

Elin Käck, “Swarming European Consciousness”. Europe and Tradition in the Work of William Carlos Williams. Studies in language and culture 27, Department of Culture and Communication, Linköping University.

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the production of a truly American poetics, one countering the imperial hold of Europe over the arts and literature, is a career-long undertaking. The demands and conditions of this commitment are central to all of his texts, and those of many, if not all, other American experimental authors.

Elin Käck's book "*Swarming European Consciousness*": *Europe and Tradition in the Work of William Carlos Williams* makes the reader return to texts that are fundamental and fascinating and that retain their difficulty despite the numerous exegeses of many brilliant critics. The texts elude definite interpretation, and acquire new significance over time, so that it is not sufficient to take for granted that interpretation necessarily is plural and contradictory rather than univocal and homogeneous: it is also mutable, and adaptable, and consequently requires the recovery of already covered ground. Williams's texts are heterogeneous and hybrid and as such generate heterogeneous and hybrid analyses that need constant reassessment and reevaluation. Over an impressive volume of 252 pages of text, complete with a bibliography of more than twenty pages and an index, Elin Käck demonstrates the necessity of these re-readings with the finesse of one that continuously resists the temptation to resolve dilemmas and aporias.

Hence the dynamics of Käck's three chapters is crucial to understanding the spiraling quality of her reflection, her reluctance to bring closure to debate and her attention to the minutiae of textual analysis. Place, power, and language are the notions that constitute the focal points of the book, since they are so intertwined in Williams's work and in his approach to Europe and European culture that they fold onto themselves and cross-pollinate one another in ways that transcend the apparent neatness of these distinctions. By choosing such transparent terms as titles for her chapters, Käck questions these categories and unsettles rather than she confirms this clarity: the corpus will prove recalcitrant to the notions, and the very perception of Europe through Williams's works will thus be complexified and transformed.

Logically, in her introduction, Elin Käck begins with a redefinition of Europe, not to be understood as the geopolitical entity one might at first envision, but as both a place and a concept. She sees Williamsian Europe as "a construct" or a "trope." Quite systematically, the introduction in fact reviews the various terms of the book's title, activating each of its words as the intellectual trajectory

Elin Käck, "*Swarming European Consciousness*": *Europe and Tradition in the Work of William Carlos Williams*. *Studies in language and culture* 27, Department of Culture and Communication, Linköping University. Linköping 2015.

In the lines of his preface to *Paterson*, William Carlos Williams expresses his disapproval of those poets that had opted for expatriation, deserting the American territory for the more polished, but less fertile grounds of Europe. Whereas he sees himself as the old "dog," who is also an old "god," he considers that "The rest have run out -- / After the rabbits" (*Paterson* 1958, 3). Williams's commitment to

moves from the issue of Europe to that of tradition. If defining what tradition represents to Williams proves complex in the long run, a primary assessment of Williams as part of the American poetic tradition today is made: he has been long excluded from anthologies in the U.S., but not anymore. He has met great interest in South America, and in Europe: in France, for instance, Williams features as the main subject of a whole issue of the ground-breaking poetics journal edited by Jacques Darras in Amiens (*In'huï* 1980). This special issue gathers original translations and critical essays, and gives a podium to Williams's poems in France and in French as early as 1980. The very same year, some of Williams's works were published in Darras's own translation by the major publisher Christian Bourgois: *In the American Grain*, and *The Great American Novel* (*Au Grain d'Amérique*, suivi de *Le grand roman américain* 1980). Williams's status is thus, as Käck underlines it, problematic and unstable, since one cannot fully argue that he is an outsider to the poetic canon, nor can one argue that he is part of it. He has been integrated as a foil to the non-democratic, dogmatic and at times elitist proclamations by authors such as Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot, but this image of Williams as the "unlearned" poet (20) is a distortion. According to Käck, Williams posits European and European culture at the center of his work in the 1920s (but also later, one could argue) as a trope generating specific literary strategies (rather than as a theme).

In her assessment of the state of the art in Williams studies, Käck lays the emphasis on the idea that "America and Europe" may be contrasted as the sites for different epistemological conditions, something which is powerfully taken up by Wendell Berry in his 2011 assessment of the usefulness of Williams's poetry: in *The Poetry of William Carlos Williams of Rutherford* (2011), one reads an account of the conceptualization of the poetry as one of place and "local adaptation" (11). The insistence, besides the comments about poetics, measure, and rhythm and the mysteries of making a poem, is laid on Williams's commitment to Rutherford as the place from which to look at the world. The portrait of the poet that thus emerges is extremely powerful, but also in keeping with the self-made image of Williams as the poet of re-contextualization and locality. To this extent, Käck's review of previous research outlines a blind spot that rests in the obliteration of the European dimension of the poetry, notwithstanding the rootedness of the poet and of

his poetic objects. It is in the textual consequences of the patterns of influence that one can recognize this more cosmopolitan dimension of Williams. What such studies might obliterate is the "discrepancy between what Williams explicitly states in his work, in his so-called rhetoric, and the operations the works themselves perform" (25). The summary of these different approaches in Williams criticism leads Käck to the statement of her own hypotheses, one that considers the text as embodying the process rather than as the resolution of the complex negotiation between the Europe (rather than European) trope and the American impetus.

The theoretical framework integrates the reflections around hegemonic power, and the counter-hegemonic strategies at work in social discourse, including in literature and the arts. Williams's text is to be read through a reinvestment of Foucauldian and Bakhtinian conceptions of discourses as sites of resistance and of form as the embodiment of intention. Käck suggests that Williams's texts are at the same time the examples and the theoretical statements of a poetics, thus simultaneously accounting for and altering their context. To this extent, the poems come to embody the Williamsian work of the imagination, fully creative and performative as it transforms the world it inhabits.

So, the methodology used by Elin Käck is far from being solely "thematic" (35), as demonstrated in her analysis of the poem "The Prelude" from the 1917 collection *Al Que Quiere*: the reading is of *topoi* in the poem's textual space and the interpretation relies on a rigorous examination of intertextual echoes to calculate the intent and portent of the poem. Going beyond the critical tensions between close reading and historicism, the method makes a very convincing argument for a more general process of analysis combining the two strategies and allowing for a stronger conceptualization, and the composition of a "socio-poesis." The reference to the poetic and critical practice of Rachel Blau Duplessis (35) is symptomatic of the innovative qualities of Käck's approach, and opens onto the notion of a "poethics" in the term coined by, among others, Joan Retallack (*The Poethical Wager* 2003).

Thus, the discussion of appropriation is important, since it raises the issue of counter-hegemonic strategies that would aim at asserting new authority over previously hegemonic material. One might contend, however, that Williams does not perform appropriation in the sense of assuming authorial control over someone else's text. As Käck under-

lines it, his modes of appropriation bear more on the allusive and evocative potentialities of words or expressions which are rather integrated or incorporated rather than imperialistically appropriated.

The three lines of reflection chosen to articulate the critical discourse offer a synchronic, rather than diachronic, vision of texts that were published between 1917 and 1928: this is the most openly experimental decade in Williams's writing, the period in which he tests a wide gamut of modes and forms. The later texts in this respect are more "recognizable" to use a Williamsian term, more specific of a poetics that has found its major tenets. This definition of the corpus evidences interest in formative texts whose very heterogeneity works against the homogeneity of an established canon, and contribute to a recovery of the poet from the classics of twentieth-century American poetry. The first chapter about "Place," the second about "Power," and the third focused on "Language" outline the different alleys of Williams's anti-dogmatic push: *place* to define localism and the possibility for a text to be informed by the very geomorphological "delineaments" of the land; *power* to account for the poetic ideal of marriage and a mystical "contact" with the radically "other"; *language* to reveal in the very structures of syntax the ideological "machine" that crushes the wild and enforces the predatory principles of empire.

The first chapter, "Place," starts by emphasizing the intricate links between the birth of an American poetics and its difficult separation from the body of Western-European culture. The issue of autonomy is at the heart of the questioning, as well as the patterns of a progressive decentering that has a lot to do with Jacques Derrida's advocacy in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (*Of Grammatology* 1997). The example of Williams's letter to Pound given on page 57 is telling in this respect:

Dear Ezra, Fer the luv of God snap out of it! I'm no more sentimental about "murika" than Li Po was about China or Shakespeare about Yingland or any damned Frog about Paris. I know as well as you do that there's nothing sacred about any land. But I also know (as you do also) that there's no taboo effective against any land, and where I live is no more a "province" that I make it. To hell with youse I ain't tryin' to be an international figure. All I care about is to write. (Williams to Pound, 4 January 1921, *Pound/Williams: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams* 1996, 52).

By questioning the very definition of center and "province," Williams adumbrates the necessary distancing from the dichotomy opposing self-centeredness to self-marginalization. Neither at the margins, nor at the center, the poet performs a more discrete reorganization of hierarchies from the vantage point of no vantage point: this important notion is inscribed between the lines of Käck's argument at this point, before she moves on to better-known comments on the position of Williams's suburb to the hyperactivity of Manhattan Dada. Now even the New York effervescence still sounds constraining when compared with the freedom of Paris as expounded on page 60: in this early twentieth century, as Käck points out very astutely, "America is in fact a colony." What this implies is the need to recover a language, poetic forms and poetic objects in a radical manner, which might have been the opportunity to put to good use the tools of postcolonial studies, particularly those honed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in the eponymous interview of *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (1990). Instead, maybe to avoid the debate over who colonized whom in America, Käck transitions from this paradoxical metamorphosis of the colonizer into the colonized and the notion of American literature as bearing at least some of the characteristics of postcolonial literature (notably because it is written in the language of a reconstructed colonizer) to the more widely investigated relations between Williams and the New York avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s.

Amidst a number of biographical elements that help explain Williams's powerful links to European culture and languages, Käck underlines a specificity of Williams's writing as it is inscribed inside the hegemonic paradigms, exposing them and evidencing the limits they unavoidably impose on the poet (69). There ensues an overview of Williams's readings, from his library, which contributes to debunking the myth of Williams as a relatively uncultured poet. Williams's reading includes all the classics, and many more authors, French and Spanish, that were not so currently read. Through the analysis of the poem "March," one understands that in fact the reading material, as well as the material gathered from the museum or the avant-garde, are considered as raw material both for the creations of their time, and for the creations of Williams's own time. The capability of the artist to transmute this material into a work of art guarantees, in Williams's eyes,

the possibility of an actual American culture. But above all Käck transcends the more conventional work on Williams's Europe, which is based on biographical investigations and the reading of *Voyage to Pagany*: condensed in one chapter of Herbert Leibowitz's recent biography (*Something Urgent I Have to Say to You: The Life and Works of William Carlos Williams* 2011), Williams's Europe could be seen as made of multiple encounters with varied individuals, with a special note for Surrealist poet Philippe Soupault or Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi. Yet, with Käck's revisitation of a more conceptual Europe in texts other than those about Europe, there emerges a different understanding of a phenomenon of European influence and inspiration that proves pervasive throughout the work.

A longer development is indeed devoted to Williams's claim of Shakespeare in the American lineage (and rather than focusing on a rejection of Shakespeare as the emblematic classic of British literature): by reclaiming Shakespeare, Williams integrates a lineage of dissent and linguistic inventiveness that is in keeping with his interest in and fantasized link to Emily Dickinson. The quotation on page 97 of Williams's description of Shakespeare is in this sense evocative: not only does he, as Käck states, define himself as an heir of Shakespeare, but he redefines Shakespeare as he sees himself — in his own image. To some extent, this self-made reading of tradition constructs every piece of interpretation, reinvention, or appropriation as an avatar of the self-portrait.

In chapter two, the interplay of power relationships in the achievement of poetic recognition is shown to be connected with the issue of violence and the use of war semantics in Williams's poems. A first step in this chapter is to specifically consider *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*: the approach is not so much centered on the possible formal or thematic common ground with the French prose poem, or with the Surrealist products of automatic writing, since those have been widely explored elsewhere. Rather it attempts to grapple with "a different kind of European presence" (115). Summoning and qualifying Mikhail Bakhtin's assertions on the monolingual and monological quality of poetry, Käck shows that poetic language cannot be radically divorced from context: in Williams's case, its very dynamics is based on constant decontextualization and recontextualization, notably when transferring the words of Europe to the American scene.

The comments on the use of myth in *Kora in*

Hell as threatening the modernist project and as "conservative" (121) may fall a bit short of the actual status of myth in Williams. As a cosmogonic discourse, the aim of myth is to provide an explanation for the world, its organization, or the chaotic lack thereof. Beyond the intertextual reference to Kora, there is an ethnographic dimension to the myth, and a reference to its Greek etymology, which implies a poetics based on the breath of life, and the spirit. What Williams does then could also be seen as an attempt to revivify discourse in 1917 and 1918, at a time of severe crisis in the Western world. To successfully return from Hell, from the realm of the dead, was a serious and very real stake at the time of Williams's improvisations. Laying more emphasis on the inscription of war in the poems may have served to better assess this value of myth as seminal, rather than merely referential, in Williams's texts.

Similarly, the point about polemics in Williams's 1920s writings singularly bypasses the actuality of war to focus on literary disputes: to the sentence "antagonism as a literary strategy is vital to Williams's construction of himself as a literary writer" (134–135), one might be tempted to respond that, in keeping with the urge to contextualize that pervades his work, Williams sees antagonism as ingrained in human relations and on many occasions, dramatizes it to denounce it. His disgust with Eliot also has to do with Eliot's detachment from the struggles of his contemporaries in real life, whereas his disapproval of Pound has a lot to do with Pound's political choices and his subsequent diatribes against the common man. Käck shows great insight in her reading of *Spring and All* and its method of including and excluding the reader from the text however: on page 146, for instance, she describes Williams's project of persuasion in extremely precise terms. The subsequent merging of criticism and poetry might have been more explicitly connected to the project that underpins Williams's work: his attempt at suppressing the notion of a poetic language that would be essentially different from the prosaic. In Williams's work since *Kora in Hell*, the poetic status of the poem lies somewhere beyond semantics or a conventional, metrically identifiable diction.

And indeed, this is what Käck goes on to explain as she comments on the role of the imagination as the power of actualization, and later on the performative qualities of *The Great American Novel*. The novel deals with the "complex network of relations that have a purchase on [Williams's] own lit-

erary efforts" (166). But it is probably in the analysis of *A Voyage to Pagany* that the Europe trope and its validity come across most clearly: there, Europe is seen "as the locus of the plot, as a powerful construct of past glory and as matter for textual rearrangement and subversion" (168). This threefold enumeration is crucial to the general argument of the book as it naturally translates into the definition of the function of the Europe trope: it is the locus of the poet's struggle, a powerful construct of aesthetic tradition, and the matter for rearrangement and subversion into an American trope. The comparison between the beginning of the novel and the beginning of the *Cantos* is very fertile and inspiring: it adds a lot to the investigation of the Pound-Williams tradition that M.L. Rosenthal first defined in his groundbreaking 1984 article, "William Carlos Williams: A Memoir" (*William Carlos Williams Review* 10, 1).

In the third and last chapter of the book, Elin Käck considers the linguistic strategies at work in Williams's texts to carry out what she calls his counter-hegemonic project. The battlefield is displaced a third time, from the primary issues of place and position, then power and agonistics, to anchor itself in text and textuality. She outlines the "de-potentialization of language," after Richard Sheppard in "The Crisis of Language" (*Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890–1930*, 1991). Remarkably, one reads there a synthetic paragraph that outlines, in my opinion, the horizon of the considerations about Williams and Europe:

Through meta-language, on the one hand, Williams' work actively destabilizes representations and description of reality, and in so doing they enact a "re-framing of the 'real'" to borrow Rancière's phrasing. Through code-switching, a linguistic term denoting a speaker's shift from the use of one language to another in conversation, furthermore, Williams destabilizes both the concept of time and of place in his work. In his use of polyphony and multiple and competing discourses within a single work, Williams enacts dissent, enacts the power-structure against which he writes, and enacts his proposition of the poem as a field of action [...]. (193)

In Williams, language becomes "a transformative, performative and subversive medium" (193). Through a thorough analysis of the various interpretations of the first poem of Section VI of *Spring and All*, Käck consequently distinguishes the dif-

ferent levels on which the poem can situate itself, as well as a whole gamut of possible reinterpretations. The poem crystallizes around the materiality of language and the arbitrariness of the sign unless it is made to radiate and establish relationships with other signs in a political and social network. Bakhtin's contention that in poetry words are suspended "in timeless air," separate from their objects and their history is turned into a theoretical foil, since Williams emerges as one of the counter-examples to this contention. What the poem does indeed is to demonstrate the vanity of meta-linguistic comment when not connected to a specific context: to problematize agency on the purely grammatical level, as Williams does it, is, as Williams puts it, to "have done nothing." To have done nothing is tantamount to having enforced nothingness, to having brought to the fore an emptiness that is depressing, entropic, a waste of energy leading to inertia. This entropic "nothing" necessarily calls forth "new linguistic configurations for social change" (203), that find their source in the re-energizing of the void.

This is further demonstrated in fact in a masterful analysis of the poem "The rose is obsolete," where Käck explicates or extricates the different levels on which the poem functions, particularly the way it provides a criticism of the rose as poetic signifier, the objective correlative for an entire tradition of romance and sentimentality, and a devalued *topos* of lyricism (201–211). This leads to considerations about the form of the poem as one realizes that such form as the sonnet is, to Williams, "a superstructure that orders and almost scripts the words." Here one wants to add that there is another worse crime of the sonnet which is that it also orders and scripts the *world*: in Williams's vision, the constraints to the poem are at the same time the symptoms and the causes of worldly constraints that need critiquing. This is another way to account for the Williamsian notion of structure as the contact zone between language and reality. As Käck astutely formulates it (216), it is "this power of language to structure and categorize that is Williams's chief concern."

Deriving from further considerations about foreign languages and polyphonic voices, the discussion of the unrecognizability of the American language is original and much to the point. Why would Williams seek to elaborate "a recognizable image" if he had not recognized its very unrecognizability? As the book moves towards a close, it is

the expression of this paradox in Williams's poetics that gets refined: Williams seeks to resolve the aporias of writing the American poem through their very reenactment, and undermining. Whether this succeeds or not is more a matter of opinion than of actual analysis, since the work is characterized by the iterations of the attempts, the composition of "new" processes rather than by the assessment of their results, thus remaining resistant to stabilization and categorization.

In the conclusion, the characterization of the part played by the Golden Age of Spanish literature as less markedly colonial than that played by English literature is probable, but it downplays the linguistic dimension of this literature that to a large extent must have addressed Williams's preoccupations with the vernacular, the instability of voice, and the precariousness of authorship and agency, that are also part and parcel of the American dilemma.

Elin Käck's work brings new concepts and innovative arguments to the field of Williamsian studies at the same time as it revisits the Euro-American relationship that is inaugurated by the poet's texts. One reads in Williams's work a dramatization of this complex relationship. The method of moving from close reading to socio-poetics suggests the possibility of a reading that will reveal the negotiation of this relationship, how it became reformulated and transformed through its questioning, precisely at a historical moment when the hegemonic status of Europe had become fragile and a reversal in hegemonic empire was taking place. The study of the Europe trope in Williams's works helps us understand the critical moment in history when America and the America trope become prevalent. The theoretical choice of Bakhtin over Rancière and his *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2013), or Derrida and his notion of de-centering and *différance*, or Deleuze and his notion of the minor mode in his study of Kafka (*Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* 1986), may at times seem disconcerting, but it does show us Williams as the "inventor" that he was, in Ezra Pound's terms, beautifully breaking out of the frame of the norm, out of the structure, and away from the normative.

Where *The Cambridge Companion to William Carlos Williams* (2016) provides important syntheses about the key aspects of the poet's life and works, addressing in turn his relations to his contemporaries, his links to the visual arts, his grounding in the American material and cultural land-

scapes, as well as his legacy, Elin Käck provides important insight to understand a more nuanced and less antagonistic relationship of his work to Europe and to grapple with the formal experiments that pervade the poems and to a considerable extent stem from the reading of more or less marginal Europeans. To this extent, it converges with Alexander Leicht's volume entitled *The Search for a Democratic Aesthetics* (Heidelberg, 2012) to reach out for original tools to return to the texts in themselves, their shifting status, and the new tradition they seek to empower. Leicht parallels Williams's work with that of Robert Rauschenberg and Walker Evans, in that they all explore their medium to produce "democratic theory in the language of art." Similarly Käck investigates Williams's poems implementing Europe as a crucial trope that helps theorize their polyglot, polyphonic, and polymorphous intermediality, and thus makes [them] relevant to Ezra Pound's poetic paradigm as it is defined in *ABC of Reading* (London, 1934): they are "news that stays news."

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