The Fallen Leaf and the Stain of Love:
the Displacement of Desire:
in Williams' Early Love Poetry

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. («Foreword» A)

So different, this man
And this woman:
A stream flowing
In a field. («Marriage» C P 56)

When Al Que Quiere!, Williams' first major collection of poems, appeared in 1917, the thirty-four-year-old poet had been married to Florence («Flossie») Herman for five years and she had given birth to their two sons. «The poems,» Williams tells Edith Heal four decades later, «reflect things around me. I was finding out about life. Rather late, I imagine. This was a quiet period, a pre-sex period, although I was married» (IWWP 23). And with reference to his next book, Sour Grapes (1921), Williams continues to insist that he «was very late, very slow, to find out about the world» (IWWP 33). «I was curious.» he admits to Heal, «very curious, but I was having none of it. They [his Bohemian friends in the Village] wanted me to go to bed just to amuse them. I knew that it must be at my own time, in my own place. The real thing is I didn’t know anything about life. I was completely ignorant» (IWWP 33).1
This was the face that Williams evidently prepared to meet the faces that you meet. The mask of innocence — what Herbert Leibowitz has called Williams’ «Beati innocenti» formula⁲ — seems to have been designed to hide the painful recognition that marriage had brought him little sexual satisfaction, that, on the contrary, it had made him more curious than ever about his own sexuality and more aware of his as yet unfulfilled desires. We know that Williams was a very proud man and, having proposed marriage (on the rebound, her beautiful sister Charlotte having rejected him) to the plain Flossie («no Venus de Milo, surely,» as he remarked years later in his Autobiography) (A 130),³ he could not admit to himself, much less to others, that his marriage was anything but a successful, or at least a perfectly «normal» one. Indeed, if he continued to long for more satisfying sexual relationships, he rationalized that such longing was inherent in marriage itself. Thus, when he remarks, in an unpublished journal, that «It is altogether good for everyone concerned for a man to have an alternate to his wife preferably some other married woman,» he is quick to add, «I am speaking of men happily married whose happiness is in danger of too great fixity [...] Refreshed we return to the basis of our love with renewed vigor and by generosity, a generous spending and sharing of our emotions, we revive all that marriage itself stands upon.»⁴

Critics have tended to take such statements at face value, construing them as the typical rationalizations of a man of Williams’ time and place, when the double standard was normative. But there was, in fact, nothing typical about Williams, who untypically, for a small-town New Jersey medical practitioner, socialized with a group of New York (and, by extension, Paris) writers and artists who took sexual relationships much more lightly than he did and hence had little comprehension for Williams’ carefully constructed self-image as «normal» happy husband and father. And by the post-Bohemian fifties, when Williams published Journey to Love, whose overriding theme was that conjugal love survives and surpasses the fleeting affairs of hot-blooded youth, admiring younger poets like Robert Lowell and Randall Jarrell, Allen Ginsberg and Denise Levertov saw no
reason to question the aging and ill poet’s declaration to Flossie that, however much he was drawn to “a field made up of women/all silver-white,” (CP2 316) it was “a love engendering/gentleness and goodness/that moved me/and that I saw in you” (CP2 317).

“We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric,” Yeats wrote in Per Amica Silentia Lunae, “but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.”5 Williams’ quarrel with himself, the quarrel between the “inner core” of sexual fantasy and the outer appearance of objective, dispassionate appreciation of beautiful women, an appreciation that was all in a day’s work, rather like the appreciation of flowers («Innumerable women, each like a flower./ But/only one man — like a city» P 7), may well have been the generative force behind the remarkable series of erotic poems written during the teens and early twenties. In these lyrics, desire is either predicated on absence or guiltily consummated with an unnamed other. More important: far from being «direct» and «natural,» as Williams’ short poems are still regularly thought to be, these love lyrics are curiously oblique, their emotions displaced onto the flowers, trees, and plant life that are their ostensibly subject. Indeed, the poet’s “inner core” of sexuality is often so hidden that readers have, as Williams hoped would be the case, been slow to discover it. As recently as 1982, W. S. Di Piero, himself a poet, could remark that “For Williams, a poem need be nothing more than an act of enthusiastic noticing, a spelling out of the lyric imperative ‘O look!’”; in this scheme of things, «beauty is reduced to that which is for whatever reason interesting.”6

The publication of A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan’s superb critical edition of the Collected Poems should lay to rest once and for all the ghost of Williams’ “O look!” or “gee-whiz!” lyric registering. For one thing, the inclusion of poems previously uncollected (for example, those published in separate issues of Others) puts the familiar anthology pieces in a new light. For another, we now have John C. Thirlwall’s annotations on individual lyrics based on Williams’ own commentary.7 What these new materials confirm, I want to suggest here, is that it may well be in the earlier «love songs» and nature poems, rather
than in the somewhat self-preening declarations of sexual prowess found in the poetry and plays of the middle years, or in the late, carefully constructed odes to conjugal love, like the famous «Asphodel, That Greeny Flower», that the extraordinary force of Williams' «rhetoric of love» most fully manifests itself.

We might begin with the well-known «Love Song» (1916), published in Al Que Quiere! (1917):

    I lie here thinking of you: —
    the stain of love
    is upon the world!
    Yellow, yellow, yellow
    it eats into the leaves,
    smears with saffron
    the horned branches that lean
    heavily
    against a smooth purple sky!
    There is no light
    only a honey-thick stain
    that drips from leaf to leaf
    and limb to limb
    spoiling the colors
    of the whole world —
    you far off there under
    the wine-red selvage of the west! (CP1 107-08)

Williams' biographer Paul Mariani observes that this love song is «addressed not specifically to Floss but to the Muse as perfect woman, with the stain of love smearing his entire world and all his poems with honey yellow, thus ‘spoiling the colors/of the whole world’ with the color of love itself.» But the love that ostensibly floods the whole world is, after all, oddly described as a «Yellow, yellow, yellow» «stain» that «eats,» like acid, «into the leaves,» «smears with saffron» (a bitter spice) the erotically charged «horned branches,» a stain (the word is repeated) so
"honey-thick" that it blots out all light and finally «spoil[s] the
colors/of the whole world.»
Moreover, the «you» to whom «Love
Song» is addressed is not beside him but «far off there under/the
wine-red selvage of the west!»
A «selvage» is an edge of cloth,
woven so tightly that it cannot unravel: the «you» of «Love Song»
is thus associated with the sharp outline of the setting sun, and by
implication, with death.

A rather odd love song, to say the least, the honey-thick
yellow stain of love (an oblique reference to the poet’s semen) the
product, not of sexual union but evidently of masturbation. The
1916 version is somewhat evasive on this issue: the «you» could
be «far off there» figuratively rather than literally, turned away
from the speaker in the aftermath of orgasm. But the first version
(1915) of «Love Song» is quite explicit. It begins:

What have I to say to you
When we shall meet?
Yet —
I lie here thinking of you. (CP I 53)

And then, following the reference to the «spoiling of the
[world’s] colors,» the poem has three more stanzas:

I am alone.
The weight of love
Has buoyed me up
Till my head
Knocks against the sky.

See me!
My hair is dripping with nectar —
Starlings carry it
On their black wings.
See at last
My arms and my hands
Are lying idle.
How can I tell
If I shall ever love you again
As I do now? (CP 154)\(^{10}\)

A note furnished by John Thirlwall is revealing: «I thought it [«First Version: 1915»] verbose and wanted to cut it down to its essentials. It was as good a love poem as I could write to Flossie — But I was always repulsed by her. She was never passionately loving, I was completely devoted to her» (CP 1 479).

Flossie, it would seem from this remark, was probably frigid at this time, a situation hardly surprising given her virginity at the time of her marriage to a man who admitted he wasn’t «in love» with her, and then her almost immediate pregnancy with its attendant morning sickness and fatigue. «Completely devoted to her,» Williams thought himself to be, but clearly she couldn’t give him what he wanted.\(^{11}\) The poetic solution was to present the «I» as «[lying] here thinking of you» and yet to have the erotic charge, which the poem defines by way of its quasi-surrealist images, come from elsewhere.

To Harriet Monroe, to whom he submitted both versions for *Poetry* (Monroe chose the first), Williams wrote:

It would be a long story to tell you how I came to change the version of the rotten ‘Love Song’ to what it was in my last. For the present suffice it to say that whichever version you like best will satisfy me also. The point is that technically I am only interested in the two main stanzas but of course, left by themselves, they make a bare looking whole. The ‘rugged beginning’ though it is more than half rhetoric makes a better impression (1 March 1916, see CP 1 489).

«More than half rhetoric,» no doubt, because the first version makes clear that the poet’s «Love Song» is auto-erotic. «I am alone,» we read in stanza 4, «The weight of love/Has buoyed me up/Till my head/Knocks against the sky.» The image of weight points back to that of the «horneed branches that lean/heavily/ against a smooth purple sky,» an image of phallic power. The modulation of color from yellow to «saffron» (deep orange) to
purple marks an intensification of eroticism, the «weight of love» «buoy[ing]» up the phallus till it «knocks against the sky.» And further, once the poet is skyborne, the «yellow, yellow, yellow» liquid turned honey-thick stain returns in the form of «nectar,» «dripping» from his hair. Like a god, he now controls the elements. «Starlings carry[ing] his nectar]/ On their black wings.»

Isolation, it seems, is the necessary condition for the transformation of semen into nectar, of orgasm into poetry. The seemingly romantic conclusion, «How can I tell/If I shall ever love you again/As I do now?» is thus highly ironic. For the moment of passion, so the imagery of the middle stanzas suggests, takes place, not when the poet comes together with his wife, but, on the contrary, when she is not there at all and when, accordingly, the poet's autoerotic fantasy can flourish. Indeed, as the «rugged beginning» testifies, it is Flossie's presence that is feared: «What have I to say to you/When we shall meet?»

«The stain of love,» let us remember, «eats into the leaves» (a reference to the power of sperm to fertilize the ovum), and then «drips from leaf to leaf/and limb to limb,» the latter phrase referring, of course, not only to tree limbs but to the poet's body. The inversion of nature imagery is one of the striking features of Williams' earlier love poetry, the most hackneyed imagery — for example, the treatment of fallen leaves — serving to define the forms of love as they take shape in Williams' imagination.

How Williams' rhetoric evolves can be seen by glancing at the pre-marital lyrics collected in The Tempers (1913). In the still quite conventional lyric of this volume, leaf and flower imagery is largely pre-Raphaelite, the courtly lover of «First Praise,» telling his «Lady of dusk-wood fastnesses»:

I have known the crisp, splintering leaf-tread with thee on
[before,
White, slender through green saplings:
I have lain by thee on the brown forest floor
Beside thee, my Lady. (CP I 4)

Here lover and lady tread on the «crisp» fallen leaves and lie
on the «brown forest floor» together even as the flowers («freshets»)
«jostle white-armed down the tent-bordered thoroughfare/Praising my Lady» (CP I 5) «I was always building it up and conscious
of this falseness,» Williams later told Thirlwall, «I should have
written about things around me, but I didn’t know how [...] I knew
nothing of language except what I’d heard in Keats or the Pre-
Raphaelite Brotherhood» (CP I 473). Again, in «Ad Infinitum»
(CP I 11), the lover brings his beloved flowers «although you fling
them at my feet» and «break them utterly/As you have always
done,» and in «I Will Sing a Joyous Song,» written shortly before
his wedding, the poet remembers «standing upon the hill» with his
Lady, «Hand in hand» and with the valley beneath them and the
wind blowing (CP I 24).\(^{12}\)

Yet, within four years, in the December 1916 issue of Others
a poem called «The Young Housewife» dislocates the traditional
nature system of hills and valleys, of the «crisp, splintering leaf-
tread» beneath the lovers’ feet:

At ten A.M. the young housewife
moves about in negligee behind
the wooden walls of her husband’s house.
I pass solitary in my car.

Then again she comes to the curb
to call the ice-man, fish-man, and stands
shy, uncorseted, tucking in
stray ends of hair, and I compare her
to a fallen leaf.

The noiseless wheels of my car
rush with a crackling sound over
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling. (CP I 57)

«The Young Housewife» is an anthology favorite, an example,
as James F. Breslin puts it, of Williams’ «new lyric form,» which
«renders prosaic subjects with a tough colloquial flatness.»\(^{13}\)

It is usually read as a charming vignette, a tribute to Williams’
powers of observation; powers that can make the everyday radiant. But why is this young housewife (to Thirlwall, Williams remarked on the poem’s source, «Whenever a man sees a beautiful woman it’s an occasion for poetry — compensating beauty with beauty» CPI 479) — a housewife obviously not the poet’s own wife but a woman who is imagined «moving» about in negligee behind the wooden walls of her husband’s house — compared to a «fallen leaf»? The more we probe this seemingly casual little poem, the stranger it becomes.

Generically, to begin with, «The Young Housewife» is best read as a parodic courtly love poem: the «solitary» physician at the wheel of his car recalls the knight on his charger, approaching the fortified castle where his lady is kept in captivity by the tyrannical lord of the manor. Given this context, the analogy between busy young housewife, coming to the curb «to call the ice-man, fish-man,» and «fallen leaf» seems patently absurd. If anything, the young housewife seems to resemble a flower in early bloom or a budding tree; there is nothing the least bit «fallen» about her. The odd construction «in negligee,» for instance (the normal syntax would be «in her negligee»), implies that being «in negligee» is the young housewife’s inherent state, an implication borne out by the curious line break after «behind» so that we visualize the woman’s «in negligee behind.» The same thing happens in lines 7-8, where the poet, passing «solitary in [his] car,» first surmises that the young woman is «uncorseted» and then observes her «tucking in» what the line break anticipates will be her flesh, deliciously not yet tucked into her corset, but which turns out to be, in the next line, «stray ends of hair.»

With the image of those enticing «stray ends of hair,» the poet’s erotic fantasy reaches its peak. Far from presenting a «prosaic» subject with «tough, colloquial flatness,» the poem presents its speaker as secret voyeur, longing to penetrate those «wooden walls of her husband’s house» and wishing the lady of the house would call, not the ice-man or fish-man (with the obvious double entendre those «calls» entail) but himself to her
side. Only by making a mock-Whitmanian grand gesture—«and I compare her/to a fallen leaf»—can the poet play out his fantasy. For look what happens:

The noiseless wheels of my car rush with a crackling sound over dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling. (CP 1 57)

To say that these lines embody a rape fantasy would be accurate although it would also be to ignore the delicacy and humor of their tone. The poet-doctor knows that normalcy must prevail, that it is 10 A.M. on an ordinary weekday and probably time for him to make hospital rounds. The desire to «rush with a crackling sound over/dried leaves» is fleeting and subliminal, a momentary wish to «have» what belongs to another man. But because, within the suburban context of the poem, such things are possible only in fantasy, nothing happens: the driver «bow[s] and pass[es] smiling.»

What especially interests me in «The Young Housewife» is the shift in the position of the fallen or dried leaf. Whereas the lover of The Tempers walks with his sweetheart over the «leaf-tread» in the brown forest, now, in the lyric that follows Williams’ marriage, there is a split between man and woman, the woman becoming, so to speak, the object of man’s «tread.» We have already seen that in «Love Song,» the «stain of love» «cuts into the leaves» and then «drips from leaf to leaf.» No longer, then, are the lovers viewed as a pair, silhouetted against a recognizable natural world. Rather, the natural world splits and fragments, challenging the poet-lover to find what are, so to speak, new fields to conquer. Or at least to fantasize about.

If the «young housewife,» «tucking in stray ends of hair,» reminds the poet of a «fallen leaf,» his relationship with his wife, in these early years of marriage, is oddly figured in images of leaves that cannot be dismembered. Thus another poem called «Love Song,» printed side by side with «The Young Housewife»
in the December 1916 issue of *Others* and reprinted in *Al Que Quiere!* begins as follows:

Daisies are broken  
petals are news of the day  
stems lift to the grass tops  
they catch on shoes  
part in the middle  
leave root and leaves secure. (*CPI* 71)

As in the first version of «Love Song» («I lie here thinking of you»), male eros is associated with breakage and lifting: the daisy stem, in this case, is his and, though it «lift[s] to the grass tops» and «catch[es] on shoes,» it «leave[s] root and leaves secure.» In the second stanza,

Black branches  
carry square leaves  
to the wood’s top.  
They hold firm  
break with a roar  
show the white! (*CPI* 71)

Even when, at the moment of orgasm, the «square leaves,» finally «break with a roar/show the white!», they are described as «hold[ing] firm,» as if to say that, even in the act of love, the poet’s wife remains inviolable. «Your moods are slow,» the poet tells her, and this love song’s final image is curiously deflationary:

We walked  
in your father’s grove  
and saw the great oaks  
lying with roots  
ripped from the ground. (*CPI* 71-2)

The young bride still walks in her «father’s grove»; marital love, far from producing sexual ecstasy, is viewed as little more than violation, the «ripp[ing]» of great oak roots from the «ground»
where they belong. No wonder the poet turns to the auto-eroticism of «Danse Russe» («If I in my north room/dance naked, grotesquely/before my mirror» CP I 86-7) or, even more obliquely, to the fantasy of «Winter Quiet»:

Limb to limb, mouth to mouth
with the bleached grass
silver mist lies upon the back yards
among the outhouses.

The dwarf trees
pirouette awkwardly to it —
whirling round on one toe;
the big tree smiles and glances
upward!

Tense with suppressed excitement
the fences watch where the ground
has humped an aching shoulder for
the ecstasy. (CP I 84-5)

«Ecstasy,» it seems, is to be found «among the outhouses»; it belongs to the union of «silver mist» and «bleached grass,» to the «upward» thrust of the «big tree,» producing the «hump[ing]» of the ground’s «aching shoulder.» The irony of the poet’s situation is that although it is his imagination that projects this scene, his actual position as lover is with the «dwarf trees [that] pirouette awkwardly» on the sidelines, with the fences [that] watch, «Tense with suppressed excitement.»

But why only a fence-watcher? The difficulty to which Williams alludes so often but so obliquely in these poems is stated somewhat baldly in «A Portrait in Greys.» which begins:

Will it never be possible
to separate you from your greyness?
Must you be always sinking backward
into your grey-brown landscapes — and trees
always in the distance, always against
a grey sky?
Must I be always
moving counter to you? [...](CP 1 99)

The poem’s uncharacteristically long lines were designed, so Williams tells Thirtwell, «to give the contemplative effect of quiet. Regret that we [the poet and his wife] were not excited by the same things» (CP 1 489). And the editors add that «In the poetry of this period ‘grey’ seems to be associated with Florence Williams.» The passage cited above makes this point rather baldly but the last seven lines contain a curious image:

I see myself
standing upon your shoulders touching
a grey, broken sky
but you, weighted down with me,
yet gripping my ankles, — move
laboriously on,
where it is level and undisturbed by colors. (CP 1 99)

The upward thrust of the tree is now familiar to us: «the weight of love,» says the speaker of «Love Song: First Version,» «Has buoyed me up/Till my head/Knocks against the sky» (CP 1 54).

But here the «weight of love,» far from propelling the poet upward, pulls the other way; he can touch the sky, now seen as «grey» and «broken,» only by standing on his wife’s shoulders, and the upward thrust of the smiling «big tree» of «Winter Quiet» is countered by the «grip» she has on his ankles.15 And what he perceives as the stifling quality of her love-making is reinforced by the reference to her «mov[ing] laboriously on, where it is level and undisturbed by colors.» There is no passion in her love-making, no spark to buoy the poet up against the sky. Everything remains «level and undisturbed,» even as in «Good Night,» the poet, after a long evening at the «crowded opera,» comes home to an immaculate kitchen, on whose «spotless floor,» «a pair of rubber sandals/lie side by side/under the wall-table,» where «all is in order for the night» (CP 1 86). No «stray ends of hair» here, no «silver mist» «limb to limb, mouth to mouth/with the bleached
grass.» What lies «side by side» is only «a pair of rubber sandals»; the poet, by contrast, is alone downstairs, day-dreaming about the «vague, meaningless girls/full of smells and/the rustling sound of/cloth rubbing on cloth [...]» whom he saw at the opera, day-dreaming while his wife is asleep upstairs. Only the «glass filled with parsley — /crisped green.» the «Parsley in a glass,/still and shining,» suggests that a more fertile time is coming.

But when that time comes, the object of desire no longer seems to be Flossie. In the anthology Others for 1919 (1920), Williams published a seven-poem sequence called «Flowers of August,» which includes «Daisy,» «Queenannslace» [sic], «It is a small plant,» «Healall,» «Great Mullen,» «Butterandeggs,» and «Thistle.» The first two and the fifth («Great Mullen») appeared in Sour Grapes; the other four were not reprinted. The Collected Poems allows us to reconstitute the sequence — a sequence pivotal to an understanding of Williams’ rhetoric of love.

«It is a small plant» presents us with an unnamed flower «delicately branched and/tapering conically/to a point, each branch/ and the peak a wire for/green pods, blind lanterns/starting upward from/the stalk each way to/a pair of prickly edged blue/flowerets» (CP 1 125). The image is one of sharp, prickly points and wires; the phrase «starting upward from/the stalk [...]» presents us with a phallic image, but the «it» is now characterized as «her regard,/a little plant without leaves,/a finished thing guarding/its secret [...]» (CP 1 125). Williams’ strategy here, as in the other flower poems, most notably «Daisy» and «Queen-Anne’s-Lace,» is to break down the male-female polarity: far from representing a fixed complex of values, the plant is imaged as a bisexual and shifting being, able to embody the complex range of moods associated with eros. Thus the plant’s «secret» seems to be that, having no «leaves,» it can accommodate the stems, «garlanded/with green sacks of/satisfaction gone to seed.» From the «pale hollow of/desire,» come «Three/small lavender imploring tips/below and above them two/slender colored arrows/of disdain with anthers/between them and/at the edge of the goblet/a white lip, to drink from — !» The crescendo is thus reached: «summer lifts her look/forty times over, forty times/over — namelessly.» Here, as in the
white desire, empty, a single stem [...] a pious wish to whiteness gone over — for nothing» of «Queen-Anne’s-Lace» (CP I 162), is the consummation long desired, a consummation evidently denied the poet in his marriage bed.

The downside of this «secret» passion is found in «Butterandeggs» and «Great Mullen.» «Butterandeggs,» according to the OED, «is a popular name for several flowers which are of two shades of yellow, esp. toadflax [...] and varieties of Narcissus.» Williams takes this definition quite literally, contemplating the «two shades of yellow» that constitute his marriage to Flossie, two shades, so to speak, that can’t quite fuse, no matter how closely related they are:

It is a posture for two multiplied into a bouquet, a kneeling mother washing the feet of her naked infant before crossed mirrors, shoes of different pairs, a chinaman laughing at a nigger, a maple mingling leaves with an elm, it is butter and eggs: yellow slippers with orange bows to them, chickens and pigs in a barnyard [...] (CP I 127)

Here the images provide a devastating picture of relationships as sour as they are familiar: the kneeling mother washing the infant’s feet before crossed mirrors, the mismatched shoes, the unlike «exotics» (Chinese, Negro), trees (maple and elm) and barnyard animals (chickens and pigs). Even the yellow slippers are not quite what they should be with their «orange bows.» Such differences, the poet tells himself, need not be «too important»; after all, don’t he and his wife do each other «little double/favors»: «a shirt/handed to a naked man by his/barelegged wife, scratch my back/for me, oh and empty the slop/then/when you go down — and get me/that flower, I can’t reach it.» With those last words, the good-natured tone of conjugal sparring dissolves. The wife, it seems, can’t «reach» the flower. And therefore, the image that follows is of
A low greyleaved thing
growing in clusters, how else? —
with a swollen head — slippers for sale,
they put mirrors in those stores
to make it seem — Closely packed
in a bouquet but never quite succeeding
to be more than — a passageway to
something else. (CPI 127)

Not a «fallen leaf» like «The Young Housewife,» or an
enticing plant «without leaves,» but a «low greyleaved thing [...]»
Closely packed/in a bouquet.» The dismissal is emphatic, espe-
cially when the final image of the «passageway to/something
else» is added.

Williams did not include «Butterandeggs» in Sour Grapes or
the Collected Earlier Poems. Perhaps he judged the poem too
indiscreet, too transparent. But in that case, it is hard to understand
why he did include the equally indiscreet «Great Mullen» in both
collections. A «mullen» — again I turn to the OED — is the
«common name of various species of the genus Verbascum,
consisting of herbaceous plants with woolly leaves and an erect
woolly raceme of yellow flowers.» Erect and yet woolly: these
attributes of plant stems must have intrigued Williams. The poem
begins:

One leaves his leaves at home
being a mullen and sends up a lighthouse
— to peer from [...] (CPI 162)

Coming to these lines from «Butterandeggs» and «It is a small
plant,» one immediately notes the irony of the opening line. The
play of homonyms enforces the notion that leaves (unless fallen or
dried and to be crunched underfoot) are emblematic of the monotony
of home, which is to say of marriage. To «send up a lighthouse» is
to leave these marriage «leaves» behind. But in «Great Mullen,»
this observation is followed by a dialogue in which the wife gets
her say: «Liar, liar, liar!/You come from her! [...],» and so on. The
poet seems all but oblivious to this tirade: lighthouse, «mast with a lantern,» «point of dew on a grass-stem,» «cricket waving his antennae,» he basks in the memory of another, this time secret love. When the down-to-earth wife quite justly berates her husband with the phrase, «You are cowdung, a dead stick with the bark off. She is/squirting on us both [...]» the poet responds, «Your leaves are dull, thick and hairy. [...]» And in the final line, after even she has admitted that he is a «straight, yellow finger of God,» but a «finger of God pointing to — her!» (the other woman), the poet tells her «and you are high, grey and straight. Ha!»

The «stain of love,» it seems, must be able to «eat into the leaves»; otherwise, they remain «dull, thick, and hairy» — grey rather than green. In Sour Grapes, «Great Mullen» is followed by the well-known poem, «Waiting,» in which the poet, making his way home, revels in his solitude:

When I am alone I am happy.
The air is cool. The sky is
flecked and splashed and wound
with color. The crimson phallop
of the sassafras leaves
hang crowded before me
in shoals on the heavy branches. (CPI 163)

Following this image of eroticized nature, there is the sudden turn:

When I reach my doorstep
I am greeted by
the happy shrieks of my children
and my heart sinks.
I am crushed.

And the poet asks himself:

Are not my children as dear to me
as falling leaves [...]? (CPI 164)
To those unfamiliar with Williams’ poetry of this period, this question seems, no doubt, intentionally absurd: how could a father not love his children as much as he loves falling leaves? But coming to “Waiting” from “The Young Housewife” or “Butterandeggs,” we recognize the reference: falling leaves, better yet fallen leaves, leaves smeared with saffron and stained with love, are the right kind, the ones one dreams of when one wants to send up a lighthouse or lean heavily against a purple sky. “You know there is not much/that I desire,” we read in a neighboring poem called “To a Friend Concerning Several Ladies,” and he continues:

    a few chrysanthemums
    half lying on the grass, yellow
    and brown and white, the
    talk of a few people, the trees,
    an expanse of dried leaves perhaps
    with ditches among them. (CP I 165)

And when the doctor of “Arrival” loosens “the books of” someone’s address/in a strange bedroom, he feels the autumn/dropping its silk and linen leaves/about her ankles” (CP I 164-65).

* * *

In 1929, the year of the Great Depression, Williams wrote a poem called “Rain,” which, so he told Thirlwall, was “in some ways the best poem I have ever done” (CP I 527). “Rain” begins conventionally enough:

    As the rain falls
    so does
    your love
    bathe every
    open
    object of the world — (CP I 343)

But if the powers of rain and love are here equated, the next stanza calls the metaphor into question:
In houses
the priceless dry
rooms
of illicit love
where we live
hear the wash of the
rain — (CP1 344)

And the poem goes on to contrast the «priceless dry/rooms/
of illicit love,» rooms that boast «paintings/and fine/metalware/
woven stuffs — /all the whorishness/of our/delight,» to the
endless rain of a love «unworldly» but also, alas, unwanted.
«[M]y life is spent,» the poet confesses, «to keep out love/with
which/she rains upon/the world.» And the rhythms of the poem,
with its short, hesitant lines, broken by white space, enact the
poet's continuing quarrel with himself, guilt alternating with
pleasure and the poignant realization that «love is/unworldly/and
nothing/comes of it but love» (CP1 346).

Perhaps a certain measure of guilt was a prerequisite for the
writing of Williams' erotically charged love poems. Indeed, when,
by the late forties, guilt and secrecy are no longer motivating
forces, illness and old age now making the poet much more
dependent on his wife, the enigmatic Queen Anne's Lace and
allegorical Butterandeggs of the early twenties begin to give way
to less ambivalent nature images. In «The Flower» (1948), for
example, the poet declares: «This too / love/Flossie sitting in the
sun/on its cane/the first rose//yellow as an egg the pet/canary/in his
cage/beside her caroling» (CP2 152-53). It is a moment of quiet
beauty, all passion spent. And in «The Province,» «The figure/of
tall/white grass/by the cinder-bank.» far from arousing the poet to
restlessness as it was wont to do, «keeps its alignment/faultlessly
[...]» and «Shines!/its polished/shafts/and feathered/fronds/en-
sconced there/colorless/beyond all feeling» (CP2 158-59).

The natural world is now perceived as being outside the self.
Accordingly, «love» is conceived in more abstract, more moralistic
terms. «Daffodil time,» announces the poet of «The Ivy Crown»
(1955) resignedly, «is past,» and he admits that «love is cruel/and

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selfish—and totally obtuse—/at least, blinded by the light,/young love is./But we are older,/I to love/and you to be loved» (CP2 288-89). Such sentiment reaches its height in the famous late poem «Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,» in whose opening sequence asphodel is compared to «a buttercup/upon its branching stem—/save that it’s green and wooden—» (CP2 310), a plain odorless flower that emblematizes what we might call the no frills relationship of the poet and his wife. Asphodel is further contrasted to the «crimson petals» of the «sexual orchid» of Helen of Troy, which sent «so many/disinterested/men to their graves» (CP2 315). «All women,» the poet tells his wife, «are not Helen,/I know that,/but have Helen in their hearts.» And he explains:

My sweet,
you have it also, therefore
I love you
and could not love you otherwise.
Imagine you saw
a field made up of women
all silver-white.
What should you do
but love them? (CP2 316-17)

However we react to this and similar rationalizations of past adulteries, we cannot help but notice that the characteristic displacements and projections of the earlier love poetry have vanished. No longer is the object of eros disguised, its force projected onto sky and sun, tree and flower. No longer do the movements of branches and the falling of leaves signify sexual fantasies and guilty desires. The tonal shifts of the early poems give way to the newly authoritative voice that declares, «Love/to which you too shall bow/along with me — /a flower/a weakest flower/shall be our trust» (CP2 317-18). Greeny flowers with branching stems, silver-white fields of women, and at the end of the poem, the memory of Flossie as young bride, herself as «a sweet-scented flower» (in contrast to the «odorless» asphodel) that «for me did open» — here, despite the assertive public stance
of Making it New, of inventing a «new measure,» are metaphors that recall the Keatsian mode Williams had cast aside some forty years earlier.

«What power,» asks the poet at the opening of Book III of «Asphodel,» «has love but forgiveness?» (CP 325). Perhaps none, but then, when it comes to the generation of poetic power, forgiveness and abnegation are not necessarily positive qualities. It is not, at any rate, forgiveness that stands behind the knotty obliquities of «The Young Housewife,» where the noiseless wheels of the doctor’s car make a «crackling sound over/dried leaves as [he bows and passes] smiling» (CP 57). Nor can the «triumph of simple confession,» as Robert Lowell characterized «Asphodel,»¹⁰ produce an image as powerful as that of the young poet of «Waiting,» so fixated on the «crimson phalloi/of the sassafras leaves/[that] hang crowded before [him], » (CP 163) that he forgets all about his wife and children.

Williams himself was by no means unaware of the loss entailed by the turn toward «moral odor.» «Come back,» he pleaded in an uncollected poem of 1956, written to be performed with music (CP 344, 497), «and give us/those days when passion drove us/to break every rule.» Breakage, cutting, the knocking of the poet’s head against the sky that we witnessed in the early «Love Song» — these, not the gradual opening of «sweet-scented flower[s], » these are the characteristic images of «seavage» whereby Williams’ closely guarded «inner core» is made manifest.
1 Cf. Chapter 1 of the Autobiography, which opens as follows: "I was an innocent sort of child 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!" (A 3).


4 Undated paragraph (BUFFALO), cited by Theodora R. Graham, «Williams, Flossie, and the Others: The Aesthetics of Sexuality,» Contemporary Literature 28.2 (1987): 168. Williams regularly adopts this stance: in the Autobiography, for example, he writes: "The end of life may be to penetrate the female or to be completed in the reverse of that. Right. But what females? There are females of too many coverings and wishes to explore them all. By finding only one pocket for relief we bore our women to the point of frustration, indeed, our own" (A 376). And in the play A Dream of Love, «Doc» (Williams) defends his infidelities with an image of the phoenix: "— to renew our love, burn the old nest and emerge transcendent, aflame — for you! Do you know any other way?" (ML 207), and cf. «The Basis of Faith in Art» (1937) (SE 187).


7 In «Appendix B: Annotations,» the editors note that entries marked «T» refer to John C. Thirlwall's annotated copy of *The Collected Earlier Poems*. In the late 1950s Thirlwall went through most of CEP with Williams and transcribed in the margins, often in a form of personal shorthand, WCW's comments on individual poems and on his poetic principles. We have drawn heavily from this new source [...] The reader should keep in mind that in these comments — as in the *Autobiography* — Williams is not always accurate in his factual recollections, and that he is viewing his earlier work from the perspective of the late poems, especially *Paterson V* (CP1 472-73).

8 Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked*, 147.


10 In *Al Que Quiere!,* «Love Song: First Version» was printed right before the second version. The latter makes some changes in the reprinted lines: there are no initial capitals and punctuation (dashes and exclamation points are added). The first version has a stanza break between «against a smooth purple sky» and «There is no light.»

11 In the *Autobiography*, Williams tries to put this situation in a more favorable light. Although, when on their honeymoon they drove out to Concord, Hossie, «poor child,» «was sick on somebody's grave,» Williams recalls that «We were as raw at our pleasure as any other young couple [...] We enjoyed ourselves, though, in a strange way, knocking down the barriers one by one in our efforts to get to know each other as we went along» (A 130-31).

12 According to Emily Mitchell Wallace, the occasion for this poem «was a reconciliation between Williams and his fiancée, Florence Herman,» see *CP1* 476.


14 For an earlier, somewhat different version of this argument, see my essay «William Carlos Williams,» 172-74. In his superb chapter on Williams in *A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance 1910-1950* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge U P, 1987). Albert Gelpi sees the young housewife as a rather different sort of victim. He argues that her station «behind the wooden walls of her husband's house» points up «her physical and
psychological imprisonment by the patriarchy," and he further notes that she can escape her house "only as far as the curb," where she calls out futilely to any man who enters her domestic neighborhood. As for the poet's passage in the car, Gelpi reads it as "insulation" in his mechanical contrivance as he passes her by with a self-protective, patronizing smile" (345).

At variance as Gelpi's reading is from my own, I find it interesting that we both regard the "young housewife" as victimized by the poet.

15 A number of readers have suggested to me that the image of "gripping the ankles" can be taken the other way around. Gelpi, for example, comments in a letter to me, "She is dull and colorless, but doesn't the poem also recognize that he only rises to touch the sky by standing on her and weighing her down, and that she is his steady base, holding him by the ankles?"

There is no way to prove that, in the context, the gripping of ankles by one who is "weighted down," has connotations of a stranglehold rather than a firm support.