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Modernism and Professionalism: The Case of William Carlos Williams

Bruce Robbins

Among
of
green

stiff
old
bright

broken
branches
come

white
sweet
May

again

"The Locust Tree in Flower"¹

Like a number of Williams' poems, this might be considered as a miniature anti-*Waste Land*. In answer to the dead tree that gives no shelter and the question of what branches grow out of arid plain and stony rubbish, it holds up the locust tree, whose memory of biblical plague is overwhelmed by an affirmation of blossoming renewal. It is among unpromising materials (stiff, old, broken) that the poem places

¹ William Carlos Williams, *Collected Earlier Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1951), p. 93.

the surprise of recreation, and it goes to some lengths to assert, in defiance of prepositional logic, that creativity is *of* as well as *among* such surroundings, which are also green and bright, bearers of new beginning. If Eliot's here-and-now is an industrial wasteland whose barrenness is thrown into harsh relief by the remembered glories of an elapsed tradition, this inhospitable present is all Williams asks for. His minimalist poem both mimics and finds sustenance in the poverty around it, just as it both ignores tradition and, reproducing the commonplace of spring rebirth, makes it new.

It is not impossible that Williams in fact intended "The Locust Tree in Flower" as a brief rejoinder to *The Waste-Land*. His bitterness toward Eliot is well known — much more so, unfortunately, than the overworked doctor's willingness to contribute financially so that his rival could quit his job at Lloyd's Bank and devote himself to his writing — and he had better grounds than Eliot's increasing recognition and his own lack of it.² Writ large in a more and more influential conception of modern literature, the dandy's otherwise inoffensive mandarinism became a legitimate target:

- Christ: In my house there are many mansions.
 Eliot: I'll take the corner room on the second floor overlooking the lawns and the river. And WHO is this rabble that follows you about?
 Christ: Oh, some of the men I've met in my travels.
 Eliot: Well, if I am to follow you I'd like to know something more of your sleeping arrangements.
 Christ: Yes, sir.³

As a believer that poetry must emerge from local conditions, Williams felt that "Eliot had turned his back on the possibility of reviving my world" and grasped presciently that those who celebrated "foreign values" and who knew "all the Latin and some of the Sanskrit names, much French and perhaps one or two other languages" were fast becoming authorities in the world of poetry.⁴ By the time Williams' *Auto-*

² Paul Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), pp. 193–94.

³ Quoted in Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 335.

⁴ *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1951), p. 174; W. C. Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1933), p. 214.

biography was published in 1951, university-based critics had accorded *The Waste Land* the status of a sacred text, and in so doing had extended the hegemony of their own priestly caste over contemporary culture. In Williams' eyes, Eliot had invited this; it was he who "gave the poem back to the academics."⁵ Eliot stood for what *Paterson* presented as a sort of professional conspiracy to restrict knowledge, to put "an impossible moat between the high/and the low where/the life once flourished." "[T]he knowledgeable idiots, the university," those who "should be devising means/to leap the gap," instead were "non-purveyors," "outward/masks of the special interests/that perpetuate the stasis and make it/profitable."⁶

Literary criticism cannot remain a disinterested bystander of this quarrel, for the charge that Eliot delivered modernism up to the academic professionals in effect implicates the profession in receiving stolen goods. This alleged collusion is one reason for reopening the case. Williams himself has been rescued from neglect; his rediscovery coincides roughly with declarations of the demise of modernism (Harry Levin began asking "What Was Modernism?" in 1960) and of the birth of post-modernism.⁷ But if modernism is a period that has ended, the specifically institutional terms of Williams' indictment against Eliot suggest that it is also a set of procedures and perspectives that Eliot shared with the institution of literary criticism, which was "modernizing" or "professionalizing" itself during the same years, and that in large part continue to function within the profession today.⁸ To bring modernism and professionalism together in this way is to raise questions both about our periodization and about our current practice. To what extent did Eliot's version become "official" modernism because of its complicity with the unconscious requirements of a professionalizing discipline? To what extent do such requirements continue to shape critical discourse now that the profession is safely established? What institutional changes can be detected or predicted since the advent of postmodernism? And

⁵ Mariani, p. 191; *Autobiography*, p. 146.

⁶ *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1958), I, p. 34.

⁷ Harry Levin, *Refractions* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 271-295.

⁸ See my "Modernism in History, Modernism in Power" in Robert Kiely and John Hildebidle, eds., *Modernism Reconsidered*, Harvard English Studies No. 13 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

what does it say about Williams, or about the academy, now that the two have seemingly been reconciled?

Owing perhaps to the paradox of a younger generation of poets who share Williams' anti-academic distaste for Eliot and yet find themselves living as poets-in-residence, Williams' views have had remarkable success in literature departments. That Eliot the critic helped push Eliot the poet, along with poets like him, through the transition "from Bohemia to Academe" is now an accepted datum of literary history.⁹ In David Perkins' judicious *History of Modern Poetry* it is noted "that the premises and the methods of the New Critics were much influenced by the poetry and critical writings of Eliot, that they trained readers especially to appreciate formally complex, compressed ways of writing and that they gradually influenced the teaching of literature in schools and colleges. Eventually this approach to literature began to seem 'academic,' to separate literature from life. Rebelling against this, young writers after World War II looked around for alternative premises and styles. They found Williams."¹⁰ The *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, which cannot be accused of straying too far from the safety of the obvious, acknowledges the collusion between poetry and the academy in a section entitled "The Institutionalization of Modernism."¹¹ The notion that there exist significant parallels and complicities between modernist literature and what might be called modernist criticism, the new procedures of reading and interpretation that came into existence in literature departments at more or less the same time as the great modernist writers and that helped interpret and canonize those writers — or some of them — while themselves becoming canonical approaches both to modern and to earlier literature, can now be assumed to be part of the profession's consciousness of itself.

What is less familiar is the application of the term "professionalism" to this context. Aside from pioneering essays by Edward Said, Richard Ohmann, and Francis Mulhern, which have called attention to the coincidence that literary modernism and the professionalization of literary criticism belong to the same period, the connections between the two

⁹ Harry Levin, *Memories of the Moderns* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 8.

¹⁰ David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 550.

¹¹ Ronald Gottesman, et al., eds., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (New York: Norton, 1979), Vol. II, pp. 1023–24.

remain to be explored.¹² To begin with, most descriptions of either term will set off reverberations in the semantic field of the other. By almost any definition, modernism is said to found its cataclysmic divide between present and past on a further break with nineteenth-century literature's submission to realism (the standard of ordinary empirical observation) and authorial responsibility (the author's accountability for his or her words to the moral standards of the public). By contrast, modernism proposes an elite or vanguard literature that is likely to be obscure to the ordinary reader and that claims independence both from the life of its author and from the standards of ordinary public morality. Let us collate these commonplaces with those of professionalism. A minimal description, stressing the claim to esoteric, specialized knowledge and to disinterested public service as joint justifications of a privileged local sovereignty, immediately offers points of contact: exclusiveness, autonomy, anti-empiricism, obscurity to the layman. "In contrast to the empiricist," Burton Bledstein writes in *The Culture of Professionalism*, "the professional person grasped the concept behind a functional activity," "penetrated beyond the rich confusion of ordinary experience."¹³ It was only by delimiting and controlling a "magic circle of scientific knowledge which only the few, specialized by training and indoctrination, were privileged to enter" that a profession could constitute itself as such and protect its "precious autonomy against all assailants" (90-92). In consequence, the profession became self-selecting and, even more important, self-policing: it could promulgate a code of ethics quite distinct from and often in conflict with other moral and social responsibilities (so, for example, doctors in Williams' time opposed public health measures for the poor on professional grounds) and could refuse outsiders the right, or the "competence," to judge what was done within it. "The dehumanization of art," Ortega y Gasset's approving phrase for modern art's transcendence of the human-all-too-human concerns of life, seems equally relevant to this description of profession-

¹² Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Richard Ohmann, *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'* (London: New Left Books, 1979).

¹³ Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: Norton, 1976), pp. 89-90. Further page references will be given in the text. On the professions see also Everett Hughes, "Professions" in *Daedalus* 92 (Fall 1963).

alism. To base professional claims on a structural disengagement from ordinary personal motives and ordinary personal ethics is to define a profession as a social aestheticism, an art-for-art's-sake of the working world that agrees to table questions of ultimate social consequence in return for a free hand within its territory of specialization. It is a short step from the "special grasp of the universe" that a profession demonstrates through "obscure and technical formalisms" to the "technical display" and "specialism" of modern literature.¹⁴ And there is a synthesis of sorts in the profession of literary criticism. It was in the name of a "new specialism" of literary study, Francis Mulhern writes, that Leavis and *Scrutiny* — again under Eliot's influence — attacked "the ideal of the scholar-gentleman," the "leisurely and expansive connoisseurism personified by Saintsbury and Quiller-Couch," in order to create "a self-confident and upwardly mobile profession" — that is, "a profession, not a patrimony."¹⁵

"The culture of professionalism tended to cultivate an atmosphere of constant crisis — emergency — in which practitioners both created work for themselves and reinforced their authority by intimidating clients."¹⁶ This pregnant remark returns us to the specific conjunction of Eliot's modernism with the profession of literary criticism. It suggests that the vision of history as a process of decay and degeneration that has produced the modern wasteland and that now leaves us tottering on an unnameable brink, desperately shoring up history's ruins with the fragments of our cultural monuments, was not merely a formulation of apocalyptic pessimism that happened to strike the right chord in the disillusioned post-war generation. If Eliot rose to eminence on it, it is also because those who helped raise him found his sense of crisis useful. For would-be professionals of the first half of the century, struggling to displace the gentleman-scholar's tasteful, unhurried, independently-funded appreciation of the finer things, Eliot's despair was enabling and invigorating, for it declared in effect that their more rigorous and earnest professional activity was urgently needed by society. If the society of the present is fallen and degenerate, then it requires an acquaintance with values, ideals, and achievements that by definition are not accessible within it — except perhaps to a corps of experts specialized in

¹⁴ Bledstein, pp. 90, 92; Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, *Modernism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 26–28.

¹⁵ Mulhern, pp. 324, 24–25, 325, 32.

¹⁶ Bledstein, p. 100.

retrieving such knowledge from the culture of the past. That there *are* transcendent and enduring values in that culture, values superior to those available to the depleted present, is the assumption that cannot be questioned; it belongs to the catastrophist narrative of history that is the authorizing myth of the profession.

Though it is clear that a progressive view of history might also have authorized society to pay the custodians of its former values (so as to have proof on hand of how much society has progressed), one can't help but notice how a narrative of the democratic spreading and deepening of knowledge among all social levels, for example, would undermine the specialist's *raison d'être*. It is also clear that Eliot's specific historical thesis of a "dissociation of sensibility" around the time of Cromwell is no longer taken with particular seriousness within the profession. What must be stressed is that indifference to his explicit catastrophism and even to Eliot himself coexists quite comfortably with the professional assumption — the valuation of the culture of the past over a present seen as degraded — that Eliot's catastrophist narrative legitimates, and that surely would have been exposed to serious skepticism if it had not benefitted from the support of some such narrative. Once it has established itself within the unconscious "tact" of the profession, or once the profession has established itself around it, this reverential attitude toward the cultural heritage can take its pick among any number of competing hypotheses about particular historical events, and even perhaps choose to do without one. When Leavis set out to professionalize literary criticism, Lawrence served his purpose as well as Eliot: it mattered little finally *which* tradition had been lost, a Catholic hierarchical order or the blood instincts of the English countryside, as long as the loss of *some* tradition set its elite salvagers apart from their benighted contemporaries. Drawing a parallel between Eliot and Lukács, another modernist hater of modernity, Edward Said, suggests that both fled into an "affiliation" (the Anglican Church and a Leninist party) that, like professional affiliation, combined a claim to human universality with the reassurance of local solidarity. Both empower the few to preserve a cultural heritage disregarded by the many, and both continue to serve the interests of the profession.¹⁷

¹⁷ Edward W. Said, "Secular Criticism" in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, pp. 17–21.

In suggesting one underlying reason why Eliot was taken up by and had such an effect upon academic criticism, while Williams was neglected, I do not mean to join what has become an anti-Eliot chorus, but rather to indicate how powerful Eliot's brand of modernism remains, within the profession's unstated decorum, in spite of that chorus.¹⁸ This point is of special relevance to Williams precisely because Williams' recent assimilation as a precursor of post-modernism, an assimilation expedited by the body of recent European theory that is sometimes seen as theoretical post-modernism, would appear to argue the contrary. Here, as in his poetry, Williams is a sensitive indicator of what has and has not been renewed. The three moments in his reception that I propose to discuss, therefore, are markers of critical change: the concluding chapter of J. Hillis Miller's *Poets of Reality* (1965), whose approach is that of phenomenology, and two works that are indebted to deconstruction, Miller's essay "Williams' *Spring and All* and the Progress of Poetry" (1970) and Joseph Riddel's *The Inverted Bell* (1974).¹⁹

Poets of Reality presents Williams as the exemplar and highest point of nothing less than a total revolution in human sensibility, the revolution that is the subject of the book as a whole: a breakdown of the Cartesian subject-object distinction and a surpassing of the nihilism that had resulted from that distinction by means of what Miller calls a "return to earth." Miller gives an unsurpassable account of Williams's resignation to existence, the unique loss of tension in his poetry that follows from his decision to be of his world and not to strive for any of the usual forms of transcendence. But professionalism does not encourage any such tensionlessness in its own discourse; in order to protect its specialized knowledge, it must separate itself from its world in precisely the manner that Williams, in Miller's account, refuses. Thus, after boldly conjuring up the possibility that he and the profession might have

¹⁸ One might have asked instead, for example, why Williams' play *Tituba's Children* (1950), an attack on McCarthyism through a dramatization of the Salem witch trials that precedes *The Crucible* by over two years, has been so totally ignored in favor of Miller's more comfortable Broadway-classroom version. See *Many Loves and Other Plays* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

¹⁹ J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality* (New York: Atheneum, 1969) and "Williams' *Spring and All* and the Progress of Poetry," *Daedalus*, 99 (Spring 1970), 405-434; Joseph N. Riddel, *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William Carlos Williams* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974). Further page references will be given in the text.

nothing more to say about this author, Miller yields up his argument to the decorum of the profession and provides Williams with transcendence of time.

Phenomenology, which shatters the formal perfection of the individual work that modernism prizes, restores necessary professional veneration by constructing a chronology of the writer's rising achievement. As the highest point in a revolution of sensibility, Williams comes at the end of the book, and the highest point that Williams reaches comes at the end of its last chapter. In short, Miller gives him a *career*, a notion that seems worth pausing over. It does not go without saying that writing can or should be organized into that particular temporal frame, distinct both from the writer's non-writing life and from the supra-individual life of writing in society. The career is of course a particularly professional notion, and it is also a particularly modernist one. As Edward Said argues in *Beginnings*, it is in the modernist period that the career becomes a significant and even dominating conception for writers themselves, and it does so as part of art's "dehumanization," the strategic separation from ordinary life that enables certain forms of activity by foreclosing others.²⁰ In the same period, the new literary-critical profession disengages itself from ordinary life in part by imposing the concept of the career upon its subject-matter. By a reverential tracing of the writer's incremental curve of accomplishment, the critic both shows respect and acquires it — thereby perhaps giving himself a career.

The "accomplishment" that Miller attributes to Williams, the climactic illumination of the end of Williams' career and the end of Miller's book, is the wisdom that "all times are one time" (288). "'The light/for all time shall outspeed/the thunder crack': this radiant promise is the climax of Williams' writing," Miller says, "and the climax too of the development so far of twentieth-century poetry" (358). In joining the university canon, Williams also joins Eliot's timeless tradition. It may seem paradoxical that the achievement of what Miller calls "the endless present" (359) should be described as a temporal result, a reward of long effort. But this is the routine paradox of a professional discourse whose *sine qua non* is homage for its special field of objects: in order to naturalize the otherwise glaring convention of homage, it must often

²⁰ Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), ch. 4.

have recourse to the same progressive temporality (the rising curve of the individual career) that it abolishes, on the social level, in the effort to venerate the cultural monuments of the past, wherever they are located on the historical continuum, over the poverty of the present. By a trick of duplication and condensation, the abolition of temporality then appears as the culmination of the individual career.

I am suggesting that Williams' delayed success in entering the academy is an ambivalent thing; the profession has taken him up on its own terms, which are also Eliot's terms. This conclusion is more surprising in the case of *The Inverted Bell*, for Riddel follows Williams in attacking Eliot and the New Criticism, and in particular their common notion of "the study of poetry as a surrogate form of worship" (xiii). "My argument is that criticism deceives itself when it thinks it can preserve the aesthetic object in its purity by assuming a rhetoric of homage" (xvii). This refusal of homage means that Riddel's last chapter is not, like Miller's, a revelation of Williams' ultimate transcendence, a narrative happy end; it is in fact entitled "The Poetics of Failure." The failure in question is that of referentiality ("The Locust Tree in Flower" names neither the parts of the tree nor their sequence of connections; nor does it offer the kaleidoscope of a consciousness moving from part to part of a tree . . ." 134), "the necessary failure of art to provide a fuller vision," and it illustrates the conclusion that "Writing can only comment on itself" (301). But is this really a failure? For Riddel, all great texts seem to illustrate the same conclusion; in a few deft pages he suggests that Eliot too is unable to avoid demonstrating the impossibility of his own (contrary) project. And in so doing, Eliot and Williams both demonstrate "the ultimate recognition of freeplay, that there is no Truth and that that truth has made us free" (301). But freeplay, the "game of infinite substitutions," is after all the special preserve of Art: "in art alone can we contemplate the contradictions and polarities and paradoxes of our desire for the whole" (274). What Miller finds in "The Locust Tree in Flower," "a place of simultaneity" (303), represents his highest value, and when Riddel takes the poem's problematizing of semantic and syntactic connections as the beginning of "the game" (21), his rhetoric of failure fails to disguise the same (professional) poetics: Art, if not the artist, is guaranteed an irresistible success.

Of course, the doctrine of art's privileged status was not invented by or for the profession of literary criticism. But the persistence of efforts to preserve that status even at the conjuncture of deconstructive reading,

which disavows the rhetoric of homage, and Williams, who did all he could to disencumber himself of it, encourages suspicions of a sort of professional will to defend the prestige of professional objects, an unconscious conspiracy to keep up literature's value operating in restraint of the free circulation of ideas. The occasion would thus seem to demand that we at least ask how far our supposed plurality of approaches to a poet like Williams is professionally constrained, and then perhaps begin to investigate the tacit decorum that constrains it.

J. Hillis Miller, surely one of Williams's most brilliant close readers, also provides the jumping-off point for this theoretical project. That the interpretation of Williams uniquely engages the profession *as* profession, a hint that lies buried in Miller's earlier essay, comes to the surface in "Williams' *Spring and All* and the Progress of Poetry." The timelessness celebrated before as the climax of Williams' poetic vision now appears as the critic's rather than the poet's message, and in a daring move, Miller locates the value of that vision in its usefulness to the critical profession. In a parallel to what was already suggested above, he argues that the notion of "progress" in the interpretation of texts is destructive of the limited stock of literary raw materials that the specialization defines itself as processing, and hence is anti-professional. "Sometimes, as a nightmare sprung from his 'professional deformation,' the scholar may be seized by a vision of the gradual self-destruction of his enterprise. As one by one all the texts are exhausted and definitive editions and interpretations are established, his reason for existing will fade and ultimately vanish" (407). To this Miller adds a refinement: "myths of decline" such as Eliot's can have equally unprofessional consequences. If history is carrying us further and further from the human greatness out of which great poetry arises, then poets (and *ipso facto* critics) are living off an ever decreasing cultural capital. Thus Eliot must be associated both with the profession's rise and with its fall, presaged by the premise "that poets by their accomplishments are gradually putting themselves out of business" (408).

In this predicament, the profession can only be rescued by a deconstruction of the historical narratives that threaten to deplete its resources. For professional motives alone, then, if for no others, we must accept "the fact that the arts and their interpretation have neither declined nor progressed, but exist more or less as they always have, just as the poems of the past remain available to those who would read them" (414). To accept this questionable proposition is again to menace the

profession, however. In order to ensure the inexhaustibility of interpretation, it is not enough to free the profession from its vulnerability to history — an institutionalizing of modernism by which Miller seeks to “modernize” the profession. As his argument permits us to observe, the definitive value of literary texts is not inherent in them, but depends upon and might even be said to be produced by the historical narratives into which those texts are inserted. Without such narratives to deposit beforehand the ore that will then legitimate his digging, the interpreter can no longer rest his activity on the authority of “the texts.” Thus deconstruction can only protect the profession by operating a further transformation: the balance of power between text and critic must be shifted in favor of the latter. It is only from the moment when criticism is no longer conceived as disinterring values from their source in the text but rather as adding values to the text by its own playful recombination that time no longer threatens it with exhaustion.

This means, it would seem, doing away once and for all with the convention of homage that the authority of past texts commanded. Williams himself does not receive such homage. The destructive aesthetic, the repudiation of passive imitation, and the inextricable meshing of poetry and prose in *Spring and All* allow Williams to foreshadow and sponsor deconstruction’s raising of the present writer to the level of the past, its placing of art and interpretation on the same plane; in this sense, Miller’s version of deconstruction works to remake the profession in the image of Williams’ anti-professional poetics. The tensions of this project emerge, however, at the point where Williams is refused the (customary) status of seer. It is about his abolition of the authority of the past, the source of his greatest threat to a profession that retains the direction it took from Eliot, that Miller expresses the most serious reservations. Williams’ sense of novelty is simply an illusion: “his theory of art is unable to free itself from the theories it rejects” (427). He is no exception, that is, to a failure that deconstruction affirms is universal. “It is impossible to go beyond or outside this tradition because there is, for Western man, nothing outside the structure of the various languages that limit the possibilities of his thought” (430). Here inescapable failure once again seems to hide a peculiarly professional preservation of literary success. Like Eliot’s description of his poetic resources as “shabby equipment always deteriorating,” deconstruction’s complaint about its linguistic tools easily becomes a patient resignation to re-using the language of the past, which, coming full circle, vivifies and mobilizes a

profession specialized in preserving that past. A "tradition" that cannot be repudiated, by Williams or anyone else, can be paid no higher compliment.

"The business of the humanistic scholar," Miller writes, "is the appropriation of the texts of the past" (431). His version of deconstruction ensures that scholars will not be interrupted in their labors. In offering critics the freedom of endless reinterpretation inside the dateless captivity of "tradition," it sacrifices both the scrounging, populist-surrealist modernism of Williams and any recognition that meaningful historical change is possible. The true "professional deformation," one might suggest, is not the nightmare of a canon that is gradually exhausted or superseded — why should works that are insensitive to time's unimaginable touch, that are too high above shifting human values and experience to fear obsolescence, be worth the interpreter's trouble? — but rather the pleasant fancy that history can be abolished so as to keep the profession in steady work.

This is not to suggest that naive anti-professionalism represents any sort of coherent or self-evident alternative.²¹ One irony of dividing the modernisms of Eliot and Williams along the axis of professionalism is of course the fact that while Eliot was a gentleman-amateur, Williams was a practicing physician who delivered some two thousand babies, as critics are fond of repeating, and who by all accounts was a dedicated member of the profession upon which latecomers like literary criticism were just then trying to model themselves. It is not surprising, then, that the poems and above all the stories that relate to Williams' medical practice show some ambivalence toward his own position. Even among the more straightforward connections between writing and doctoring, such as the therapeutic metaphor, there is criticism of what I might call the professionalism of the profession. In a story like "The Use of Force" or a poem like "The Young Housewife," for example, the medical regard that penetrates an otherwise protected intimacy and the professional privilege of bypassing the usual taboos so as to know the world and people by touch, and in touching to be touched, are shown to be saturated with a will, eroticism, and violence that the profession denies

²¹ For a more positive approach to professionalism, see for example Ohmann, p. 251; Samuel Weber, "The Limits of Professionalism," *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 5 Nos. 1 & 2 (1982); and my "Homelessness and Worldliness," *Diacritics* 13 (Summer 1983).

— and that might be either personal or, more unsettling still, the dark underside of the institution itself. The assumption that the profession can be legitimized by its impersonal detachment and disinterestedness does not survive one reading of even the more innocent stories of *The Farmers' Daughters*. And yet these stories also suggest that the measured “dehumanization” of professional objectivity, whose borders Williams frequently violates, enable him to help, give him a mode of *action* in the midst of fatality.

This ambivalence can be gathered around the color, or non-color, white. In 1950, when Williams had begun to attract a certain attention, he was visited by a team of interviewers from *Time* magazine who forced the doctor to be photographed in a white coat, which he disliked and almost never wore.²² What the white coat meant to *Time* is perhaps what Williams was resisting: the professional pretense of spotless, antiseptic authority, or simply the saleable oddity of being a writer-doctor. In any case, this resistance to white has a peculiar resonance given the striking place of white in his poetry. Consider, for example, two of the shocks that “The Locust Tree in Flower” administers. One comes from the sudden increment of white space that is almost the signature of Williams’ minimalism. To isolate words one per line against a disproportionate, overwhelming background of what Cary Nelson calls “white blankness,” cleansing them of their ordinary associations so that they can be freely recombined, is to do something similar to what a hospital does: an antiseptic separating off from the human environment that produces a new, total visibility of the body, which can then be subjected to new, total forms of treatment.²³ And this also resembles what is accomplished by professional dehumanization in general: by a germicidal elimination of the squalor of everyday consequence and complication, it enables a delimited but purposeful activity. The second shock is the poem’s rephrasing of spring rebirth not as a pastoral greening of the world but as a movement from leaf to blossom, from green to white. Like the ambiguous “come,” a plural verb for a singular subject that thus asks to be read as an imperative, the white of Williams’ May is less a reminder of Nature’s traditions than an invitation to unpre-

²² Mariani, p. 601.

²³ Cary Nelson, *The Incarnate Word: Literature as Verbal Space* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 197. On the hospital see Michel Foucault, *La Naissance de la clinique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1963).

cedented human action. Thus the modernist white of Williams' "page, his white field, where we *do* something together" joins professional white, which excludes the human-all-too-human, in a common production of active competence, a qualifying of activity.²⁴ This is just to say, with Williams' own characteristic absence of praise or blame, that he reflects the ambiguity of professionalism itself — an ambiguity for which we can be grateful, for it holds out to us the possibility of refashioning our professions in an image that is both more modern and more human.

²⁴ Nelson, p. 203.