be to get at the American background or to describe the American experience, it will never be a successful literary work unless it wins the approval of Europe. At the same time, of course, the dialogue in which this power-struggle is enacted helps clarify and bring to light the conditions which govern American art. In the end, despite the poet-speaker's insistence on his American identity, material and stance, it seems that his initial conclusion – "to Europe we must" – stands. Not only does the American poet have to turn to Europe for words, he also has to turn to Europe for approval. Even an anti-novel which fails to be the great American novel is unthinkable without the European judge of literariness. Inscribed in the literary work rather than external, forming part of the work rather than commenting on it after the fact, this judge allows Williams to dramatize the political aspect of writing literature from an American locus, of being of the periphery. His pose, indeed his position, depends for its success upon the judgment and mockery of other, more established and central, writers. In *The Great American Novel*, as in many other works, Williams actualizes and – in fact – enacts the complex network of relations that have a purchase on his own literary efforts. In this way, his work displays the conditions which govern American writing and illustrates the difficulty of finding and maintaining a position as a literary writer. It is within this context that Williams' great American novel makes sense; it is unsuccessful as a proper novel, as we have seen in the dismissals which Williams has included in the work itself. If anything, it is a series of improvisations and therefore entirely unsatisfactory with regards to its title, but at the same time it is a highly successful instance of position-taking. This, indeed, is the work which the novel performs. The dramatizations of the literary field and the position-takings necessary for the poet who wishes to stake out his territory helped Williams to accumulate status as a "literary" American writer in a literary climate where the dominant and most respected literary developments came from Europe.

[27] Williams. *The Great American Novel*, p. 210.

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