

Paterson via the Passaic

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To Rob Fure and Dick Davidson:

But any young man with a mind
bursting to get out, to get down on the page even a clean
sentence-gets courage from an older man who stands ready
to help him-to talk to.

(Paterson, p. 231)

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There are some areas in my study of English Literature which I will never master. The difference between "which" and "that," the correct spelling of "immediately," and the appropriate use of the semicolon have and almost certainly will remain enigmas which a great many English courses have been unable to permanently clarify or resolve for me. On the other hand, countless essays on authors as diverse as William Shakespeare and Peter Taylor have allowed me to isolate several tenets of critical writing which can never be broken if literary criticism is to make sense. Among these is the principle that the most effective critical essay must maintain an extremely close relationship with the text, tracing and analyzing its developments as they occur.

Given this "cardinal" rule, my initial confrontation with William Carlos Williams' poetry was extremely problematic. Without the luxury of a consistent, logically ordered text possessing a clear beginning and conclusion, my commentary had to be somewhat removed or distanced from the subject if it was to possess the elements of order which the poem lacks. This is particularly true of Williams' poem Pa_terson. The critical essay that attempts to note and trace each of the many radical shifts and reversals as they appear within this poem's

structural and thematic development would almost certainly lose its reader in the ensuing turmoil and confusion. Contrary to my initial opinion, however, Williams' intention in constructing the lines in this revolutionary manner was not to make life difficult for the struggling college student assigned with the task of developing logical, coherent, understandable comments on the poem and the imponderables therein. Indeed, for the serious, patient reader, Paterson offers just the opposite; the insight required to live a life of sustained growth, novelty, and satisfaction.

Paterson does and says many different things but its most central concern is man and his relationship to the world. Williams adamantly believes that a sustained, immediate interpenetration between the individual and his physical environment is essential, and is continually at war with the individual's impulse to deal with abstract, indefinite matters of mortality and spiritual truth. Given the state of unending flux that continually occurs within both the mind and its physical environment, the individual must continually reexamine, reaffirm, and rework all that he has thought, spoken, and written if Williams' interpenetration is to be sustained. Ideally, such continual remeasuring of the old culminates in a life of refreshing change free of monotony and stagnation.

As a means of illustrating the benefits and joys inherent in such an existence, and some of the problems and

difficulties associated with its attainment, Paterson has as its main character Paterson, a young, inexperienced poet who is struggling to overcome the suffocating burdens of tradition which threaten to cut him off from the true source of his art, the immediate world. His quest takes place throughout the first four books of the poem beginning with an examination of the "elemental character" of Paterson's environment, Paterson, New Jersey. By selecting identical names for the man and the city he wanders in and around, the similarities in their complexity, diversity, and individuality are made particularly apparent. In anything but a clear narrative voice, the poem continues by describing the poet's numerous trials, failures and eventual success in developing a language that "breaks through the deadness of copied forms which keep shouting above everything that wants to get said today, drowning the man with the accumulated weight of a thousand voices in the past."¹ The fourth book concludes Paterson's struggle for enlightenment with his gaining a new understanding of the full creative process, the final element needed to make his revolutionary language vocal and sustained.

Williams' selection of Paterson, New Jersey as a setting for his poem was not an arbitrary one. As even the most cursory examination to the text indicates, he perceived its physical layout, natural surroundings, and colorful history as ideal images for illustrating and

charting Paterson's problems, growth, and final enlightenment. Given the fact that a detailed, page by page examination of Paterson as a whole is both impractical and unmanageable, perhaps the most expedient way of tracing the source of the poem's power and insight is by examining one of the work's dominant images, the river, which spans and to some degree unites its two hundred forty four pages. Williams' treatment of the Passaic river seems particularly appropriate as its frequent use and unending development typify his use of all the major symbols. Indeed, Williams' sustained impulse to "measure anew" each of his comments and observations on the river actually threatens to make the critical examination of even this subordinate portion of the poem an overwhelming task. As is always the case with Williams' poetry, however, patience and persistence lead to discovery. Given the complexity of this image, it thus seems most appropriate to begin this discussion with a general overview of the river and its numerous functions in Paterson, followed by a closer examination of their formulation and development.

The Passaic's geographical source is well above Paterson, New Jersey in the Watchung mountain range. From these mountains the river moves north, growing continually in size as it merges with other rivers and streams within its drainage basin. Upon entering Paterson, it cascades over

the Passaic, or "Great" Falls and then continues to move southward, bending around the outside of the city. Having passed Paterson, it finally flows through Newark, New Jersey and merges with the Atlantic Ocean in Newark Bay.

In a very general way the physical progress of the river documents the progress of the poem. In the opening lines of the Preface, the river is rained down somewhere upstream from Paterson. Although the majority of its movement above the town is not traced in detail, the river's flow in and below the immediate vicinity of the falls is charted closely using numerous physical landmarks. From this point on, the river, the poem, and Paterson the poet flow and develop together as they simultaneously move forward, ending (or as we will see, beginning) in the salt water of Newark Bay in Book Four. Although Williams' tracing of this general progression downstream is sustained throughout the poem's body, it is by no means continuous or regular. At a very early point he begins to focus his attention on the river in the immediate vicinity of the Passaic Falls, the roar of which Paterson the poet can continually hear. This torrent of water quickly becomes the poem's central image, possessing a myriad of meanings and functions. To gain the best overview of this multipurposed, transient image, the falls, as well as the function of the river above and below them, it seems appropriate that we follow the advice Williams continually offers the

poet and "make a start of particulars/and make them general, rolling up the sum" (p. 3). The last passage of the third section of Book Three is particularly appropriate in this respect.

At this central point in the poem, the wandering, misguided, confused poet at last comes to several critical conclusions about man, the world, poetry, and the barriers still to be overcome in his search for a meaningful, permanent language. All of these topics and issues are examined through the image of the falls and river, each of which continue to take on new meaning as Williams works and reworks them in his lines.

In the first stanza Paterson begins with a general description of the natural setting before him, the roaring falls and the flowing river above and below. He immediately converts this scene into an image for the passage of time, viewing the upper portion of the river as the past, the falls as the immediate present, and the lower portion of the river beyond the roaring cataract as the future. The association of the raging falls with the present gives us a clear illustration of the enormous amount of flux and diversity inherent in our immediate physical surroundings at all times: "The past above, the future below/and the present pouring down: the roar of the present" (p. 144). Having given us this general panoramic glance centering on the falls, Paterson next turns inward comparing the

river to the roar of thought that passes through his mind. This torrent of language is fueled by the flow of his imagination. It lacks, however, the physical, concrete, knowable properties of the Passaic's water sliding over the cliff. Locked in the poet's mind, the creatures of his imagination fall back to their source below, unknown, unexpanded, and irretrievable. Thus, the poet's sole concern is "the roar of the present" (p. 144), or the process by which his raging thoughts can take on the physical, lasting characteristics of the Passaic Falls.

In the stanza's closing lines, the poet perceives that the only way this process can be carried out is through audible "speech," or more specifically, through poetry. Such vocalization is a "necessity" or essential to his future health and happiness: "The roar of the present, a speech-/is, of necessity, my sole concern" (p. 144).

Thus, in this introductory, four line stanza, Williams incorporates the river as a symbol of time, immediacy, thought, and poetry. But of course, Williams does not end here in the development of the image. The following stanza makes a brief reference to several unnamed people who chose not to struggle with the unstable, unpredictable world and the torrent of thought it evokes. Rather than attempting to sort out and vocalize this confused flow, they simply resolve themselves to a life of silence by plunging into the silent waters below the falls, a realm

which the passage's preceding stanza has described as being separate from the present: "They plunged, they fell in a swoon./or by intention, to make an end-the/roar, unrelenting, witnessing" (p. 144). Thus, the river takes on still another meaning, symbolizing the silent, isolating, beckoning realm which can allow an escape from the unrelenting roar of thought and speech in exchange for the individual's immediate sensory contact with the physical world. As the following lines indicate, however, such a tradeoff leads to a deterioration of the mind which Paterson the poet must avoid at all costs: "Neither the past nor the future/Neither to stare, amnesic-forgetting" (p. 144, 145).

Having cast off this unhealthy impulse to "plunge" or "swoon," the poet again turns his attention to the language still fading into the invisible worlds above and below him, and reaffirms his interest in the vivid immediacy it possesses: "The language cascades into the/invisible world, beyond and above: the falls/of which it is the visible part-" (p. 145).

With this sustained determination, the poet continues by directing his efforts to the task of converting his language into a form of communication with the same qualities of immediacy that the roaring falls possess. This is clearly another reference to his impulse to create poetry, the physical body of words which is the permanent artifact created by the poet's imagination. However, as

the following lines remind us, a poem cannot be created solely from the poet's imagination, nor can it use predigested, trite images, themes, and languages. Rather, it must be a union of thought and immediate experience, combining both the falls as a portion of the poet's physical environment and the falls as the poet's flowing imagination. Paterson's awareness of the necessity of this interpenetration between his thoughts and the world is made clear by the intentionally ambiguous pronoun "it" appearing in the lines that express his dedication to creating poetry. Having directed his attention to both the physical falls and his rushing flow of thought, he then states, "Not until I have made of it a replica/will my sins be forgiven and my/diseases cured" (p. 145). Given this ideal state of interpenetration of experience and thought, "it" is not an inappropriate pronoun as the world and the imagination have become one organic whole within the composition.

Finally, Paterson again stresses that his composition cannot use preconceived images, structures, and languages. Thus, the poem must comprise a union of thought and immediate experience verbalized in a new language that the poet himself has combed out from the torrent of thoughts continually roaring through his head.

I cannot stay here
to spend my life looking into the past:

the future's no answer. I must
find my meaning and lay it, white,
beside the sliding water: myself-
comb out the language-or succumb
(p. 145)

The final appearance of the resulting "replica" is unimportant. What is essential to the poet's success is that he escape the confines of an exhausted language and that his rhetoric be a real thing existing in the world around him: "Whatever the complexion. Let/me out! (Well go!) this rhetoric/is real" (p. 145).

Clearly, the most difficult task for the poet is getting in a position to write. This involves freeing himself from the immaterial recollections and notions of past and future, and casting an unwavering line of attention on the immediate world and the torrent of language which it evokes within his mind. Having done this, a poem can be created, disciplining raging thought and physical experience into one physical body of words of complete originality and purity. The final composition, in its ideal form, does not "transubstantiate, boil, unglue, hammer, melt, digest and psychoanalyze, not even distill but [sees] and [keeps] what the understanding touches intact-as grapes are round and come in bunches."²

The examination of the water imagery in this small, self-contained portion of Paterson provides some cumulative insight into several of the central functions of this imagery within the poem. However, I am ignoring

the line's meaning and Williams' poetic by removing it from the numerous separate bodies of material which precede and follow, and examining the lines as a finalized summary or conclusion. Indeed, in doing so I am essentially choosing a fate identical to that of the unnamed persons who succumbed when confronted with the monumental task of combing out the language, finally resorting to silence and seclusion. As the passage illustrates, meaningful language and poetry can only arise from the individual's interaction with the immediate world around him and the opposing pulls and forces therein. Thus, Williams would not dream of leaving out the processes which led to the discoveries and insights of the poet. Indeed, it is this process of creatively remeasuring the world's divergent properties which give the language and the poem their life sustaining character. When this process ends, we too "plunge" and "swoon," and die. Thus although such moments of discovery are important to the poem, our main interest must lie in the experiences and processes through which they are arrived at. Again, one of the most expedient ways of tracing this process in Paterson is to remain within earshot of the river.

The World

Williams believed that every facet of man's life must be grounded in the material elements of his physical world. Throughout Paterson, he continually states that there can be "no ideas but in things" (p. 6). This principle is clearly illustrated in the first lines of the poem, ^{by Williams' attention} to the falls themselves and his subsequent vow of attention to all portions of his environment which the river has come to represent. It should come as no surprise, then, that significant portions of Paterson are devoted exclusively to an examination of the physical world and the processes and occurrences therein. Like the treatment of all the poem's subjects, such descriptive sections of the text are not grouped in any one part of the work, nor do they occur in a recognizable sequence. Further, Williams regularly uses characteristics of the river to illustrate similar traits of man, and vice versa. This can lead to some ambiguity as to which subject is of primary concern in a particular passage. As one progresses through the four books, however, several overriding characteristics of the environment can be "combed out," the majority of which are expressed at one time or another through water imagery.

The predominant concern throughout the excerpt discussed in the introduction is the passage of time, a process which occurs continuously regardless of man's wishes. Contrary to popular belief, Williams does not see this

movement as a linear progression with a clear beginning and end. Rather, time is circular; all things move continuously through the same progressions and fluctuations. This principle is demonstrated and reaffirmed throughout the text, but it is initially illustrated through water imagery in the conclusion of the poem's preface. Here, Williams examines the river's formation, beginning with the dew on the ground which is evaporated by the sun, becoming a mist, and finally forming a cloud. From this state the water is rained back down onto the earth where it is regathered by the river which then carries it downstream: "Divided as the dew,/floating mists, to be rained down and/regathered into a river that flows/and encircles" (p. 5). With the exception of the last line, this process does indeed seem to possess a linear progression with a beginning in the "divided dew" and an end in the flowing river. The term "encircles," however, reminds us that the process does not end with the flowing river or even with the ocean which lies below. Rather, it is an ongoing, repeating cycle, any stage of which could easily be called its beginning or end. As Williams states in the previous stanza, "the beginning is assuredly the end" (p. 3), and conversely, the end is assuredly the beginning.

On a much larger scale, this circular principle is again illustrated by the poem as a whole. As the water flows downstream from the first to the last book, our in-

nate conception of time as a linear process suggests that the things it carries downstream will end their journey when the river meets the amorphous ocean. This preconception is shattered, however, when several "seeds" swept out into the ocean return to land and begin a new life in the unending cycle.

Within such circular progression, Williams also notes an infinite number of secondary cycles which make up the whole. At one point, he gazes into the flowing river and notes the infinite number of subsidiary movements which continually occur therein. He states that the smaller channels of the river "interlace, repel and cut under, / rise rock thwarted and turn aside / but forever strain forward" (p. 7).

The diversity and variation within this single body of water leads Williams to look more closely at the unlimited diversity and variation within his environment as a whole. A quick glance about his surroundings reveals a seemingly infinite number of realms and microcosms which demand his attention and examination. Again, the river serves well to illustrate this unending diversity, essential similarity, and ultimate separation in a passage in the middle of the second section of the second book. Here, Williams divides his attention between the worlds above and below the river's surface, noting their striking similarities, yet their utter inability to mingle. "And the

air lying over the water/lifts ripples, brother/to brother . . . parallel but never mingling" (p. 25). Williams next immerses us in these two different yet similar worlds, comparing their residents and inner processes. "The birds as against the fish, the grape/to the green weed that streams out undulant/with the current at low tide beside the bramble in blossom, the storm by the flood" (p. 25).

The impulse which Williams shows here to explore, embrace, and study all the realms about him on every scale dominates throughout every page of Paterson. Whether he is discussing man or the world, Williams is absolutely incapable of confining himself to a single perspective of the scene of subject. Because of its infinite diversity, the environment can allow this process of discovery to continue forever, regardless of the intensity of the exploration the individual chooses to undertake.

Despite the similarity of the numerous realms within the environment, Williams continually emphasizes their inability to mingle, as is the case with the air and water described above. In the subsequent passages of Book Two, section two, this eternal separation is underlined by his description of a sea-plane's landing on a land-locked lake in "the sombre mountains of Haiti" (p. 26). The plane approaches the lake at an angle which would take it below the water level were it not for the impenetrable interface which the water-air discontinuity imposes: "He pointed it

down and struck the rough/water of the bay, hard; but lifted it again and/coming down gradually, hit again hard but/re-mained down to taxi" (p. 26). This description of the pilot's bumpy landing gives us the impression that he was actually attempting to penetrate the interface as he strikes it, lifts the plane, and strikes it again. Despite these efforts, life above and below the water remains confined to its separate realms.

In numerous other passages Williams shows us the fatal results of transferring an inhabitant of one microcosm to another, thereby strengthening our notion of their insolubility. One example of this is near the end of Book One, section three. In this historical prose narrative Williams recollects the night on which a large lake was drained, exposing all the fish and marine vegetation to the air. "By nightfall of the 28th, acres of mud were exposed and the water mostly had been drawn off" (p. 35). Robbed of their life giving liquid environment, the "millions of fish and ell" (p. 35) soon died and were carted off in wagons and baskets.

Similarly, Williams often discusses the results of a land dweller's immersion in water. In the prose passage following the one concerning the lake's draining, Williams recounts another past instance in which an employee of the local power company discovered a corpse floating about the generator's water wheel. Here again we see that the two

mediums and their inhabitants are unable to mingle.

There is, however, one significant exception to this principle of insolubility which, although it is never specifically described as such, is mentioned throughout the poem's body. This exception occurs at the falls when the Passaic flows out of its confining river basin and mingles with the atmosphere in a "catastrophic descent" (p. 8). This misty state in which water and air each take on the other's qualities is associated with an enormous release of energy and dynamic turmoil. The waters "leap" into the air and, "relieved of their weight, / split apart, ribbons: dazed, drunk / with the catastrophe of the descent" (p. 8). As we have already seen, the unique state which the falls embody comes to be one of Paterson's central images, being applied to almost every subject and issue in the poem.

Finally, Williams points out and examines the tremendous amount of flux which occurs within the physical world. This shifting and rearrangement takes place on every conceivable scale and at every possible velocity. Further, this movement occurs in an unending progression which, as we already know, is cyclic. Small scale illustrations of this flux are provided by the river in almost every section of the poem. From our discussion of the earth's diversity, we have already seen the way the flowing channels of water "interlace, repel, and cut under" (p. 7) in an unending process of rearrangement. Later in the poem,

however, the river is the driving mechanism of changes and rearrangements of far greater magnitude and importance. This is certainly the case at the beginning of the third section of Book Three where Williams begins a lengthy description of the great flood of 1902 which damaged a great deal of property in and around Paterson. The lines begin by describing the rainstorm which "surfeits the river's upper reaches,/gathering slowly" and "draws together/runnel by runnel" (p. 129). As the river swells and escapes the confines of its banks, it begins to wash loose debris from the land downstream. All the while the water continues to rise, eroding and destroying as it goes. The pouring torrent of muddy water "undermines the railroad embankment" (p. 136), floods the turnpike and scours the stones. When the water finally recedes, the environment has changed drastically: "When the water had receded most things have lost their/form. They lean in the direction the current went. Mud/covers them" (p. 140).

Given the constant forward movement of the world's cyclic time progression, the flux continues to rearrange and reshape the world, beginning in this case with the growth of a white flower. "Where the dredge dumped the fill,/something, a white hop-clover/with cordy roots (of iron) gripped/the sand in its claws-and blossomed/massively" (p. 141).

Thus, through the movement and progression of the

river, Williams describes several of the world's most basic, overriding characteristics. Despite its rigidly, and cyclic time progression, the environment possesses an infinite number of secondary microcosms which comprise its whole, and these diverse subsets are engaged in continuous cycles of flux and rearrangement, giving everything around us a sustained novelty and freshness as diverse as the world itself. Such an environment can provide man with the means of unending growth and development. This high level of compatibility is illustrated by some of man's most prevalent traits and characteristics. To analyze these traits, Williams again turns to the river as his dominant vehicle of expression.

Man

Of the many microcosms which Williams isolates within his world, none can rival the complexity, diversity, and individuality of man. Indeed, his infinitely spacious memory combined with his unpredictable, dynamic imagination allow Williams every bit as much room for exploration and analysis as the physical world itself offers. Given these two realms of such awesome diversity and fascinating intricacies, Williams finds it impossible to confine his attention to one long enough to complete a thorough examination of any of its multiple facets. After beginning his examination of one, he inevitably discovers elements of the other therein. He then immediately turns his attention to this new discovery and its source within the opposite realm, leaving the examination of his initial subject uncompleted. This oscillation occurs throughout nearly every one of Williams' descriptions of man of the environment, particularly in passages that incorporate water imagery. Such shifting makes an examination of man's general characteristics far more difficult. However, there is a great deal of method to this organizational madness, for it suggests man's diversity through the structure of the poem.

In the poem's introductory lines, Williams immediately begins his description of man by making references to his diversity, alluding to him as "the multiple seed,/packed

tight with detail" (p. 4). His use of water imagery to illustrate this complexity occurs shortly thereafter in a passage we have already examined in the discussion of nature's intricacy. In these lines Williams begins by looking at the "jostled" water of the river as it flows past his observation point above the falls. Rather than completing his examination of the current, however, Williams continues by comparing the flowing river, with its numerous sub-currents, eddies, and obstructions, to man's stream of consciousness, and its equally numerous inner complexities. Like the water, man's thoughts unceasingly "strike/an eddy and whirl, marked by a/leaf or durdy spume, seeming/to forget/Retake later the advance and are replaced by succeeding hordes/pushing forward" (p. 7, 8).

Clearly, this unending diversity brings with it an enormous amount of mental flux. Like the sustained process of rearrangement which takes place throughout the environment, however, the flux within the mind moves in a cyclic fashion, never arriving at any end or final conclusion. This principle of motion is discussed most clearly in the well known "Descent" passage at the beginning of the third section in the Second Book.

In the first lines of this passage, Williams summarizes the regular progression of joy to despair, victory to defeat, and good to bad so common in all of our lives.

scended back into himself, man too is capable of a rebirth and his despair undergoes a reversal, becoming joy.

The descent
 made up of despairs
 and without accomplishment
realizes a new awakening:
 which is a reversal
of despair.
 For what we cannot accomplish, what
is denied to love,
 what we have lost in the anticipation-
 a descent follows,
endless and indestructable
 (p.78, 79)

Although this passage is not rich in symbolism of any kind, its central image, "the descent," clearly suggests the falling water of the falls, the sustained flow of which is a function of the larger scale cyclic process of the natural world.

Thus, in subtly suggestive passages such as this one, we begin to see the remarkable similarities between our existence and that of the outer world. Both embody an infinite diversity and an inner complexity which is in a constant state of flux. Further, the movements and progressions within each of these similar yet separate worlds do not progress along a linear plane but in a cyclical oscillation allowing unending rearrangement, regrouping, and most importantly, growth.

Unfortunately this last characteristic, growth, is inherent only in the natural world. As we have seen, the individual who permanently withdraws himself from the roar-

ing flux and diversity of the immediate world inevitably "plunges" or "swoons," entering a world of silence, seclusion, and stagnation. Thus, for man to grow and develop he must move outward (as Paterson the poet moves in the first passage discussed from Book Three, section three), freeing himself of the stale, indefinite past and future. Having done so, he can tap the refreshing energy of the everchanging, immediate, natural world. This refreshment can only be accomplished through sustained attention to the things, processes, and cycles which comprise our immediate environment. Indeed, the attention must be so close that an "interpenetration" takes place between man and his environment. The result of this unity is described in section one, Book One, using the metaphor of the falls.

As our previous examination of this passage has shown, this roaring cataract of water represents the union of two physical realms within our environment, air and water. If we regard the flowing river as man's stream of consciousness, however, the falls begin to take on additional meaning, representing the state of interpenetration between man and the world. If man can channel all his attention on the outside world, his thoughts "coalesce:"

glass-smooth with their swiftness,
quiet or seem to quiet as at the close
they leap to the conclusion and
fall, fall in air! as if

floating, relieved of their weight,
split apart, ribbons; dazed, drunk
with the catastrophe of the descent
floating unsupported
to hit the rocks: to a thunder,
as if lightning struck.

(p. 8)

By embracing the world, man can be "relieved of [the] weight" exerted by the suffocating, indefinite realms of abstraction within his mind. Although such immediate thoughts must "retake their course" (p. 8) in the silent river, sustained attention to the present and the immediate allow an unending flow of thought leaping out from the mind's confines in the state of dynamic intensity described above.

Paterson's emphatic proclamation that he "must" direct his attention to the immediate roar of the falls cascading before him indicates not only that he has yet to actually arrive at the full, permanent interpenetration of thought and experience, but that such an achievement is far from easily won. Despite the fact that man and his world possess remarkably similar characters, the environment's infinitely complex and innumerable realms can easily overwhelm the individual struggling to "comb out" and interact with each of them. As we have seen throughout Paterson, opposing forces continually pull the individual in their respective directions creating a tension which

not everyone can cope with and even revel in as Williams seems to. As a means of illustrating the magnitude of this tension, Williams regularly describes specific situations in which Paterson the poet is blasted with contradictory demands upon his limited powers of concentration. Such is the case in the third section of the second book. Here, the poet is on one hand being drawn towards the enchanting, roaring falls, or the natural world of immediacy and flux. Beckoning in precisely the opposite direction is a woman, coaxing the torn, young poet to marry her and abandon the falls which she sees as unimportant:

And She -

Stones invent nothing, only a man invents.
What answer the waterfall? filling
the basin by the snag-toothed stones?

And He -

Clearly, it is the new, uninterpreted, that
remoulds the old, pouring down

And She -

It has not been enacted in our day!
.....Marry us! Marry us!
Or! be dragged down, dragged
under and lost.

(p. 82, 83)

Yielding to this tempting female's offer would indeed provide Paterson with relief from the immediate inter-tangled realm of the falls, however, immersion in the wedding ceremony's "empty words" (p. 83) would be disastrous to his creative imagination and art. Severed from the life sustaining falls, his life would be bound up in abstract notions of eternal devotion and spiritual attach-

ment established through the Bible's stale, outworn language. Inner stagnation would soon follow. "(The multiple seed/packed tight with detail, soured,/is lost in the flux and the mind,/distracted, floats off in the same/scum)" (p. 4).

In describing these gnawing tensions which exist within man's environment, Williams begins hitting extremely close to home. The infant screaming out its first moments of life has already become aware of that which the child and adult have had to learn and relearn throughout their existence. As Williams illustrates here, life is enormously difficult and painful, requiring an unlimited amount of patience, persistence and strength to endure. Despite Williams' plea to the contrary, a great many people deal with this anxiety and discomfort by turning away from the environment of the world which, if embraced, can relieve much of the pain of life.

However, many choose to "plunge" or "swoon," and as this centripetal movement begins, the outside world takes on an increasingly inaccessible, foreign appearance. The surrounding cycles continue to move forward in their evolution while the isolated individual lives in the world as it was when he abandoned it. Finally, this oblivious state leads to decay so that the individual is no longer able to interact in the slightest with any of the infinite realms that coexist around him. To illustrate this highly

undesirable state, Williams again resorts to the river, comparing man's mind to air sliding over the water but unable to interact with it: "And the air lying over the water/lifts the ripples, brother/to brother, touching as the mind touches,/counter-current upstream . . . whirling/accompaniment-but apart" (p. 25). In the following lines, Williams suggests the irony of this situation, given their nearly identical characteristics of diversity and cyclic flux. "One unlike the other, twins/of the other, conversant with eccentricities/side by side, bearing the water drops/the snow, vergent" (p. 25).

To the individual who has arrived at this state in which he and his environment are "paralle/but never mingling," the falls take on wholly new associations. Still a symbol of the immediate world, they no longer evoke the dynamic, rejuvenating flow of response within the mind. Rather, the unending flow of water crashing upon the rocks below becomes a numbing, overwhelming force driving the already isolated individual still deeper into the silent realm of his mind. Indeed, the falls finally threaten to induce a state of unconsciousness and ultimately death. "With the roar of the river/forever in our ears (arreas)/inducing sleep and silence, the roar/of eternal sleep.... challenging out waking-" (p. 18).

The ease with which experience and thought can be divorced, the difficulties involved in having such "sins

forgiven" and "diseases cured" and the final processes by which an individual can reestablish an interpenetration with his environment are all illustrated by Paterson the poet throughout the bulk of the text. Again, this process of maturation is not recounted in a linear, systematic fashion because that would be unnatural; human understanding does not occur in this fashion. Imposing such an order on Paterson's development would divorce it from experience, leading the reader in precisely the opposite direction that Williams would direct him. Therefore, we can only continue as we have until now; by isolating and piecing together the bits of insight which our experience with Paterson and the Passaic sporadically reveal.

Paterson

The very first scene Williams describes in the four books of Paterson consists of the young poet floating on his back in the river below the falls: "Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls/its spent waters forming the outline of his back" (p. 6). Given our past discussion of silence, immersion, and unconsciousness, it should be immediately apparent that Paterson is in an extremely precarious, undesirable state. Although he is not completely submerged, he is dangerously close, the "multiple seed" of his existence already appearing to be "soured." In the following lines, however, it becomes clear that he has not completely severed himself from his immediate environment, as Williams shifts from a panoramic description of the river below the falls to the activity within the sleeper's mind: "He lies on his right side, head near the thunder/of the waters filling his dreams! Eternally asleep,/his dreams walk about the city where he persists incognito" (p. 6). Although Paterson is aware of the immediate roaring world around him, he clearly is "its slave," (p. 145) completely incapable of penetrating it as it is currently penetrating him. The poet thus remains "eternally asleep," his thoughts drawn from the noise of the pouring river and confined to the realm of the mind which is unable to channel them in a centrifugal direction.

The following stanza, illustrates more specifically the stagnant quality of the poet's isolated world using the river above the falls as a symbol for his soured mind. Set well apart from the crashing falls, the poet's imagination is seen here as a region of static fermentation and decay, without any sort of flux and embodying no growth whatsoever:

From above, higher than the spires, higher
even than the office towers, from oozy fields
abandoned to grey beds of dead grass,
black sumac, withered weed-stalks,
mud and thickets cluttered with dead leaves-
(p. 6)

Throughout these opening pages an exterior voice continually advises the mentally diseased young poet to turn from his stagnant realm of inner deterioration by diverting his attention to the immediate world of things. Again and again we hear the command, "say it, no ideas but in things" (p. 9), pleading with Paterson to unlock his thoughts from the realm of his unknowable, temporal dreams, and convert them to their knowable form within his environment through speech. At the opening moment, however, Paterson is not capable of "combing out" the turbulent, rushing river of his thoughts which, we have seen, "interlace, repel, and cut under" (p. 7) in a never ending movement within his mind. Until he learns to channel the flow of his thoughts over the falls in the form of speech, they will continue to roar painfully about within him.

The first such episode involves Mrs. Sarah Cumming, a minister's wife who lived during the early nineteenth century. As the passage illustrates, her role in life was nothing more than "consort" (p. 14) to her husband. We are, of course, intended to take the word "consort" at its full meaning, and thus view Mrs. Cumming not just as the Reverend's spouse, but as his everpresent follower, always in full agreement with all that he said or did. In such a position she was rarely called upon to think for herself, much less interact with the immediate problems and corruptions within her environment. Rather, she was continually expected to divert her attention to the static spiritual truths and goals of her husband's religion within Williams' dreaded, abstract realm of "the someday." Williams underlines the artificiality and removed quality of this woman's life by utilizing an equally artificial, elevated, unauthentic language. Further, the prose keys on irrelevant details and spiritual abstractions:

Mrs. Sarah Cumming, consort of the Rev. Hopper Cumming, of Newark, was a daughter of the late Mr. John Emmons, of Portland, in the district of Maine . . . She had been married about two months, and was blessed with the flattering prospect of no common share of temporal felicity and usefulness in the sphere which Providence had assigned her;
(p. 14)

The passage goes on to describe a trip the couple took to Paterson, New Jersey where, after ministering to

the spiritually destitute, they went to examine the Passaic Falls. Given our understanding of the overwhelming sense of immediate turmoil, passion, and flux this natural phenomenon possesses, we can anticipate Mrs. Cumming's response of dismay, confusion, and perhaps terror upon her confrontation with the roaring body of water. Williams does not tell us whether she slipped or fell, but her subsequent plunge into the river was certainly, as later lines indicate, the result of her inability to come to terms with, or interpenetrate her environment through speech. As we have seen, the only language she knows is one of elevated decorum, in no way related to her experience or the immediate world of turmoil, flux, and tangible things. In Williams' words, she only knew "a false language pouring-a/language (misunderstood) pouring (misinterpreted) without/dignity, without minister, crashing upon a stone ear" (p. 15). Unable to transfer her energies and attention to the falls, her psychological isolation soon becomes permanent as the waters of the Passaic confine her to a silent realm "in a depth of 42 feet" (p. 15).

Directly after this narrative prose section is another which describes the brief career of Sam Patch, a cliff diver. Unlike Mrs. Cumming, Patch was a common laborer in one of Paterson's mills, earning his living by the use of his hands. The story recounts the big day in which the first bridge was to be erected over the Passaic Falls.

Large crowds gathered to witness the project's completion. Their pleasure was shattered, however, when one of the pullies being used to haul the bridge across the gorge broke loose and fell into the raging waters below. Upon witnessing this chain of events, Sam Patch dove off the cliff to retrieve the pulley. His actual intention in making this jump, however, was not to salvage Tim Crane's bridge project, but to overshadow it through the defiant boldness of this assertion over the powerful falls. As he leapt from the cliff's edge he muttered "Now old Tim Crane thinks he has done something great; but I can beat him" (p. 16). Although Patch showed himself to be more aware of the natural world's power than Mrs. Cumming, he too adopted an equally improper, unrealistic relationship to it in his attempt to assert his power over its raging might. Divorced from the powerful roar of the falls, he too confines himself to the empty language of meaningless inner abstraction.

Having successfully completed his initial leap over the Passaic Falls, Patch began a career as a stunt diver, leaping off dangerously high cliffs before crowds of spellbound spectators. In describing his ensuing tour around the country, Williams again underlines Patch's continuing inability to discover an authentic language through the diver's selection of two silent traveling partners, a fox and a bear. Here again, our past ex-

perience with inarticulate individuals allows us to predict Patch's ensuing death via immersion before it is revealed in the following lines. While preparing to make one final leap to beat all leaps, Patch was called upon to make a speech to the assembled crowd. Confused and disoriented, he stumbled off the platform crashing onto the water's surface on his side and sinking into its silent realm:

A speech! What could he say that he must leap so desperately to complete it? And plunged toward the stream below. But instead of descending with a plummet-like fall his body wavered in the air-Speech had failed him. He was confused. The word had been drained of its meaning.

(p. 17)

The undesirable nature of his ensuing state of eternal sleep is highlighted in the passage's concluding lines which describe the final recovery of the silent corpse the following spring: "Not until the following spring was the body found frozen in an ice-cake" (p. 17).

By the end of Book One the reasons for Paterson's emphatic reference to the language as a "necessity" have become abundantly clear. Through the nearly exclusive use of water imagery, Williams has lucidly outlined and illustrated the fatal effects of a language severed from its true source, the eternally new, rejuvenating realm of the immediate world. Unless Paterson can join the roaring language of the falls with the turbulent flow of his

imagination, the life sustaining interpenetration of thought and experience will never come about:

I must
find my meaning and lay it, white,
beside the sliding water: myself-
comb out the language-or succumb
(p. 145)

In Book Two Paterson tries desperately to "comb out the language" through his undivided attention to the falls. When asked what his occupation is, he answers; "What do I do? I listen to the water falling. (No/sound of it here but with the wind!) this is my entire/occupation" (p. 45). Despite this sustained level of attention and his increased abhorrence of the thought "that a poet,/in disgrace, should borrow from erudition (to unslave the mind)" (p. 80), Paterson remains "hedged by the pouring torrent" (p. 39).

Caught (in the mind)
beside the water he looks down, listens!
But discovers, still, no syllable in the confused
uproar: missing the sense (though he tries)
untaught but listening, shakes with the intensity
of listening
(p. 81)

At the end of the book his sense of desperation and frustration is amplified by the previously mentioned, unnamed female who attempts to draw him permanently away from the falls with the "empty words" (p. 83) of the marriage ceremony. Unwilling to succumb to her plea and unable to comb out the language of the falls, Paterson flees them both, yet does not escape the roar: "he fled

pursued by the roar" (p. 84).

Although this retreat from the falls does not mark Paterson's escape from the seemingly impenetrable roar, it does initiate his adoption of a new approach to the problem of expression. In the third book the young poet enters the public library with hopes of isolating the shortcoming in his language through the examination of past writer's works. In the three sections that follow, he reads of three natural disasters which occurred in Paterson, New Jersey's history, a fire, a tornado, and most important to this discussion, a flood. In describing these catastrophes Williams, more than anywhere else in the poem, capitalizes on his technique of equating the progress and effects of the natural phenomena with the developments that take place within the poet.

The first historical incident, in the poet's reading is the tornado that swept through the city in the early nineteenth century. As he reads the report of this disaster, it soon becomes clear that its dry, journalistic language is as artificial and removed from the immediate world as that of Mrs. Cumming who swooned and plunged into the beckoning, silent water. Thus, the empty language in the book evokes a new, unauthentic cataract of language within the poet, which is in effect nothing more than the roar of "dead men's dreams" (p. 100). Within the poet's mind

a falls unseen
tumbles and rights itself
and refalls-and does not cease, falling
and refalling with a roar, a reverberation
not of the falls but of its rumor
unabated
(p. 96)

Despite the fact that this reverberation is only a rumor of the real falls, Paterson finds it far more suffocating than the authentic, seemingly impenetrable roar he fled in the previous book. At one point, he admonishes himself for remaining in the library and contemplates returning to the falls for relief from the book's stale, distasteful language: "Quit it. Quit this place. Go where all/mouths are rinsed: to the river for an answer/for relief from meaning" (p. 111). Unable to tear himself away from the "cool of books," (p. 95) however, he remains in his seat and continues to read.

Again, given our past experience with stale language and removal from the immediate world, it should be obvious that Paterson is engaged in a process that leads to inner deterioration. Although his goals are healthy, his newly adopted methods of achieving them involve his separation from the life-sustaining falls, nearly complete withdrawal into the self, and immersion in an outworn, stagnant language. What saves Paterson's "seed" from being soured and enduring the fate of a Cumming or a Patch is the fact that despite his misdirected efforts, he is still in an active process of seeking: "Searching

among books; the mind elsewhere/looking down/seeking" (p. 112). As long as his mind actively continues to move forward in its search for an authentic language, we can assume that this despairing descent into the self will be succeeded by an ascent back into the world of the roaring falls. As Williams has told us, given this essential clinging to life's inevitable forward movement, "the descent/made up of despairs/and without accomplishment/realizes a new awakening:/which is a reversal of despair" (p. 78).

Thus, Paterson keeps on reading, descending farther and farther into himself as the roar of the books becomes greater and greater. In the third section, however, this inward movement can go no farther. Here, Paterson is reading about the great flood of the Passaic and the enormous amount of destruction and damage it caused. This account begins with a description of the heavy rains upstream, all of which were collected by the area's streams and channeled into the swelling Passaic. As the level of the river rose, debris scattered about the water's edge was swept loose and carried downstream. Eventually, the water's flow became so powerful that even "old timbers" embedded in the mud began to move and flow towards the falls and the ocean:

Rain

falls and surfeits the river's upper reaches,
gathering slowly. So be it. Draws together,
runnel by runnel. So be it. A broken oar

is found by the searching waters. Loosened
it begins to move. So be it. Old timbers
sigh-and yield.

(p. 129, 130)

At this point, the river becomes a wholly destructive force, drowning the water lilies and sullyng the once "sweet" (p. 130) water in the well. Only one element of the natural world is able to lift itself above this destructive process of rearrangement, thus remaining unchanged and unaffected by the raging body of "muddy flux" (p. 130). "Men stand at the bridge, silent,/watching" (p. 130). These silent individuals are, of course, strikingly similar to Mrs. Cumming who could only gaze in wordless awe at the roaring Passaic falls. Set apart from the natural cycle of destruction, the men on the bridge cannot partake in the ensuing process of growth, the ascent following the descent. As the next stanza reveals, however, the poet's immersion in the flood of the book's language allows him a different fate.

As Paterson's attention remains fixed on the book he is reading, the reader's shifts to the poet's mind in which a psychological counterpart to the physical flood is developing. Just as the muddy water flows through and obliterates the city, the poet's stream of consciousness, muddied and swollen by the contaminating language of the books, begins to carry out the same processes within his mind. This overwhelming rush "anchors him in his

chair" (p. 130) prohibiting him from making a retreat to the company of the silent men watching the destruction from their bridge: "And there arises/a counterpart, of reading slowly, overwhelming/the mind; anchors him in his chair" (p. 130). As the sullied flow pours through his mind the "lilies" (p. 130) of his imagination are also drowned by the muddy flux. The "leaden" stream continues to grow, fueled by all the other texts, synopses, digests, and emendations on the shelves around him.

In the lines that follow Paterson at last arrives at the limit of this destructive process of inner deterioration. Overwhelmed by the roaring flood of unnatural language pouring through his mind, he reaches the point of psychic and verbal chaos in which the words become divorced of their meaning. All previously held associations of sound and sense are scoured away by the muddy flux leaving the still raging flow of thought in a state of absolute anarchy. Before Williams examines this state more closely, however, he turns back to the physical flood, first examining the silent individuals on the bridge who, because of their isolation, remain confined by their unchanging, stagnant language of the past:

Until the words break loose or-sadly
hold, unshaken. Unshaken! So be it. For
the made-arch holds, the water piles up debris
against it but it is unshaken. They gather
upon the bridge and look down, unshaken.

(p. 130)

The water continues to rise throughout Paterson, New Jersey and Paterson the poet, threatening to submerge them both completely. At one point it is "two feet now on the turnpike/and still rising" (p. 135). Later, it is "undermining the railroad embankment" (p. 136). Throughout, however, its scouring, reordering properties are stressed. "The water at this stage no lullaby but a piston,/cohabitous, scouring the stones" (p. 136). At last the language of the poem begins to reflect the chaotic, unrecognizable, uncomprehensible body of meaningless syllables which are now cascading through the poet's mind.

Hi, open up a dozen, make
it two dozen! Easy girl!

You wanna blow a fuse?

All manner of particularizations
to stay the pocky moon :
January sunshine .

1949

Wednesday, 11
(10,000,000 times plus April)

—a red-buttèd reversible minute-glass

loaded with
salt-like white crystals
flowing

for timing eggs

Salut à Antonin Artaud pour les

lignes, très pures :

*"et d'évocations plas-
tiques d'éléments de"*

and

"Funeral designs"
(a beautiful, optimistic

word . . .) and

"Plants"

(it should be explained that
in this case "plants" does NOT refer to interment.)

"Wedding bouquets"

—the association
is indefensible.

(p.137)

All of the most basic tenets of language are undermined and mixed in this and the following meaningless bodies of words. Non sequitur follows non sequitur, French follows English, and passages of dialogue follow passages of descriptive prose. As the water rises past Paterson's "teeth/to the very eyes" (p. 136) the limit is finally reached. The unordered spewing of words in the preceding pages is finally reduced to the primitive mumblings "uh, uh" (p. 140). Here at last all remnants of a past, preconceived language have been washed from the poet's mind. The descent is complete and for an instant Paterson reaches the absolute nadir of existence.

FULL STOP
-and leave the world
to darkness
and to
me.

(p. 140)

Without a language to describe and illustrate, the world is an intangible realm of darkness, empty and meaningless. Here again Williams toys with the lines' structures to emphasize their meanings. As the last flecks of language fade away within the poet, the lines undergo an identical process of deterioration, finally fading into one monosyllabic word and then silence.

Instantly, Williams shifts to a description of the physical land after the flood. The roaring, filthy waters have deposited a thick layer of acrid mud and

slime everywhere, leaving the entire environment unrecognizable and foreign: "When the water has receded most things have lost their/form. They lean in the direction the current went. Mud/covers them/fertile(?) mud" (p. 140).

This last phrase, "fertile (?) mud," raises the possibility of new life springing from the formless, seemingly sterile environment. Ignoring the principle of time's inevitable cyclic progression between life and death, the following lines mourn the fate of their stinking, decayed environment and curse the "pustular scum" (p. 140) that brought about the lifelessness around them. The mud is seen as a "sort of muck, a detritus,/in this case-a pustular scum, a decay, a choking/lifelessness-that leaves the soil clogged after it" (p. 140).

Similarly, Paterson's mind is equally formless and lifeless as a result of the devastating torrent of muddy thought that has only recently receded. Paterson, however, rejects the pessimistic attitude of the previous lines. Free of the confining tradition, style, and form of the past, he at once reestablishes his search for a meaningful language; a language kept alive and vital by its inherent authenticity:

How to begin to find a shape-to begin to begin
again,
turning the inside out: to find one phrase that
will
lie married beside another for delight . ?
P. 140)

At first this goal seems "beyond attainment" (p. 140) and the poet considers returning to the past for inspiration and aid in his struggle. However he resists this temptation, glancing again over his lifeless environment and the processes of decay occurring therein: "The leaves that were varnished/with sediment, follow the clutter/made piecemeal by decay, a/digestion takes place (p. 141). Having isolated this process of digestion, he next exclaims "of this, make it of this, this/this, this, this, this" (p. 141). Here Paterson at last finds the means of survival and the eternal source of his art within nature's processes of digestion, rebirth, and growth. By immersing himself in time's forward flow and flux he has freed himself of the past and has locked his mind in phase with the cycles of his changing environment. Paterson thus places complete faith in the world's immediate cyclic oscillation between life and death, joy and despair, ascent and descent. In doing so he can permanently divorce himself from those individuals who worry about the future and the dreamy someday and concentrate his energies exclusively on the immediate, infinitely diverse world of intricacy, movement sensory stimulation. Thus, the flower that sprouts out of the mud in the following stanza reflects the inevitable processes of rebirth and rejuvenation occurring in both Patersons, man and city.

Where the dredge dumped the fill,
something, a white hop-clover

with cordy roots (of iron) gripped
the sand in its claws-and blossomed
massively.

(p. 141)

As the white hop-clover grips down in the foul, acrid mud, so too does Paterson begin to penetrate the world in all its beauty and foulness. This process first involves leaving the library and returning to the falls where he makes his affirmation of the present which we first examined in this discussion of the river and water imagery.

Having struggled with Paterson through cyclones, fires, floods, and stale languages, the reader is now in a far better position to recognize the tremendous difficulties involved for the poet in achieving his goals as well as the magnitude of the benefits associated with his success. For the interpenetration between Paterson and the environment to come about, the poet must unendingly renew and reestablish his relationship with the world's many changing parts. Thus, "combing out" and making a separate "replica" of the language of the falls demands a language that continually shatters the old forms and makes its own new model embodying the flux of the earth, "whatever the complexion" (p. 145).

The reader's first impulse at this point may be to breathe a huge sigh of relief. Paterson seems finally to have conquered the enormous barriers between his mind and

environment and set himself on a path of sustained happiness and satisfaction. The creative cycle, however, has not been completed, nor can we assume that it has such a beginning and a conclusion. Paterson has, in an extremely arduous struggle throughout the first three books, moved from ignorance to some degree of insight; however, as the river has shown, time does not stand still at this point. Thus, the poet must continue to adhere to the river's cyclic course throughout the ensuing fourth book.

Although the fourth book is entitled "The Run To the Sea," there is very little direct reference to the river or ocean until the third section. At this point, however, the Passaic again springs to the center of attention as the section's dominant image. Throughout these concluding lines Paterson, the poet, appears to be floating along with the river's current as it moves towards the ocean. Further, the poet seems to have aged a great deal, feeling far more acutely the pull towards nostalgia. As he drifts downstream reminiscing in his mind about past people and places he has known, the presence of the engulfing ocean becomes increasingly noticeable. Approximately midway through the section, the poet appears partially to regain contact with the flowing Passaic as he describes the dominant role it has played in every part of his life. Indeed, as he here observes, it has in one form or another embodied all of the most basic

characteristics of the world including nature's infinite diversity and continuing progression of constructive and destructive flux:

My serpent, my river! genius of the field,
Kra, my adored one, unspoiled by the mind,
observer of pigeons, rememberer of
cataracts, voluptuary of gulls! Knower
of tides, counter of hours, wanings and
waxings, enumerator of snowflakes, starrer
through thin ice, whose corpuscles are
minnows, whose drink, sand .

(p. 193)

Finally, at the end of the section, Paterson is jerked out of these reminiscient wanderings by an inner voice that points out that his immersion in the sea will mean complete separation from the life giving properties of the world and river. This voice continues by challenging the poet's ability to withdraw himself from this unknowable body and make a new beginning out of this overwhelming end: "You cannot believe that it can begin again, again, here/again. here" (p. 220).

Thus, the sea begins to take on a destructive character associated almost exclusively with death. After describing the sea worms which "jubilate" at death, and the lethal shark that "snaps at his own trailing guts" (p. 200) making the green water red, the poet is again emphatically urged to leave the river while he can: "Turn back/I warn you" (p. 200). Paterson, however, has had a great deal of experience with inner deterioration, and his

most depressed moments have come when he has separated himself from the cyclic progressions of his environment. Thus, there arises within him a counter voice advocating his continued immersion in the river and the continuous cycles of time: "But lullaby, they say, the time sea is/ no more than sleep is. afloat/with weeds, bearing seeds" (p. 200). Paterson seems to be referring here to the insight he gained from his immersion in the flood of Book Three. Regardless of the magnitude or severity of the abyss, whether it be a formless, post-flood mudscape or an enormous indistinguishable ocean, there will always exist seeds from which new life can eventually grow, given sufficient nurturing from the imagination. Thus, the ocean is not to be feared, but welcomed and embraced as the next step in our cyclic life. The opposing voice again repeats its warning: "I warn you,/the sea is not our home/the sea is not our home," (p. 201) stressing again the water's destructive forces which will do irreparable damage on the poet. However, this warning is again countered with the other voice's comment: "The sea is our home whither all rivers/(wither) run" (p. 201).

In a sense each of these conflicting voices pulling the poet in its respective direction is correct. On one hand, the sea does mark the end of the river's flow as it "wITHERS" into the sea's unknowable enormity. On the other hand, the shattering of form and such identifying

characteristics as current and falls is also the beginning of a new cycle with the final destination or home of the "oozy fields/abandoned to grey beds of dead grass,/black sumac, withered weed-stalks,/mud and thickets" (p. 6) at the Passaic's headwaters. The sea is our home in that it is a part of the natural cycle; however, it has no more maternal claim on us than any other realm in the natural world. Thus, as the river and Paterson flow into the ocean these conflicting voices again confirm Williams' central thesis that "everything exists from the beginning."³

At the instant that the sea and the river meet, we immediately lose track of Paterson and our perspective shifts to an unnamed individual on the beach who notes an unidentifiable mass floating about in the ocean just barely within his sight. He guesses at its identity, speculating that it might be a duck, a dog, or possibly a porpoise. Unable to distinguish its exact identity, however, he simply concludes that it can be nothing more than floating wreckage or refuse.

What's that?
-a duck, a hell-diver? A swimming dog?
What, a sea-dog? There it is again.
A porpoise, of course, following
the mackerel. No. Must be the up-
end of something sunk. But this is moving!
Maybe not. Flotsam of some sort.
(p. 202)

Engulfed in this abstract, unchartable body of water, this description of Paterson as an unidentifiable form is

not wholly inaccurate. As the cycles repeat themselves, the poet again gives up his form and identity as he did when submerged and scoured by the muddy flux in Book Three. Such destruction, however, is no longer any cause for alarm as we can depend on this downward cycle to inspire its opposite.

Accordingly, the following lines again shift our attention, this time to a large dog pacing anxiously about the seashore. "She looks to sea,/cocking her ears and,/restless, walks to the water's edge where/she sits down, half/in the water" (p. 203). Clearly, this faithful hound shares our anticipation of the poet's emergence from the dark sea. The poet does indeed emerge in the following stanza, immediately wiping the water from his face and knocking it from his ears as a means of reestablishing contact with his natural environment. This struggle to regain his identity and environment of sensory stimulation has not been any more easily won than his struggle with the overwhelming flood, as he immediately stretches out on the hot sand and falls asleep: "Wiping his face with his hand he turned/to look back at the waves, then/knocking at his ears, walked up/to stretch out flat on his back in the hot sand" (p. 203).

Having rested, he gets up again and dresses, preparing himself to begin anew his interaction with the environment. Fully clothed, he directs his steps towards the roar of a

distant waterfall from whose chaotic language he must again comb out a new meaning. On his way towards the faint roar the poet picks several beach plums and samples one of them, spitting out the seeds. Although the poet departs, his discarded seeds, his poems, remain, spawning new life and a renewed cycle given a fertile nourishing environment such as our imagination.

The End/The Beginning

At last Paterson is in a position to write, which, having "lived" in Williams' full sense of the word, will be very easy: "The writing is nothing, the being/in a position to write (that's/where they get you) is nine tenths of the problem . . . to write, nine tenths of the problem/is to live" (p. 113). As Paterson's experience in the library has taught him, the poem cannot be completely separated from the world. Rather it must form an interpenetration with the environment, capturing some of its confused energy in its lines.

The province of the poem is the world.
When the sun rises, it rises in the poem
and when it sets darkness comes down
and the poem is dark .

(p. 99)

Having harnessed a portion of the falls' roar in the poem, the poet's work can have a far greater effect on the reader than his unsupported language could evoke by itself. Thus, between the world and the poet, the poem embodies its own "little universe" (p. 224) retaining the dissonant characteristics of both of its sources: "A poem is a complete little universe. It exists separately" (p. 224). From this body of words, the reader must comb some meaning for himself.

But Paterson does much more than simply tell us these things, it embodies and illustrates them over and over again. The actual word "interpenetration" is only men-

tioned once throughout the entire text. On nearly every page, however, we experience this state through Williams' weaving man and environment, thought and experience:

"Jostled as are the waters approaching/the brink, his thoughts/interlace, repel and cut under" (p. 7). Again and again these two infinite diversities of man and the world are bound into a contrapuntal union, so that they form a harmonic relationship while retaining their cyclic individuality. Thus, Paterson does indeed form its own universe filled with as much diversity and dynamic flux as Paterson and the world possess themselves.

As was the case in Paterson's universe, the realm which Paterson embodies also contains its own elements of disorder; yet a beckoning roar draws the reader to comb these complications out. As my initial difficulties in confronting the poem illustrate, this can be a very trying process, requiring an enormous amount of patience and perserverence. Trained only to discuss and analyze literature on the basis of its adherence to thematic, structural and aesthetic tradition, my personal appreciation of the text required a "descent" much like the one Paterson, the poet, repeatedly undergoes. Nowhere to be found are the Shakespearian rhyme scheme, the familiar elements of trajedy, or even a hint of the heroic epoch structure, any one of which I could have spent hours discussing and relating to past and future literary develop-

ments. To comb meaning from Paterson, a "man is under the crassest necessity/to break down the pinnacles of his moods/fearlessly" (p. 85). Such an abandoning of tradition and literary "fact" is extremely difficult as the reader is left with no resources other than his own mind in the struggle with the tangled flow of the poem. The ensuing immersion in the words, however, allows him to "realize a new awakening/which is a reversal of despair" (p. 78). Sustained measuring and remeasuring of the work's syllables, words, lines, sections and books finally leads to the critical interpenetration between Paterson and the reader. Thought is married to the experience of untangling and measuring anew Williams' knotted, roaring text.

At the end of the first book Williams is engaged in a description of the relationship between the mind and the world. The lines indicate that it is the "Myths" of man's imagination resulting from the interplay with the physical surroundings that allow the falls their infinite power; Within the mind, the "moist chamber" (p. 39) behind the rushing torrent, "the myth/that holds up the rock,/that holds up the water thrives there/in that cavern, that profound cleft" (p. 39). Like the roaring falls, the chattering "universe" of the poem is but a universal blank, except when combed out and invested with significance by the reader's imagination. Once attained, the relationship grows and develops into an inseparable, mutually sus-

taining union; one of strength and beauty equal to the
bond between Pater and son.

Footnotes

¹William Carlos Williams, "A New Measure," in Modern Poetics, ed. James Scully (New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 1965), p. 70.

²Scully, p. 70.

³William Carlos Williams. The Great American Novel (Paris: Contact, 1923), p. 9.

⁴All references to Paterson from: William C. Williams, Paterson (New York: New Directions, 1963).

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