The Man Who Loved Women: The Medical Fictions of William Carlos Williams

In one of William Carlos Williams’ autobiographical sketches about the world of the big city hospital, a story called “World’s End,” the doctor-narrator recalls a particularly difficult little girl about six years old who was brought to the hospital kicking and screaming so violently that she could not be placed in a ward. The doctor decides to see what he can do: he takes the child to his office where she promptly bites him in the thigh, knocks off his glasses, and carries on like a wild little animal. Finally, not knowing what else to do, the doctor opens his desk drawer, takes out some crackers, and starts to chew on one. Here is the sequence that follows:

The child quit her tantrums, came over to me and held out her hand. I gave her a cracker which she ate. Then she stood and looked at me. I reached over and lifted her unresisting into my lap. After eating two more crackers she cuddled down there and in two minutes was asleep. I hugged her to myself with the greatest feeling of contentment—happiness—imaginable. I kissed her hot little head and decided nobody was going to disturb her. I sat there and let her sleep.

The amazing thing was that after another half hour—two hours in all—when I carried her still sleeping to the door, unlocked it and let the others in—she wakened and would let no one else touch her. She clung to me, perfectly docile. To the rest she was the same hell cat as before. But when I spoke severely to her in the end she went with one of the nurses as I commanded.¹

¹ The Farmers’ Daughters: The Collected Stories of William Carlos Williams (New

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This little incident provides us with a paradigm for all the medical
tories collected in the volume called Life Along the Passaic River
(1938). Consider the following points: (1) the patient, whether a child
as in this case, or a teen-ager as in “The Girl with a Pimply Face,” or an
adult as in “A Night in June,” is always female. In only one instance,
“A Face of Stone,” is the baby a boy, and then Williams, who, by his
own account, wrote these stories “at white heat” and “seldom revised
at all,” makes a remarkable slip:

The man turned to his wife. Gimme the baby he said. . . .
Give him to me. . . .
I hold her, the woman said keeping the child firmly in her
arms. (FD, p. 168)

(2) The doctor-narrator, Williams’ projected image of himself, is regu-
larly presented as a no-nonsense, matter-of-fact type; if, in “World’s
End,” he takes great pains for the little girl, he is also remarkably un-
flappable—a man who knows what needs to be done and does it. On the
other hand, (3) although the doctor keeps his distance in the proper pro-
fessional way and is designated throughout the Passaic stories as a married
man whose emotional life lies elsewhere, his references to the treatment
of the female patient are regularly couched in sexual language: in this
case, he lifts the little girl “unresisting” into his lap where she “cuddled
down,” and he recalls that “I hugged her to myself” and “I kissed her
hot little head.” (4) In keeping with this subliminal erotic response of
doctor to patient, the success of the “treatment” induces a sense of elation
or victory that seems quite in excess of the actual event: “I hugged
her to myself with the greatest feeling of contentment—happiness—
imaginable.” At the same time, (5) the patient is wary of all other doc-
tors, which is to say of men who would or could have similar power over
her. When the little girl wakens, she “would let no one else touch her.
She clung to me perfectly docile. To the rest she was the same hell cat
as before.” Only his “severe” words can make her finally go with one
of the nurses “as I commanded.”

Critical commentary on these medical fictions has tended to rational-
ize their sexual component more or less as follows. Williams, both in
his life and in his art, so the reasoning goes, was unusually sensitive and

York: New Directions. 1961). All parenthetical page references not otherwise identified
are to this text.

2 Williams, I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Work of a Poet,
responsive to the human condition—especially to the condition of the ordinary poor people, many of them immigrants, who came to him as patients in his native Rutherford, New Jersey. His stance toward these people who become the characters of his short stories is, in James Breslin’s words, at once “tough and sympathetic.” Williams does not sentimentalize their plight, yet he can see—in even the homeliest woman in her ninth month of pregnancy or in the “girl with a pimply face”—a glimpse of what he calls “the hard straight thing in itself,” the “Beautiful Thing” he was to celebrate in Paterson. Williams’ unillusioned toughness and direct treatment of the thing gives the short stories their air of remarkable “authenticity.” Or, as J. Hillis Miller has suggested:

Williams’ fiction is based on the power to put oneself within the life of another person and make him comprehensible by an objective report of his speech, movements, and facial expressions. There is none of the problem of knowing others which has long been a thematic resource in fiction—all that play of perspectives and points of view, product of the assumption that each man is locked in the prison of his consciousness. . . . Williams’ characters, like those of Virginia Woolf, penetrate one another completely and are known by a narrator who has transcended point of view so that he stands everywhere in his story at once. His fiction, like that of the French “new novelists,” is evidence of a Copernican revolution in the art of the novel. . . . Williams’ people are not fixed personalities persisting through time, but are flowing centers of strength, polarizing themselves differently according to each situation.

But how does the poet enter the lives of those around him? “The reaction which gives Williams possession,” Miller observes, “is strongly sexual.” But since, in the Williams universe, one knows human bodies in the same way that one penetrates the life of flowers or fish, the sexual, Miller would argue, is more or less equated with the larger viralistic, erotic pulse of the universe, the spirit celebrated from Kora in Hell to Paterson and beyond. In this context, Williams’ ecstatic participation in

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the birth process of his patients (as, for example, in “A Night in June”),
is read as emblematic of the poet’s sense of creation, perpetual beginning.
Birth is the opening of the field; the poet’s mission is “to make a start out
of particulars.”

No doubt Williams wanted his fiction to be read in this way. In his
remarkably evasive Autobiography, Williams plays the role of genial
innocent, the good fellow who has never quite figured out what, in his
own words, makes women “tick.” “I was an innocent sort of child,” the
first chapter begins, “and have remained so to this day. Only yesterday,
reading Chapman’s The Iliad of Homer, did I realize for the first time
that the derivation of the adjective venereal is from Venus! And I a
physician practicing medicine for the past forty years! I was stunned!”6
But this “gee-whiz!” tone gives way, at moments, to its opposite: a cocky
reminder that this poet-physician has been around. Consider the follow-
ing passage in the Foreword:

I do not intend to tell the particulars of the women I have been
to bed with, or anything about them. Don’t look for it. . . . I am
extremely sexual in my desires: I carry them everywhere and
at all times. I think that from that arises the drive which
powers us all. Given that drive, a man does with it what his
mind directs. In the manner in which he directs that power lies
his secret. We always try to hide the secret of our lives from
the general stare. What I believe to be the hidden core of my
life will not easily be deciphered, even when I tell, as here, the
outer circumstances. (Auto., unpaginated)

This is, as Herbert Leibowitz notes in a fascinating new essay on
the Autobiography, “at once a warning and a challenge to the reader.”
as if to say, “keep your distance. Don’t expect an easy intimacy with
me.”7 In a later chapter of the autobiography called “Of Medicine and
Poetry,” Williams dangles the same key to his “secret life”—the “secret
life I wanted to tell openly—if only I could”—in front of our eyes when
he remarks:

... my “medicine” was the thing which gained me entrance to
these secret gardens of the self. It lay there, another world, in
the self. I was permitted by my medical badge to follow the
poor, defeated body into those gulfs and grottos. And the as-

6 The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams (1951; rpt. New York: New Direc-
7 “You Can’t Beat Innocence: The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams,” Forth-
coming in American Poetry Review.
tonishing thing is that at such times and such places—foul as
they may be... just there, the thing, in all its greatest beauty
may for a moment be freed to fly for a moment guiltily around
the room. In illness, in the permission I as a physician have had
to be present at deaths and birth... just there—for a split sec-
ond... it has fluttered before me for a moment, a phrase which
I quickly write down on anything at hand, any piece of paper
I can grab. (Auto., pp. 288-89)

This astonishing passage is not just another account of the coming
of the privileged moments that yield poetic vision. For the key word
here is surely guiltily: “the permission I as a physician have had to be
present,” the poet’s “medical badge,” are what give him access to the
“secret gardens of the self,” but such access is perceived as somehow
guilty. The medical metaphor, in other words, allows the narrator to
present his true feelings about women in the guise of safety and respect-
ability. It would seem, then, that this narrator has not so much “tran-
scended point of view,” as Miller suggests, as he has carefully displaced
it. In hugging the little girl who has finally stopped screaming and kick-
ing, the doctor is, after all, behaving not abnormally or inappropriately;
his gestures are, in his own words, “not easily deciphered,” and so the
“hidden core” of his life is not violated. Indeed, it is the poet’s peculiar
oscillation between “normalcy” (another routine house call with its
trivial incident and predictable dialogue) and the pressure of desire, a
desire neither acted upon nor fully understood, that gives the short
stories of the thirties their particular poignancy.

“The Girl with a Pimply Face,” for example, begins on a matter-
of-fact note:

One of the local druggists sent in the call: 50 Summer St., sec-
ond floor, the door to the left. It’s a baby they’ve just brought
from the hospital. Pretty bad condition I should imagine. Do
you want to make it? I think they’ve had somebody else but
don’t like him, he added as an afterthought. (p. 117)

Challenged by his “afterthought” which presents him with an unknown
rival, the physician-as-knight sets out on a quest to rescue, ultimately,
three damsels in distress: baby girl, mother, and surrogate patient in the
person of the baby’s sister—“a lank haired girl of about fifteen standing
chewing gum and eyeing me curiously from beside the kitchen table.”
The narrator’s immediate response to this girl is “Boy, she was tough
and no kidding but I fell for her immediately.” And after some desultory
talk about the baby’s diarrhea, he notes: “This young kid in charge of
the house did something to me that I liked. She was just a child but nobody was putting anything over on her if she knew it.

Although, or perhaps perversely because her legs are covered with scabby sores, her feet with big brown spots, and her face with terrible acne, the unnamed girl attracts the doctor and he mentally undresses her: "But after all she wasn’t such a child. She had breasts you knew would be like small stones to the hand, good muscular arms and fine hard legs. ... She was heavily tanned too, wherever her skin showed" (p. 119). The physician’s sensible advice as to what soap the girl should use for her face, and his gentle reprimand that she should be in school must be seen in the context of these fleeting thoughts about her breasts and legs; she is not just any patient but an ignorant, helpless girl to whom he can minister in the role of masterful, efficient male. Imagine Williams’ story as "The Boy with a Pimply Face," and the point will become clear.

When the baby’s mother finally arrives and the doctor examines the real patient, he finds that the infant has a severe congenital heart defect. Calmly and professionally, he notes that "she was no good, never would be," but he prescribes formula, calms down the mother, and writes out a prescription for "lotio alba comp." for the teen-age girl’s acne. "The two older women looked at me in astonishment—wondering, I suppose, how I knew the girl.” To them, he evidently appears as a miracle worker; it is a response nicely balanced in the story by the tolerant skepticism of the doctor’s wife:

What’s it all about, my wife asked me in the evening. She had heard about the case. Gee! I sure met a wonderful girl, I told her.
What! another?
Some tough baby. I’m crazy about her. Talk about straight stuff ... And I recounted to her the sort of case it was and what I had done. The mother’s an odd one too. I don’t quite make her out.
Did they pay you?
No. I don’t suppose they have any cash.
Going back?
Sure. Have to.
Well, I don’t see why you have to do all this charity work.
Now that’s a case you should report to the Emergency Relief.
You’ll get at least two dollars a call from them. (p. 126)

There is a fine irony in this last speech, for the wife cannot understand—as the reader does by this time—that her husband is getting much...
more than "two dollars" for his "charity work." He too is in need of a kind of "emergency relief." Indeed, the doctor is, in his own words, so "keenly interested," that even a colleague's account of the case—his warning that the mother is an alcoholic, the father a liar who pretends to have no money, and that the "pimply faced little bitch," as he calls her, has "a dozen wise guys on her trail every night in the week" and deserves to be run out of town—cannot alter the narrator's feelings. And in an oblique way, his "sympathy game," as the other doctor calls it, is rewarded. Here is Williams' conclusion:

The last time I went I heard the, Come in! from the front of the house. The fifteen-year-old was in there at the window in a rocking chair with the tightly wrapped baby in her arms. She got up. Her legs were bare to the hips. A powerful little animal.


How's the baby? She's all right.

Do you mean it? Sure, she eats fine now. Tell your mother to bring it to the office some day so I can weigh it. The food'll need increasing in another week or two anyway.

I'll tell her.

How's your face? Gettin' better.

My God, it is, I said. And it was much better. Going back to school now?

Yeah, I had tuh. (p. 130)

This is not the inconsequential ending it appears to be. For the implication is that, consciously or unconsciously, the girl goes back to school in response to the doctor's wish. The baby is getting better, the mother is placated, the girl's skin is clearing up. Thus the "powerful little animal" with the bare legs has responded to the doctor's power.

To read "The Girl with a Pimply Face" as a story about the beauty, vitality and strength latent in even the most "venal and oppressive environment" is, I think, to sentimentalize it. Like "The Young Housewife," in which the poet compares the woman to "a fallen leaf" and then declares, with humorous asperity, "The noiseless wheels of my car/ rush

8 The phrase is Thomas Whitaker's; see Williams, p. 101.
with a crackling sound over/ dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling.”

this short story is a fantasy of sexual possession. But it is important to note that unlike the fictions of such postmodern writers as Coover or Sorrentino or Kozinski, Williams’ story is firmly wedded to the mimetic convention. The narrator, that is to say, is not about to engage in kinky sex with the pimply-faced girl. Rather, the focus is on the disparity between the doctor’s external manner—so composed and matter-of-fact—and his sexual urges.

Another interesting variation on the paradigm I have described is found in “A Night in June.” Here the doctor’s quest romance takes him across town to deliver the ninth baby of an Italian woman named Angelina. He approaches the prospect of the delivery (he has brought all but one of Angelina’s children into the world and remembers with grief her first baby which he lost) as one would contemplate a love affair. Fondly, he prepares his instruments and puts them in an old satchel; lovingly, he sets out into the “beautiful June night.” All is peaceful and still: “The lighted clock in the tower over the factory said 3:20.” At the house, there is much to do and the doctor once again becomes his efficient self, selecting artery clamps and scissors, preparing the hot water, ordering an enema, and so on. Labor has not yet begun and he sleeps briefly, awakening to “the peace of the room” that strikes him as “delicious.” Later, he gives Angelina a dose of pituitrin; “She had stronger pains but without effect.” Here is the poet’s reaction:

Maybe I’d better give you a still larger dose, I said. She made no demur. Well, let me see if I can help you first. I sat on the edge of the bed while the sister-in-law held the candle again glancing at the window where the daylight was growing. With my left hand steering the child’s head, I used my ungloved right hand outside on her bare abdomen to press upon the fundus. The woman and I then got to work. Her two hands grabbed me at first a little timidly about the right wrist and forearm. Go ahead, I said. Pull hard. I welcomed the feel of her hands and the strong pull. It quieted me in the way the whole house had quieted me all night.

This woman in her present condition would have seemed repulsive to me ten years ago—now, poor soul, I see her to be as clean as a cow that calves. The flesh of my arm lay against the flesh of her knee gratefully. It was I who was being comforted and soothed. (p. 142)

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Here delivery becomes deliverance. The physical ritual of the birth process becomes, in Williams' account, a variation on the act of love—the welcome feel of the woman's hands, the pressing down, the strong pull, the relief and relaxation: "The flesh of my arm lay against the flesh of her knee gratefully." By such contact, the doctor is "comforted and soothed." And yet this erotic experience is "permitted by the poet's medical badge" and hence domesticated, made safe. Within minutes, he is worrying about putting drops into the new baby's eyes and getting rid of the afterbirth. Again, he asserts his down-to-earth, "sensible" role as doctor, prescribing boric-acid powder to dry up the belly button. Even this new belly button, I might add, belongs to a baby girl.

The medical metaphor thus provides Williams with a plausible evasion of a persistent problem. For curiously, in the rare stories in which the challenge becomes real, as it does in "The Venus" (the story originally at the center of *A Voyage to Pagany* which Williams removed, presumably because the publisher found the manuscript too long), the self-assurance of the narrator dissolves. Here is the reaction of Dev (the protagonist of *Pagan* who is a thinly disguised version of Williams himself) to the German girl he meets on an outing to Frascati:

This day it was hot. Fraulein von J. seemed very simple, very direct, and to his Roman mood miraculously beautiful. In her unstylish long-sleeved German clothes, her rough stockings and heavy walking-shoes, Evans found her, nevertheless, ethereally graceful. But the clear features, the high forehead, the brilliant perfect lips, the well-shaped nose, and best of all the shining mistlike paledgold hair unaffectedly drawn back—frightened him. For himself he did not know where to begin. (p. 212)

On Roman soil, stripped of his medical props and defining role, the Williams hero is like a knight stripped of his armor and his magic talisman which will open the gates to the castle. Face to face with a beautiful woman who has no reason to be dependent on him, he is frightened. "Not knowing what else to do or to say, he too looked (as the tram went through some bare vineyards) straight back into her clear blue eyes with his evasive dark ones." Confronted by this Venus who keeps asking him what America is like, the poet-doctor retreats. For to be an American is, as Williams knew only too well, to fear eros even as one is obsessed with it. America, he tells the Fraulein, "is a world where no man dare learn

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anything that concerns him intimately—but sorrow—for should we learn
pleasure, it is instantly and violently torn from us as by a pack of hungry
wolves so starved for it are we” (p. 214). But when the German Venus
then asks him why, given his attitude, he should want to return to Ameri-
ca, Dev replies: “It is that I may the better hide everything that is secretly
valuable in myself, or have it defiled. So safety in crowds.”

Here again is the guilty secret to which Williams alludes again
and again. The “pagan grove” of Frascati is too openly erotic; Dev’s last
words to the German girl are “come on . . . let’s get out of this.” And we
recall that it is “medicine” that gives him entrance to the “secret gardens
of the self.”

Indeed, the failure of medicine is oddly equated with the failure of
desire. The very short story “The Accident,” written as early as 1921
but included in the Passaic volume, begins with the sentence, “Death is
difficult for the senses to alight on” (p. 221). The surprising word here
is “senses” where we would expect “mind” or “heart.” The narrator now
explains: “After twelve days struggling with a girl to keep life in her,
losing, winning, it is not easy to give her up. One has studied her inch
by inch, one has grown used to the life in her. It is natural.” From this
deathbed image, the story now cuts abruptly to the following morning,
a morning of spring sunshine in which the poet is driving somewhere
with his baby son. Having so recently witnessed the girl’s death, his
mood is one of unrelieved sexual tension:

What are you stopping here for! To show him the four goats.
Come on. No? Ah! She blushes and hides her face. Down the
road come three boys in long pants. Good God, good God!
How a man will waste himself. She is no more than a piece of
cake to be eaten by anyone. Her hips beside me have set me
into a fever. I was up half the night last night, my nerves have
the insulation worn off them. (p. 221)

In the Laurentian sequence that follows, the doctor converts his
sexual energy into some “harmless” play with the goats; he tries, for ex-
ample, to back the smallest goat “around the tree till it can go no fur-
ther,” whereupon the goat “tries to crowd between me and the tree.”
The doctor wins this particular struggle and lets the baby touch the
goat’s “hairy cheek” and stroke its flanks. We read: “The nozzle is hairy,
the nose narrow; the moist black skin at the tip, slit either side by curled
nostrils, vibrates sensitively.” Here it is, of course, the father rather than
the child who finds relief. Accordingly, when (on their way back to the
car) the baby stumbles and “falls forward on his hands,” his face in the
dirt, the doctor-father is struck with guilt. For why did he bring the child
here in the first place? And although the baby’s fall is in fact a pure “accid-
ent,” the narrator’s guilt is oddly confirmed by the response of the “six
women” whose heads appear, suddenly and mysteriously, “in the win-
dows of the Franco-American Chemical Co. across the way.” “They
watch the baby, wondering if he is hurt. They linger to look out. They
open the windows” (p. 224). The eyes of these strange women seem to
penetrate what Williams calls the “hidden core” of his life; it is as if
they challenge his erotic fantasy. But then, in a sudden transformation
that recalls Surrealist film, the women are transformed: “They laugh
and wave their hands.” And indeed life, seemingly cut off by the death
of the little girl as well as by his own baby’s accident, goes on:

Over against them in an open field a man and a boy on their
hands and knees are planting out slender green slips in the fresh
dirt. row after row.
We enter the car. The baby waves his hand. Good-bye!

(p. 224)

To read a story like “The Accident” is rather like looking at a relief
map of what appear to be flatlands, only to see little mountain-shapes
well up from beneath the surface and create peculiar irregularities. But
before we can take the measure of these new mountains, canyons, and
watercourses, the map collapses from somewhere within and flattens out
once again. So in “The Accident,” the baby’s waving of the hand and
the word “Good-bye” break the spell; the narrator’s desire is once again
enclosed in its secret chamber and “normalcy” is restored.

But what happens when the map undergoes no such transforma-
tions, when the tension between desire and the need for safety disap-
ppears? In such later fictions as “The Farmers’ Daughters” (1957), the
medical paradigm I have been describing undergoes some curious
changes. The patient or patients are, as always in Williams, female: in
this case, Margaret and Helen—both lonely and self-destructive women
who turn to the doctor (here presented in the third person) for help.
But this doctor is not called upon to deliver babies; rather he gives vita-
min shots, advises the persistent Margaret on how to improve her breasts,
and counsels Helen on her alcoholism. More important, the doctor of this
story is no longer the tough but sympathetic narrator of “The Use of
Force” or “A Face of Stone”; he is, on the contrary, deeply involved in
the lives of the two women, even though he is himself safely married.
Throughout the story, there are allusions to his lovemaking, whether or not it is fully acted out, with both women, and especially with Helen, the stronger of the two, who turns out to be the survivor. Interestingly, in this story where the doctor’s sexual interest in his patient becomes quite overt, there is never the moment of satisfaction that occurs in “A Night in June” or in “World’s End”—the moment of bliss when the doctor finds the proper “treatment” for the patient. It is as if Williams needed to hide what he calls the “inner core” of his life, to keep the “Beautiful Thing” buried in the recesses of his being. When, as in “The Farmers’ Daughters,” the sexual encounter moves from the realm of fantasy to reality, a curious apathy—a kind of post coitum tristia—occurs, an apathy coupled with a new irritatingly patronizing tone toward women. Consider this passage:

The doctor had a climbing rose in his garden named Jacquot which his wife and he both very much admired. It was a peach-pink rambler, the petals fading to a delicate lavender after the first flowering. More than that, the rose throve in their garden against odds thought by the man who sold them the plant to be overwhelming. . . .

In spite of that its vigor was phenomenal, you couldn’t kill it. It covered the trellis with a profusion of blossoms that in early June were a wonder to see. In addition it was delicately scented so that their whole yard smelled of it when it was in bloom. He had never encountered it in any other garden.

Once he spoke of it to Helen and invited her to come over and see it and whiff its odor during the flowering season.

They gave her a layered shoot; she planted it and it took hold at once. (pp. 366–67)

So the doctor keeps the rosebush for his wife but gives a shoot to Helen: he has his cake and eats it too. Both Margaret and Helen have had lovers and husbands, but they constantly assure their doctor that he is the only man they can really love and trust, their only friend and confidant. He is the recipient of Helen’s favorite photograph, of Margaret’s post-Thanksgiving banquet (“a poetic occasion, a love feast”). It is he who yearns for Helen’s “Dresden china blue eyes,” just as she yearns for her little Dresden china doll—he who tells Helen, “When you talk about that doll you’re beautiful” (p. 361). Again, when Margaret decides to leave town in search of new adventure, he chides her gently but tells her: “in many ways you are the best of us, the most direct, the most honest—yes, and in the end, the most virtuous” (p. 371). Hearing these words,
Margaret predictably “wrapped her arms around his neck, curled up on his knees and sobbed quietly.” Finally, after Margaret’s terrible death (she is murdered by her most recent fly-by-night husband), Helen tells the doctor:

No one came to the funeral but her family and me. They didn’t open the casket. There were no flowers beside the bunch of red roses I’d sent her, her favorite flower.—How are you, my sweet? Take good care of yourself ’cause I can’t afford to lose you. When she died, I died too, you’re the only one I have left.

(p. 373)

In his discussion of “The Farmers’ Daughters,” Thomas Whitaker concludes that each of the three characters sums up one facet of their common predicament: “in Margaret, the most desperate and naked loneliness; in Helen, a more vigorous if precarious thriving despite that loneliness; and in the doctor—imperfectly manifest through his own need—that non-possessive love which might cure the alienation from which all suffer.” This is, I think, to sugarcoat the pill. For the doctor’s “love” is not as nonpossessive as all that: he is, after all, charmed and titillated by the attentions of Margaret and Helen, by their openly declared love, their kisses and embraces. As opposed to the two women who are, in their different ways, losers, the doctor (however unfulfilled some of his yearnings may be) retains his position and his equilibrium; he is left, finally, with bittersweet and tender memories—memories that form the substance of the fiction itself.

Whitaker rightly points out that the doctor in this story is not the real focus of attention, that he is “hardly more than a mode of relating. . . . The narrative structure causes us . . . not to look at him so much as to see with his eyes.” But it is precisely this narrative stance that makes “The Farmers’ Daughters” problematic. For whereas the earlier fictions delineate the quandaries attendant upon a dimly understood sexual tension, “Farmers’ Daughters” is, as it were, carefully censored so as to give the reader no choice but to accept the narrator’s overt evaluation of himself and of his two “patients.” Unlike the protagonist of the earlier story, “The Use of Force,” who suddenly remarks: “I could have torn the child apart in my own fury and enjoyed it. It was a pleasure to attack her” (p. 134), this doctor is careful not to drop his guard. Indeed, he resem-

11 William, p. 118.
12 See Whitaker, William, p. 118; J. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality, p. 323.
bles the speaker of "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower," who believes he
can justify his countless infidelities to his wife by telling her:

Imagine you saw

a field made up of women
all silver-white
What should you do

but love them? 13

It sounds so simple, so earthy and natural. But as the recently published
manuscript called "Rome" (the first version of Voyage to Pagany)14 re-
mind us—and as Williams’ best work makes clear—the Man who Loved
Women never had quite so easy a time of it. For the “beautiful thing”
flies only for a moment “guiltily about the room.” Or, as Williams put
it in a cancelled preface to "The Girl with a Pimply Face”:

How shall I say it? I who have wished to embrace the world
with love have succeeded only in binding to myself a wife and
children... I who have wished, in a general way, to die for
love have suffered only the small accidents of fatigue, bewilder-
ment and loss?

Who feels enough confidence to say anything? All I know is
that no matter what we have dreamed or desired it slips away
unless by a supreme effort we struggle to detain it.15

It is this “struggle to detain” what “we have dreamed or desired”
that gives force to Williams’ finest stories, such as "The Accident” or
“A Face of Stone.” And the younger Williams knew, as perhaps the
mature poet no longer cared to admit, that such struggle was a bloody
business. In the ecstasy of the “guilty” moment, the poet’s “medical
badge” could become a kind of “open sesame.” But, as Dev tells the
beautiful Fräulein in “The Venus”: “To me it is a hard, barren life,
where I am ‘alone’ and unmolested (work as I do in the thick of it)
though in constant danger lest some slip send me to perdition” (p. 216).

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159–60.
(Summer 1978), 1-65. This improvisational diary abounds in four-letter words and
“dirty” references, expressing the poet’s anger and frustration at finding no proper outlet
for his sexual desire.
15 Cited by Whitaker in Williams, pp. 103–4.