

## Conversation and the Poetics of Modernism

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*Poetry* as a literary genre encompasses many modes but *conversational poetry* or *conversation in poetry* is not what comes first to mind when one tries to define the essence of poetry. In fact, poetry and conversation constitute different kinds of discourse with different ideological goals and different communicative appeals and responses. While conversation is primarily a societal phenomenon and as such plays a major role in novels and plays, poetry's prime end and mode of communication, at least from the era of Romanticism through Modernism to Postmodernism, is to affect the sensibility of individuals individually and intimately.

In contrast, conversation—whether we think of the enlightenment aristocrats of the eighteenth century or the salons of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie—was very much a public affair. In this regard, it is helpful to remind oneself of the social and scenic quality of the term *Konversationsstücke*, *conversational pieces* in art history, a subspecies of *genre painting*, depicting social gatherings both in interior scenes (Jan Steen, *The Bean King's Festival*, 1668; Jan Vermeer, *Christ at the House of Mary and Martha*, 1655) and as *fêtes galantes* in stylized landscapes (Antoine Watteau, *The Champs Élysées*, 1717-21, Édouard Manet, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863) in which conversation plays a major role. As for *conversational pieces* in literary history, T. S. Eliot's poetry volume, *Prufrock and Other Observations* 1917, contains not only interesting examples of poems in which conversation or conversational elements play a role but even one poem that is entitled "Conversation Galante."

The French title of this poem is a reminder of the impact on modernism of the great *conversational* tradition of *salons* and *fêtes*

*galantes* and particularly of the revival of interest in them through the neo-rococo of Verlaine and Beardsley. In T. S. Eliot's "Conversation Galante," the speaker's flourish of parodic moon images ("I observe: 'Our sentimental friend the moon!'" Eliot 33)<sup>1</sup> elicits from the female respondent a commentary that is not exactly appreciative: "How you digress!" His second attempt to evoke for her a romantic setting through an "exquisite nocturne"—perhaps by Chopin—"and moonshine" is hardly more successful: "Does this refer to me?" Finally, she counters his resentful remark ("You, madam, are the eternal humorist, / The eternal enemy of the absolute" and "indifferent and imperious") with the terse ironic question: "Are we then so serious?" Obviously, the elegant French title is in ironic contrast to this poem on a failing love affair.

Erotic failure is also the theme of T. S. Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady," a more extended literary *conversation piece* in the same volume. In contrast to poetry, where the 'authority' usually rests with one person, in conversation it is likely to shift between several speakers. Furthermore, people respond differently to each kind of discourse, reserving emotional identification, a connotative engagement of their imagination and a contemplative mood for poetry and expecting a more rational, informative and denotative kind of communication when entering into a conversation. In accordance with our cultural code, most of us associate with poetry a stronger emphasis on form and, along with that, a much greater intensity of experience. Obviously, then, there exists some kind of basic difference or even antagonism between poetry and conversation, and from this predicament several questions arise: what is the relationship of the poetic and the conversational in specific literary periods, for instance in modernism? How do individual authors incorporate conversation or conversational elements in their poetry? What is the cultural basis, what the aesthetic function of this use of conversational elements in particular poems?

As a first step in answering these questions, I shall study a few pertinent poems by a leading modernist poet, T. S. Eliot, and against

this background I shall attempt an overview of the use of conversational elements in the poetry of another major American poet, William Carlos Williams. I mean to engage in this comparison because Eliot and Williams have been taken as representatives of two opposite, or at least different, poetic traditions and because their popularity curves reflect major ideological as well as aesthetic changes. After Williams had unfairly suffered comparative neglect up to the Seventies, the situation since then has just as unfairly been reversed. T. S. Eliot has been ousted from his prime place and is denigrated as alien to the great American tradition and as a euro-centric *poeta doctus*, while Williams is regarded the true heir of Whitman and the forefather of Ginsburg and Olson. Perhaps the study of the similar and different use of conversational elements in Eliot and Williams may prepare the ground for a more balanced reappraisal of their poetry and for a better understanding of an aspect of the *Poetics of Modernism* that so far has not been systematically explored.

"Portrait of a Lady" is not just the record of a conversation, but a *poem* because of its form, a montage of three different "conversations" ironically presented and reflected upon by a first person narrator: one conversation taking place in December after a Chopin concert ("We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole / Transmit the Preludes [of Chopin], through his hair and finger-tips" Eliot 16), a second one in spring ("Now that lilacs are in bloom / She has a bowl of lilacs in her room" 17), and the third and, presumably, last one, in October ("I have been wondering frequently of late / . . . Why we have not developed into friends" 19). As a consequence of the narrator's frustrated and remorseful reflections ("Well! and what if she should die some afternoon" 20), the "Portrait of a Lady" becomes also an ironic self-portrait. The awkward relationship between a reluctant male and a sentimentalizing female is beautifully captured in the manneristic description of the conversation:

—And so the conversation slips  
Among velleities and carefully caught regrets

Through attenuated tones of violins  
 Mingled with remote cornets  
 And begins.  
 'You do not know how much they mean to me, my friends,  
 And how, how rare and strange it is, to find  
 In a life composed so much, so much of odds and ends,  
 [For indeed I do not love it . . . you knew? you are not blind!  
 How keen you are!]  
 To find a friend who has these qualities,  
 . . . .' (Eliot 16)

"Portrait of Lady" is a successful and original poem because Eliot's parodic handling of the conversational fragments agrees well with the overall ironic design of this poem on "unrequited love," a theme that so far had only be treated tragically.

Poems as diverse as "Mr. Apollinax" and the *Waste Land* show the range in Eliot's use of fragments of conversation. Mr. Apollinax (*nomen est omen*), a strangely mythic figure associated with Fragilion, Priapus, Poseidon, and centaurs, appears, disconcertingly, in the pretentious and trivial world of contemporary America:

When Mr. Apollinax visited the United States  
 His laughter tinkled among the teacups.  
 I thought of Fragilion, that shy figure among the birch-trees,  
 And of Priapus in the shrubbery  
 Gaping at the lady in the swing.  
 In the palace of Mrs. Phlaccus, at Professor Channing-Cheetah's  
 He laughed like an irresponsible foetus.  
 His laughter was submarine and profound  
 Like the old man of the sea's  
 Hidden under coral islands  
 . . . . (Eliot 31)

While the narrator is keenly aware of Mr. Apollinax's uncanny and grotesque impact ("I looked for the head of Mr. Apollinax rolling under a chair . . . / I heard the beat of centaur's hoofs over the hard turf" 31), the fragments of the conversations at the reception show that his hosts are not:

'He is a charming man'—'But after all what did he mean?'—

'His pointed ears. . . . He must be unbalanced,'—  
 'There was something he said that I might have challenged.'

The party guests by their inane chatter serve to contrastively emphasize the mythic aura and to unwittingly suggest ("pointed ears . . . unbalanced") Mr. Apollinax's faunlike, otherworldly nature. The poem is important among Eliot's early works by marking his advance beyond societal satire towards creating symbolic deep structures, his response to James Joyce's "mythic method," as he had called it in his review of *Ulysses*.

In the rich intertextual cosmos of *The Waste Land*, comprising quotations from Ezekiel to Hermann Hesse, the conversational assumes new forms and functions. Fragments of conversation like "Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch" (Eliot 61) or "You gave me hyacinths first a year ago; / They called me the hyacinth girl" (62) enter into symbolic relationships with other segments in the text. The German sentence becomes part of the thematic complex *migration, alienation* and the words of the hyacinth girl expand the leitmotif of the "dull roots" and "dried tubers" in the opening passage ("April is the cruellest month"). At the same time, the conversational elements instigate interesting stylistic contrasts and tensions as well as affinities within their immediate verbal context, for instance, between the words of the hyacinth girl and the quotation from Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*: "Frisch weht der Wind / Der Heimat zu / Mein Irisch Kind, / Wo weilest du?" (62).

The end of section I "Burial of the Dead" constitutes a particularly striking example of how creatively Eliot worked with conversational elements because he succeeds in weaving several quotations and allusions into what reads like one piece of conversational speech linking and integrating Stetson, a contemporary, with Mylae, the Roman sea-battle of 260 BC, and the dog-image from the dirge in Webster's *White Devil* with Baudelaire's confidential address to his "hypocrite lecteur . . . mon frère."

'Stetson!

'You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!

'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
 'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
 'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?  
 'O keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,  
 'Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!  
 'You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!  
 (Eliot 63)

In addition to the use of short and isolated conversational elements, functioning in the context like quotations, Eliot also introduces more extended conversational segments. In section II of *The Waste Land*, "A Game of Chess," he contrasts with the dehumanized attractions of his decadent Cleopatra (an ingenious rewrite of Enobarbus's speech from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* II.ii.190) the more trivial allurements of contemporary women, ranging from the neurotic Bloomsbury type ("My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me" 65) to women from the working class milieu of Lil and her false friend ("When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said— / I didn't mince my words . . . he wants a good time / And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said. / Oh is there, she said" 66).

Like T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams draws on material that would have been regarded as *unpoetic* and even *taboo* in other periods of literary history. But he transforms the bit of conversational back and forth between "the girl" and "the barkeeper" into the stanzas of the poem, "At the Bar," which from the girl's opening flourish "Hi, open up" to the barkeeper's warning "You'll blow a fuse," proves a tightly knit aesthetic whole.

At the Bar

Hi, open up a dozen.

Wha'cha tryin' ta do—  
 charge ya batteries?

Make it two.

Easy girl!

You'll blow a fuse if  
 ya keep that up. (EP 431)<sup>2</sup>

One gets the same impression from the poem with the ironic title "A Fond Farewell" which is a conversation only in the sense that its tirade of vituperative exclamations implies a listening partner. What makes this rather one-sided conversation a poem is the balance between the continuing angry outpour and its careful organization in four stanzas of three lines each. At a close look, one discovers a subtle rhythm deriving from the tension between verse and syntax and between run-on lines and periods. The beginning and the end ("You? . . ."; "I'm / going elsewhere") are effectively emphasized. However, what moves one in this poem is the mixture of comic bravura and psychic and social misery ("sucking / my life blood out"; "baker and garbage must be served"), off-set by the masterful form:

A Fond Farewell

You? Why you're  
just sucking  
my life blood out.

What do I care  
if the baker  
and the garbage man

must be served.  
Take what  
you might give

and be damned  
to you. I'm  
going elsewhere. (EP 422)

The greatness of Williams poetry derives from the fact that his professional life as a doctor and his lifelong exposure to the social problems and the human predicaments of his patients appealed to his creative imagination. The outcome might be a humorous poem like the following one of the poems entitled "Detail":

Detail

Doc, I bin lookin for you  
I owe you two bucks.

How you doin'?

Fine. When I get it  
I'll bring it up to you. (EP 427)

But the result could also be, as in the case of the telephone-call, in which aging Dr. Williams tries to get rid of an insistent mother, a self-accusing and deeply disturbing poem. Williams captures admirably the contrast between the woman's confused and anxious talk and his own detached tone in which he tries to make her call again at a more convenient time. Against this bulk of the poem he sets as a dramatic counterpoint the concluding punch line: "I, I, I don't think it's brEathin'." This finish reveals to the reader that the selfcritical poem is not only entitled "To Close" because it marks the conclusion of the book.

It stands to reason that an author who could turn a telephone call or a chat with a patient into poetry, would draw inspiration from family life. What appears amazing though is the range of poetic forms and moods arising from this source. "Promenade" is a poem, in which Williams, the family man, takes his little son out for a walk, so that his wife Flossie can relax and remain undisturbed while fixing breakfast. The poem is loosely structured, evolving in three parts of different length and numerous irregular stanzas. It has a lot of movement, many references to changing scenery and numerous short segments of authentic baby-talk (see for instance, the repetitions of the word "splash"). Its achievement lies in giving shape to the material while retaining an air of improvisation. This fits very well the self-irony of the situation ("Well, mind, here we have/ our little son beside us: / a little diversion before breakfast" EP 132) in which the poet toys with the idea that "A poem might come of it?" but instead heroically enters into his role of devoted husband and entertainer of his son "Oh, be useful. Save annoyance to Flossie . . ."; "Splash the water up! (Splash it up, Sonny! . . . See it splash! Ah, mind, / see it splash! It is alive." The theme of being at the same time a family man and a poet is given a parodic turn in part III when, in making a wreath for Sonny, he playfully alludes to the time-honored tradition of crowning poets:



Oh, then a wreath! Let's  
refresh something they  
used to write well of.

Two fern plumes. Strip them  
to the mid-rib along one side.  
Bind the tips with a grass stem.  
Bend and intertwist the stalks at the back. So!  
Ah! now we are crowned!  
Now we are a poet! (EP 133)

In contrast to the very nimble and scenic early poem "Promenade," the late poem "The Horse Show" conveys in six block-like regular stanzas of seven lines a static situation, a talk between the 64 year-old Williams and his mother. However, this talk becomes the occasion of an epiphany ("Constantly near you, I never in my entire / sixty-four years knew you so well as yesterday / or half so well") adumbrated in the title "The Horse Show" and eventually captured in stanzas 6 and 7. This epiphany is to be seen as a development of and a counterpoint to the gist of the conversation in which son and mother "talk intimately of themselves" and touch on such things as her belief in a life-giving "spirit and the world of spirits." The theme of her boredom and her restless curiosity, introduced, in stanza 5, by her exclamation "Oh if I could only read!" (LP 186), is encapsulated in the image of the *horse show* with which she—like the boy in Joyce's story "Araby"—seems to associate a world of magic richness and wonder: "Tell me about the horse show. I have / been waiting all week to hear about it."

Mother darling, I wasn't able to get away.  
Oh that's too bad. It was just a show;  
they make the horses walk up and down  
to judge them by their form, Oh is that  
all? I tho't it was something else. Oh  
they jump and run too. I wish you had been  
there, I was so interested to hear about it.

The exchanges, in stanza 6, between the two partners are left without quotation marks and are presented mostly in run-on lines which makes this conversation appear as one continuous speech. This

has the effect of ironically leveling the distance between the mother's rich imaginations and her son's trivializing account of the factual ("It was just a show; they make the horses walk up and down"). We understand that the busy pediatrician Dr. Williams thinks he has more important things to do than attend a horseshow to entertain his senile mother with his account of it. But we realize that he has sadly missed the point when, in the last lines of the poem, she repeats her desire with that stubbornness which the very old share with the very young: "I wish you had been / there, I was so interested to hear about it." However, if the Dr. Williams in the poem is obtuse and callous, there is no doubt that the Dr. Williams, writing the poem, has had an epiphany and one that we share.

There is no doubt that the unorthodox use of everyday conversation in poetry presupposes a society increasingly uncertain not only about the traditional language of poetry but also about itself and eventually ready to dismantle the political hierarchies and social distinctions of the Victorian and pre-World War I era. These cultural changes made a profound impact on contemporary aesthetics such as the foregrounding of unpoetic subjects and unpoetic diction. Situations of ordinary life demanded an ordinary language. In terms of literary history this meant the modernists had to recover the language of poetry from the thematic and formal limitations of the *traditionally poetic*. It is in this historical context that exploration of conversation as a poetic means of expression became important. Colloquial tone, delight in the vernacular, lightness of touch, flexibility, also a new kind of interest in the sensuousness of the ordinary, which is quite different from the exotic sensuousness of the *fin de siècle*, are elements characterizing the new kind of poetry.

Several of these qualities are evident in the little poem "This Is Just to Say" which is not more than a poeticized kitchen note of Dr. Williams to his wife Flossie. The three stanzas of this poem with their subtle short lines are carefully if humorously wrought, the first sentence taking up the first two stanzas, the counterweighing second sentence making up the third stanza. The first stanza contains the

writer's confession of 'guilt,' the second shows consideration for his wife, whose breakfast plans he has crossed, the third shows, in the repetitions of the final flourish "so sweet / and so cold," that sensuous delight clearly outweighs moral considerations. The poem is so popular because the ironic play with the ordinary is off-set by an equally prominent shaping power.

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox

and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast

Forgive me  
they were so delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold (EP 354)

In developing this shaping power, Williams, like other modernists, looked not so much to literary forebears as to contemporary artists. Norbert Bischoff has described the Armory Show of European and American avantgarde painting (1913), at which W. C. Williams read his two poems "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" and "Portrait of a Woman in Bed," as the great event upsetting the flabbergasted American public but also inspiring American painters and poets.<sup>3</sup> How this inspiration of the arts interacts with the irony of the conversational tone manifests itself in such poems as "To a Solitary Disciple."

As so often in Williams's conversational poems, the situation is not one in which two partners exchange views. Rather, it is the master whose speech pattern of insisting advice—a parody of an art lesson—is the ironic force informing the poem: stanza (1) "rather notice . . . than"; (2) "rather observe . . . than"; (3) "rather grasp . . . perceive how

. . . ”; (4) “See how it fails!” (5) “Observe . . . It is true . . . ”; (7) “But observe . . . observe.” There are two nuances that are of particular interest in connection with the poetic use of conversational elements. In stanza 4, the teaching of rhetoric takes on a dramatic coloring: “See how it fails!” In the sentence connecting stanzas 5, 6, 7, the clause “It is true . . . But observe” serves to enhance the conversational element.

The gist of the master’s lesson is the importance of observation and perception on the one hand and of facts, structure, architectonics on the other (the repetition of the order “to observe”; “how the dark/converging lines of the steeple / meet at the pinnacle;” “But observe / the oppressive weight / of the squat edifice”). This new modernist ideal is set against the late romantic penchant for rare coloring (shell-pink), painterly effects and fine writing. The last stanza draws the full consequence from this kind of poetic “statics,” balancing against “the oppressive weight of the squat edifice” “the jasmine light / of the moon”:

#### Solitary Disciple

Rather notice, mon cher,  
that the moon is  
tilted above  
the point of the steeple  
than that its color  
is shell pink.

Rather observe  
that it is early morning  
than that the sky  
is smooth  
as a turquoise.

Rather grasp  
how the dark  
converging lines  
of the steeple  
meet at the pinnacle—  
perceive how  
its little ornament  
tries to stop them—

...

But observe  
 the oppressive weight  
 of the squat edifice!  
 Observe  
 the jasmine lightness  
 of the moon. (EP 167)

As the last stanza of "To a Solitary Disciple" iconically captures the contrapuntal pull and push of weight and lightness, the two-stanza poem "The Dish of Fruit" appears in its entirety as an icon. The two stanzas mirror the relation of the poem to Juan Gris's still life *Dish of Pears* in which the cubist projections of the table are also prominent. Moreover, the two stanzas embody the opposition between description and simile, between the two halves of a simile, between being and becoming, between thing and artwork, between painting and poetry.

Furthermore, there is the parodic parallel and opposition of the table and the poem: "four legs, by which / it becomes a table. Four lines / by which it becomes a quatrain" and "The table describes nothing—The poem . . . lifts the dish of fruit." This analogy is matched by its reversal, linking the beginning and the end ("The table describes / nothing . . . how will it describe / the contents of the poem") of this little masterpiece that emerges in one sentence, comprising its two halves in one unity: it is in this context that the elements of a conversational argument ("if we say . . . how will it") fulfill their ironic purpose, smoothing the process through which an abstract poetological proposition becomes a concrete poem:

#### The Dish of Fruit

The table describes  
 nothing: four legs, by which  
 it becomes a table. Four lines  
 by which it becomes a quatrain,

the poem that lifts the dish  
 of fruit, if we say it is like  
 a table—how will it describe  
 the contents of the poem? (LP 91)

While ordinarily poetological poems like love poems are far from being ironic, this is quite different with Williams whose contributions to both kinds of poetry are characterized by their ironic tone and, in conjunction with it, by their use of conversational elements. In fact, his "Portrait of a Lady" (EP 40) is as much a poetological *exercise* in stylizing and ironic deflating as it is a love poem. The extravagant praises of the beloved, inspired by the courtly paintings of Watteau and Fragonard but also by the manneristic metaphors of the Song of Solomon, are parodically undercut by the lady's terse realistic questions: "Your thighs are appletrees / whose blossoms touch the sky. / *Which sky?* The sky / where Watteau hung a lady's / slipper. Your knees / are a southern breeze . . . . *Agh! what sort of man was Fragonard?*" These questions annoy the enthused poet, seeing himself forced to give up his idealizing language and to adopt a conversational tone: "*—as if that answered anything.*" After he has been thus put down, it is only with some effort that he can recover his idealistic fervor ("One of those white summer days, / the tall grass of your ankles / flickers upon the shore,") only to be pulled down again with the question: "Which shore?" The comic outcome of his lady's insistent questioning—she repeats the question four times—is that his poetic rapture is completely deflated: "Agh, petals maybe. How / should I know . . . I said petals from an appletree."

In comparison with this parody of manneristic male playfulness in "Portrait of a Lady," the case of conversational dismantling of male postures in the poem with the indifferent title "Twelve Line Poem" is much more serious.

Pitiful lovers broken your loves  
 the head of a man  
 the parts disjointed of a woman  
 unshaved pushing forward

And you? Withdrawn caressive  
 the thighs limp eyes  
 filling with tears the lower lip  
 trembling, why do you try

so hard to be a man? You are

a lover! Why adopt  
the reprehensible absurdities of  
an inferior attitude? (LP 202)

After the first half of the poem has presented a realistic picture of the exhausted lover which is quite revealing in regard to Williams's view of sex and gender, the second part confronts the lover, under the pressures of his *machismo*, with the detached, ironic question: "why do you try / so hard to be a man? You are a lover! Why adopt / the reprehensible absurdities of / an inferior attitude?"

There are several "love poems" employing conversational elements to humorously explode male deficiencies. Among them, "The Gentle Rejoinder" (LP 59) is a comic and concise variant on the theme of male narcissism and obtuseness that in Henry James's famous story "The Beast in the Jungle" has such tragic consequences. In "The Gentle Rejoinder," the male partner uses the first and longer stanza to set forth his idyllic vision of catching sea-snails "like the old men I once saw / on the wharf at Villefranche." The female partner has the shorter second stanza to remind him of "something else you could catch . . . / if you wanted to." As it turns out, the stanza and, in a way the whole poem, moves towards her ironic and movingly diffident appeal in the last line: "But you probably / don't want to, do you?"

What seems important in regard to Williams's employment of conversational elements is that they depend on and often emerge from a short scene, the scenic and the conversational reinforcing each other in Williams's reality-oriented poetry. In the case of "The Act," there is even a one-line introductory description of the scene "There were the roses, in the rain." She discards his plea for not cutting the roses ("But they are so beautiful / where they are") with the ironic remark "Agh, we were all beautiful once." However, her flippant tone is belied by the grave and emotional manner in which Williams has him register her action: "and cut them and gave them to me / in my hand" (LP 96).

But Williams does not only use “conversational elements” to enhance and add weight to the thematic developments in his short “realistic” poems. In “The Monstrous Marriage,” a narrative poem of 12 stanzas of 3 lines each, the mythic encounter and ironic conversation between male and female speaker arise from a realistic situation depicted in 1-3: A woman’s attempt to help a wounded pigeon leads to a painful and awkward struggle with the wounded animal and, eventually, to their miraculous union, the “monstrous marriage” of the title: “You are my wife for this.” (LP 53) After the initial bloody encounter, in which their blood commingles, she finds it advisable to “adopt a hawk’s life”—instead of a pigeon’s. This shift from pigeon (peaceful love bird) to hawk (bird of prey) is as important a metamorphosis as the humorous back and forth between animal and human features. It culminates, in the last line, in the grotesque provisions for their monstrous marriage:

I try to imitate you, he said while she  
cried a little in smiling. Mostly  
he confided, my headed is clouded

except for hunting. But for parts of  
a day it’s clear as any man’s—by  
your love. No, she would

answer him pitifully, what clearer than  
a hawk’s eye and reasonably the  
mind also must be so.

...

After that she had a leather belt made  
upon which he perched to enjoy her. (LP 53-54)

The motive for this strange poem is probably the modernist urge, observable also in Joyce, Eliot, Faulkner, and Hemingway as well as in Picasso and Stravinsky, to explore in myths or in the relationship between human beings and animals the kind of primitive configuration and liminal situation embodied in archetypes. In “Monstrous Marriage,” the use of conversation allows Williams to give an ironic touch to the mythic love relation between humans and



animals, e.g. Leda and the swan: "Certainly, / since we are married," she said to him, "no / one will accept it." The parodic use of conversational elements is matched by the grotesque details of the narrative ("Nestling upon her as was his wont . . . always astonished at his assumptions . . . she had a leather belt made/ upon which he perched to enjoy her"). The outcome is a text whose ambiguous combination of the mythic and the ironic invites the kind of imaginative participation demanded by modernist poetry.

In their search for a new language to express a new kind of sensibility, William Carlos Williams and T. S. Eliot, like other modernist poets, made use of conversational elements to rupture conventional poetic associations and to set free, through this intertextuality, new linguistic energies. Characteristically, these poets, like modernist painters in their collages and montages, used snippets rather than whole conversations. And their aim in this was also similar, both demanding ironic distance as well as unorthodox playfulness to liberate their arts from Victorian pathos and stylistic paralysis. The examples of conversational elements in Williams's poetry show clearly that he introduced them to give his poems a witty, relaxed, and improvised quality. However, his new lightness of touch did neither make him neglect form nor abandon the inner zone of poetry.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Quotations are from T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1935* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959).

<sup>2</sup>Quotations are from *The Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1951) abbreviated EP. *The Collected later Poems of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1963), abbreviated LP.

<sup>3</sup>See also: *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House 1951) and *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*, ed. Edith Heal (Boston: Beacon Press 1958); Volker Bischoff, *Amerikanische Lyrik zwischen 1912 und 1922: Untersuchungen zur Theorie, Praxis und Wirkungsgeschichte der "New Poetry"* (Heidelberg: Winter 1983) 29-33.