

## Rivista di poesia comparata

Direttore responsabile: Francesco Stella

## Iniziative

**8 dicembre 2019**  
Semicerchio a "Più libri più liberi"

**6 dicembre 2019**  
Laura Pugno alla Scuola di Semicerchio

**5 dicembre 2019**  
Convegno Compalit a Siena

**4 dicembre 2019**  
Addio a Giuseppe Bevilacqua

**29 novembre 2019**  
Maurizio Maggiani alla Scuola di Semicerchio

**8 novembre 2019**  
Laboratorio di poesia: Valerio Magrelli

**12 ottobre 2019**  
Semicerchio e LinguaFranca a Salon de la Revue di Parigi

**27 settembre 2019**  
Reading della Scuola di Scrittura

**25 settembre 2019**  
Ultimi giorni iscrizioni al Corso di scrittura creativa

**20 settembre 2019**  
Incontro con Jorie Graham per l'uscita di "fast" (Garzanti)

**19 giugno 2019**  
Addio ad Armando Gnisci

**31 maggio 2019**  
I'M SO TIRED OF FLORENCE: READING MINA LOY

**12 aprile 2019**  
Incontro con Marco Di Pasquale

**28 marzo 2019**  
Sconti sul doppio Semicerchio-Ecopoetica 2018

**27 marzo 2019**  
Semicerchio al Convegno di Narrazioni Ecologiche-Firenze

**24 marzo 2019**  
Premio Ceppo: Semicerchio e Guccini a Pistoia

**15 marzo 2019**  
Rosaria Lo Russo legge Sexto

**6 febbraio 2019**  
Incontro sulla traduzione poetica -Siena

**25 gennaio 2019**  
Assemblea sociale e nuovi laboratori

**14 dicembre 2018**  
Incontro con Giorgio Falco

**8 dicembre 2018**  
Semicerchio a "Più Libri Più Liberi" Roma

**6 dicembre 2018**  
Semicerchio issue on MIGRATION AND IDENTITY. Call for papers

**16 novembre 2018**  
"Folla delle vene" di Iacuzzi a Semicerchio

Semicerchio XXXIX (2008/02) Waste Lands. Eliot &amp; Dante. pp. 8-16

by Stephen Tapscott

With thanks to Simone Giometti,  
Daniela Roselli, and Paolo Del Bianco

Recent translators of Dante into English often perform an intriguing reversal, echoing in their new translations lines from *The Waste Land* that T. S. Eliot had borrowed from the *Commedia* (in an earlier translation). The Italian lines appear in Canto III of the *Inferno*, as Dante and Virgil stand near the River Styx. Having passed the inscribed gate to hell, Dante-the-pilgrim hears the clamor of the bolgia that lies before them; he faces a plain where the souls of the indifferent trail behind a wavering banner. These are the souls of the morally-neutral, those «who were never alive», and who survive in infinite deferral, «without infamy and without praise», wailing regret. The moment is powerful, sublime and poignant, yet also dangerous: Dante almost expresses compassion for the «retrograde and faithless crew». (Early in the narrative Dante is often tempted toward such sympathy. He ends Canto III in a swoon, and by *Inferno* XX Virgil has to scold him for expressing pity for the sinners they meet.) The souls in this vestibule of hell are beset by hornets and wasps in «a never-ending rout»: so vast a procession, Dante claims, «si lunga tratta / di gente, ch'io non avrei mai creduto / che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta» (Inf. III, 56-7). «I had not thought death had undone so many», Eliot writes, repeating the line in the English version from the Charles Eliot Norton prose-translation of 1891 (which he had read while a student at Harvard).

At this moment and in these lines, Dante-the-pilgrim abruptly recognizes the dimensions of the «universe of death» he has entered. The lines define a horizon of mortality, and their literary antecedents deepen that horizon. Behind Dante's description looms the precedent of Virgil, whom Dante has met in Canto I and whose example – as poet and as representative of a new Roman Imperium – Dante clearly aims to emulate, even to complete. (Virgil first appears to Dante like «one who through long silence seemed hoarse», Inf. I, 48). In the *Aeneid*, Book VI, as Aeneas approaches hell, Virgil had briefly described the multitudes who wait for passage across the Styx («huc omnis turba ad ripas effusa ruebat», «Hither rushed all the throng, streaming to the banks», VI, 305) and then had famously compared them, in their multitudinousness, to falling leaves and gathering birds in the cold winds of autumn.<sup>1</sup> In the *Inferno*, that is, Dante summons the *literary* example of Virgil before he fully represents Virgil as a character in his poem; Dante's verbal memory of Virgil's text occurs at the moment the pilgrim recognizes the depth of mortal time, to acknowledge the dimensions of human suffering to which Virgil is introducing him. Dante summons the example of Virgil to elaborate Virgil's metaphor and to complete – or compete with – his predecessor. In his own metaphors of the crowd of the dead, Dante personalizes Virgil's famous metaphorical throngs of leaves and birds. Dante recognizes human individuals: husbands and wives, boys and unmarried young women, heroes and youths. The Virgilian metaphors that register the impersonal, organic multitudinousness of hell are made to seem, in Dante's handling, a crowd of suffering persons – individual sinners responsible for their condition. (And that horizon deepens again when we remember that Virgil in the *Aeneid* VI is adapting the model of the *Odyssey*, Book XI, in which Homer has Odysseus visit an antechamber of hell to converse with the souls of the dead.) The line of mortality deepens with the layering of literary antecedents: to follow these guides is to encounter the dead, to address them, and to measure the experience in a new standard of time and by a new standard of judgment. And at the same time, Dante's treatment of the Virgilian model acknowledges that it can be difficult to address the influence of a valuable predecessor. In this first encounter with Virgil in the new poem, Dante claims the Roman poet as forebear, alludes to a famous moment in his work, and pointedly adjusts that antecedent to fit his own purposes. At such a moment of important transition, we need a guide, and we need to negotiate that guidance, adjusting the guide's example to our moment and to our needs.

Virgil adapts Homer; Dante adapts Virgil; the old translation renders lines from Dante which Eliot adapts. Contemporary readers recognize the lines from T. S. Eliot's appropriation of them in the «Unreal City» section of *The Waste Land*. In Eliot's poem, the lines make the crowding mass seem metaphorically «undone» by emotional sterility, the modern analogue to the medieval sin of anomie:

Home-page - Numeri

Presentazione

Sezioni bibliografiche

Comitato scientifico

Contatti e indirizzi

Dépliant e cedola acquisti

Links

20 anni di Semicerchio.

Indice 1-34

Norme redazionali e

Codice Etico

The Journal

Bibliographical Sections

Advisory Board

Contacts &amp; Address

Saggi e testi online

Poesia angloafricana  
Poesia angloindiana  
Poesia americana (USA)  
Poesia araba  
Poesia australiana  
Poesia brasiliana  
Poesia ceca  
Poesia cinese  
Poesia classica e medievale  
Poesia coreana  
Poesia finlandese  
Poesia francese  
Poesia giapponese  
Poesia greca  
Poesia inglese postcoloniale  
Poesia iraniana  
Poesia ispano-americana  
Poesia italiana  
Poesia lituana  
Poesia macedone  
Poesia portoghese  
Poesia russa  
Poesia serbo-croata  
Poesia olandese  
Poesia slovena  
Poesia spagnola  
Poesia tedesca  
Poesia ungherese  
Poesia in musica (Canzoni)  
Comparatistica & Strumenti  
Altre aree linguistiche

Visits since 10 July '98

1937539

Unreal City,  
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
 I had not thought death had undone so many.  
 Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
 And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.  
 Flowed up the hill and down KingWilliam Street,  
 To where Saint MaryWoolnoth kept the hours  
 With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.  
 «There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: Stetson!  
 You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!  
 That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
 Has it begun to sprout?[...]». (Eliot, TWL 61)

In Eliot's poem the citation from Dante suggests a parallel moment of collective suffering, also a moment in which a guide appears, albeit a problematic one (Stetson!). The crowd of the modern city crosses London Bridge, and the context makes them seem normatively suffering. Dante had employed the Virgilian reference to signal the location, in hell, of those who had never made difficult choices – the indifferent, the incontinent, and the passive. Eliot makes this ennui the earthly norm: «those who did not die» but who are living/dead all the same, like the corpse that sprouts in the garden.

New translators, then, adapt Eliot's use of Dante, through older translation. I'm intrigued by how often newer translations of sections of Dante's *Commedia* rely on this back-formation to *The Waste Land*: lines from the early-20th century poem, which Eliot had appropriated from Dante's original, are reclaimed in the newer translation. Thus

- from the Carlyle-Wickstead translation of 1932: «I should never have believed / death had undone so many» (C-W, 30)
- from John Ciardi (1954/1996): «I had not thought death had undone so many» (Ciardi, 32)
- from Michael Palma (2007): «That death had undone so many, / I had not dreamed» (Palma, 28-9)
- from Robert Pinsky (1994): «a train / Of souls, so long that I would not have thought / Death had undone so many» (Pinsky, 27)
- and even on-line, in the colloquial Microsoft 'version': «who knew that death had undone so many?»

The effect is odd, as if the earlier poet were learning from – or influenced by – the later poet.<sup>2</sup> On its face, the paradox seems an instance of what Harold Bloom famously calls the ratio of «apophrades», or «the return of the dead»: that stage of influential internalization in which causality reverses, and the work of the earlier poet seems 'influenced' by the achievement of the chronologically later writer (Bloom, 159ff).<sup>3</sup> The repetition of the line, in new contexts, once again deepens the line of mortality; the citation registers not only the persistence of the livingdead, but also a recurrent pattern of 'guidance' and influence, as well. In the presence of the multitudinous historical dead, and in the presence of massive 'indifference' as a mode of suffering, a literary 'guide' or influence is needed, though his influence may be subject to revision or negotiation – as Dante's was at the start of the 20th century, in Anglo-American poetry.

I suspect that what's at stake in the retrieval of the Dante line in the newer translations has to do with an echo of the contentious literary appropriations of Dante early in the 20th-century, in which Dante functioned as literary 'guide' and antecedent in aesthetic and political terms (as Virgil had been, to Dante). It was a contest of variouslyproposed Dantes, in which manifestoes about the advantages and disadvantages of certain stylistic choices carried arguments about historicity, time, and social formation, in American and in English conversations just after WWI.<sup>4</sup> I want to look at that moment when the experimental momentum of Anglo-American poetry was under negotiation, and before the impulse toward cultural or social or class solidarity which resulted from the Great Depression of the 1930s and WW II (when William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, for instance, each stopped writing lyric poems for a long period of time). At that moment (between the publication of *The Waste Land* and the publication of Eliot's 1929 essay on Dante), the term 'Dante' becomes an iconic cultural referent, which Eliot and Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams and others use to define their aesthetic positions. The Modern poets use Dante to contest rival theories of the Sublime – for Eliot a cosmopolitan, cohesive internationalism, for Pound a lucid medieval lyricism with political overtones, for Williams a nativist American Sublime – by claiming Dante as a part of a «usable past».

Our sense of the most influential Modernist image of Dante tends to derive from Eliot's reading of Dante, which he developed throughout the 1920s – often in indirect dialogue with Pound – and articulated in his magisterial essay *Dante* in 1929 and later (in prose in *After Strange Gods*, 1934, and in verse in *Little Gidding*, 1942). (I suspect that the frequency with which the newer translators adapt the Dante-lines from Eliot measures, indirectly, the eventual dominance of Eliot's version of a Dante for modern use.) But other versions were certainly proposed. Pound defines his 'Dante' first in relation to literary values (comparisons with Cavalcanti's clarity and emotional accessibility) and later in relation to economic theories of monetary and verbal circulation.<sup>5</sup> Other iconic readings were circulating at the same time, as well. Yeats reads Dante as a universalizing force, «the

**12 ottobre 2018**  
**Inaugurazione XXX Corso di Poesia con Franco Buffoni**

**7 ottobre 2018**  
**Festa della poesia a Montebeni**

**30 settembre 2018**  
**Laboratorio pubblico di Alessandro Raveggi a Firenze Libro Aperto**

**23 settembre 2018**  
**Mina Loy-Una rivoluzionaria nella Firenze dei futuristi - Villa Arrivabene**

**22 settembre 2018**  
**Le Poete al Caffé Letterario**

**6 settembre 2018**  
**In scadenza le iscrizioni ai corsi di scrittura creativa 2018-19**

**5 settembre 2018**  
**Verusca Costenaro a L'Orchestra**

**9 giugno 2018**  
**Semicerchio al Festival di Poesia di Genova**

**5 giugno 2018**  
**La liberté d'expression à l'épreuve des langues - Paris**

**26 maggio 2018**  
**Slam-Poetry al PIM-FEST, Rignano**

**19 maggio 2018**  
**Lingue e dialetti: PIM-FEST a Rosano**

**17 maggio 2018**  
**PIM-FEST: il programma**

**8 maggio 2018**  
**Mia Lecomte a Pistoia**

**2 maggio 2018**  
**Lezioni sulla canzone**

» **Archivio**



**scuola di scrittura creativa**

- » Presentazione
- » Programmi in corso
- » Corsi precedenti
- » Statuto associazione
- » Scrittori e poeti
- » Blog
- » Forum
- » Audio e video lezioni
- » Materiali didattici

**Eurozine** Europe's leading cultural magazines at your fingertips

**Why do young women dominate Finnish politics?**

Author: Janne Wass

Finnish politics today is dominated by strong, politically savvy women. many under the

read in Eurozine

**Editore**  
 Pacini Editore

**Distributore**  
 PDE

imagination of Christendom». Joyce reads Dante through Aristotle, structurally, as Beckett will later, in his tripartite novels. Hilda Doolittle finds Dante's model of purgation and ecstatic vision useful as metaphors and models for her succinct and sequential poems from the 1930s onward; Gertrude Stein measures the power of the idiomatic and the vulgate through Dante's example, in *The Making of Americans* (1908). Several of these Modernist conceptualizations of Dante are inter-related, of course, as writers worked out their positions in conversation and in correspondence, defining their own ambitions – and their retrospective 'traditions' – in counter-relation to those of others: William Carlos Williams postulates an idiomatic poet 'Dante' in counter-relation to Eliot's more internationalist Dante, which itself was defined in relation to Pound's Dante,<sup>6</sup> the Rossetti-like craftsman-of-the-vernacular, who also influenced Joyce, and so on. I want to look especially at the uses of the icon 'Dante' that William Carlos Williams devises in *Kora in Hell* (1920) and in other texts of this period that clearly respond to the 'challenge' of Eliot, in his defense of the use of the «American idiom» and of the «American Sublime». In his vehement turning from Eliot's culturally-definitive 'Dante', Williams describes issues of cultural authority and demotic language – specifically the relation of vernacular idioms to time, and implicitly the relations between the historical authority of democratic cultures and the pressures of historical change. These questions lead him to postulate a different cultural icon of Dante, one that ratifies his own ambitions. Clearly, Williams' responses to Eliot change, as well as his appropriations of Dante – not surprisingly, because Williams consistently defines his 'Dante' in symmetrical opposition to Eliot's and his changes.<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I restrict attention to this formative period, just after *The Waste Land* and before Eliot's influential essay of 1929.

\*

In the prologue to his book of experimental prose *Kora in Hell* (1920), Williams quotes an affectionate, slightly patronizing letter that Hilda Doolittle, his college-friend and former fiancé, had sent him a few years earlier. In it, HD addresses what she hears as «flippancy» in Williams' early poems, a derivative quality that stems ultimately, she claims, from an American sense of diffidence or of shame:

«It is as if you were ashamed of your Spirit, ashamed of your inspiration! – as if you mocked at your own song. It's very well to mock at yourself – it is a spiritual sin to mock at your inspiration». HD hears in this rhetoric of bad faith a challenge to a concept of composition as sacralization: «I don't know what you think but I consider this business of writing a very sacred thing!» (WCW, *Imag.*, 12-3).

It's perhaps a measure of Williams' candor in his own text that he includes the letter, in effect adverting to its accuracy (at least, about his earlier poems). And it's perhaps also a measure of his residual flippancy that Williams deflects that criticism into a focus on HD's argument about the «sacred»: «Oh well all this might be very disquieting were it not that 'sacred' has lately been discovered to apply to a point of arrest where stabilization has gone past the time. There is nothing sacred about literature, it is damned from one end to the other. There is nothing in literature but change and change is mockery» (13). Questions about art's 'seriousness' and about the American Sublime are related to questions about cultural stasis, time, and artistic development.

Throughout the prose of *Kora in Hell*, Williams is obsessed with Eliot and the «conservatism» of his aesthetic; he postulates by contrast an American / Dantean tradition of democratic accessibility and linguistic adaptability. The argument seems complicated not least because of the psychodynamics of personal jealousy and a sense of displacement on Williams' part; those motivations are the dimensions that recent criticism has taken to describe the ways in which the Modernist 'sons' are completing for the patrimony of the 'father' Dante. There is an element of sibling rivalry in the way Williams triangulates his response to Eliot/Dante off his wounded feelings about his old friend Pound<sup>8</sup> – even though Williams claimed in later interviews that he had written all the sections of the mixed-media book *before* the publication of *Prufrock*.

When I was halfway through the «Prologue», *Prufrock* appeared.  
I had a violent feeling that Eliot had betrayed what  
I believed in. He was looking backward; I was looking forward.  
He was a conformist, with wit, learning which I did  
not possess. (WCW, *Imaginations*, 4)

Williams's response to the values that he thinks *The Waste Land* encouraged is famous, famously fierce, and largely unjust. Williams later claimed that the poem had been a «great catastrophe» for American letters; in effect it had blocked the momentum of an alternate, more generative future-oriented mode of American Modernism. The influence of Eliot's example deflected energy away from a new formal attention to the vernacular «line» and from «a drive that was gathering headway upon the theme of a rediscovery of a primary impetus, the elementary principle of all art, in the local conditions». Such incipient American experimentalism, Williams recalls later, «staggered to a halt under the blast of Eliot's genius which gave the poem back to the academics» (WCW, *Auto*, 146). Other critics have fully discussed Williams' resistance to Eliot, to his poems, and to the effects of his reputation. I do think that Williams' dismay is overdetermined, stemming from several causes that get confounded.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, Williams distrusts the «conformism» (among other artists) and the academic codifications (among critics) that seem to be effects of Eliot's influence. Williams' personal disappointment and envy that Pound, his loyal university-friend, was advocating this patrician newcomer («EP is the best enemy United States verse has») gets tangled, I think, with envy

about Eliot's reputation, and with an authentic resistance to the methods of the Eliot poem, its allusiveness and its elegant rhythms and its smoothly ironic surfaces (mediating Laforgue as well as Virgil and Dante and many others). The Eliot example seems dangerous to Williams because the broad textual sampling in *The Waste Land* seems to be enlisted in a cultural project of radical deracination and disengagement. Having cut himself off from the continuity and grounding of a native tradition, Williams argues, Eliot writes a broken lyric of complaint about that condition of alienation, mistaking his personal disenfranchisement as a 'universal' mode of experience in the culture. Against this projection, Williams offers a «rediscovery of a primary impetus, the elementary principle of all art, in local conditions». The key is place, the mediating connection between discourse and belonging, in a specific time and society.

Williams elaborates this argument by suggesting that despite Eliot's critical assertions of the poet's «impersonality», in practice Eliot as poet tends to generalize a personal or situational failure into a universal condition of impotence and sexual disappointment; Williams further associates that tendency with the Puritan history of America, suggesting that like the Puritans Eliot has «cut himself off from the fecundating female» of place (one of the recurrent themes of Williams' *In the American Grain*, 1923).

I felt he had rejected America and I refused to be rejected  
and so my reaction was violent. I realized the responsibility  
I must accept. I knew he would influence all subsequent  
American poets and take them out of my sphere. I had envisioned  
a new form of poetic composition, a form for the  
future. It was a shock to me that he was so successful my  
contemporaries flocked to him— away from what I wanted.  
It forced me to be successful.

Biographical critics have proposed several reasons for the vehemence of Williams' resistance to Eliot through the immediate post-War period, arguing that he's professionally disappointed; he's envious; his aesthetic and the momentum of his career are threatened; he's stuck in New Jersey, married with two young children; he's overworked as a doctor making calls to impoverished homes and tubercular hospitals, getting paid occasionally in chickens rather than cash while his old university-friend Pound advocates the high elegant seriousness of an expatriate fellow American from St. Louis who writes in a quasi-British diction about the difficulties of life in the modern urban world. At first Williams does seem to be lashing out (the first book he publishes after the appearance of *The Waste Land* was, in 1921, a small-press book entitled *Sour Grapes*), but he soon tempers his argument.

The problem with the influential success of the Eliot model derives, Williams subsequently argues, from its reduced sense of the power of the idiomatic; the poem seems static, derivative. Despite *The Waste Land's* attention to dance-hall songs and to pub-gossip, Williams claims, its style is elegant but stultifyingly iambic, and the position of the central observer in the poem remains the Tiresian observer, distanced and abstracted, polysexual and voyeuristic. Eliot sees decline in the European social fabric (and will eventually advocate a pan-European Christianity as a solution to this cultural dilemma), and in this context Eliot will propose his 'Dante' as guide to restoration. Williams, by contrast, sees the need for a 'new world' aesthetic in the face of these changes, and he summons his Dante as guide to democratic reconstitution and as a formal solution to his immediate conundrum, the inability of the autonomous image to carry larger social argument.

At this point Williams is also realizing that in general terms he's painted himself into an aesthetic and formal corner in his own poems: having recognized the limits of the image as a 'pure' vehicle for carrying information, Williams is exploring new modes and structures for the American poem: by complicating the image itself (in the poems of *Spring and All*, 1920), by new strategies of objectivity («no ideas but in things»), by resequencing and collage of individual images and full sections of texts (leading to *Paterson*, 1946-58), by an attention to prose and to the continuities of history (through the narrative reconstructions of *In the American Grain*), and by a larger move from the visual image to an interest in spoken discourse. In poems from *Al Que Quiere!* (1917) onward, stressing the image had provided Williams liberation from other forms of poetic organization (quatrains, rhyme, metrical regularity). However, the disadvantages of the autonomous image were that it seemed unmoored, incapable of cultural argument, and a bit coy, paradoxically self-referential. It's worth noting the dimension of the 'sacral' in Williams' collage-book *Kora*, because I think that the 'serious', even 'incarnational' elements of Williams' poems of this period tend to get overlooked. In the book's «Prologue», Williams enlists HD to make the direct case: that the process of «sacralization» tends to be a taboo subject for the American writer, because we're ashamed of our physicality and because our language doesn't support the high-minded effort. To write from the spirit is to engage a certain shame, through a paradox through which the writer comes to recognize the disproportionateness between American spiritual aspirations and the received standard American idiom. From this disconnection, familiar to the American literary tradition since Hawthorne, springs Williams' version of the American Sublime. Thus throughout *Kora in Hell*, in manifesto-prose and in interpolated experimental prose sections, in a form he claimed to be adapting from *La Vita Nuova*,<sup>10</sup> Williams builds a counter-Eliotic case in favor of structural experimentalism (countering what he sees as the domination of the «conservative» iambic line in Eliot's prosody), localism (answering what he sees as a desperately rootless cosmopolitanism at the heart of the Eliot program), and the vernacular American Sublime (retrospectively constructing a tradition to

ratify his own ambitions). I think it's no coincidence that Williams retrieves a satiric image of Dante elsewhere in *Kora*, as well.<sup>11</sup> In this occasion the figure «Dante» has little to do with Dante Alighieri or with the historical Dante's work – or even with Williams' reading of Dante, which doesn't until this point seem to have been particularly consistent or systematic. «Dante» here is a unit or marker of cultural signification, an icon of projected values. Williams' allusions to Dante and to the possibility that allegory might work in a new way in a landscape without a long history of cultural markers, link with the HD-argument about shame, connecting a new form of the vernacular with a pursuit of the «sacred», with an attitude toward time, and with a certain democratic cultural authority. Williams postulates a vernacular Dante to ratify an alternate, more democratic nativist-American Modernist tradition, leading eventually to his concept of the American Sublime: he needs a model predecessor to ground a tradition that can bridge the pressures between change and stasis, personalism and impersonality, traditional aesthetic written forms and future-oriented oral democracy. «There is nothing in literature but change».

For democracies have a special relation to time: the absence of transhistorical continuities that structure other cultures (class, privilege, inherited wealth, ur-myths of origin, material placements like buildings and sacred sites) makes the social and aesthetic forms of a democracy especially sensitive to the vicissitudes of change in time. The arts in a democracy – especially in an electoral republic – need to replace the vertical sense of stability and continuity with a horizontal sense of time as development, momentum, even progress. The verbal arts, especially, must accommodate to this tension between transcendent truth and sequential history, if only because the connotations of diction change as the community of language-users changes. Following this pattern in the work of historians and artists from prehistoricist social theoreticians of Athens, through Machiavelli and Hobbes, and into writers of the modern era, J. G. A. Pocock concludes that in the verbal forms of the histories of democratic societies

time so conceived differs from the time of the physicist or metaphysician in being filled with – indeed, comprised of – a rich texture of the acts, words, and thoughts of personal beings; and in stating the continuities and recurrences and occurrences of which it consisted, theorists encountered problems which compelled them to recast their thoughts in terms of process, change, and discontinuity (Pocock, 157).

Pocock presents the conundrum as an energy-source that can generate positive, adaptive results: a more fluid definition of «history», more open-ended structures for art. We don't need to look farther than Tocqueville, or Henry James' famous account of Hawthorne's depleted America, for the complementary case: that poetry suffers in America *because* language in such a culture tends to love evolution, adaptation, slang, and synthetic abstraction, as means to counteract – in Tocqueville's distinction – democracy's confusion of the «Real» with the «Ideal». Part of the paradox of Williams' account of Dante in these terms is, of course, that Williams is also sympathetic to the Tocqueville/James argument about the counterpressure on concepts of time and of measurement and of abstraction in democratic forms. This dual sympathy accounts for much of the power of Williams' socially-analytic lyrics from the 1920s, like *To Elsie* (WCW, CP, 217). That poem begins «The pure products of America / go crazy» and ends by asserting American solitude and cultural instability, the problem of time and timing, as both problem and energy source:

It is only in isolate flecks that  
something  
is given off

No one  
to witness and adjust  
No one to drive the car

Pocock's reading of the relation of the stability of democratic forms to the nature of time within the received standard discourse of a culture does highlight, in fact, the «personal» or subjective dimension of that discourse. In some sense it seems also to explain a relation – one that Williams assumes but doesn't explain – between such horizontal «democratic» discourses of time and traditional Romantic forms. Pocock's theory aligns the sense of subjective time with the compensatory energies of «democracy» and sets them pointedly in opposition to those very aesthetic characteristics that Eliot mistrusted: individualism, subjective sensation, spontaneity, deliberate «primitivism», an apparent lack of discipline and of subordination. These are (not coincidentally) the aesthetic qualities that Williams actively advocates: he finds them necessary antidotes to those characteristics of modern life that even Eliot, following Irving Babbitt, had identified as sources of excess and of suffering in modern life.

\*

Williams' attention to questions about the relation of historical change and the stability of the lyric recall several of Dante's own early projects on the uses of vernacular languages for high art and its public ambitions. Early in his exile Dante had addressed several of those themes, in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (1304-6), composed in Latin prose during Dante's exile in Bologna and delivered as public lectures. His concern in the *Eloquentia* is to consider the status of the vernacular as

a vehicle for poetry. For Dante, the vernacular offers the advantages of familiarity, immediacy, and emotional resonance: it is that mode «which we acquire without any rule, imitating our nurses» (Dante, *Eloq. I, I*).<sup>12</sup> (American poetry comes «out of the mouths of Polish mothers», according to Williams.) Despite these advantages, however, the vernacular as a literary vehicle involves a problem: the perplexing realization that languages, like cultures, decay and die.

The more recognizable and powerfully familiar a contemporary idiom, the more it risks change and historical estrangement. In this sense, Dante is testing what might result from the change from Latin to Tuscan-based Italian. The problem for Dante, which Williams recognizes, is whether poems can aspire to transcendent truth, linking human aspirations with divine knowledge, while using a linguistic form that is itself hostage to human time and change. If humans individuals are subject to debasing emotions, Dante wonders, how does the possibility of personal «nobility» relate to the structures of the language we use, and to the concepts of «virtue» embedded in our idioms and in our concepts of nobility? The Biblical story of the Tower of Babel seems to Dante a warning not only about the limits of human aspiration, but also – because it addresses the question of linguistic dispersal – about the connections among linguistic decadence, change, and civil disorder. To write in a vernacular language, then, is to make a gesture toward an intervention in civil affairs, but at a cost: its idiom joins the artwork to the vagaries of human time and historical sequence. Only personal «nobility» (the shameless seriousness that HD advocates as essential to Williams' enterprise as an American writer) can counteract this tendency in the influence of the vernacular.

It helps, I think, to recognize the Dantean etymology of this resistance in Williams' work, in order to frame his account of the power of the «vernacular». Where Eliot summons the power of cultural continuity in the reception of Dante's epic, Williams stresses the argument relating to the power of the vernacular as the proper medium of the lyric («We must make anew, of old particulars»).<sup>13</sup> Where Eliot needs the authority of Dante to counter cultural forces of exile and diffraction, Williams asserts the vernacular's effects on place and emplacement («It is in the wide range of the local only that the general can be tested for its unique quality, its universality»). Where Eliot emphasizes «impersonality», Williams stresses (or has HD teach him) that the local idiom is also a measure of personal character and ratio («It is the poet who lives locally, and whose senses are applied no way else than locally to particulars, who is the agent and the maker of all culture», *WCW, America*, 101ff).

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 (*WCW, Imagin*, 23)<sup>14</sup>.

In an essay of 1917, Williams summarizes his interconnected argument involving these questions of historicity, change and cultural specificity, influence, freedom, and tradition: «To live,» he claims, «our poetry must send roots into the past. To live freely, it – as we – must live free of time. To be free of time it must live for all time, past and future. It must have the common interlocking quality that establishes it in its environment. It must live or be capable of living from the beginning to the end» (*WCW, America*, 101).

There is no art of poetry save by grace of other poetry. So Dante to me can only be another way of saying Whitman. Yet without a Whitman there can of course be no Dante. Further than that: there is no way to talk of Whitman but in terms of by own generation – if haply such a thing may be. (102)

«Another way of saying Whitman»: the association is surprising but plausible, having to do both with the the two forefathers' assertion of the eloquent power of the vernacular, and with issues of freedom and the American Sublime on Williams' own vernacular and formal terms, «to write the culture into history». Later Williams will come to closer terms with Eliot: his insistence on «no ideas but in things» has much to do with Eliot's «objective correlative»; his lyrical-epic *Paterson* talks back to the meditations on place throughout Eliot's *Four Quartets*; the variable metrical experiments of his «triadic line» attempt to domesticate Dante's *terza rima* as filtered through personal memory, much as Williams recognized Eliot's final poems did. For Williams just after WWI, however, his differences with Eliot and with Eliot's cosmopolitan, pan-European Dante matter more than the possible convergences. In the 1917 essay Williams is venting his dismay; in the novel forms of *Kora in Hell* (1920) he's articulating a theory of response to the challenge of the Eliot aesthetic, with its Dantean genealogy; by the time of *Spring and All* (1923 – the same year he begins *In the American Grain*) Williams is writing the poems and the experimental prose that embody this «new world» aesthetic of change, vernacular freedom, «dignity», and emergence from «hell». In each stage of this individuation, he claims Dante as predecessor. Let me close, then, simply by citing a poem from *Spring and All* in which Williams lays out, in a landscape poem, an *ars poetica* that speaks back to what he sees as the dessication and despair of the Eliot model. I hope our discussion about the contested theories of Dante, time, and the forms of the vernacular helps to contextualize this apparently-simple poem. I hear in its approach along the road to the «contagious» hospital a metaphorical journey through a kind of contemporary 'hell'. What interests the observer in the poem is that the infernal condition here changes, so that the timing of the

observation constitutes both the material observation of the poem and its form. In the poem *Spring and All*, this 'hell' of un-form begins in a welter of qualities, without definitive categories (the «reddish / purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy / stuff»). With the arrival of spring, however, some vital thing begins to «grip down», and the exigent form – of the plant, of the poem – 'tightens' into clusters (quatrains, rootedness) that approximate traditional formulations, in local conditions. I read this poem, the title poem of the volume *Spring and All*, as recalling – repeating – the journey of Kora<sup>15</sup>, Persephone's daughter, out of hell, largely as a response to what Williams saw as the despair and stasis of Eliot's cultural vision, and as a Virgilian task to step out of hell, like Dante with Virgil, into a «new world». This emergence is characterized by novelty and freshness and vulnerability and dignity – a surprising term to use in relation to Williams – through the power of revived tradition. It both describes and enacts the growth of Whitman's «leaves of grass» in an infernal urban wasted-land.

### *Spring and All*

By the road to the contagious hospital  
under the surge of the blue

mottled clouds driven from the  
northeast – a cold wind. Beyond, the  
waste of broad, muddy fields  
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water  
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish  
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy  
stuff of bushes and small trees  
with dead, brown leaves under them  
leafless vines –

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish  
dazed spring approaches –

They enter the new world naked,  
cold, uncertain of all  
save that they enter. All about them  
the cold, familiar wind –

Now the grass, tomorrow  
the stiff curl of wild carrot leaf  
One by one objects are defined –  
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of  
entrance – Still, the profound change  
has come upon them: rooted they  
grip down and begin to awaken  
(WCW, CP, 183)

### NOTE

1 *quam multa in siluis autumni frigore primo  
lapsa cadunt folia, aut ad terram gurgite ab alto  
quam multae glomerantur aues, ubi frigidus annus  
trans pontum fugat et terris immittit apricis.  
stabant orantes primi transmittere cursum  
tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore.*

thick as the leaves of the forest that at autumn's  
first frost drop and fall, and thick as the birds that  
from the seething deep flock shoreward,  
when the chill of the year drives them overseas  
and sends them into sunny lands.  
They stood, pleading to be the first ferried  
across, and stretched out hands in  
yearning for the farther shore.  
(Virgil/Fairclough, I, 23)

2 Some recent influential translators seem to have moved away from the influence of the Eliot model, translating Dante's «disfatta» as «unmade» – making the perception less psychological and more material. Thus Allen Mandelbaum (1980): «I should never have believed / that death could have unmade so many souls»; also Robin Hitchcock (2006): «I could never have believed / that death had unmade so many».

3 If, indeed, 'influence' is what's at stake here – or if translators can be said to be «influenced» by the reception of a later poem into the tradition. This shifting of the paradigm would, in fact, seem to echo Eliot's sense of the fluctuating adjustments that a tradition makes in response to individual talents. I'm inclined to think of the effect as an instance of what Loy Martin famously spelled out as a dynamic of less aggressive encounter, looking toward resolution in dynamics of «sanction» and «resonance». (Martin, 655ff)

4 This process repeats a pattern of tendentious appropriation that Seamus Heaney sees frequently occurring in relation to crossculturally

influential poets. Heaney observes how W. B. Yeats' tormented, self-reflexive image of Dante, in poems like *Ego Dominus Tuus*, reflects Yeats' sense of his self-as-poet, or a certain mode of 'himself' in relation to his visionary system. Heaney generalizes: «When poets turn to the great masters of the past, they turn to an image of their own creation, one which is likely to be a reflection of their own imaginative needs, their own artistic inclinations and procedures» (Heaney, 239). The example of Heaney's reading of the figure is enriched, further, by Heaney's own use of the mortality-and-guide configuration in his own long poem *Station Island* (1984), by that poem's metaphors of pilgrimage and its addresses to «Sweeney Astray» and to dead heroes of the Irish struggles, and by its summoning of James Joyce as a fierce Virgilian guide. For a useful anthology of 20th century poets' prose encounters with Dante, see *The Poets' Dante*, ed. Hawkins and Jacoff.

5 'Pound's literary values': see *Make It New*, 203-5. Pound's 'circulating values' (like publishing and edition): Pound used the *Inferno* as an analogue for depictions of 'infernal' conditions, in his correspondence, in his studies of Cavalcanti, and in his 'Hell' cantos (#14 and 15, 1930), with their scatological excoriations of bad editors and publishers. See also Stephen Sicari's *Pound's Epic Ambition: Dante and the Modern World*, an eloquent guide to Pound's use of both Virgil and Dante (from the *Convivio* and the *Eloquentia* through the *Commedia*). Sicari makes a convincing case that Pound is performing an Oedipal «completion» of Dante's hell-vision in those cantos, by making his own modern economic hell seem comic or parodic. On particular terms, see also Reed Way Dasenbock's succinct essay *Why the 'Commedia' is Not the Model for 'The Cantos' and What Is*. See also, in this context, Matthew Hofer's discussion of these sections, 470ff.

6 Other critics have amply documented the influence of Dante and his structures on Pound's work, from his early interest in aural structures of *canzone* through the largest organizational structures of Pound's. For our purposes, I think it's useful to note that although Williams' reformulation of Dante and his utility, in this period, happens to converge with Pound's, even at this point small differences anticipate future divergences. Pound for his part often factors apart questions of lyric form and commitment-to-the-vernacular that Williams combines in his reading of Dante; Pound seems to ascribe to Guido Cavalcanti some of the values that Williams ascribes to Pound and to Pound's 'Dante', while acknowledging Pound as the origin of his ideas. Pound finds Cavalcanti «much more 'modern' than his young friend Dante», for instance, in *Make It New*, but credits both Provençal-influenced poets with the achievement of the «mediaeval clean line», a formal commitment with a political and moral dimension, in «the dogma that there is some proportion between the fine thing held in the mind, and the interior thing ready for instant consumption» (*Make It New*, 203-5). That elegant formulation points Pound, paradoxically, toward wild invective in its application. Pound's most 'Dantesque' poems, Canto 14 and 15 (1930), claim Dante's *Inferno* as their model in their journey-structure and in their aggrieved, vengeful representations of «monopolists, obstructers of knowledge / obstructers of distribution».

7 Eliot's reading of Dante changes, over time, accompanying the shift in his poems from the fractured Symbolist whispers and disorientations of *The Waste Land* – where Dante and Virgil and Tiresias serve as guides through an *inferno* – to the more serene philosophical meditations of *Little Gidding*, where *The Paradiso* serves as model and behind which Dante hovers. In this sense, Eliot moves through *The Waste Land* through visions influenced by the *Inferno* toward a 'purgatorial' sense of progressive dismantling: the poem ends with Arnaud Daniel (*Purg.*, XXVI, 145-48) returning into the flame that purifies, in lines that transpose Dante's Tuscan-Italian with Daniel's troubadour Provençal.

8 Louis Simpson graphs Williams' evolving theoretical positions against some of his personal antagonisms, in a three-part 'biography' of Williams, Pound, and Eliot; my assumptions about the psychology of competition here clearly derives from his work in *Three on the Tower*, part 3, 253ff.

9 I hear personal grievance as well as aesthetic and professional disagreement in his railing at Eliot's success, and after all this account derives from Williams' *Autobiography* (1948), several decades later. In fact, I don't see evidence of such dismay in the correspondence around the time of the publication *The Waste Land*; I suspect that some of the anxiety expressed in the *Autobiography* is cumulative grievance.

10 See the Williams-Pound *Correspondence*, 153ff.

11 «...Imagine a meeting of the [poets of the] nations – ...when they meet Paris will be more than slightly abashed to find parodies of the middle ages, Dante and the *Langue d'oc* foisted upon it as the best in United States poetry...» (WCW, «Prologue», 26).

12 See also Barbara Reynolds, *Dante*, ch. 5.

13 Pound alludes to this issue of democratic accessibility when in 1934 he praises the «intrinsic» worth of Lawrence Binyon's elegant translation of the *Inferno*: «We owe Binyon a great debt for

having shown (let us hope once and for all) how little Dante needs NOTES. The general reader has been hypnotized for centuries by the critical apparatus on the *Commedia*..... the essential fact [is], it is really THERE ON THE PAGE». (Pound, *Hell*, 390)

14 Pound reacted fiercely to this accusation, that he has become so internationalist as to be blind to American possibilities, being in effect «two places at once». That claim is «bilge», Pound tells

Williams, «just sloppy bilge». In a letter to Williams («My dear old Hugger-scrunch») of September 11, 1920, Pound responds systematically to the claims Williams makes about Pound's positions, throughout the «Prologue» to *Kora in Hell*, including the admittedly unfair suggestion that Pound is not «providing the mechanical means» by attending to experimental structures in poems. Pound responds defensively, reminding Williams he is working «scrap for the mot juste, for clear honest statement in verse», and that his attentions to Eliot and a transAtlantic mode of Modernism hardly constitute an affirmation of «Eng. punk», or of «the dry dung of the

Georgians, or the wet dung of the London Mercury». Throughout the letter he rehearses many of his own attitudes of the period, including a «racial» theory of American identity, from which identity he excludes the part-Hispanic part-English Williams («you can idealize the place (...) but you haven't a drop of the cursed blood in you»). Pound then shifts the metaphor from one of a racial defect one of an American «virus»: «you don't have to fight the disease day and night; // you never have had to. Eliot has it perhaps worse than I do – poor devil». «I really can't to the whole show», he concludes. «Beside[s,] I am not supposed to run the American end» (*Correspondence*, 36-40).  
15 Williams credited Pound with the title and concept of *Kora*. See the «Prologue» to the City Lights edition of the book, *Imaginations*.

## Biografia

- Alighieri, Dante. *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, trans. Stephen Botterill, Cambridge: Cambridge U Press. 1996.
- , 'The Divine Comedy': The Calycole-Wickstead Translation, N.Y.: Random House, 1932.
- , *The Divine Comedy*, trans. John Ciardi, N.Y.: Modern Library/ New American Library, 1996/2003.
- , *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick, NY: Penguin, 2006.
- , *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum, Berkeley: California, 1980.
- , *Inferno*, trans. D. Goedels, Microsoft: 2006.
- , *Inferno*, trans. Charles Eliot Norton, State College: Penn. State U, reissue 1891/1985.
- , *Inferno*, trans. Michael Palma, N.Y.: Norton, 2007.
- , *Inferno*, trans. Robert Pinsky, N.Y.: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994.
- Auerbach, Eric, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Mannheim, Chicago: Chicago, 1961 (1929).
- Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence*, London: Oxford, 1973.
- Dasenbock, Reed Way, *Why the 'Commedia' is Not the Model for 'The Cantos' and What Is*, in *Ezra Pound's 'Cantos': A Casebook*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 2006, 81-93.
- Eliot, T[homas] S[tearns], *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963.
- Hofer, Matthew, *Modernist Polemic: Ezra Pound v. 'the perverters of language'*, «*Modernism/modernity*», Vol. 9, no. 3, Sept. 2002, 463-89.
- Martin, Loy, *Literary Invention: The Illusion of the Individual Talent*, «*Critical Inquiry*», Vol. 6, No. 4 (Summer, 1980), 649- 6.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet*, in *The Poets' Dante*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff, N.Y.: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2002, 239-59.
- Pocock, J[ohn] G[reville] A[rcher], *Time, History, and Technology in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes*, in *Politics, Language, and Time*, N.Y.: Atheneum, 1971, 157ff.
- Pound, Ezra, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, N.Y.: New Directions, 1995.
- , *Hell*, «*The Criterion*», XII, 1934, 382-96.
- , *Cavalcanti*, ed. David Anderson, Princeton: Princeton U Press, 1983, including sections from *Make It New* (1934).
- Reeves, Gareth, 'The Waste Land' and the 'Aeneid', «*The Modern Language Review*», Vol. 82, No. 3 (Jul., 1987), 555-72.
- Reynolds, Barbara, *Dante: The Poet, The Political Thinker, the Man*, London: Shoemaker, Hoard, 2007.
- Sicari, Stephen, *Pound's Epic Ambition: Dante and the Modern World*, Albany: SUNY Pr., 1991.
- Simpson, Louis, *Three on the Tower*, N.Y.: Morrow, 1975.
- Virgil, [Publius Vergilius Maro], *Aeneid*, with prose translation by H. R. Fairclough, N.Y.: Loeb, 1916, 2 vols.
- Williams, William Carlos, *America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry*, «*The Poetry Journal*», VIII, vol. 1, 1917, 27-36; reprinted in «*The William Carlos Williams Review*», XIII, vol. 1, 1987, 1-4.
- , *Autobiography*, N.Y.: New Directions, 1948.
- , *Collected Poems*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, N.Y.: New Directions, vol. I, 1991.
- , *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, ed. Edith Heal, N.Y.: New Directions. 1967.
- , *Review [of Pound's Eleven New Cantos]*, «*New Democracy*», 3 Feb. 1935, 10-1.
- and Ezra Pound, *Selected Letters*, N.Y.: New Directions. 1996.

→ [top of page](#)