



PROJECT MUSE®

Paterson: Poem as Rhizome

Alba Newmann

William Carlos Williams Review, Volume 26, Number 1, Spring 2006,
pp. 51-73 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wcw.2007.0002>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/216545>

Paterson: Poem as Rhizome

Alba Newmann

UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. . . . There is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made. (3)

The rhizome is . . . a map and not a tracing. . . . What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real. (12)

—*A Thousand Plateaus*, G. Deleuze and F. Guattari

THE significance of place, and of the American scene in particular, is one of the features by which William Carlos Williams distinguished his work from that of his expatriate contemporaries. Advocating the poetic value of the American experience and idiom, Williams rejected Eliot's, and even Pound's, classicism and Eurocentrism and grounded his work in the particulars of his native New Jersey. While the setting for a piece like Eliot's "J. Alfred Prufrock" remains ambiguous (are these the smoky, half-deserted streets of St. Louis or London?), Williams's *Paterson* requires that poem and place be one. He asserts, within *Paterson's* first few pages, that ideas and things are inextricably linked: the ideas of the American city and the American experience must reside within the city-as-thing. *Paterson* cannot exist as some vague semblance of city; it must be made of *Paterson* itself. As one speaker in Book III says:

of this, make it of *this*, this
this, this, this, this . (P 141)

Williams was born and raised in Rutherford, New Jersey, neighboring Paterson; he resided there, practicing medicine, throughout his adult life. Although the first volume of *Paterson* was not published until 1946, as early as 1926 Williams had begun thinking about the city as poetic material. In that year, he wrote a poem called "Paterson," elements of which he would eventually integrate into his long work. He later explained, in a series of interviews, that the scale of the city (neither as large as New York, nor as small as Rutherford), the richness of its history, and the presence of the Passaic River and Falls influenced his choice of locale (IWWP 72–3).

Many have used Williams's emphasis on the American scene to define his ideal of "contact." And, indeed, in the manifesto written for the first issue of the "little magazine" bearing that name, Williams explains: "For native work in verse, fiction, criticism or whatever is written we mean to maintain a place, insisting on that which we have not found insisted upon before, the essential contact between words and the locality that breeds them, in this case America" (*Contact* 1). This may not, however, adequately express the full extent of what "contact" means for his poetry. As Williams's friend, philosopher Kenneth Burke, points out, "the implications of 'contact' . . . were quite different and went much deeper [than a simple cult of 'Amurricanism']" (*Language* 283). Instead, Burke describes contact in terms of a productive physicality, one that enacts rather than duplicates (283). Because of its proliferative potential, "contact" is realized within a poem not in an act of description or duplication, but in an act of being. As Williams says in Book III of *Paterson*, "Language / is not a vague province" (P 110):

The province of the poem is the world.
When the sun rises, it rises in the poem
and when it sets darkness comes down
and the poem is dark . (100)

Williams and Burke share a concern with the translation of physical and conceptual worlds into language—as an enactment, rather than a mirroring of those worlds. In their writings, they each describe a revelatory or transcendental "naming" process which brings words and things into contact with one another. As Brian Bremen discusses in *William Carlos Williams and the Diagnostics of Culture*, this poetic naming represents a condensation of the experiential and the imagined, which is and must always be more than a mimetic process: it must, for Burke, be a "symbolic action," for Williams, a freeing of language and its structures that facilitates discovery on the part of author and reader.

Both men are concerned with the accretions of commonly held beliefs, to

which they give various names—"facts," "knowledge," "the symbols of authority"—that can deny "contact" between words, ideas, and things, because they are proscriptive, rather than responsive to and engaged with the world itself. The reified compartmentalization that results from these "ideologies" is representative of the "divorce" that Williams finds all around him, what Bremen describes as "a separation, a dissonance that leads to the most chilling acts . . ." (37). Antithetical to "contact," such rigid orders—systems of separation and hierarchy (the "order, perfect and controlled / on which empires, alas, are built")—are dangerous (P 178). They prevent interaction and enactment, that is, the productive synergies of words and things. They allow for an over-reliance on the traditions and authority of the past. And they inhibit empathy and imagination, two fundamental ways in which the poet can make contact with the world.

Because "contact" is so central to Williams's writing, we must look for explanatory models that will help us better understand its functioning, particularly within his longest work, *Paterson*. Such a model cannot resort to a jingoistic explanation of his interest in writing the American scene; nor can it be solely based on the idea of the concrete made textual, or the textual made concrete. To more fully understand the operations of contact, we must take Williams's "empathic imagination" into account, where the interaction of the imagination and the materials of the world makes revelation and discovery possible.

In 1987, Burke wrote to Bremen that perhaps *Paterson* could be read as "a Baedeker": "its very *title* would suggest the totality of his art-as-contact, informing the reader, as *tourist*, of what is going on in *Paterson* as both a place and a poem." Burke's emphasis on the word "title" is suggestive of his concept of "entitlement": that transcendental naming process described above, which creates a "summarizing vessel," into which experiential data is condensed, offering an analogical representation of the many, complex characters which must be connected to constitute the concept or thing being named (*Grammar* 516).¹ For Burke, the book named after the place, the book which contains the place, can be read as a "summarizing vessel" for Williams's greater project of "art-as-contact." The choice of the "guidebook" as vessel resonates with Burke's dual focus on language (or "symbolicity") and action: it is language ("book") and a call to action ("guide").

As a model for understanding *Paterson*, Burke's analogy is both promising and problematic. In its capacity to open unfamiliar territory to the reader, to invite "travel" through *Paterson*/*Paterson* and contact with unfamiliar terrain, the Baedeker represents *Paterson* well. Williams, as I will discuss below, was consciously engaged with the rhetoric of place—the stuff of which guidebooks are made—a focus that contributes significantly to the relevance of Burke's conceit. Accordingly, I begin with a closer examination of the guidebook and its implica-

tions as an explanatory model for Williams's poem and its practice of contact. To invoke the Baedeker, however, is to call upon specific cultural and historical positions with regards to the landscape—positions that claim objectivity and domination.² While Burke is celebrating the totality of art-as-contact, his comparison evokes another totality—one that overwrites the complexities and contradictions of a place in service to a readily followed formula, designed to deliver readers from point A to point B, both in terms of their location and their understanding of the place.

The guidebook is a tool of orientation. Whether it presents a linear, descriptive narrative, or a series of compartmentalized data (introduction, history, culture, where to stay, where to eat, etc.), its ability to *enact* the terrain it describes is debatable. In *Spring and All*, Williams expresses his disdain for the “traditionalists of plagiarism” (drawing on a phrase from Poe’s critique of Longfellow): those who adhere to convention, rather than emphasizing imagination, innovation, or insight. How easily might the guidebook become one of the “prose paintings” or “copies” that Williams critiques: an exercise in “plagiarism” rather than discovery? We should consider Burke’s summarizing vessel more closely, but in doing so, we must ask whether the guidebook is not representative of one of the “older forms” that the poet urges us to destroy, so that the imagination may be free from its ideology of “facts.” The trick is to find a model, be it summarizing vessel or otherwise, that will not, as Bremen describes, “solidify into a ‘calculus’—a predetermined form in which we fit our discoveries in advance” effectively blocking discovery rather than aiding it (112).

While the Baedeker comparison attends to the text-and-place as one, it cannot represent Williams’s efforts to get out from under the thumb of traditional authorities—to “make it new.” Nor can the guidebook model account for the richness of Williams’s city/man/poem, its intertextuality and layering, its arrivals and departures, both structural and thematic. The subversion of conventions, the rejection of “classical” values and aesthetics, and the transvaluation of the seemingly mundane, or even monstrous, into the celebrated create a text that is as much a tool of disorientation as it is one of orientation—because in disruption and disorientation there is the potential for discovery.

Paterson is not only an invitation or guide, it is an enactment; it is a text that shifts, flows, and falls, that breaks off and starts again, that “somersaults” and escapes. Because of these complexities, and because of Williams’s position with regards to poetry’s capacity to produce rather than simply duplicate, Burke’s notion of the poem as guidebook is, ultimately, unable to explain the poem’s practice of contact adequately. Instead, I offer an alternative, connecting *Paterson*

with the writings of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his co-author, psychologist Félix Guattari, to suggest a “rhizomic” reading of *Paterson’s* practice of contact.

I. Poem as Guidebook

The Baedeker company began publishing guidebooks in Germany during the first third of the nineteenth century, participating in the birth of the guidebook as a genre, an early nineteenth-century phenomenon in both Europe and Britain. As travel became increasingly popular among members of the middle classes, the Baedeker quickly rose to prominence, and by 1856 was a standard accoutrement of the traveler in Europe, and even the Middle East (Hinrichsen 8, 14). Initially available in German and then French, the publication of English editions began in 1861, and from that time forward, as Burke’s reference suggests, the guidebooks became so ubiquitous that a reference to “a Baedeker” became shorthand for any guide (Eggert 207).

Characteristically, these books contained (as the now more common Fodor’s or Frommer’s do) information about popular scenic, cultural, and historical sites, as well as accommodations, food, and travel logistics. In Burke’s words:

A town in Italy, say, is famous for its Cathedral, or the number of paintings by one famous artist. The Baedeker informs tourists of these facts. Also it adds notable details about its history over the centuries, possible trips to surrounding areas, inns, restaurants, figures who had been notable citizens, picturesque sights, such as cascades or outlooks, etc.
(Letter to Bremen)

A Baedeker could cover an entire nation, a region, or a single city. Its goal was to facilitate travelers’ interactions with the spaces in which they were traveling.

Like a guidebook, Williams’s poem aims to introduce the reader/visitor to a specific space—the city of Paterson, New Jersey. The text tells the reader/visitor where to look, focuses our gaze and attention, and reflects information that the author feels will enrich our experience, including details designed to titillate interest and inform. Although the site Williams has chosen to guide us through is not standard tourist fare, like the “city in Italy” to which Burke refers, Paterson has its own scenic highlights, its own claims to historic significance (if not fame). It is not accidental, after all, that Burke mentions “cascades” in his description of the Baedeker: the Passaic Falls are first and foremost among Paterson’s scenic offer-

ings. Many episodes in the poem, particularly in Book I, focus on the falls—their appearance, sound, and magnitude, their historic and economic significance.

The park, too, with its view of the town and river valley, is another of the highlights which garners attention in the poem, and serves as the setting for a walking tour. Itineraries for such tours are a common feature of many travel books (Baedeker's included), and *Paterson's* Section I of Book II, "Sunday in the Park," is particularly evocative of this convention. The section follows the ascent of a pedestrian, climbing through a local park to a cliff and its "picturesque summit," then doubling back again. The summit affords a view of the surrounding landscape and prominent features of the local terrain, both built and natural. Along the way, the poem makes note of local flora—sand-pine, cedar, sumac; it describes the activity of hikers, picnickers, and lovers; and marks the milestones of the climb.

This ascent links the poem to a tradition predating the formal guidebook: the aestheticizing language of late eighteenth- and early-to-mid-nineteenth-century travel accounts, particularly those written in the English Romantic tradition. Often, as Robin Jarvis argues, this tradition was paired with the literature of pedestrianism. Compare, for instance, *Paterson's*:

At last he comes to the idlers' favorite
haunts, the picturesque summit, where
the blue-stone (rust-red where exposed)
has been faulted at various levels
(ferns rife among the stones)
into rough terraces and partly closed in
dens of sweet grass, the ground gently sloping (P 56)

with a passage from a 1793 edition of *Descriptive Sketches*:

Now as we lower trace the river's course,
The prospect opens, we have left behind
The lofty rocks and overhanging crags,
And nothing now doth greet the ravish'd sight
But graceful slopes and richly planted meads,
And the smooth surface of the distant sea. (qtd. in Jarvis 84)

Williams's own description is arguably more lyrical than Miss M. Bowen's (the author of "The Walk," quoted above), but both participate in the "picturesque":

“a mixture of masculine ruggedness and unrepressed elemental forces”—the rough and exhilarating faulted stones and crags—and “feminine depths, pleasing variety, and partial concealments”—gentle and soothing dens of sweet grass and graceful slopes (Jarvis 60).

In part, Williams achieves a romanticized affect in the poem by incorporating textual material from actual nineteenth- (and early twentieth-) century accounts. The passages adapted largely verbatim from Charles P. Longwell’s *A Little Story of Old Paterson as Told by an Old Man* (1901), offer examples, such as the lines

Branching trees and ample gardens gave
the village streets a delightful charm and
the narrow old-fashioned brick walls added
a dignity to the shading trees. (P 194)

Although Williams often alters the passages he acquires from outside sources, the florid vocabulary and sensationalist descriptive techniques found in many pieces remain, as is the case with the tale of the Rev. and Mrs. Cumming, taken from John Barber’s and Henry Howe’s *Historical Collections of the State of New Jersey* (1844):

On Monday morning, [the Rev. Cumming] went with his beloved companion to show her the falls of the Passaic, and the surrounding beautiful, wild and romantic scenery. . . . Having ascended the flight of stairs (the Hundred Steps) Mr. and Mrs. Cumming walked over the solid ledge to the vicinity of the cataract, charmed with the wonderful prospect, and making various remarks upon the stupendous works of nature around them. (14)

Similarly, Baedeker guides incorporate commentary from past (and often famous) visitors. So, for instance, in a contemporary Baedeker’s *Portugal* we get Lord Byron, in 1809, describing the village of Cintra as

perhaps in every respect the most delightful in Europe; it contains beauties of every description, natural and artificial. Palaces and gardens rising in the midst of rocks, cataracts, and precipices; convents on stupendous heights—a distant view of the sea and the Tagus. (78)

And later, quoting from its own edition of 1908:

. . . [Lisbon] in spite of the absence of a mountain background or distinguished buildings, possesses a beauty of its own in the picturesque disposition of its terraces, its view of the wide expanses of the Tagus, and the luxuriant vegetation of its public gardens and parks. (79)

As Burke points out in his letter, both guidebook and poem include historical anecdotes in order to add color and depth to the scene. As early as page nine, Williams begins to incorporate vignettes from Paterson's past—scenes of life, primarily from the nineteenth century, but some reaching back to the colonial period. Many of these take place in the immediate vicinity of the Falls. A number of the historical passages indicate Paterson's history of tourism, prior to the writing of this "guide" to the city. They also begin to situate Paterson within the broader context of American history: "General" George Washington "rested" in the area, and Hamilton stopped there, too (P 10, 12, 70). The history of the Native American populations of the region—and their encounters with European colonists—also plays a significant part in the poem.

Williams had begun thinking about this poem at a time when many American writers were abandoning their native country for Europe. Throughout its composition, he urged a return to American roots, and a recognition of vernacular value. His poem argues that *here* is a place in which men of merit (Washington, Hamilton, Chief Pogatticut) found value: the historical episodes emphasize the cultural relevance of the site and the persistence of its value over time. These depictions also focus on the remarkable in Paterson. *Here* is a site of extraordinary abundance (long an American trope), as seen in the discovery of pearls in local mussels or the catching of enormous fish (9, 11, 34). Here, too, is a site of drama and heroism: the daring deeds of locals, the major events that shaped the city's past and present. Like the core samples brought up by the digging of the artesian well in Book III, Williams's materials are excavated from local sources (139).

In *A Tourist's New England: Travel Fiction 1820–1920*, Dona Brown observes, "Tourism is actually one of the oldest industries in New England—as old as the industrial revolution" (4). Many early visitors came to the region, not to witness its lovely scenery, but because they wanted to examine firsthand the economic, industrial, and social developments underway in the still-young nation. Williams appears similarly interested in those elements of the city's and the nation's development—its experimental and productive nature. According to Brown, factories were a common stop along a New England tourist's path. The subsequent craze for landscape consumption shifted the focus away from the man-made and onto the natural environment; still, Paterson's industrial history might have played an

important role in its early history as tourist destination (4–5). And certainly, it plays an important role in the poem. It was not as a scenic attraction, but as a location for future industry that Hamilton was drawn to the Passaic Falls. The silk mills were, for a time, the region's source of fame and monetary well-being, and they figure repeatedly in the poem. While industrial presence may no longer be a feature praised in many guidebooks, it was a source of power and value for Paterson, and, importantly, for the industrializing nation the city synecdochically represents.

Williams understands the mechanisms at work within the guidebook genre, how sites are invested with value by the author's descriptive and rhetorical choices; and he is able to use some of these conventions to position Paterson similarly—even in commemorating the less familiar, less picturesque elements of the city.³ At the same time, however, he understands the reification of place that the guidebook genre enforces, with its over-reliance on traditional, middle-class values and aesthetics, its structure, based on “exact hierarch[ies] of importance” and its “severely factual flavour” (Eggert 210); and this makes its conventions ready targets for his more iconoclastic tendencies.

Accordingly, Williams repeatedly manipulates the conventions, complicating and disrupting them. Descriptions of scenery that begin in a typical, travel-guide tone, may take a decidedly sexual turn, like the observation tower which “stands up / prominently / from its pubic grove,” or the juxtaposition, on a single page, of the image of “the deep-set valley . . . almost hid / by dense foliage” with the “labia that rive” in childbirth (P 53, 192). In creating landscapes that carry sexual charge, the poet may be commenting upon the conversion of place into a site of desire and conquest, where the traveler becomes paramour. Of course, he would not be the first to conflate land and body. If anything, he is taking a trend already present in the language of travel narrative and accentuating it, at the same time disrupting the guidebook's rhetorical claims to a helpful objectivity.

Within the first ten pages of the poem, we realize that Williams is not solely invested in aestheticizing the surrounding landscapes or connecting those landscapes with desire. The Passaic River begins, we are told, in “oozy fields / abandoned to grey beds of dead grass, / black sumac, withered weed-stalks, / mud and thickets cluttered with dead leaves” (7). And, as the poem continues, the poet includes anecdotes from the city's present and past that cast a pall over the local scene; so, for instance, just before children sprinkle flowers in front of Lafayette's feet, a news report describes how a baby girl was murdered by her father and buried under a rock, wrapped in a paper bag (194–5).

Revelations of violence are an intrinsic element of the fabric Williams is creat-

ing, as are images of “monstrosity”—the torture of Indian prisoners, the murder of children, the exhumation of a hydro-encephalitic man, “Peter the Dwarf,” whose skull has been buried in a separate coffin from his body. This is no strategy for putting visitors at ease with their surroundings. Nor is it one designed to put the “best face forward” for Paterson and its historical residents. It offers a stark contrast to the techniques of the Baedeker, which according to Paul Eggert “pre-digested” experiences for travelers, according to a previously established aesthetic, and confirmed “existing ways of understanding the foreign” (213, 212). As early as 1908 (when E. M. Forster’s *A Room with a View*, which comments on the guide, was first published), the Baedeker had gained the reputation of being staid and stodgy, the crutch of the timid or incurious traveler. None of these qualities resonates with the portrait of place Williams is constructing, nor the kind of traveler he wants to entice.

In general, guidebooks are not written by locals or for locals, but rather by “expert” travelers who come, assess, and depart—who maintain a distance between themselves and the spaces through which they pass. Their standards of judging, and the depth to which they are able to penetrate the local scene are determined by their status as outsiders and authorities. The fragments which constitute the poem’s epigraph point to a number of recurring concerns within the book, among which are: “a local pride” and “a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands” (P 2). “Local pride” is an affirmation of value and a source of insight in Paterson itself. Williams explained in a press release, placed before the text by the editor of the 1992 edition, that he chose to write about Paterson because of his “intimate” knowledge of the city (xiii). This local knowledge makes the kind of facile generalizations that streamline a guide unlikely, if even possible.

In Book III, a speaker invites us to “take a ride around, to see what the town looks like” (106). Later, taking a ride is dismissed as removing the visitor too greatly from the environment in which she or he should be immersed. Instead the text urges:

WALK in the world
 (you can’t see anything
 from a car window, still less
 from a plane or from the moon!? Come
 off of it.) (211)

To walk offers the opportunity to collect local knowledge—to be in contact with the world as it is, not as it might be seen in passing, or from a great distance.

Of course, as I have mentioned, some travel guides do promote pedestrian travel—but only through the “good” parts of town. In contrast, the excerpted letters of Allen Ginsberg serve as testimony from a local informant and fellow walker about where the true values of Paterson reside:

. . . I inscribe this missive somewhat in the style of those . . . who recognized one another . . . as fellow citizenly Chinamen of the same province, whose gastanks, junkyards, fens of the alley, millways, funeral parlors, river-visions—aye! the falls itself—are images white-woven in their very beards. (172–3)

and later

I have been walking the streets and discovering the bars—especially around the great Mill and River streets. Do you know this part of Paterson? I have seen so many things—negroes, gypsies, an incoherent bartender in a taproom overhanging the river, filled with gas, ready to explode, the window facing the river painted over so that people can’t see in. I wonder if you have seen River Street most of all, because that is really the heart of what is to be seen. (193)⁴

While many tourists (and, likely, tour-guide writers) long to get to the “heart of what is to be seen,” it is the purview of locals, who have walked the less “scenic” streets, to have both the knowledge of and pride in these places, even (or especially) when the heart of what is to be seen is unexpected.

Williams and Ginsberg share an interest in bringing to light the uncelebrated aspects of Paterson. Their resistance to canonical assertions of value, in favor of a local, “hands on” approach is another iteration of “contact,” as well as a possible response on Williams’s part to Eliot, Pound, and the expatriate community in general. The “bare hands” with which Williams replies to Greek and Latin (those emblems of canonicity and Eurocentrism) are suggestive of a fisticuffs—showing Greek and Latin a thing or two “with the gloves off”—but the bare hands offer, at the same time, an implication of intimacy unachieved by the icons of authority. Bare hands can actually touch the world. Williams, as a doctor, who, in Burke’s words, possessed the “knowing touch”—the ability to “read” and understand his patients and the world through touch—was certainly aware of the power of this form of intimate contact (*Language* 283).

II. Poem as Rhizome

Roughly fifty years after Williams published the first volume of *Contact*, Deleuze and Guattari wrote their own manifesto in praise of contact: *A Thousand Plateaus*, the second volume of their larger project *Schizophrenia and Capitalism*. Both men belonged to that generation of French thinkers and activists who, having experienced the events of May 1968, were deeply committed to revealing the mechanisms that establish and maintain authority, and to exploring how individuals can challenge the constructs and categorizations of the world “as we know it” in search of new insights.

In the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, they explain the model of the “rhizome” as an anti-hierarchical means of organizing knowledge and of recognizing intersections and engagements between seemingly disparate ideas and things. Botanically speaking, the rhizome is a branching, often subterranean, asexual means of reproduction (for plants such as the iris, ginger, and bamboo) that has no “center.” All segments of the rhizome are fertile: any segment broken off from the rest may serve as a new starting point—a new origin for life. This model of fertile, acentered branching, which can be interrupted without being destroyed, represents the system of connections, or contacts, that Deleuze and Guattari propose in their writings. Unlike its botanical namesake, which is characterized by a uniformity of genetic material, their rhizome has a necessarily heterogeneous composition—it brings all manner of materials into productive contact with one another: “it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds” (*Thousand* 3). Their description suggests a preliminary, but interesting, correlation between the composition of *Paterson*, built as it is of variously formed matters (prosaic, poetic, historic, public, personal) and very different dates and speeds, and that of the rhizome.

Deleuze and Guattari contrast the acentered system of communication and proliferation found in the rhizome with the “root/radical” or arboreal system of the “tree,” in which knowledge is organized around and branches out of a central “trunk.” In the arboreal system, the trunk is understood as the origin, the source of authenticity or authority. Its branches are mere iterations or representations of their own content; they grow out of the trunk, and are completely dependent upon it. They have no vitality of their own, and are isolated from productive contact with other branches. Traditional theories of perception and representation (such as the Platonic) reflect this arboreal model—where “reality” or “truth” is the trunk, and perception, experience, and representation (at even further removes) are weaker echoes of the core.

A number of critics have discussed anti-Platonism in the works of Williams, as well as in those of Deleuze and Guattari.⁵ Two principle aspects of this opposition are worth noting here. One is Williams's emphasis on the significance and substance of the real in the world, and our ability to access it. This is the "quality of independent existence, of reality which we feel ourselves" that Williams attributes to nature (CP1 207–8). Similarly, in his survey of Deleuze's philosophy, John Marks discusses Deleuze's attention to the hecceity or "this-ness" of the things of the world, identifying it with a "life" within things, within the "real" (reminding one of the mandate in Book III of *Paterson*, to "make it of *this*, this / this, this, this, this" [P 141]) (Marks 38). The second is, as Brian Bremen notes, that Platonic thought demotes our representations of the world to "an imperfect imitation of thought, which is an imperfect imitation of that ideal essence within or behind reality"—an articulation of the arboreal model Deleuze and Guattari criticize (20). Neither they nor Williams accept this "imperfect" echo as the only role of thought or representation. For them, there are always at least two types of representations—ones which echo or mirror (i.e., "plagiarisms," like the branches of the tree), and ones which engage with, which *produce*, such as the poem (a "machine" of words, designed to produce) and the rhizome.

Marks, using Deleuze's and Guattari's own terminology, describes the rhizome as "a multiplicity," which "seeks to move away from the binary subject/object structure of Western thought" producing, instead, a form of "polytonality" (45, 25). A multiplicity is neither one thing nor another—it is the network of relationships between things. As an example, Marks points to Deleuze's writings on Spinoza:

. . . best considered as a project of free indirect discourse. . . . Deleuze seeks to work with other thinkers and artists so that his own voice and the voice of the author [about whom he is writing] become indistinct. In this way, he institutes a zone of indiscernibility between himself and the authors with whom he works. (25)

This practice is, again, a rejection of the "arboreal" structure, in which the subject (in this case, Spinoza's writings) would be the trunk, and the historian's or critic's writings mere branches off of this trunk, branches that can never develop the productive synergy that occurs when the boundaries between subject and object are dissolved. This concept of multiplicity and the ways in which it functions resonate with the "mutuality" of identity that Bremen emphasizes in his reading of

Williams's poetry, in terms of its revelation of interdependences and a resistance against traditional systems of power and privilege.⁶

In their writings, Williams, Deleuze, and Guattari resist the authoritarian or "scientistic" privileging of a single perspective, a single voice—the self over the other, or the other over the self—the enforced "clarity" which interrupts contact. The blurring of distinctions between the voice of the author and subject describes both the fusing of Paterson as man, poem, and city, and Williams's incorporation and manipulation of passages by other writers throughout his poem. Among the most prominent of these are the "Cress" letters, originally written by Marcia Nardi, as well as correspondence from Dahlberg and Pound, and the Ginsberg letters already noted. It is the practice of multiplicity that leads us to the productive, if sometimes uncomfortable, questions of "who is speaking?" and "for whom?" within these writings.

The Cress letters may be the most problematic of these for readers. Quoted at much greater length than any of the other interpolated texts, their raw vulnerability can suggest misuse, both as unfair divulgence and a co-optation of voice. In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari respond to similar concerns, but suggest an alternative understanding of the role of such constitutive voices. According to them, each "concept" is made up of multiple elements that do not lose their own identities and are not entirely subsumed or co-opted by their incorporation into the larger concept. Instead, they create "a 'fragmentary whole' . . . made up of components which remain distinct, whilst allowing something to pass between them" (*What is* 16, 20, qtd. in Marks 42). Of course, the "Cress" letters are not the texts exactly as they were written to Williams; but as elements of the rhizome, they maintain a distinct voice of their own, at the same time that they participate in the collective, intersecting voice of the poem. Williams goes further, in his correspondence with Burke, to explain that the poetic act "in full" is composed similarly—of the "conjunction" of the work of the poet and the reader or critic (*Humane* 154). That the rhizome, the multiplicity, and the concept operate similarly is not coincidental, since each, in its way, expresses Deleuze's and Guattari's belief in a productive and revolutionary contact that amounts to more than the sum of its parts, without diminishing the individual elements from which the "whole" is manifested. For the poem, the purpose of incorporating and layering all of the many texts, personal as well as public, is to create resonances—that something which "pass[es] between"—to reveal something not yet witnessed or understood about the individual voices and about Paterson as a whole, to take

. . . a mass of detail
to interrelate on a new ground, difficulty;

an assonance, a homologue
 triple piled
 pulling the disparate together to clarify
 and compress (P 19)

Like Williams and Burke, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between “traditional” forms of representation and the more active “interventions” of language in the world. Elaborating upon this distinction, they suggest a contrast between “tracing” and “mapping.” The rhizome, they state, is a map and not a tracing. According to them, “what distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real” (*Thousand* 12). This map is quite different from the typical atlas or road map with which we are familiar, that is, an object that traces the contours of the terrain it describes and regularly situates the viewer in a position of privilege, looking down from above the fray. Instead, this map “fosters connections between fields [and] . . . is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” (12). It is an interactive exploration of an indeterminate number of points of contact: the intersections of heterogeneous materials, often unexpected, always productive.

The plateaus to which the title of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s work refers are the segments of the rhizomatous map—discrete in so far as they contain a certain “consistency” of their own (which should not be confused with homogeneity—think, instead, of the consistency of a force field made up of waves or particles, or a field of grass composed of many leaves). The definition of plateaus, or planes of consistency, is necessary for the rhizome to describe something other than a system of inscrutable flux or disassociated points. There is a body of content here, and order, but it is not a rigid order. It is always flexible and active; and each plateau is connected to others by experimental connections, by what the authors describe as “lines of flight” (12).

In contrast, a “tracing” is “like a photograph or X-ray that begins by selecting or isolating . . . what it intends to reproduce” (*Thousand* 13). The tracing (unlike the map) “describe[s] a de facto state,” and “maintain[s] balance in intersubjective relations” (such as hierarchies, or fixed perspectives). In pursuit of clarity, it “organize[s], stabilize[s], neutralize[s] the multiplicities according to the axes of significance and subjectification belonging to it” (13). According to Deleuze and Guattari, all of “tree logic is a logic of tracing and reproduction” (12). The map, however, “unfolds potential;” it reveals a dense and complex fabric, or “assemblage,” that “ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (7).

The interest in bringing “organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” into contact is certainly in keeping with Williams’s own philosophical stance. His articulation of the differences between prose and poetry (particularly in *Spring and All*) parallels the distinction between the tracing and the map. As Bremen relates, prose and poetry “reflect two different ‘methods of projection,’ two ‘ways of thinking,’ whereby the world is either ‘copied’ according to some previously existing set of conventions, or alternately, ‘made anew,’ in Williams’s terms, by a new way of seeing” (CP1 178–82, 204–10, qtd. in Bremen 16–17). The journalistic tendencies of prose lend themselves to representational tracing, to “plagiarizing” nature; but poetry, according to Williams, exists to create something new—an addition to nature. Within *Pater-son*, the incorporation of prose *into* the poetry allows the prosaic textual material to participate in Williams’s more powerful and inventive poetic mapping.

The tracing, with its regime of “facts,” correlates with the Baedeker’s agenda of delivering, in a pocket-sized document, all the “relevant” information about a destination, “according to the axes of significance and subjectification belonging to it.” While the guidebook is, no doubt, more complex than a photograph, it creates artificially still surfaces and descriptive units that have closure by hierarchizing and omitting information in service to a linear trajectory. In contrast, *Pater-son-as-map* accesses not only surfaces, things seen from a distance, but depths and experiences, crosscurrents and reversals. Its “perspective” is one of immersion—seen from the midst of the flow—the flow of images, time, water. This is one of the reasons the river is such a fundamental figure in the poem. Immersion in the river’s waters, an image of contact, offers an antidote to the conceptual “divorce” that so worried Williams. Even the potential divorce (death, separation) brought about by the action of falling, which occurs repeatedly within the poem, may be mitigated by the possibility of falling as water does or falling into water: “Only the thought of the stream comforts him, / its terrifying plunge, inviting marriage” (P 82). Even when the product of falling is death, as is the case with the student in Book IV, immersion still produces metamorphosis, invention—a becoming of something that was not (164–5).

The river proves a central vehicle for “contact,” as rivulets and ripples join the larger flow, carrying “rumors of separate worlds” to one another (P 25). Both the river’s movement and the movement of the poem more broadly evoke the “lines of flight,” which “evol[e] by subterranean steps and flows, along river valleys or train tracks . . .” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 7).⁷ Discussing this movement and the connection between plateaus, Brian Massumi, the translator of *A Thousand Plateaus*, makes a point of explaining that the French term for flight, “fuite,”

is a term for escape—related to the English “to flee”—but not to our airborne “flight” (xvi). A rhizomic map may be dense or spare, depending on the number of lines of flights it observes, but there is always much that escapes from one plateau and infiltrates the next.

Early on, Williams links the movement of water with the movement of thoughts through the mind:

Jostled as are the waters approaching
the brink, his thoughts
interlace, repel and cut under,
rise rock-thwarted and turn aside
but forever strain forward—or strike
an eddy and whirl, marked by a
leaf or curdy spume, seeming
to forget . (P 7–8)

The linkage between liquidity and thought is relevant to the operation of lines of flight, in that it is the mind with its fluid capacity to imagine that allows us, as cognitive beings, to recognize contact, even when the physical evidence says otherwise:

It is the imagination
which cannot be fathomed.
It is through this hole we escape . . . (210)

Institutions, of culture or education, teach us to accept “absolute” scales, such as those of rationality or propriety, to fix distances, and to recognize certain categories at the expense of other potential contacts. The flexibility of the mind, however, moving by liquid, subterranean paths, eludes these strictures, allowing for invention and revelation.

Language, too, as thought enacted, becomes a fluid figure—flowing, falling, crashing down within the poem: “The language cascades into / the invisible, beyond and above; the falls / of which it is the visible part” (145). As the episodes focusing on the force of the Falls and effects of the flood suggest, water is not easily contained, it has a power to resist stagnation, to resist the “designs” placed on it (unlike the sun which rises, ignorant, within the same “slot” each day) (4). In Book I, a speaker cautions against the “writing of stale poems,” products of “Minds like beds always made up / (more stony than a shore)” (4–5). Such a bed is

the course of the river too narrowly defined, a course in which the mind of the poet and the river itself are unwilling to remain:

unwilling to lie in its bed
and sleep, and sleep, sleep
in its dark bed. (97)

The slipping and blending suggested by the movement of water is also expressed prosodically, in the slippage of sounds and the metamorphoses of words across lines. So for instance, we have the movement of “ribbon” into “robin,” on page 18, with the *r* sound continuing into “Erudite” and then “Erasmus.” Or, on the following page, the flow of “white” into “swallows,” “flowered,” “shallow,” and “water” (19). Working within the materiality of the language, Williams recognizes assonance and consonance as forms of contact, ways in which words touch and inform each other, to trigger unexpected associations or harmonies for the reader.

Images shift and slip, as well. In Book III, Section III, a chain of dog-related events links an unspecified present with a Native American past and, further, with a mythical Greek past: a dog is killed for biting a passerby; a dog is killed to accompany the death of a chief; a dog’s body is carried by the river down to Acheron. Through these moments, the city of Paterson participates in a pattern connecting the mundane events of its present with a current of events through time and cultures.

And the river is not the only agent of escape. Not all lines of flight are liquid—some walk, or run away. A decision to “leave the path” to walk “across-field” (as a line of flight does) precipitates a rhizomic chain of associations in the mind of the walker. The rapid convolutions of thought make this a difficult sequence to describe, a difficulty prefigured at its opening:

Walking—
he leaves the path, finds hard going
across-field, stubble and matted brambles
seeming a pasture—but no pasture . (47)

As the walker moves through “file-sharp grass,” “a flight of empurpled wings” startles up from the field, then plunges into cover once again (47). The wings are those of grasshoppers that dodge ahead of the walker as he moves. The figure of the grasshoppers is transformed into “a grasshopper of red basalt,” which tumbles

from the walker's mind, falling like a stone from an eroding bank under a tropic downpour. The tropical location and the grasshopper are then linked together in the thought of "Chapultepec! grasshopper hill!" (Chapultepec, a mountain outside of Mexico City, means, literally, "grasshopper hill" in the Aztec language.) Echoing the movement of the flying grasshoppers, an imagined trajectory of a stone that has been thrown pairs with the "red basalt" of the mind: "his mind a red stone carved to be / endless flight," becomes, in its final permutation, "Love that is a stone endlessly in flight" (47–9). Flight, in and of itself, becomes a line of flight in this portion of the poem, as does the image of the grasshopper, and the red stone—perhaps seen while on a walk, perhaps conjured from memory. As this series of passages suggests, the poem brings a mass of images, textures, rhythms, ideas, and things into "contact." Some touch by location on the page, others by the repetition of sounds, lines, or images lifted from one source and set down in another. In some cases, like the grasshopper episode, the linkages seem to follow a particular stream of consciousness, perhaps the consciousness of Paterson-as-man. Others happen without obvious human focalization.

Structurally, the poem's interpolations and polyvocality highlight the significance of mingling and heterogeneity, resisting divorce; but this appears figuratively as well, in the "masticated" mud that is dredged up after the flood, in the congeries of flowers in the Cloister's tapestries. It is evoked in scenes of trespass, metamorphosis, and miscegenation. The Ringwood episode in Book I tells of a community of runaways—dispossessed Tuscarora Indians; women, both black and white, who have escaped enslavement; and deserting Hessian soldiers—all of whom have taken to the woods, to create a "bold association," which Williams describes as "strange if not beautiful" (12–13). There is a power implicit in this "strangeness," its disruption of norms, its testaments to the productive potential of heterogeneity, coupled with the movement of escape.

The power of the poet, to invent and to make discoveries, is not always a matter of linking two things or ideas together, of marrying or summing; it is equally important to "estrangle" to disrupt expectation and association, looking at dissonance as well as resonance, for

Dissonance
(if you are interested)
leads to discovery (175)⁸

There are benefits to shaking things up, to "turning the inside out" (140). In *Paterson*, incidents of disruption, particularly the fire, but also the tornado and

images of inundation and draining, lead to discovery and reveal fertile potentials. The tornado and the fire impact rigid institutions of society—the church is turned on its foundation, the Library, “sanctuary to our fears” with its “smell of stagnation and death,” is purged by flame (98, 101). Fire does more than empty that which it touches, it transforms and releases: “The beauty of fire-blasted sand / that was glass, that was a bottle: unbottled” (118). Williams recognizes the kinship between fire and poetry when he defines the act of writing as “a fire and not only of the blood” (113). Like writing, fire is rhizomic in its potential to leap from page to page, “from house to house, building to building,” releasing that which it connects through the association and destruction of conflagration (119). The atomic fire that can “smash the world wide” is at work in the poem and in the city of Paterson: “a city in itself, that complex / atom, always breaking down” (170, 177). *Paterson* testifies to those processes of building up and tearing down that defy containment. This is appropriate to the rhizome, as, according to Deleuze and Guattari,

It is not a question of this or that place on earth, or of a given moment in history, still less of this or that category of thought. It is a question of a model that is perpetually in construction or collapsing, and of a process that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again.
(*Thousand* 20)

At the poem's opening, the poet lays out this project:

To make a start,
out of particulars
and make them general, rolling
up the sum, by defective means—(P 3)

Initially, the “defective means” seem a statement of failure; but there is a degree to which the inability to make a total sum is not a failure, but a necessary condition—it preserves a means of escape. Even the poet must, at times, acknowledge that things escape from the names that have been placed on them:

a flower within a flower whose history
(within the mind) crouching
among the ferny rocks, laughs at the names
by which they think to trap it. Escapes! (22)

Both connection and disruption can be described in terms of escape. And escape is fundamental to understanding the rhizome as a descriptive, but not totalizing, model for contact. *Paterson*, as rhizome, is a text that is never finished, never total; it is “perpetually in construction or collapsing,” “perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again.” Book V extends what was initially defined as a four-book work; and at his death, Williams was working on yet another extension and expansion of the poem. Even within the pieces that are “complete,” we see the rejection of a terminal form in the poem’s anti-teleological fragmentation and doubling back, suggested by the image of the snake with its tail in its mouth, and the man’s emergence from the sea at the poem’s end (229–30). The fracturing and joining within the poem, its perpetual movement, and its ability to “resist the final crystallization” make the rhizome/map a powerful figure with which to discuss *Paterson* (P 109).

Had Burke left us with a more fully developed explanation of his vision of *Paterson*-as-guidebook, he might have focused, ultimately, on the ways in which Williams “moves in on” or infiltrates and subverts the dominating structures of the guidebook, allowing it to engage differently with the world it represents—a position that would have been in keeping with much of his other writings on the poet’s work. In the absence of such information, it is interesting to note that both Burke’s summarizing vessel for the poem and the rhizome share mapping connotations. Though it is not entirely surprising that a book linked to a place as intimately as *Paterson* is to its namesake should call out to be discussed spatially, the idea of movement—of mind, of time, and of place—and the means of documenting this movement are at the heart of Williams’s poetic project, and are expressed, in different ways, in the Baedeker and the rhizome. Burke is correct in knowing that Williams is trying to show his readers something about the nature of *Paterson*, its significance—to put *Paterson* on the map, and to “show us around”—but Williams does much more, immersing us in it, its complexity, contradictions, and fecundity. As readers, we encounter in *Paterson* not only a document of place, but an explosion of it, a thickening of our understanding of what such a place could mean that corresponds with the thickening of the identity of city and man and text—“triple piled,” in Williams’s terms. The model of the rhizome is well suited to revealing such a city/man/poem, as Williams knew and expressed it. It allows for an openness, a flux that is critical to understanding *Paterson* not only as a representation, but as a place of rivers, a process, a defiance of authority, and as “an experimentation in contact with the real.”

Notes

1. For a further discussion of Burke's summarizing vessel, see Bremen, *WCW and the Diagnostics of Culture*, 32.

2. Both formalist and poststructuralist scholars have made note of the appropriative strain within Williams's writing about place. Critics like Kinereth Meyer have spoken about Williams's writing as an act of possessing, an attempt to possess America—often drawing on Williams's description of his writing process for *In the American Grain* (1925). Certainly, Williams is concerned with questions of appropriation (of land and of language), but there is too much that escapes in *Paterson* for me to believe that its aim, or its effect, is simply to possess through poetry. Such readings decline to see in *Paterson* both a "a dispersal and a metamorphosis" as well as a "gathering up" (P 2). There is a significant tension, here, however. As Williams began the research necessary for the composition of his poem, he was excited by the wealth of detail he encountered: "I . . . fell in love with my city . . . all the facts I could ask for, details exploited by no one" (IWWP 73). His description is enthusiastically appropriative. His excitement at having discovered the "unexploited" terrain of Paterson clearly puts him in the role of exploiter; however, as an act of claiming, it may also be designed to offset the acts of abandonment Williams witnessed among his peers—allowing him to write, in Joel Conarroe's words, a celebratory "anti-exile poem" (21).

3. In doing so, Williams also lays the groundwork for other artists interested in bringing New Jersey to light, "in all the sordidness of its abused beauty and energy" (Deutsch 101). Most notable among these is Robert Smithson, the conceptual and earthworks artist, who was a patient of Williams's as a child, and who would later write "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967) (cf. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*).

4. Despite Williams's investments in resisting authority and those "order[s] perfect and controlled/ upon which empires, alas, are built," it is worth noting the Orientalizing, and generally exoticizing, aspect of Ginsburg's rhetoric in these passages, echoing common tropes of Imperial literatures of travel.

5. John Marks, for instance, explains, "Deleuze actively seeks out an alternative tradition from which he can draw support against the line which runs through Plato, Hegel, and Heidegger" (16).

6. See Bremen, chapters 2, 4, and 5, in particular, for their discussion of mutuality.

7. This particular quote comes from a discussion of the operations of language, but because Deleuze and Guattari are describing language as rhizomatous, I do not believe this elision misrepresents their thinking.

8. I would like to note, briefly, the movement of the "i", "n", and "d" sounds as they move through the three lines: Williams's beautiful use of assonance and consonance in a passage that discusses dissonance.

Works Cited

- Baedeker's Portugal. Hampshire England: AA Publishing, 1999.
- Bremen, Brian. *William Carlos Williams and the Diagnostics of Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Brown, Dona, ed. *A Tourist's New England: Travel Fiction, 1820–1920*. Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1999.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1969.
- . *Language as Symbolic Action*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987.
- . Letter to Brian Bremen. July 21 and 24, 1987. Collection of Brian Bremen. Austin, TX.
- Conarroe, Joel. *William Carlos Williams's Paterson: Language and Landscape*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1970.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987.
- . *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. London: Verso, 1994.
- Deutsch, Babette. *Poetry in Our Time*. New York: Columbia UP, 1956.
- Eggert, Paul. "Discourse versus Authorship: The Baedeker Travel Guide and D. H. Lawrence's *Twilight in Italy*." In *Texts and Textuality: Textual Instability, Theory, and Interpretation*. Ed. Philip Cohen. New York: Garland, 1997. 207–34.
- Hinrichsen, Alex. *Baedeker-Katalog*. Trans. Michael Wild. Bevern, Germany: Ursula Hinrichsen Verlag, 1989.
- Jarvis, Robin. *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel*. New York: St. Martin's, 1997.
- Marks, John. *Gilles Deleuze: Vitalism and Multiplicity*. London: Pluto, 1998.
- Meyer, Kinereth. "Possessing America: William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* and the Poetics of Appropriation." In *Mapping American Culture*. Ed. Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1992. 152–67.
- Smithson, Robert. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Ed. Jack Flam. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996.
- Williams, William Carlos. Untitled Manifesto. *Contact* 1 (December 1920): 1.
- , and Kenneth Burke. *The Humane Particulars: The Collected Letters of William Carlos Williams and Kenneth Burke*. Ed. James H. East. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2003.