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A Williams Sound-Script: Listening to “The Sea-Elephant”

Bob Perelman
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WILLIAMS HAS REMAINED a foundational poet for me for decades: the exuberance, variety, and transparency of his formal experimentation; the surprising eloquence amid his sometimes bumptious democratic stylistic affirmations; the complexity of the political-formal negotiations throughout *Paterson*; his unflagging honesty—there are many ways his writing remains of the greatest interest. However, during the decades I’ve been reading and re-reading his work, there have always been the lesser moments in poems I value very highly, the not particularly notable pieces, and even some downright clunkers like “Tract”: “I will teach you my townspeople / how to conduct a funeral—.” My intuition is that the problems are quite closely bound up with the strengths.

“The Sea-Elephant” has moved from somewhere in clunker/not-interesting territory to become a poem I find quite fascinating. This is not due to any perspicacious reading on my part; rather, it’s because I listened to Williams reading it (CD track 2).

This experience has split “The Sea-Elephant” into different objects. As a poem on the page, its quatrains enact the typical Williams tussle between syntax, prosody, and lineation. The four-line boxes display a visual metric

that has little relation to the sound, at least as Williams himself voiced it in the recordings we have:

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Trundled from
the strangeness of the sea—
a kind of
heaven—

Ladies and Gentlemen!
the greatest
sea-monster ever exhibited
alive (I, 341)

Here, as throughout much of Williams's verse, we can see (that is, read) his polemic, as he uses democratic American materials to attack that double-headed ogre of his poetics, England, an opponent that was both passé (sonnets, iambic pentameter) and more fashionably advanced than Williams's own work (think *The Waste Land*). After decades of Williams's quasi-hegemonic influence on American poetry, such quatrains may look normative to us, but line breaks such as "a kind of / heaven" and "exhibited / alive" were unfathomable for many readers at first.¹

Much the same polemic can be detected in the oral performance, but in that medium "The Sea-Elephant" takes up the battle quite differently, dramatizing Williams's American (anti-Eliotic) poetic principle in a suite of voices, with what I call a "poetic" voice recurring amid interruptions from a circus carny, the sea-elephant, a fussy woman, ending with the poet breaking out in a sarcastic parody, halfway to a falsetto.

It takes only the briefest introspection to be reminded of the foundational difference between listening to a poem and reading it. To bracket the complexities memory would bring in, let's make it a poem read or heard for the first time. I will only make brief mention of the complexities of neurological processing and will bypass theoretical speculations about the tangled relations of sight and sound. I am concerned here with the middle ground of human perception.

Reading is voluntary, whereas with listening there's a basic passivity. While I can listen carelessly or even with hostility and thus I have some control over how the sense is being made, nevertheless this control is secondary: the speaker's words, affect, timbre, timing, volume, pitch-

1 See Bochner (162–215) for a great account of the initial shock of Williams's lines.

contour, and intonation are inescapably primary physical facts. But with reading, nothing happens unless my eyes activate the poem, and in any instant that desire flags reading ceases. On a bad day, with a poem I'm not interested in, my reading motor may stop every few seconds. It's not exemplary behaviour, I grant. But whether it stutters or not, reading provides a more capacious temporal vantage than listening. While construing the clumps of letters at the focal centre (that is, reading words), my eyes simultaneously receive a sense of the words and spaces on the rest of the page or screen. It's an unfocused sense, but it means that in a bare way to read is to see a bit into the near future (and, symmetrically, the near past). When listening I'm more confined to the present, though there is some sense that holds the sound from the near past together while syntax and semantics are being construed. (Again, I'm ignoring the case of re-hearing a piece where I can sense a future vantage as I anticipate certain passages I know will be arriving next.)

Beyond such simple facts of sensory processing, in my experience there's been a most basic difference: my emotional set toward what I read is critical, hard to please, while much of what I hear I tend to like or accept. Am I home to two distinct sensory beings? Or does reading push in the direction of privacy (autonomy, solipsism) while listening is irreducibly social?

It's tempting to dramatize this difference. William James writes that the separation of one mind from another is absolute: "Neither contemporaneity, nor proximity in space, nor similarity of quality and content are able to fuse thoughts together which are sundered by this barrier of belonging to different personal minds. The breaches between such thoughts are the most absolute breaches in nature" (226). Can this dramatic, eschatological language apply to a more intimate, counterintuitive breach: the breach within a single mind between the eye and ear, reading and listening? Perhaps so, but then again it's a breach that is constantly traversed in commonsense discussion. We can listen to the poet read the written poem, attend to slips, surprising emphases or inflections, but these are simply matters of performing a score; any distance between reading and hearing is continually normalized by the fact that we're forced by the language we use to say "The Sea-Elephant" is the same sequence of words whether it's read or heard, that is, the same poem. Still, it's more interesting here to explore the different territories of listening and reading than it would be to map the two onto one another.

Listening has fundamentally changed my judgment of the poem, not only adding qualities I had simply missed in reading it but eliminating an

irritating fuzziness that only existed on the page. Reading (at the “high end” at least) is in the service of exact reproduction. Take two quite different examples from both the arts that can be perceived by reading, music and poetry²: there is Olson’s familiar claim that the projective poet is to use the typewriter to make the page a score, thus unifying the written and spoken poem, and there is the antique anecdote I picked up in my days of reading record jackets that has Brahms being asked if he’s going to the concert and him replying, No, he’s just read the score and heard a perfect performance of the symphony in his head; it would only get botched in the concert hall. Brahms and Olson are quite distinct, I’m sure we all agree, but both are asserting that reading is an exact activity. The guarantor of this exactitude is the poem on the page (the musical score), which insists on perfect, reproducible performance.³

My initial reading experience of “The Sea-Elephant,” as I try to reconstruct it, was hardly perfect. But its imperfection supports my sense that reading aims at exactitude. As far as I can remember, I never would actually finish reading the poem. My reading eye would always bump off it, noticing only the quatrains, mostly two- or three-word lines with single-word lines appearing unsystematically, reinforcing my sense that Williams’s line breaks were always a seat of the pants operation. The only specific that stands out in memory is an irritant: “Blouaugh!”

I had never liked reading Williams’s non-lexical moments: poem xx of *Spring and All*: “The sea that encloses her young body / ula lu la lu” (I, 222–23); the 10/30 entry from *The Descent of Winter*: “To freight cars in the air / ... / pah, pah, pah / pah, pah, pah, pah, pah” (I, 301); “The Trees” (I, 337–38); “For a Low Voice” (II, 153–54), among others. And of course not to forget the locus classicus from *Paterson*: “And, derivatively, for the Great Falls, / PISS-AGH, the giant lets fly! good Muncie, too” (10).

These moments were all downers, but “Blouaugh!” seemed especially annoying. Some non- or quasi-linguistic sounds are more favourable to transcription than others. “Ula lu” and “pah” at least look precise—one knows what they’re supposed to sound like. But how is “Blouaugh!” pro-

2 Of course, one can read faces, paintings, skies, etc. And parol e in liberta, calligrammes, the vast variousness of lettrist writing require quite other notions of reading. But for this discussion, I’m intending a plain denotative sense of reading: sequential processing of marks on paper.

3 The actual practice of Western music loosens or even attacks this precision: think of Cage and postCagean procedures. This turning away from exactitude can be traced back to the *sprechstimme* of Cage’s teacher, Schoenberg. And prior to that there are the traditions of cadenza improvisation (Mozart, Beethoven), filling in figured basses (Bach).

nounced? One syllable or two? Was it “Blow” + “augh!” or was it more like a stretched-out “Blog!”? Not being able to tell instantly (and the thing appears three times in the poem) would always push me on to some other poem.

But listening to the “The Sea-Elephant” changes that. “Blouaugh!” is no longer an ungainly phonetic blur to vex the exacting lone reader: its differing manifestations are key parts of the oral narrative of the poem. “The Sea-Elephant” is a publicly performed tragicomedy of poetics.

It’s as if the technologies of sound reproduction have reversed the moment of Pisistratus (the tyrant of Athens who, the lore has it, instigated whatever process it was that got Homer written down, transforming the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* from variable oral poems⁴ into fixed texts). But now, the fixed letters of the text can be performed variously as versions of “Blouaugh!” (CD track 3).

Just as the three instances of “Blouaugh!” differ, one performance of the poem can differ greatly from another. The first is from an MP3 (1:52) made from a Williams reading at Princeton in 1952, followed by a comment (1:39) that is at least as interesting as the poem, if not more so.

Here, I will be a phonological docent for this performance, one that, as I say, completely changed my idea of the poem, making it into a specific event, more capacious and less self-similar than the printed poem.

Typical of many an oral performance, Williams makes a mistake in the reading, dropping the “too-” from “too-heavy,” but that fact is of little note. Much more significant are the social, sonic, and rhetorical dimensions clearly dramatized by the sound-script. A second performance of the poem is from a reading in 1954 at UCLA where Williams sounds much more damaged, still a trouper, but forcing the sequence of social tones and dramatic turns through a voice that can’t pronounce or modulate all that well. Nor does it sound like he’s seeing the page very clearly. This less felicitous version makes clear how much one performance may differ from another, but it also reveals Williams performing the same sound-script (that is, the same sequence of voices and the same schema of accentuation in the phrasing). The second version takes longer: 2:15, and is tough sledding, especially if you go on to listen to the long comment (7:40) where Williams slowly discusses the variable foot and his invention of the staircase line (which “The Sea-Elephant” does not use) then rambles on about the need for American poets to overcome iambic pentameter, which he tries to define but gets wrong. It’s interesting evidence (if any

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4 See Havelock and Lord.

more were needed) about how central an obsession metrics was for him from pre-World War I Imagism to the end of his life, although listening to the earlier reading (that is, turning back to the 1952 recording), must remind us of the crucial fact that his practice would often, as it does here, far outstrip his theory.

Somewhat analogous to the Homeric situation, where you could hear a sketch—a bare-bones narrative with basic ornamentation (epithets to fill out the meter)—or you could order the full-dress elaborated performance (I wonder if they charged by the simile?), I’m proposing, tongue not totally in cheek, that we consider the performance here (poem + comment) as a more complete version. This is not an homage to a favourite performance moment: the temporality of this construct is multi-layered. The poem was written in 1929; Williams is reading and commenting in 1952, post World War II, post stroke and post heart attack; and we are retrieving his voice via twenty-first-century technology. Nevertheless, this version reveals, to my ear, a fundamental change in Williams’s sense of the place, nature, and use of poetry, resolving some of the awkwardness of the poem, redeeming its touching openness from the bumpy satire it keeps falling into.

To underline my interest in the comment, I’ll print it at the end of this piece, lineated to mime the printed poem. (The transcribed comment contains almost exactly the same number of words so my lineation works nicely until the last quatrain.)

In giving my sense of the 1952 performance, I will be counting in the bits of audience participation that are audible; for instance, the satisfied surprise and shock of the listeners dissolving into screams and laughter as they re-hear the second “Blouaugh!,” louder and longer. Williams and the audience both expressing wants and fears via the lower half of the phonological apparatus without much syllabic fuss at all from tongue, teeth, and lips. Instantaneous oral negotiation is audible: a sturdy play-contract has been established, on the fly: I’ve scared you again, but you’ll recognize that there’s nothing scary, you’re not a fish, you’re not a victim of the raging appetite whose crudity I’ve forced you to hear again. The audience laughs and screams like kids at Halloween, shocked into a skittish glee by the unpredictable irruption of the now-recognizable monster.

Audio Tour

To one whose knowledge is produced and ratified by reading, the sonic medium is elementary and vague: *trundled from the strangeness of the sea*. In the sound universe we no longer read Williams for line breaks with all the drama, quandary, and excitement of those decisions that I’m

citing: quarrels over metrics are replaced by social agons. Nor are poems machines made of words; the phrase becomes the unit, with contestatory foregrounding of various social voices, some pushed more toward quoted presentation, *Ladies and Gentlemen! the greatest sea-monster ever exhibited alive the gigantic sea-elephant!*, some more thoroughly caricatured, *Yes it's wonderful but they ought to put it back into the sea where it came from*. We no longer hear Williams railing against what he once called the medieval masterbeat, iambic pentameter. In the history of Anglo-American modernism, to iamb or not to iamb was a charged matter—"To break the pentameter, that was the first heave," but in the sonic universe of "The Sea-Elephant" such battles cease. *trundled from the strangeness of the sea* is a particularly well-balanced floating stretch of regular beats, which could be a snatch of iambs, or trochees, indifferently.

In the naive, echoey world of sound, what does it matter if we hear TRUN dled / FROM the / STRANGE ness / OF the / SEA—catalectic trochees (final syllable missing)—or TRUN / dled FROM / the STRANGE / ness OF / the SEA—acephalous iambs (first syllable missing)? Either way, *trundled from the strangeness of the sea* is a symmetrical stretch of stressed/unstressed syllables enclosed by stresses, which is then followed by its inverse, *a kind of heaven*, a symmetrical stretch of stressed/unstressed syllables enclosed by non-stresses. What could sound more sea-like, womb-like (trundle bed, bundle of joy) than these two phrases with their syntax withholding the subject of the sentence and thus reinforcing the sense of unending suspension?

The subject of the sentence then bursts upon us, fulfilling, in some technical sense, the syntactic contract. The sentence-construing listener is owed one subject (something is trundled from the sea, but what?), which is then provided. What the ear hears, though, is not syntactic completion but the brash interruption of a different intonation. At least, that's what's in the sound-script: Williams himself doesn't initially realize he's inhabiting a different speaker until he's halfway through the phrase: *Ladies and Gentlemen! the greatest sea-monster ever exhibited alive the gigantic sea-elephant!* No more saline, womb-like undifferentiation; we are now gendered beings, and are addressed as such: either ladies or gentlemen, fractions shied through Life's gate, as Melville had it. And the fractures don't stop there; we're customers, we're classed (we're at the circus), and we're regional (as the Bronx/Jersey nasality informs us). Via accent and denotation, the carny's voice has made it clear that *the greatest sea-monster ever exhibited alive the gigantic sea-elephant!* is, precisely, not Moby Dick.

But where the
carny offers
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But the poet cedes no ground. He grabs the mike back (so to speak) and using a slightly lower pitch and a non-nasal seriousness pronounces the fact that although the poem has just quoted commercial speech it nevertheless is mounting an attack on the poetic sublime: *O wallow of flesh where are there fish enough for that appetite stupidity cannot lessen? Sick of April's smallness the little leaves—Flesh has lief of you enormous sea—Speak!* The carny was using the American commercial vocative: the address to the customer. In reaction from this, Williams's poet addresses the sublime using the Latin vocative, *O wallow of flesh* (and there's a real argument to be made that "O" in that construction is not English, but Latin). But once we take the part of the sea-elephant (something the vocative suggests that we do), how do we feel about what the voice is saying to us? The tone seems concerned, but we hear, first thing: *O wallow of flesh*—that's not a compliment. But then again, no, it turns out that a solicitous question is being asked: *where are there fish enough for that appetite*. But no again, without warning another insult: *that appetite stupidity cannot lessen*.

Throughout the poet's speech the rhythmic emphasis is earnest, as is the tone and the speed of assertion: everything hinges on the series the poet punches out, fraught with insistence. An odd sequence when they're listed in print: WALLOW FLESH FISH APPETITE STUPIDITY SICK SMALLNESS LEAVES LIEF ENORMOUS SEA SPEAK! Note (there is a clip of this word sequence on CD track 4) the dying falls, not just on APPETITE or SMALLNESS, but the monosyllables, too: SICK, LIEF.

In one way, the poet and carny are saying similar things: for both, the sea-elephant is monstrous. But where the carny offers mastery for just a quarter, the poet is making complex, not to say contradictory, demands: *O wallow of flesh where are there fish enough for that appetite stupidity cannot lessen? Sick of April's smallness the little leaves—Flesh has lief of you enormous sea—Speak!* A lot is being asked of the sea-elephant here. On the one hand, he's a sublime wallow of carnality, Pig Cupid's big brother.⁵ He's an ally in the fight against *The Waste Land*; a monster to use against some genteel April which often seemed to Williams to have Eliot's copyright on

5 The sea-elephant is mostly male, though the gender story is tangled. Halfway through Williams mentions a beard (and that could be ambiguous); he next ventriloquizes the sea-elephant as female (if you accept the low-key allusion to Aphrodite rising from the sea); and then near the end the sea-elephant is triumphantly depicted as disporting with his harem, while always remembering to eat.

it. Eliot's well-known "April is the cruellest month" is, of course ironic, but Williams seems to have disregarded this to give vent to his annoyance here and in poems such as "April is the Saddest Month" (II, 117) which depicts the aftermath of dogs fucking.

Beneath his undeniable cynicism Williams shows himself (here as so often) capable of being jejune, smitten with spring, Keats-ish. Via a sonic pirouette (leaves = lief), what were the trite symbols of spring, *the little leaves*, become a site of his own desire as he insists that *Sick of April's smallness the little leaves—Flesh has lief of you*. "Lief" is a word, though not one the ear hears much at all, an odd, rusty adjective, adverb, even an obsolete noun (= dear, sweetheart), but mostly used in "I had as lief .." Here and elsewhere Williams uses it as his own idiosyncratic noun to indicate some sort of utopian leafy permission. In "Asphodel" he writes: "A thousand tropics / in an apple blossom. / The generous earth itself / gave us lief. / The whole world / became my garden!" (II, 313).

But if the battle is to rescue modern poetry from old-fashioned docility (descriptive seasonality), the cry *Flesh has lief of you, enormous sea* is an odd-sounding call to arms. If the goal is to bring poetry and the present into closer alignment, then wouldn't the carny be more contemporary than the poet? Perhaps the would-be modern poet, tangled up in disgust and desire by long e's—*leaves, lief, enormous sea—Speak!*—had better turn the mike over to the sea-elephant: *Blouaugh! #1*. Does one hear this as rebuke, release, self-satire, or affirmation? If we imagine a scale of earnestness stretching from the religious awfulness of the Eliotic Thunder's DA to a bad boy pretending to puke on the marble floors of culture, just how solemn-sarcastic is *Blouaugh! #1*? The primary aggression could be directed at the carny (O blasphemous venality of the commercial world, *Blouaugh! #1*), or Eliot (O pedantic smallness of poetic ambition, *Blouaugh! #1*) or himself (O overblown poet commanding the enormous sea to speak, *Blouaugh! #1*). Each alternative sounds plausible: *Trundled from the strangeness of the sea—a kind of heaven—Ladies and Gentlemen! the greatest sea-monster ever exhibited alive the gigantic sea-elephant! O wallow of flesh where are there fish enough for that appetite stupidity cannot lessen? Sick of April's smallness the little leaves—Flesh has lief of you enormous sea—Speak! Blouaugh!*

The poetic voice's subsequent elaboration will not resolve any ambiguities. It begins in the first person as if the poet were ventriloquizing the sea-elephant but quickly switches perspective to the poet observing the sea-elephant⁶: *(feed me) my flesh is riven—fish after fish into his maw unswallowing to let them glide down gulching back half spittle half*

brine the troubled eyes—torn from the sea. Just as it is not easy to tell if *Blouaugh!* #1 was a cry of ejection or incorporation, desire and disgust are not disentangled here. Is this eating or spitting up? Is this authoritative, kingly appetite or childish puking? This equivocation extends even to the idiosyncratic verb “gulching back”: the sea-elephant’s gullet is an insatiable gulf that vomits fish back out.

As if to comment on such gorging messiness, another voice is heard: *(In a practical voice) They ought to put it back where it came from.* On the page, the enclosing parentheses, “(In / / a practical voice),” is meant as a stage direction for voicing. Awkward though it may seem on the page, it demonstrates that Williams was thinking of the poem as a sound-script, to use my earlier term. For the listener, however, the phrase is simply redundant. Here, the sarcasm of Williams’s tone is dominant, and it’s hard not to assimilate this woman to a stereotype of the anti-corporeal matron (second cousin to Loy’s English Rose, say, in “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose”). This sense is quickly reinforced by repetition, as we soon hear the woman again, a little bit more emphatic in dismissing the historical mysteries of the sea-elephant, the old gender-bending mermaid: *Gape. Strange head—told by old sailors—rising bearded to the surface—and the only sense out of them is that woman’s Yes it’s wonderful but they ought to put it back into the sea where it came from.*

Having set up this woman as a satirical target, Williams then uses the full volume of the sea-elephant against her. There is no ambiguity here: this is the sea-elephant as emblem for Williams’s rejection of domesticity: *Yes it’s wonderful but they ought to put it back into the sea where it came from. Blouaugh! (Blouaugh! #2 on CD).*

As if the sea-elephant had just spoken for him, the poet uses the beast’s undifferentiated massiveness to dismiss all craft and cleverness. The immediate referent for the following would seem to be trained seals (Williams wrote “The Sea-Elephant” after a visit to the circus in 1929), but on the page these lines seem emblematic of Williams’s life-long struggle with line breaks.

Swing—ride
walk

6 This is another Keatsian facet of Williams, who was never shy about hosting other consciousnesses—compare one of Keats’s less famous sound bites on negative capability: “[I]f a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel” (74).

on wires—toss balls
stoop and

contort yourselves— (I, 342–43)

Rather than engage in such prosodic cleverness, why not just bellow one's own presence? You other-trained, contorted poets may worry over the damn line breaks, but for me it's all desire, all the time. At least, that's what poet-as-sea-elephant is saying. In fact, the actual line breaks are an excellent species of Williams's own prosodic contortions: *Swing—ride walk on wires—toss balls stoop and contort yourselves—But I am love. I am from the sea—*. As I mentioned earlier, here Williams ventriloquizes the sea-elephant as Aphrodite, rising from the sea.

But if the sea-elephant is the poet's democratic love-goddess of insatiable appetite, then the third *Blouaugh!* (*Blouaugh!* #3 on CD) becomes the approved cry of triumph, appetite asserting its priority.

Positivity is harder to pronounce. Sea-elephants can interrupt poems, but they don't seem to do as well in writing them. Williams tries to make the sea-elephant emblematic of his own poetic enterprise, indulging in a little descriptive fantasia of hetero carnal bliss: *there is no crime save the too-heavy body the sea held playfully—comes to the surface the water boiling about the head the cows scattering fish dripping from the bounty of ...*

But the bounty of such triumphant identification proves ephemeral, and the poem suddenly switches without warning back to literary polemic. The target is some vague bolus of Pound (whose catchy but ultimately nondescript satire is quoted: Winter is ycummen in), Eliot, and ye olde Britishness. The poem ends with finicky, aggressive sarcasm: *and Spring they say Spring is icummen in—*.

This makes the audience laugh. (Of course, the “Blouaugh!”s, the carny, and the woman had softened them up.) Throughout the reading, Williams seems to have had a strong hold on the listeners. (This will become even clearer in the comment.) It's not that much of a stretch to compare Williams's repertoire of vocal manners in the poem to the carny's behaviour: both are examples of “aggressive outreach,” call it. The product the carny is urging on the public is a sight of the sea-elephant; with Williams the product is that recommended so sharply in his poetry. And if we remember the context of Williams's career at the time of the writing, the final speech can sound rather sour, a grumpy realization of his secondary position. Rather than an omnipotent male disporting in the sea, the poet is a married man in New Jersey, probably taking the kids to the circus. Aggrieved masculinity chafes within petty rituals of renewal.

Aggrieved
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Listening to the poem, this intense deformation of the poet's voice at the end makes an odd conclusion. The emotional level—what old-fashioned terms the sonic universe seems to bring to mind!—seems not far from grade school sarcasm. Perhaps some of Williams's polemic is directed toward his own practice as a poet: he is conflicted about his own partially repressed Keatianism, but is the aggressive inarticulation of the sea-elephant any way forward?

Before I turn to the comment, I want to reflect on the temporal issues of my procedure. "The Sea-Elephant" was written in 1929 in the midst of Williams's polemic over the place of his vision of poetry in America and Europe. He had, at that time, only equivocal evidence that he wasn't losing that fight. By the time he read the poem and commented on it in 1952, he was a few years into the physical battering (strokes, heart attacks, bouts of depression) that would unravel him, but he had also begun to live the life of the acclaimed poet, reading at universities, being listened to, etc. And here I am in 2008, belatedly realizing that new technologies make for new ways of writing and reading. Still, I find the comment quite a concentrated example of the qualities that seem to remain most useful for poetry.

My wife tells me I read the rougher pieces. Every man hates to expose himself in the ... public (I was going to say) [Laughter]. You don't like to reveal the more sensitive ... feelings you may have perhaps. It's always easier to be a little ... a little rough. At least it's a way of being timid, I suppose, showing your timidity anyhow. Because modern, the modern poet, such a one as I am, at least, does not seek the temple. There are those—and I don't mean to belittle them—such as Ezra Pound, who are always—or T.S. Eliot, or some of the French, the distinguished poets of the past, W.B. Yeats, they carry about with them an *aura* that is *poetry* it seems. Forgetting [louder] *that you are the poetry for God's sake! Let 'em come down to you and lift you up!* Anyhow, it's very *attractive* to have these wonderful people stand above you and make you feel like a *worm*. [Loud, sustained laughter] Uh? There're other things. Poetry in the past has been gusty [gutsy?], it's been rough, it's been Villon, it's been parts of Shakespeare. It isn't only that temple thing. (CD track 5)

The way the audience picks up the vulgar suggestion in Williams's nearly whispered rumination shows how closely they're listening: *My wife tells*

me I read the rougher pieces. Every man hates to expose himself in the ... public (I was going to say) [Laughter]. This was not an isolated trope for Williams. Discussing another reading (New York University, 1949) where “he had read one or two confessional pieces that he had not intended to read, he told the friend who had arranged the reading that he felt like he had been ‘talking into a felt mattress.’ Confessing in public felt as if you have pulled ‘back your foreskin (if you have one) in public.’”⁷

But the moral here, to my ear at least, is not Williams was an unreconstructed phallic monster. “The Sea-Elephant” can certainly be read as a phallic attack on femininity/feminization. But in the comment Williams finds his wife’s remark informative, and it leads him to a complex perspective on his own aggressivity: to be “rough” is, finally, to display one’s “timidity”: *You don’t like to reveal the more sensitive ... feelings you may have perhaps. It’s always easier to be a little ... a little rough. At least it’s a way of being timid, I suppose, showing your timidity anyhow.* Semantically, what follows is a non sequitur: *Because modern, the modern poet, such a one as I am, at least, does not seek the temple.* Logically, this explanatory “Because” is puzzling. The intertwining of masculine display/fear is *caused* by arguments over poetic decorum? But on the emotional level, such sudden leaps into the arena of modernist authority have been occurring throughout the poem.

In what follows, Williams begins with an earnest attempt at decorous discussion: *There are those—and I don’t mean to belittle them—such as Ezra Pound, who are always—or T.S. Eliot, or some of the French, the distinguished poets of the past, W.B. Yeats, they carry about with them an aura that is poetry it seems.* The key word here is “belittle.” Williams is not (ostensibly) belittling them, but they, as we will hear in a moment, have already belittled him. Meanwhile, as he warms to the rage he’s about to vocalize, he shouts out his most paradoxical poetic credo: *Forgetting [louder] that you are the poetry for god’s sake! Let ’em come down to you and lift you up!* I find this very moving, if endlessly complicated. The audience is the poetry but needs the poet (apparently in a superior position) to sublimate them. I won’t attempt to untangle the complications of this. Again, my intuition (the same faculty that saw Williams’s strengths and flaws as a baggy unity at the beginning of the essay) suggests that this may be an unresolvable knot.

The poet may be in a superior position, lifting the audience up, but, typical of Williams’s sudden reversals, his next position is low indeed:

7 Middleton (84), quoting Mariani’s biography.

Anyhow, it's very attractive to have these wonderful people stand above you and make you feel like a worm. The audience's loud laughter is ultimately as impossible to parse as "Blouaugh!" But it strikes me as entirely plausible that one element animating their explosion of pleasure is a sense of the kinship of the sea-elephant and the worm. Both fit easily into the tragicomedy of phallic authority we've been hearing. Whether or not one grants this connection, the audience's pleasure is a palpable fact and fleshes out Williams's insistence that the audience is the poetry.

The Sea-Elephant

Comment

Trundled from
the strangeness of the sea—
a kind of
heaven—

My wife
tells me I read the
rougher pieces. Every
man

Ladies and Gentlemen!
the greatest
sea-monster ever exhibited
alive

hates to expose
himself in
the ... public (I
was

the gigantic
sea-elephant! O wallow
of flesh where
are

going to
say ...) [*Laughter*]. You don't
like to reveal
the

there fish enough for
that
appetite stupidity
cannot lessen?

more sensitive ... feelings you
may
have perhaps.
It's always

Sick
of April's smallness
the little
leaves—

easier
to be a
little ... a
little

Flesh has lief of you
enormous sea—
Speak!
Blouaugh! (feed

rough. At least it's a
way of
being
timid, I

me) my
flesh is riven—
fish after fish into his maw
unswallowing

to let them glide down
gulching back
half spittle half
brine

the
troubled eyes—torn
from the sea.
(In

a practical voice) They
ought
to put it back where
it came from.

Gape.
Strange head—
told by old sailors—
rising

bearded
to the surface—and
the only
sense out of them

is that woman's
Yes
it's wonderful but they
ought to

put it
back into the sea where
it came from.
Blouaugh!

suppose, showing
your timidity anyhow.
Because modern, the modern poet, such
a

one as I am, at
least, does
not seek the
temple.

There
are those—and
I don't mean
to

belittle them—such as
Ezra
Pound, who are *always*—
or T. S. Eliot

or
some of
the French, the distinguished
poets

of
the past, W.B.
Yeats, they
carry about with them

an *aura* that
is
poetry it seems. Forgetting
[louder] *that you*

are the
poetry for god's sake! Let
'em come down
to

Swing—ride
walk
on wires—toss balls
stool and

contort yourselves—
But I
am love. I am
from the sea—

Blouaugh!
there is no crime save
the too-heavy
body

the sea
held playfully—comes
to the surface
the water

boiling
about the head the cows
scattering
fish dripping from

the bounty
of ... and Spring
they say
Spring is icummen in—

you and
lift
you up! Anyhow, it's
very *attractive*

to have
these wonderful
people stand above you
and make you

feel
like a *worm*. [Loud, long laughter] Uh? There're
other things. Poetry
in

the past
has been gusty [gutsy?],
it's been rough,
it's been

Villon,
it's been parts of Shakespeare.
It
isn't only that

temple thing.

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Audio tracks cited in this article are available on the compact disc accompanying the print version of this special issue. Some of the audio tracks cited in this article may also be available at www.arts.ualberta.ca/~esc under the “Extras” tab.

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