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The Descent of Winter: William Carlos Williams Under the Influence of Paris

Phillip Barron

The Descent of Winter, published in Ezra Pound's magazine *The Exile* in 1928, is an uneven experiment in unclassifiable writing. Williams began writing the diaristic entries aboard the *SS Pennland* "in the fall of 1927. He was returning from Europe, where he had left Florence Williams with their two sons, who were to attend school in Geneva." (*Imaginations*, 231) The slim book alternates between spare, image driven poems composed of short lines and diaristic prose. Most entries are titled only with the dates of their composition. In aesthetics, Williams always concerned himself with form. The variety of styles present in *The Descent of Winter* can be seen as an extended experiment to find the form or forms of writing best suited to modernity and, for the meandering way in which the styles are linked together, a formalist's representation of surrealism.

Many entries bear the same title, implying that, on some days, Williams wrote more than one piece a day. For example, the first entry titled 10/28 is a prose block of 1048 words on the circumstances of Dolores Marie Pischak's birth. The writing style is disjunctive and non-sequitur, but the passage has a unifying focus on the lives of the infant's family and the neighborhood into which she has been born. The passage concludes:

Whisper of the high school girl that had a baby and how smart her mama was to pretend in a flash of genius that it was hers. Jesus Christ. Or let us take a run up to the White Mountains or Lake Mohonk. Not Bethlehem (New Hampshire) any more, the people have ruined that like lice all over the lawns. Horrible to see. The dirty things. Eating everywhere. Parasites.

And so order, seclusion, the good of it all.

But in Fairfield men are peaceful and do as they please— and learn the necessity and the profit of order— and Dolores Marie Pischak was born.

Formally, the second entry (of four) titled 10/28 contrasts sharply with the imposing block of prose that precedes it:

10/28

On hot days
the sewing machine
whirling

in the next room
in the kitchen

and men at the bar
talking of the strike
and cash.

Here is Williams' typically spare lineated poetry. Like in the previous piece, factual details ground this 10/28. Instead of writing "whirls" in the first stanza or "talk" in the last, Williams modifies the predicates of each clause by using the participial forms of the verbs. The modified predicate destabilizes the subject, and the effect is an implied compression of language. The juxtaposition of images—a sewing machine and men talking at a bar—suggests a relationship between the two. What that relationship is, however, is left unexplained.

This technique of placing unexplained images side by side recurs throughout Williams' poems in *The Descent of Winter*.

10/ 22

that brilliant field
of rainwet orange
blanketed

by the red grass
and oilgreen bayberry

the last yarrow
on the gutter
white by the sandy
rainwater

and a white birch
with yellow leaves
and few

and loosely hung

and a young dog
jumped out
of the old barrel

The poem presents the reader with images. There is little narrative arc to the poem, there is minimal story to tell. There is no indication how these images are valued or compared. There is no guide to the emotional state of the poem's speaker. There are only images observed. The poem's adjectives describe the scene's colors and suggest the changing seasons. Only the word "brilliant" implies a possible admiration for the colorful scene. But "brilliant" has multiple meanings, and an interpretation more in line with the rest of the poem suggests that "brilliant" should be read synonymously with vivid or intense. "Say it, no ideas but in things," Williams would write nearly twenty years later in the opening stanzas of Book I of *Paterson*, his epic poem of industrialism and modernity. Poetry composed of "no ideas but in things" would later be recognized by Louis Zukofsky, Ezra Pound, Charles Reznikoff, and others as objectivist. (Perloff, 149) The spare, imagistic language of *The Descent of Winter*, and of the poems that comprise *Spring and All* before it, exhibit his early experiments with objectivism.

Throughout *The Descent of Winter*, the pieces alternate between what may be called prose and lineated poetry. Chronology is the only organizing structure. The alternating styles, the disconnected subject matter, and the diaristic format give the reader insight into the ways in which Williams emphasized experimentation over adherence to traditional forms.

The poet's use of onomatopoeia to recreate the sounds of a freight train tugging through the landscape in 10/30 suggest the influence of futurism. "clank, clank/clank, clank" and later "wha wha/of the hoarse whistle//pah, pah, pah/pah, pah, pah, pah, pah" reads the only entry for that day.

By leaving to chance what the subject matter and form of each day's entry would be, Williams experiments with Surrealism and Dadaism. *The Descent of Winter* is Surrealist in its composition in that chance determines the juxtaposition of images and brief narratives. Williams writes with an immediacy that reflects the equanimity of his thought, moving seamlessly from the objectivist poem of 9/29 to the next day's self-critical reflection on his own writing. (Bremen, 66; Copestake, 111) Although Surrealism is typically associated with psychological mysteries and dream-like sequences of impossible connections, Surrealism's core principles of automatic writing and chance are evident in *The Descent of Winter*. One reason for this may be the company Williams kept in Paris.

During his 1927 visit to France, Williams kept his distance from the expatriate crowd. But through an American editor, he welcomed an introduction to the Surrealist writer Philippe Soupault. (Soupault, vi) In Paris, Williams and Soupault spent time walking "the deserted streets and on the quays along the Seine" at night. Soupault, who along with André Breton founded Surrealism and in 1919 authored the first book of automatic writing, remembers talking in the cafés with Williams about the habits of Parisians. "He preferred his solitary strolls to the 'exiled' American get-togethers," Soupault writes. (Soupault, 178)

A year after Williams' visit to Paris, Philippe Soupault published his third novel, *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris*. The novel's thin plot revolves around chance, the night, somnambulist characters, sexual desire, mysterious violence, and repressed memories. The narrator's nocturnal walks around the city are punctuated by the chance encounters with other characters, and occasionally the narrator gives voice to the order he seeks in the unplanned introductions. "The man laid down these words before us like so many playing cards," Soupault writes. "Sharply and unexpectedly, they revived the unexplained and unexplainable scenes which I had witnessed. Once more chance had destroyed oblivion, and given reality to what I would willingly think of as dreams." (Soupault, 72)

Williams translated Soupault's novel, which Macaulay and Co. published in New York in 1929 under the title *Last Nights of Paris*. Williams' masterful rendering reads as

simply as an original work. The story must have reminded the poet of his nights walking the streets of Paris with Soupault.

In 11/1 Introduction, a meditation on modern writing, Williams describes his own poetics:

poetry should strive for nothing else, this vividness alone, per se, for itself. The realization of this has its own internal fire that is “like” nothing. Therefore the bastardy of the simile. That thing, the vividness which is poetry by itself, makes the poem. There is no need to explain or compare. Make it and it is a poem. This is modern, not the saga.

Four years later, Louis Zukofsky cites *Spring and All*, rather than *The Descent of Winter*, as among the “works absolutely necessary to students of poetry” in his essay Program: “Objectivists,” which appeared in the February 1931 issue of *Poetry*. (268) Aware of the confusion that surrounded the term “objectivism,” Zukofsky describes objectivist writing as without an epistemological claim on the truth because “there was neither consciousness of the ‘objectively perfect’ nor an interest in clear or vital ‘particulars.’ Nothing—neither a new object nor the stripping of an old to the light—was ‘aimed at.’” (269) Zukofsky’s claim that objectivism entails an ontological equality rather than epistemological impartiality echoes Williams’ statement of poetics. Bram Dijkstra argues that *The Descent of Winter*’s unclassifiable structure of alternating text forms “is representative of the conscientious fashion in which Williams pursued his quest for a completely objective mode of writing.” (Dijkstra, 179)

But this pure descriptive focus on the world and its images lets in many of the values that disappointed Williams. The industrial world’s values, as they present themselves to the rational mind, are uninspiring. Concerned with the pollution of the Passaic River and other dehumanizing effects of industrialism, “it is almost as if Williams intuited the Depression waiting in the wings.” (Leibowitz, 262) In the original publication of *The Descent of Winter*, a second entry titled 11/1 appears. It has been removed in subsequent publications, especially in anthologies, but it appears again along with all of the other prose sections of *The Descent of Winter* in the essay titled “Notes in Diary Form,” which itself appears in Williams’ *Selected Essays*. The second entry for 11/1 consists entirely of “I won’t have to powder my nose tonight ‘cause Billie’s gonna take me home in his car. // The perfect type of the man of action is the suicide.” (*Selected Essays*, 68) The startling mention of suicide changes the mood of the entry as well as

the book as a whole. It is unclear whether one should read the stanza in the voice of the speaker of the previous stanza. Because the speaker mentions not needing to powder a nose, we may read the line in the voice of someone other than the author. The second stanza, the single line about suicide, however, seems to be in Williams' voice, and calling the person who commits suicide the "perfect type" suggests an endorsement of self-inflicted violence. But one can also read the statement as a philosophical observation, not unlike Albert Camus' abrupt opening lines in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. The French-Algerian writer, a Parisian expatriate during World War II, opens his 1940 essay with the lines, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy." (Camus, 3) Perhaps, as Webster Schott writes in the introduction to the New Directions anthology that contains *The Descent of Winter*, Williams "was speaking of the power of the imagination to hold human beings to life and propel them onward." (Imaginations, xv)

For Williams, the imagination is the supreme human tool for processing the tedium of industrial life. As a physician, as one who struggled personally with poverty, and as a resident of industrial America, "Williams knew one reality. He created another reality to make the first manageable." His poetry exhibited "the powers of the imagination to sustain and expand human consciousness." (Imaginations, xv)

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