

THE FUNCTIONS OF NAMES IN THE MYTHOPEIC PROCESS  
IN WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS' PATERSON

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Of all the American poets who wrote during the first half of the Twentieth Century, William Carlos Williams has had the greatest influence on later poets, those, especially, who wrote during the years from the middle 1950's to the middle 1970's. In the main, I think, this influence stems from Williams's early recognition of a simple fact of our linguistic life: that we do not speak English. We speak, he asserted, "the American idiom," a speech that derives from our experience, our history, our culture--which is to say, from the ways in which Americans have lived their lives in their places in their times.

Unfortunately, most readers know Williams almost exclusively as a writer of brief, basically lyric statements such as "The Red Wheelbarrow" or "By the road to the contagious hospital," the opening section of "Spring and All." His largest poem, PaterSON, which is in so many ways his best, remains too little known and too little appreciated, in good part, I suspect, because it is not only long but complex. In it, though, he attempts to bring together his understandings of the world about him, his culture, and to offer them in that "American idiom" which both embodies and expresses the culture. This he does by creating a collocation of characters and in-

cidents and environment that transcends mere story and becomes a magnified image and implicit explanation of the intrinsic nature of things--in a word, myth.

Now, myth almost inevitably relies upon the miraculous, upon wonders--traditionally, such occurrences beyond "normality" as the passion of a god for a mortal, the transformation of a nymph into a flower, the superhuman feats of a hero (his demidivinity itself often the product of the union of god and mortal)--we all know the range of instances. But in each and every case the miracle serves to illuminate the nature and meaning of some locally perceived (though in reality universal) phenomenon, something intrinsic to the experience of the society in which the myth arises. The Greeks, for example, cared not a whit about the experiences of their "barbarian" neighbors the Persians; they were interested in Greek experience and in how to comprehend and cope with it. And that experience could not have been expressed in any language but Greek, which, after all, derived precisely from the need to deal verbally with what Greeks felt and thought and knew.

If all that I have said seems to belabor the obvious, we have only to recall that as late as the 1930's "good English," by which was meant something that imitated educated British English, was still the language expected not only of scholars, but of "serious" poets (as distinct from "popular" poets or "local colorists"); and Walt Whitman was regarded as some sort of aberration who could be

explained (or was it explained away?) by articles about his homosexuality! How many of us cannot remember that cute little aphorism "Ain't ain't in the dictionary"? And it wasn't. But "ain't" was an integral, essential part of the language that expressed the American experience, the language that Williams heard, the language that he sought. On the flyleaf of the original edition of the Third Book of Paterson, he spoke of that volume as "a search for the redeeming language by which a man's premature death, like the death of Mrs. Cumming in Book One, and the woman's (the man's) failure to hold him (her) might have been prevented."<sup>1</sup>

Now, one way by which we may see how Williams found that "redeeming language" is by looking at how he uses names in the poem; for in names, perhaps more than anywhere else, will we see the local, the specific, the concrete, as he creates the ultimate identity of place and person, city and man, in his mythic character Paterson. For a man and a city are one, he says, "if imaginatively conceived."<sup>2</sup>

To begin with, then, we find that from the outset of the poem the place names establish a sense of the poem's rootedness in the physical locale. In some cases we know the names as part of our general geographical knowledge: Newark, Paterson, the Ramapo mountains, West Point, the Passaic River; and even when we do not actually know the places, we are inclined to feel that we do: the apparent factuality, even the probable factuality, of Garrett Mountain or Ringwood (to sample only from names that appear early in the po-

em)--this sense of their being real places helps us to suspend disbelief in the "wonders" and to envision a familiar America. Furthermore, as a means of enhancing their apparent factuality, Williams uses the names far more often than not in interpolated prose passages, some of which are (at least purportedly) letters and the rest, a larger number, purported historical documents, usually journalistic reports.

But for all that Paterson is a city, a geographical place, as place it contains a history of lives lived within it, and that history is metaphorically, becomes metamorphically, the biography of the man Paterson. Hence, in the creation of the man/city identity, Williams begins in the prose passages with the bare statements of fact--of who did what--and transmutes these facts into the man/Paterson's "dreams"--in effect, to use Jungian terms somewhat loosely, his "collective" memories. So, after a brief verse "Preface" that announces his intentions and (metaphorically) his quest, Williams commences the poem with an image halfway between metaphor and personification:

Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls  
its spent waters forming the outline of his back. He  
lies on his right side, head near the thunder  
of the water filling his dreams....

(14)

Ten pages later he has reached the possibility of metamorphosis and interjects.

THE GRRRREAT HISTORY of that

old time Jersey Patriot

## N. F. P A T E R S O N

(N for Noah; F for Faitoute; P for short)

"Jersey Lightning" to the boys. (24)

The evocative possibilities of "Noah" are manifold: the destruction of a world and its rediscovery, re-creation, and salvation; the associations of the deluge itself, so like the associations of the deluge of water tumbling incoherently (an inchoate language) from the falls. "Faitoute," of course, means "makes everything" or "does everything." And, of course, that is exactly the description of Paterson, who will be poet and doctor as Williams was, but will be all the things that Williams was not, all the things that all the personae of Paterson's history have been and done. "Paterson [sic] is a man (since I am a man) who dives from cliffs and the edges of waterfalls, to his death--finally. But for all that he is a woman (since I am not a woman) who is the cliff and the waterfall."<sup>3</sup>

Thus literally scores of names of persons float to the surface of Paterson's consciousness. Most of them fall back into the subconscious, are lost sight of, but a few remain, forever in Paterson's thoughts and ultimately mingling, merging into the threads of common themes that are the dominant facets of the mythic Paterson's "personality"--if the word can be so used. Those that disappear are employed primarily for their gift of verisimilitude. For example, just four pages into the poem Williams interjects a report

of one

...David Hower, a poor shoemaker with a large family, out of work and money, who collected a lot of mussels from Notch Brook near the city of Paterson.

(17)

At first, Williams tells us, Hower threw away the "hard substances" he found in the mussels, but later sold some of them to a jeweler,

who gave him twenty-five to thirty dollars for the lot....One pearl of fine lustre was sold to Tiffany for \$900 and later to the Empress Eugenie for \$2000 to be known thenceforth as the "Queen Pearl," the finest of its sort in the world today.

(17)

Though David Hower does not reappear in the poem, he has played his part in establishing the undeniable factuality of a "wonder." The specificity inherent in the names of the persons and places and even the name ascribed to the pearl itself demand our acceptance of the story. Poor shoemakers and empresses and miraculously found pearls--all that belongs in fairytale. But here is no fairytale; this is real because it is "history," every component named and identifiable. As that eminent linguist and scholar Casey Stengel used to say in another context, "Ya could look it up."

The foundation of the mythic process in the "factuality" of the miraculous continues in the ensuing prose passages. We are told of "a monster in human form" whose head is as long as his body, twenty-seven inches; though we are not here told his name (late in Book Four we learn that it is Peter the Dwarf--a play on Peter the Great?), we are told that he was visited by General Washington, who asked whether he was a Whig or a Tory. What happens in the passage

is unimportant, but again the names lend credibility to the account of a "wonder"; but now they also lead the reader's mind to associations of the traditional, official history that one is acquainted with. In a single line of verse that now becomes itself a sort of interpolation within a prose matrix, Williams comments, "A wonder! A wonder!" and immediately returns to official history for more names. He tells us that Hamilton had seen the place and follows with a demographic census of 1870 which names the "foreign-born"—which is to say Paterson's ethnic origins: French, German, English, Irish, Scotch, Hollanders, and Swiss. Then in short order he tells of a huge sturgeon (a wonder) captured near the falls by a John Winters and how "the Bergen Express and Paterson Advertiser of Wednesday, September 3, 1817, devoted half a column to an account of the incident under the heading 'The Monster Taken.'" And finally, in a passage of some four hundred words, he explains the historical process by which the name "Jackson's Whites" came to be applied to a group that had settled in the woods near Paterson.

Throughout all this Williams has introduced portions of what he calls "the elemental character of the place," and he has so intermingled the facts of "official" history with the "facts" of legend and local accounts that they have coalesced; he has named places and people and thereby created a "history" to suit his purposes. Then, concluding the opening section of Book One, Williams introduces the names of three characters who will remain in Paterson's

thoughts and who will in time merge in the myth that the poet envisions. The first two are Mrs. Sarah Cumming and her husband, the Rev. Hopper Cumming, of Newark. A passage describes how, the pair having climbed "the Hundred Steps" to view the Passaic Falls, Mr. Cumming turned from his wife and upon looking back discovered that she had disappeared into the falls. The language had failed them, and Mrs. Cumming had become one with the inchoate sound of the water; her spirit had become identified with the falls. A part of the myth had come into being.

Immediately, in a brief bit of verse that follows, Williams adds, almost offhandedly, "Patch, too, as a matter of fact." Names are facts; and Williams proceeds to offer an account of Sam Patch, a local mill boss, who leapt into the falls to save a roller being used to draw a footbridge across the river, and who thereby began a career as a famous jumper which ended when, unable to finish a speech before a jump, Patch lost his bearings and was drowned. The language had failed Patch, too, and his spirit had (has for us, the readers) also become identified with the falls, the roar of unarticulated language in which we drown. It is as a sort of headline for this account that Williams has used the name of N.F. Paterson as described above (24). But by this point the reader can see that Paterson is not only Everyman, but in a literal way a composite of all men, not only metaphorically Noah, who must save mankind from the flood (of meaningless words?), but Faitoute, who does everything

--and is therefore everyone.

As Williams develops the poem, then, he can add the remaining ingredients of Paterson's direct heritage: among them such as Cornelius Doremus, who lived from 1714 to 1803; William Dalzell, who shot John Van Houten in 1880; Sergeant John McBride, John Ferguson, John McGuckin, and William McNulty, Dean of Saint Joseph's Catholic Church. As time moves toward the present the names change to evoke the cultural memory of new immigrant groups, in particular the Germans and the Irish, who settled in the area. And in counterpoint to this movement, looking backward toward a still earlier time even than that recalled by the previous prose passages, Williams recalls the Indians' names for places, persons, and things--the indigenous, intrinsic sounds of identity from before our incursions, our memories.

While he establishes this base of factuality, this evocation of a past that goes beyond history to an archetypal subconscious, Williams maintains the recurrent appearance of the names of Sam Patch and Mrs. Cumming, the prototypical "leapers" into chaos. As he moves into Book Two, however, Williams begins to establish what he calls "the modern replicas." Increasingly he centers his historical reference about Alexander Hamilton's vision of Paterson as "a great manufacturing center, a great Federal City, to supply the needs of the country" (87)—another wonder. But this is the same Hamilton whose dream was unfulfilled in great measure because he regarded the

people "a great beast," a dream (or is it a nightmare?) that Williams turns metamorphically into the Platonic beast with two backs as on Sunday Paterson multifariously suns himself in the park. In this "Sunday in the Park" section, Williams juxtaposes against Hamilton a fictional visionary named Klaus Ehrens, an immigrant who, having made his fortune, now preaches an evangelical doctrine of the rejection of wealth. Over and over Williams returns to these two names as representing the polar antitheses of vision, bound together inextricably both by their being visionary and by their being rejected. Eventually each comes to represent his time, names such as Washington, Jefferson, and Madison, names from our "official" history, accreting about Hamilton, while names such as Lilienthal and Altgeld (and by inference, one supposes, Bryan) are associated with Ehrens in the ranks of the outcasts of history, excluded from the "official" rosters.

By the close of Book Two we can see Williams's strategy: the factuality established in good part by names in the prose sections has begun to metamorphose into verse, and the names begin to transcend their times and places. More and more the data of the poem are being "made" into poetry, into the final myth. But the very conclusion of the second book brings to us something new: an autobiographical, eight-page-long letter to "Dr. P." from a woman poet who signs herself just "C." Replete with the names of several contemporary writers along with other facts, the letter serves both as

a conclusion to Book Two and as a transition to Book Three, "The Library," which deals directly with the search for a redeeming language. Interestingly, the very absence of a signature name becomes a telling stroke: the "C." is like a name; in a sense it is only a familiar form of name. We might even revert to Williams's "P for short" in his "explanation" of the "meaning" of N.F. Paterson; only a stranger would say (or require) all of a name.

As the poem moves through Book Three and Book Four we find more letters signed with initials, and we feel increasingly the factuality of the correspondence precisely because of the use of initials and their sense of familiarity. Some are easy to decipher: A.G., for example, is obviously Allen Ginsberg. But the DJB at the end of an illiterate letter? A fiction? Undoubtedly. But it is so entirely of a piece with the "factual" initials that Williams has again blurred the distinction between the two: reality has become simply that which is made into poetry.

But with Book Three Williams also introduces another new kind of name: along with Paterson and Newark and Henry are Acheron and Persephone. I spoke a moment back of Paterson's direct heritage; but he has an indirect heritage, too, a past that appropriately appears in the library, the myths before the new myth, as, perhaps, the Titans were before the Olympian gods. Williams plays the names with classical reference against Indian names—and thus still another sort of indirect heritage—by placing the classical names in

the verse while he places the Indian names in the prose. In effect, he acknowledges that the classical names have already been absorbed by Paterson, made part of his memories, part of his total being; but the Indian names and what they refer to, the actions and incidents, the persons and places--these have not. And so, near the close of Book Three, Williams identifies past with present through the classical myth of Orpheus and Persephone, reminding us merely by mentioning the names of what can happen--of what has happened--when an incoherent language drowns out the music of poems. Williams depends, clearly, upon the reader's process of association to supply the myth in its entirety; he expects the knowledge to be available to any reader of poems.

With the beginning of Book Four--originally intended as the final book of the poem--Williams adventures even further with the use of names from classical antiquity. He writes what in a letter to Marianne Moore he termed "an idyll of Theocritus, a perverted but still recognizable 'happy' picture of the past...."<sup>4</sup> Here are Corydon and Phyllis, but our expectations are violated: the modern Corydon is a lesbian poet-manqué, and Phyllis, employed as her companion, is a frigid hick escaping from an alcoholic father, involved in an unfulfilled and unfulfilling affair with Paterson, and wholly incapable, not only of understanding Corydon's poetic references, but of comprehending that there can be such a thing as poetry. All the evocations of the pastoral world are brought ironi-

cally to nought.

From the failure of life in Corydon and Phyllis, Williams moves to a section that takes as its center his phrase "the radiant gist." Here Williams juxtaposes Marie Curie with Billy Sunday, evoking through their names the sense of a modern "saint" of science in contradistinction to the evangelist's religiosity--two forms of faith, two kinds of "enlightenment." After an interpolated letter from "A.G." filled with the names of authors and quickly sketching in the literary development of its writer, Williams turns back to his contemplation of the radiant gist (the inspiring force, the liberated and liberating energy) and in large measure by the use of names and their associations contrasts the modern world (and its gist, its energy) with the past (and its spirit). (How reminiscent of Henry Adams's Virgin and the Dynamo!) The representative statement for the whole section may well be

As Carrie Nation  
to Artemis  
so is our life today .

(211)

The choice of names is perfect. What more is there to say?

Williams finishes this fourth book, which he spoke of as "reminiscent of episodes," with references in the verse to places and persons from both near and far: names leading the mind to the past, as the river runs to the sea, which is its home. "Thalassa! Thalassa! calling us home..," Williams says. But immediately, reminding us somewhat ironically of Odysseus's precaution against

seduction, he counters with, "I say to you, Put wax rather in your/ ears against the hungry sea/ it is not our home!" (235) And so to the end Williams alternates between names from classical antiquity and names from his local world, Paterson, the man/city, still trying to reconcile the opposed forces in his mythic mind.

Book Five of Paterson, which Williams wrote in a sense outside and beyond the original scope of the poem, is dedicated "To the Memory/ of/ Henri Toulouse Lautrec/ painter." It is concerned almost entirely with art--poetry, painting, music--and with the power of art (and hence of the artist) to transform, perhaps because by this point in the poem all the prosaic data have been metamorphosed, "mere" history turned into poem. Hence the book is in effect a coda to the original poem. It is filled with the names of artists and their works, evoking the reader's response, one suspects, less from the significance of each name individually than from the sheer mass of names. One need not know the specific reference of this, that, or the other name; there are enough more to compensate for any gaps. Yet, interestingly, in the midst of this veritable orgy of naming Williams stops and contemplates a woman he has seen "in our town," a woman of no real physical distinction, but an artist of sorts in the way she dressed. He concludes the contemplation with "And she was gone!" and follows with a passage that I find fascinatingly to the purpose of the present discussion:

. if ever I see you again  
as I have sought you

daily without success

I'll speak to you, alas  
too late! ask,  
What are you doing on the

streets of Paterson? a  
thousand questions:  
Are you married? Have you any  
children? And, most important,  
your NAME! which  
of course she may not

give me—though  
I cannot conceive it  
in such a lonely and

intelligent woman.

(256-7)

In many cultures it is believed that if one tells another person his name, he gives that person a part of himself and thus a power over him; it is as if the name is that person in some magical way. Poet that he was, Williams understood that notion. He declared, "No ideas but in things," but he recognized that only by naming a thing could he communicate its whatness—the thing itself. And so he can place before us the city/man Paterson, the mythic embodiment of his world, only when he has named all of Paterson's parts.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>William Carlos Williams, Paterson (Book Three) (New York: New Directions, 1949), flyleaf.

<sup>2</sup>William Carlos Williams, Paterson (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 7. All further references to the text of Paterson, taken from this edition, will be cited by page number(s) in parentheses following the quotation.

<sup>3</sup>Williams, Paterson (Book Three), flyleaf.

<sup>4</sup>William Carlos Williams, The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957), p. 305.