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April Boone

William Carlos Williams Review, Volume 26, Number 1, Spring 2006, pp. 1-25 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/wcw.2007.0000

William Carlos Williams's *The Great American Novel:* Flamboyance and the Beginning of Art

April Boone
UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

In the early 1920s in Rutherford, New Jersey, William Carlos Williams had serious doubts that the "Great American Novel," as it was then conceptualized, could ever be written. Though generally known for his revolutionary work in poetry, Williams was also quite an experimentalist in prose, claiming in *Spring and All* that prose and verse "are phases of the same thing" (144). Williams showed concern for the future of American literature in general, including that of the novel. In response to what he viewed as specific problems facing the American novel, problems with American language, and problems inherent in the nature of language itself, Williams created *The Great American Novel* in 1923. Williams was troubled by the derivative nature of American novels of the time, their lack of originality, and their dependence upon European models; the exhausted material and cliché-ridden language of the historical novels of his day; the tendency of such novels to oversimplify or misrepresent the American experience; and the formulaic quality of genres such as detective novels. At the heart of *The Great American Novel* is Williams's concern with how these conventional novel forms obscure the play of language and fail to engage readers in the defamiliarization that drives his poetics. Growing out of these underlying premises, *The Great American Novel* engages the techniques of what we would now call metafiction to parody worn out formulas and content and, ironically, to create a new type of novel that anticipates postmodern fiction.

The Great American Novel has received infrequent yet varied responses from scholars. In an interview with Edith Heal published as *I Wanted to Write a Poem,* Williams himself calls the work "a travesty on what [he] considered conventional American writing" (IWWP 38). He adds, seemingly offhandedly, "People were always talking about the Great American Novel so I thought I'd write it. The hero-

ine is a little Ford car—she was very passionate—a hot little baby. Someday you should read it. You'll have fun" (IWWP 38–9). From this attitude (as well as some of the work's content), we might gather that parody of American writing as usual was at least a part of Williams's aims for the work.

Linda Wagner, however, in *The Prose of William Carlos Williams,* claims that the "Language is neither so playful nor erudite as Joyce's; tone is not that of parody, as Williams later suggests" (48). Wagner further states, "No jokes or puns, no neologisms, no portmanteau words—Williams's novel asks nothing from the reader except the seriousness of mind to shape the fragmented parts into a whole . . ." (58). To view *The Great American Novel* in this light, though, is to completely miss the work's unmistakable humor (much of which does involve wordplay such as puns). The reader of this work inevitably must confront this question of how seriously we are to take it. The issue calls to mind a work by Dadaist Man Ray called "Gift" which looked like an iron that one would typically use to remove wrinkles from clothing—but the iron also had fourteen nails sticking out of the ironing face. How seriously are we to take such a work of art? As Mark A. Pegrum states, "Man Ray's iron cuts, but it is also humorous" (180). The same is true of *The Great American Novel.*

Many critics have valued *The Great American Novel* primarily as an interlude or exercise by Williams on his way to more important work. Hugh Kenner, for example, views *The Great American Novel* as a first draft of *Paterson,* a working out of the scope and technique of this later poem ("A Note" 182). In *A Homemade World,* Kenner subsequently describes *The Great American Novel* as "parodic" and "an obstetrician's vignette" (18). Dickran Tashjian, in *Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde,* calls the work "an exercise complementary to European Dada" and "a prelude to *In the American Grain*" (109).

Tashjian and others, in pointing to the relevance of Dada, make observations that can be quite useful for understanding *The Great American Novel.* Tashjian was one of the first scholars to note that Dada had never been sufficiently explored in relation to Williams's work in general (*Skyscraper* 251n), and Tashjian's 1975 study still provides one of the relatively longer discussions of Dada as it relates, in broad terms, to *The Great American Novel* in particular (*Skyscraper* 109–13). Williams did undergo what Tashjian refers to as "his Dada phase" (251n), though Williams sometimes denied any influence of the movement on his work. Williams was acquainted personally with the Dadaists who lived and worked in New York from 1915–21, including Marcel Duchamp, Walter and Louise Arensberg, Man Ray, and Francis Picabia. Clearly, Williams's

encounters with the art and philosophy of this group had a major influence on the themes and techniques of *The Great American Novel.* As Tashjian explains in his 1978 *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene, 1920–1940,* "In New York, Dada focused upon the tensions of art/anti-art, exploring the dialectic between destruction and creation, between accepted art forms and experimentation, which might lead to new works hitherto unrecognized as art by American culture and society" (58). The achievements of the Dadaists—the ready-mades of Duchamp, the concepts of found art, the collages of Joseph Stella, the work of Man Ray—are certainly relevant to my claims about Williams's goals for his satiric novel.

The discussions of scholars such as Bram Dijkstra and Peter Schmidt provide valuable insight into the influence of Cubism and Dadaism on Williams's thought in general, but tend to mention *The Great American Novel* only in passing. Of Williams's early works addressed by Dijkstra in *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech,* for example, *The Great American Novel* receives the least attention, with only a very brief reference. In Schmidt's *William Carlos Williams, The Arts, and Literary Tradition, The Great American Novel* is often marginalized, literally, either in brief parenthetical references or in short footnotes, but Schmidt acknowledges the need for more critical attention to the work, which he includes among Williams's "own versions of Dadaist 'automatic' writing" (8, 91) and also calls an experiment "with literary Cubism" (64). In addition, Schmidt makes the important observation that Dadaism is mentioned by name in *The Great American Novel.* Overall, the brilliance of Schmidt's work is that it complicates the discussion in richly provocative ways: by reminding us that Williams's perceptions of Dada were not fixed but were altering over several years (93), by noting the influence of Dada as simultaneous with Williams's explorations of "Emerson's and Whitman's assumption that originality and inherited literary forms are incompatible" (8), and by pointing out differences between Dadaism and the varieties of Cubism and how Williams appropriated now one, now the other, as his purpose required (140). Though primarily focusing on *Improvisations* and *Spring and All,* chapters 3 and 4 of Schmidt's book should be required reading for the student of *The Great American Novel* because they are rich with relevance and possible applications in regard to the avant-garde art of which Williams himself was an avid student.

The claims I will demonstrate by considering *The Great American Novel* as metafiction are concurrent with some of the conclusions reached by those who have approached Williams's work in general as Dadaist or Cubist. The concerns of the Dadaists and Cubists who are categorized as modern artists are often parallel with concerns of the postmodern writers of metafictional novels. The intersec-

tion of these concerns is notable in *The Great American Novel.* Mark A. Pegrum, in his recent book *Challenging Modernity: Dada between Modern and Postmodern,* points out that a number of scholars view Dada as a forerunner to postmodernism, and that "A few even consider Dada as a possible *changeover point* from the modern to the postmodern" (3). Though he doesn't specifically refer to Williams, Pegrum's analysis of Dada and the postmodern, particularly his chapter 3 section entitled "Dada Against History"; chapter 5 on the question of how seriously one is meant to take the flamboyance of Dadaism; and chapter 7 on (Anti)Art, merit close attention from scholars interested in the relevance of Dada and proto-postmodernism to Williams's art, and especially to *The Great American Novel.*

Williams was clearly intrigued by and influenced by what the Dadaists were doing, yet he never came to agree with the segment of Dadaism that would decry the value of all art, and he resisted the term "anti-art" sometimes applied to his own projects. When Wallace Stevens called Williams's work anti-poetic in 1934, "Williams argued . . . that the poetic and anti-poetic were of a piece, creation and destruction, art/anti-art, inextricably bound together in a dialectic" (Tashjian, *William Carlos Williams* 59–60). Therefore, the claims of many critics, such as Webster Schott and biographer Paul Mariani, who label *The Great American Novel* an anti-novel, seem accurate on some levels—but not all (I 155; Mariani 208). When one compares the work to Joseph Heller's 1961 anti-novel *Catch-22,* for example, there are obvious similarities. Both works parody and radically oppose the conventional expectations of what a novel should be. Both works satirize convention, rules and restrictions. Yossarian, Heller's antihero, "succeeds" by feigning illness rather than fulfilling his duties, and therefore, because of this ploy (among other, more influential factors, of course), he breaks free of the catch-22 regulation, a paradoxical rule that made discharge on the grounds of insanity an impossibility. Williams's antihero is a struggling novelist, caught in his own catch-22 situation, the impossibility of writing a novel, an impossibility created by the very rules that supposedly are meant to facilitate this writing. Like Yossarian, the novelist "succeeds" by acting against expectations, creating the "novel" that is *The Great American Novel.*

Undoubtedly, *The Great American Novel* does bear qualities of the anti-novel, but this label doesn't adequately sum up the scope of Williams's work. C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon have aptly noted that, characteristically, an anti-novel "experiments with fragmentation and dislocation on the assumption that the reader will be able to reconstruct reality from these disordered and unevaluated pieces of direct experience" (28). Granted, *The Great American Novel* works

partly on such an assumption, and like *Catch-22, The Great American Novel*'s humor comes largely from the parody and satire of convention. However, *The Great American Novel* has a self-conscious dimension as a work of fiction that differs from *Catch-22*'s primary purpose of satire on social conventions, authority figures, and the human condition. The satire of *The Great American Novel,* in contrast, is ultimately directed toward the conventions imposed upon all creators of fiction and, specifically, toward the rather stagnant state of the American novel in Williams's time. Where *Catch-22* criticizes novelistic conventions indirectly, *The Great American Novel* makes this criticism the primary focus of the novel. In the work, Williams confronts the problems facing the American novel and creates a piece that seems prophetic, even proto-postmodern, in its vision of the inevitable move to predominance of metafiction in the postmodern novel.

The earliest known use of the term "metafiction" is in a 1970 essay by William H. Gass, in which, interestingly, he applies the term as a corrective because some works which had been labeled as anti-novels needed a more fitting term to indicate their primary thematic concern with the act of creating fiction (Waugh 25). As previously discussed, such is the case with *The Great American Novel.* Metafiction was not a new phenomenon in literature at Williams's time. Williams, in fact, greatly admired Laurence Sterne and his *Tristram Shandy,* one of the precursor texts of metafiction, written in the mid-eighteenth century. Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky, in his 1921 essay on *Tristram Shandy,* observes that "awareness of form constitutes the subject matter of [Sterne's] novel." However, discussing metafiction as such did not come into vogue as a critical trend until the early 1970s, when Gass and others began to take note.

Thus, critics prior to that time, as well as critics such as James Breslin, writing about the same time as Gass, could not view metafictional works through the lens of the extensive study we now have on the subject. Still, in his *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist,* Breslin perceptively notes the following: "One tendency, evident in the novel from Andre Gide to John Barth, has been to make this self-conscious struggle with literary form into the fictional subject itself. Williams appears to have been one of the first twentieth-century writers to try this, in his ironically titled *The Great American Novel*" (126). Breslin also comments that Williams uses a "work-about-itself technique" in creating the novel (133). With that said, I propose a new look at Williams's text in light of more recent scholarship which defines metafiction and explores the abundance of metafictional novels in postmodern times.

As my opening paragraph indicates, *The Great American Novel* is actually *not* a novel in any conventional sense of the word. The work has no coherent plot

and no typical protagonist or antagonist. Thus, Williams was clearly being a bit facetious in titling his work *The Great American* Novel. However, when looked at from another view, the title seems to ring somewhat true, as a vision of the direction future American novels would take.

Williams had been experimenting with new forms, publishing his *Kora in Hell: Improvisations,* a collection of prose poems, in 1920, and *Spring and All,* which he describes as "poems interspersed with prose," in 1923. Given that the word "novel" originally derived from the Latin *novus,* meaning "new," and came to English from the Italian word for short story, novella (a short work of prose fiction that told a new, original story, in contrast to retelling a traditional one), Williams also must have been somewhat serious in calling this "new" work a "novel." Because he viewed the current status of the American novel as stagnant, Williams sought to make a new novel, just as his goal in the poetic genre was to "make it new." Apparently, he believed that any new creation in either genre would have to come through a completely new type of form.

Therefore, with the pastiche and the found art of Dada, the Synthetic Cubism of those such as Juan Gris, the metafictional techniques of Laurence Sterne, and (as we shall see) the wordplay of Gertrude Stein, Williams creates his "Great American Novel" in the form of a collage consisting of sections of his novelist's self-conscious fictional prose interspersed with bits of other found materials. We get a sense of Williams before his typewriter, surrounded by fragments of writing he had collected. Certainly included were letters from Ezra Pound written to him in the early 1920s regarding Williams's work; recent letters and notes from his friend and fellow poet Alva N. Turner, whom we also see in *Paterson;* a crumpled past due bill; several hastily though poignantly written recordings of startling occurrences Williams witnessed as an obstetrician who delivered more than two thousand babies; the December 1920 issue of *The Ladies' Home Journal* with an article on the Cumberland mountain mother; newspaper clippings on *Flaming Youth,* the hottest new novel of 1922 being published in *Metropolitan* in installments under the pen name Warner Fabian, often speculated to be "one of the most important and serious-minded novelists in America" as reported in *The New York Times* November 5 and December 24, 1922; current advertisements for new clothing fashions from magazines such as *Vanity Fair;* clippings from *The New York Times* of September 19 and September 28, 1920, announcing *Lohengrin* to be performed in Italian at Manhattan with Anna Fitziu in the starring role (or perhaps a souvenir playbill from Williams's own attendance at the production); and published descriptions of American industrial production and products, probably also from newspaper articles, ads, or manufacturing company brochures.

I also speculate that Williams had before him the following: issues of popular magazines (such as *Romance* and *Western Story Magazine*) from the last decade or so that often published the sort of trite American writing that unnerved him; the September 4, 1915 issue of *All-Story Weekly* with a dog-eared story entitled "Diada, Daughter of Discord" by E. K. Means; passages from the flurry of publicized reports from arctic expeditions over the last several decades such as John Murdoch's 1892 *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition* or the Smithsonian's 1894 *Ethnography of the Ungava District* by Lucien M. Turner (reports also covered often in *The New York Times*), which included information on the living conditions and marital practices of Alaskan Eskimos; passages including some of the more melodramatic accounts of the American past, perhaps from selected history books that had been published since the mid-nineteenth century; and sketches in recent editions of *The New York Times* of successful American immigrants. Such found materials as these make up *The Great American Novel.*

The text that includes these pieces demands a patient, motivated reader who is willing to read on without the luxury of a coherent story with a conventional beginning, middle, and end. Perhaps because of its experimentation with technique, Linda Wagner, in *The Prose of William Carlos Williams,* has called *The Great American Novel* "Williams's attempt at a stream-of-consciousness novel" (32). No doubt, Williams had been impressed by Joyce's *Ulysses,* published in 1922, and passages of *The Great American Novel* do utilize a sort of stream-of-consciousness technique, but as a whole, the work has more in common with that of Russian Formalists such as Rozanov, who promoted a "resolution of the novel back into its raw materials, into a kind of linguistic collage" (Jameson 78) and with what Jorge Luis Borges, in his 1941 essay "The Garden of Forking Paths," labeled infinite regress (McHale 114). Like *Ulysses, The Great American Novel* lacks a traditional plot, but Williams's work seems more metafictional in its intent because what we are reading seems to be the unrefined, unassimilated building blocks of the story that the novelist is trying to create. The pastiche technique allows Williams to foreground the process of the novelist's efforts to put together the random materials mentioned above into a coherent fiction, and thereby calls attention to the typical process by which novels assimilate and transform bits and pieces of culture into their fiction. Thus, the novel may effectively be read as the story of a man writing a story of himself attempting to write a story.

The unnamed novelist who is the protagonist of this novel is obsessed with beginnings. Obsession, by definition, is a continued dwelling on one idea or emotion without the ability to dispel it. Thus, this novelist's obsession with beginning is

evident because one might read the entirety of his novel as a constant search for a beginning. In her seminal work entitled *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction,* Patricia Waugh defines such a search as a redefinition of a conventional literary theme: "The traditional fictional quest has thus been transformed into a quest for fictionality" (10). This is the quest we see beginning in *The Great American Novel*'s chapter I, the only titled chapter in the whole work, which is called, significantly, "THE FOG." In the opening lines, we are in the mind of the writer as he attempts to coax his novel's beginning out of the fogginess of insubstantial ideas: "If there is progress then there is a novel. Without progress there is nothing. Everything exists from the beginning. I existed in the beginning. I was a slobbering infant . . . Yet if there is to be a novel one must begin somewhere" (I 158). As Waugh points out, "Metafictional novels often begin with an explicit discussion of the arbitrary nature of beginnings" (29). However, because the novelist is unable to find the beginning, the viable subject, the initial building block, the events, or even the words to give his "Great American Novel" a fruitful start, he seems throughout the work to begin with one section, then to abandon it as hopeless and begin completely anew in the next section. He even abandons the convention of titling his chapters, perhaps because he had titled chapter I with the hope of being able to write himself out of "the fog," but to no avail.

Chapter I also gives an indication that the conventional use of time as a linear progression will be abandoned at some points in this novel. In the book's opening paragraph, the novelist states, "Yesterday was the twenty-second. Today is the twenty-first. Impossible. Not if it was last year. But then if wouldn't be yesterday" (I 158). Similarly, chapter II's opening paragraph mocks the traditional temporal guidelines provided for readers: "Last night it was an ocean. Tonight trees. Already it is yesterday" (162). Paragraph four of this chapter ends by stating, "Three A.M. To be exact twenty-eight minutes past three," but this temporal "clue" seems to have no connection to the paragraph it completes.

More extensive twists in traditional linear progression may be found in chapter VII, which begins with an account of Columbus and his sailors' joyful arrival in the "new world". After three paragraphs on this subject, the narrative abruptly shifts to the present world of the novelist writing the story:

> Yes this party of sailors, men of the sea, brothers of a most ancient guild, ambassadors of all the ages that had gone before them, had indeed found a new world, a world, that is, that knew nothing about them, on which the foot of a white man had never made a mark such as theirs were then making on the white sand under the palms. *Nuevo Mundo!*

> [Thus ends this paragraph. Then, the next paragraph begins:] The children released from school lay in the gutter and covered themselves with the fallen poplar leaves.—A new world! (182)

It is the novelist who is observing the children in the gutter and linking their feeling of a new world with that of Columbus and crew, but Williams depends on the reader's ability and willingness to fill in the gap in the text's presentation of time, using ideogrammatic logic.

Likewise, the reader must make a similar leap, a few paragraphs hence, when the thoughts of the novelist again leap forward in time from Columbus to George Washington to an Indian raid in November 1916 upon a white settlement. After fourteen paragraphs of detailed description of the raid and its aftermath, the narrative just as abruptly shifts back to Columbus in a new paragraph: "For a moment Columbus stood as if spell-bound by the fact of this new country. Soon however he regained his self-possession and with Alonso Pinzon ordered the trunks of trifles to be opened which, being opened, the Indians drew near in wonder and began to try to communicate with these gods" (185). The juxtaposition of the two groups of Indians in the text seems to occur in the novelist's mind as it would in an ideogram, and the reader, transported from one instance to another as if by a flash of lightning, is left to reorder the chronological occurrence of the two events by temporal progression.

This sort of time shifting, which takes place at numerous points throughout the work, often plays upon the metonymic: the type of singular moments in historical accounts which have become the conventional way of viewing entire groups of people and their characteristic social positions. For example, the idea of Native Americans' awe of the first godlike European explorers had become utterly conventional by the time of Williams's writing, and had come to work metonymically, one event serving as a trope for *the* view of Native American attitudes. (Perhaps, by extension, Williams also uses the moment of the Indians' awe at the trunk of trifles to point metaphorically to contemporary American views of Europeans and their treasure trove of established artistic form and content as superior.) Interestingly, David Reid has argued that, as opposed to metaphor, "Metonymy . . . typically plays on *ready-made* associations between things, such as circumcision's marking the Israelites, or the fact that the French eat frogs or that British sailors used to eat limes against scurvy" (italics mine, 3). In Dadaist fashion, then, Williams uses the trunk-opening moment in American history as a ready-made, or in Cubist fashion, places this moment in a collage of historical moments involving Native Americans, next to the 1916 raid, and thereby forces

new associations, new ways of thinking beyond convention. The moment in which the Indians viewed the riches of European explorers with wonder (and viewed the explorers themselves with adulation) is juxtaposed with a historical moment centuries later in which Native Americans take the riches, the weapons and liquor, of white settlers (one of them referred to as "a cocky Englishman") by force (I 183). Like one viewing a ready-made of Duchamp or a collage of Gris or Picasso, the reader is confronted with an old "thing" in a new context, and forced to rethink conventional referentiality.

Though the collage technique of *The Great American Novel* often ignores or frustrates the reader's expectation of plot progression, the novelist also demonstrates a high degree of awareness of possible critical responses to his text. This awareness is undoubtedly born of the novelist's (any avant-garde novelist's) inevitable resentment of the constraints placed upon his capacity to utilize the imagination—the constraints of critical expectation, of rules which limit what a writer should or should not do with his art. As Waugh remarks of B. S. Johnson's 1964 metafictional work *Albert Angelo,* the self-conscious novelist "voice[s] a paranoid fear that his audience will misinterpret his fiction by reading it according to expectations based on the tradition of the realistic novel" (7). In *The Great American Novel,* this "paranoid fear" of critical condemnation is first seen in chapter II, in Williams's response to a letter from or conversation with his friend regarding appropriate subject matter: "You are wrong, wrong, Alva N. Turner. It is deeper than you imagine. I perceive that it may be permissible for a poet to write about a poetic sweetheart but never about a wife—should have said possible. It is not possible" (166). When Williams uses the word "permissible" here, he seems to grow indignant at the thought of choosing his subject only with permission of critics, so he attempts to correct himself by saying that he should have said "possible" rather than permissible. However, he finds himself trapped by the critics because the inevitable negative response of critics to breaking the law of permissibility makes true revolutionary success impossible.

The novelist of *The Great American Novel* also parodies critical authoritarianism by including a negative review of his own work as part of the text (a review which, in part, sounds conspicuously like the criticisms of Ezra Pound toward Williams's work). Chapter III begins:

> It is Joyce with a difference. The difference being greater opacity, less erudition, reduced power of perception—Si la sol fa mi re do. Aside from that simple, rather stupid derivation, forced to a ridiculous extreme. No excuse for this sort of thing. Amounts to a total occlusion of intelli-

> gence. Substitution of something else. What? Well, nonsense. Since you drive me to it. (167)

This clever way of staying one step ahead of the critic is also seen in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy,* in a remarkably similar passage: "And what of this new book the whole world makes such a rout about?—Oh! 'tis out of all plumb, my Lord,—quite an irregular thing!—not one of the angles at the four corners was a right angle.—I had my rule and compasses, &c. My Lord, in my pocket" (180–1). In both of these passages, the critics of Williams and Sterne miss the point that confusion or defamiliarization *is* the point. We see a similar metapoetic moment in the opening lines of *Spring and All,* when the writer takes the pose of a critic of his work, creating a critic who responds to his break from traditional rhyme and rhythm by crying, "You have robbed me. God, I am naked. What shall I do?" (89). With such techniques, Williams and Sterne, as many later writers of metafictional texts, are able to essentially thumb their noses at any possible responses of the critics who make the rules that they are breaking.

A second aspect of *The Great American Novel*'s self-conscious dread of critical response is of the type that would be later described by Harold Bloom as the anxiety of influence. This seems to be one of the basic driving forces of Williams's text because the fear of being derivative is often what causes the novelist to abandon one of his beginnings and embark upon a new beginning, which he hopes will be original. We see the novelist's self-conscious obsession with originality articulated in chapter III, and then we see the numerous failed attempts to be original throughout the remainder of the text. For example, the critic's voice is once again heard in chapter III stating, "In other words it comes after Joyce, therefore it is no good, of no use but a secondary local usefulness like the Madison Square Garden tower copied from Seville—It is of no absolute good. It is not NEW. It is not an invention" (168). This dismissal of a writer's work plays on one of the deepest fears of the writer, the sense that there *is* nothing new, articulated by Waugh as "a desperate sense of the possible redundancy and irrelevance of the artist" (8). No doubt, Williams had personally experienced this anxiety of influence because he includes, in the text of *The Great American Novel,* Ezra Pound's comment on *Kora in Hell:* "*. . . c'est de Rimbaud.* Finis" (167). Other creative depictions of derivation in chapter III include Sigfried Wagner's "composition" of a "beautiful Cantata on a theme [he] discovered in one of [his] father's operas," (167) which highlights the paradox of composing from preexisting material; and the mention of Rosinante, the name of Don Quixote's broken-down horse, which seems to invoke the cliché of beating a dead horse (169).

Before turning to the way that *The Great American Novel* ironically solves the problem of anxiety of influence, we will address the crux of the work, as well as of Williams's poetic philosophy as a whole: the word. Williams was fascinated by words, and his creative mission became an effort to maximize their potential. A film entitled *Voices & Visions: William Carlos Williams* depicts Williams at his typewriter in the act of composing his untitled poem now commonly referred to as "The Red Wheel Barrow," which was originally published in *Spring and All* the same year as *The Great American Novel.* The film portrays Williams typing and retyping the draft of this one-sentence poem, experimenting with the line breaks to maximize the semantic potential of each word. As James Breslin states, "To get at the way Williams handles the line we can say that he breaks lines so as to maintain as much as possible of the energy which he finds naturally inherent in words and objects" (80). Charles Altieri has pointed out that the energy of this poem depends predominantly on the capability of the words to shift in their grammatical roles:

> Each part of speech reveals its capacity to transfer force. Each first line ends in what could be a noun—a substance allowing rest in the flow of meaning—but that turns out to function adjectivally. As adjectives, the words define aspects of an intending mind . . . seeking a substance in which to inhere. But the words' nominal qualities do not disappear. Their incompleteness, and their shared position with the verb "depends," combine to create an effect of substance in action. In effect, concrete qualities seem verbal—seem capable . . . of transferring force from object to object and from the mind's intentions to concrete events. (233–4)

Williams's interest in this grammatical and syntactical flexibility of words would explain his appreciation for the work of Gertrude Stein.

In a 1930 essay, Williams notes the similarities between Sterne's aim in *Tristram Shandy* and the work of Stein. In fact, Williams perceives Sterne as Stein's predecessor in the project that also most concerned Williams:

> The handling of the words and to some extent the imaginative quality of the sentence [in chapter 43 of *Tristram Shandy*] is a direct forerunner of that which Gertrude Stein has woven today into a synthesis of its own. It will be plain, in fact, on close attention, that Sterne exercises not only the play (or music) of sight, sense and sound contrast among the words

> themselves which Stein uses, but their grammatical play also. . . . It would not be too much to say that Stein's development over a lifetime is anticipated completely with regard to subject matter, sense and grammar—in Sterne. (SE 115)

Such grammatical play is of primary interest to Williams, not only in poems such as the one now conventionally called "The Red Wheel Barrow," but at the heart of *The Great American Novel* as well.

More important than the novelist's search for a viable subject in *The Great American Novel* is his search for a word—*the* word. This search for a sort of transcendental signifier often comes in the form of grammatical wordplay, play on the sounds and appearance of words, and even a play on the shape of letters themselves. For example, in the opening chapter of the text, the word "progress" shifts between functioning as an object: "If there is progress then there is a novel" and "Such is progress," to functioning as a verb: "Words progress into the ground," to functioning as a subject: "Progress is to get" (I 158–9). In such passages, Williams seems to toy with the notion of free play of the signifier. Perhaps, therefore, the concerns of those who explore Williams and Dadaism intersect most prominently with my project on the issue of Williams's dissatisfaction with referentiality and the sign. (Dadaism and Cubism break traditional referentiality in an attempt to make new signs of existing objects.)

In addition to calling attention to our dependence upon grammatical functions of words, as he had done in "The Red Wheel Barrow," Williams also causes us to focus on the fact that words are essentially sounds and combinations of sound patterns as well as visual combinations of letters on a page (although he never completely breaks free of reference). For example, the dynamo passage illustrates the process of our mind's formation of sounds into words: "Turned into the wrong street seeking to pass the power house from which the hum, hmmmmmmmmmmmmm—sprang. Electricity has been discovered for ever. I'm new, says the great dynamo. I am progress. I make a word. Listen! UMMMMMMMMMMMM—" (I 162). The dynamo, a machine for converting mechanical energy into electrical energy, reminds us of how our mind converts sounds into meaning in the form of words. Significantly, the dynamo's hum sounds like the noise "um," which we often make when our minds are actively in the process of transforming our ideas into the sounds that make words.

In this passage, Williams is clearly engaging chapter 25 of the 1918 autobiography of American historian, journalist, and novelist Henry Adams. Though Adams may be considered late Victorian, it is clear why the chapter (entitled "The

Dynamo and the Virgin") appeals to Williams, for Adams's ideas have much in common with Williams's poetics, with his frustration at his own efforts in writing, and with his current qualms about the state of American culture and American artistic vision. Adams describes how at the Great Exposition, which showcased in Paris the latest and most promising worldwide inventions at the turn of the twentieth century, he is shown an exhibit that featured dynamos. In a passage very much in the style and spirit of *The Great American Novel,* Adams writes:

> Satisfied that the sequence of men led to nothing and that the sequence of their society could lead no further, while the mere sequence of time was artificial, and the sequence of thought was chaos, he turned at last to the sequence of force; and thus it happened that, after ten years' pursuit, he found himself lying in the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exposition of 1900, his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new. (382)

The exhibit evokes a sort of epiphany in Adams, who sees in the dynamo "a silent and infinite force" and states that "Among the thousand symbols of ultimate energy the dynamo was not so human as some, but it was the most expressive" (380). The raw energy of the dynamo leads Adams to meditate upon the mystic forces that have been seen as driving the universe, such as the sun, the revolution of the planets, even the spiritual forces such as the fecund powers of goddesses once worshipped, and of the Virgin Mary. Driving force is one of the most recurrent concerns of *The Great American Novel* as well as *Spring and All,* in which the writer states, "the imagination is an actual force comparable to electricity or steam, it is not a plaything but a power that has been used from the first to raise the understanding" (CP1 207). While Duchamp's ready-mades reveal that in an age of machine-made objects, "the divine force is electricity" (Schmidt 139), Williams looks to the latent power of imagination.

In an effort to get at the ultimate energy behind words, the novelist of *The Great American Novel* sometimes calls attention to the compound word and the kenning, a metaphorical compound of two or more words. In the passages that states, "But who do you think I am, says white goldenrod?" (I 159), "goldenrod" is a compound word representing the appearance of the object represented—its color and shape. Since one would normally conceive of goldenrod as a flower with golden blooms, the phrase "white goldenrod" defamiliarizes the image, to create a new image of a sterile or albino plant, devoid of its familiar color. The novelist, in the line "Come into my heart while I am running—jumping from air-

plane to plane in midair" (166), performs a similar play on the kenning "airplane" by calling attention to the fact that the only difference in plane and airplane is the break between the compound words in the middle: air/plane. The phrase "jumping from airplane to plane in midair" creates an image in the reader's mind of a person acting out this leap in the *substance* of air itself, but it also foregrounds our dependence upon understanding the *word* "air" to visualize the image.

Similarly, the novelist highlights the visual appearance of words as letters, and foregrounds our lack of ability to make physical "contact" with the symbols that make words: "Liberate the words. You tie them. Poetic sweet-heart. Ugh. Poetic sweetheart. My dear Miss Word let me hold your W. I love you. Of all the girls in school you alone are the one—" (166). Remarkably, the letter *W* resembles the female sexual organ. The novelist longs not for sexual relations, but *textual* relations, for intimate contact with a genital-shaped letter, a bold and delightfully witty gesture that seems very similar to Stein's project. Peter Nicholls, in *Modernisms,* notes Stein's reference to "caressing nouns" (207) and highlights "The erotic and textual pleasures indulged in [her] writings" (210). Williams's novelist struggles to go that far, stating, "The words must become real, they must take the place of wife and sweetheart" (I 166), and "He went in to his wife [the words made wife] with exalted mind, his breath coming in pleasant surges. I come to tell you that the book is finished. I have added a new chapter to the art of writing" (167). However, the novelist's book was far from finished at that point, and he had not actually succeeded in overcoming representation.

The novelist's play upon the appearance of a letter is similar to that which Brian McHale notes in Richard Brautigan's postmodern work, *The Tokyo-Mountain Express:*

> [Brautigan] designates Osaka as the "orange capital of the Orient." The real-world Osaka, so far as I can discover, has nothing in particular to do with oranges; nevertheless, Brautigan's motive for associating Osaka with Oranges is transparent—transparent in the sense that it depends on the signifiers of the signs in question, on the word in the most literal sense. Osaka is the Orange Capital of the Orient simply because Osaka, Orange and Orient all begin with the letter "O." There is, moreover, an iconic relationship involved: at the level of the written (printed) word, the letter "O" resembles an orange. Here formal features of the verbal signifier . . . even letter shape—have been given the power to generate signifieds; the word transparently determines the make-up of Brautigan's world. (156)

This is also Williams's world, a world of representation which one must inhabit as a means of communicating and attempting to contact the essence of things.

Because of the problematic relationship between the word as signifier and the object signified, Williams seemed to have a lifelong love-hate relationship with words. In *I Wanted to Write a Poem,* he states, "You must remember I had a strong inclination all my life to be a painter. Under different circumstances I would rather have been a painter than to bother with these god-damn words" (IWWP 29). Nonetheless, words became his medium, and a frustration with the inability of words to overcome representation and actually to *become* the things represented is at the heart of *The Great American Novel.*

The novelist makes a greater number of statements about the problematic nature of words than any other matter in the text. As Waugh points out, "The metafictionist is highly conscious of a basic dilemma: if he or she sets out to 'represent' the world, he or she realizes fairly soon that the world, as such, cannot be 'represented' (3). Besides the problem of words' inability to capture the ever-changing present, as seen in his statement, "Now I am not what I was when the word was forming to say what I am" (I 158), Williams's novelist is painfully aware of the impossibility of capturing the full sensual nature of experience with words, for he laments:

> Progress is to get. But how can words get.—Let them get drunk. Bah. Words are words. Fog of words. The car runs through it. The words take up the smell of the car. Petrol. Face powder, arm pits, food-grease in the hair, foul breath, clean musk. Words. Words cannot progress. There cannot be a novel. Break the words. Words are indivisible crystals. One cannot break them—Awu tsst grang splith gra pragh og bm—Yes, one can break them. One can make words. Progress? If I make a word I make myself into a word. Such is progress. I shall make myself into a word. One big word. . . . I begin small and make myself into a big splurging word: I take life and make it into one big blurb. (159–60)

To overcome the problems of the crystallization of words articulated here, words would either have to enact the mythical blessing described in chapter VIII: "Let us bless him [a sleeping child] with words that change often and never stiffen nor remain to form sentences of seven parts. To him I send a message of words like running water" (188), or they would actually have to *become* the things represented, as in the novelist's dream of achievement: "The words from long practice had come to be leaves, trees, the corners of his house" (166). The novelist's

failure to write his ideal novel rests on the impossibility in using conventional prose to achieve either option.

The "novel" that he does, paradoxically, create by this failure is based ultimately on the issue of derivation, and the trap of inevitable intertextuality. With his focus on the word "creation," the novelist points out that words themselves are formed and preserved by derivation, and therefore, creative writing, with words as its medium, must also be derivative: "To progress from word to word is to suck a nipple" (159). In writing, one word derives its meaning from the surrounding words, gaining sustenance and continued existence from them as a baby thrives on mother's milk. Thus, the key issue that the novelist is trying to resolve is the dilemma of trying to create something new while depending on old materials to do so. As Pegrum states, "If postmodernism is a game with the vestiges of the past, an ironic rehashing, then so too is Dada a game of irony, built around the knowledge that an escape from the modern legacy is impossible, but with a determination to achieve some distance from it nonetheless" (58).

As previously mentioned, Williams was especially frustrated with the state of the American novel in his time. No doubt, he viewed the inherent problems of words themselves as the primary problem, but he also lamented an American cultural situation that he viewed as problematically fixed in nature, like words. Williams feared that American writers would always write work that was derivative of European models. As his novelist states, "America is a mass of pulp, a jelly, a sensitive plate ready to take whatever print you want to put on it . . . We have no words. Every word we get must be broken off from the European mass" (I 175). To Williams's dismay, many writers capable of creating the fabled "Great American Novel" eventually seemed to give up on American material all together. This could be seen, for example, in Hawthorne's initial fixation upon colonial Puritan stories, then his later move to create stories that take place on foreign soil, such as *The Marble Faun,* set in Italy. Even American novelists such as Hemingway, who did work with a "specific American mythology" (Norris 322), have been read as rehashing old types, revising the American cowboy figure, for example, as a bullfighter in a Spanish setting. Feeling overwhelmed by the lack of truly original options, therefore, the novelist of Williams's work is unable to create a new novel in the traditional sense, but must turn to radical techniques to create the new form that is *The Great American Novel.* Given his own feelings of despair at the obstacles that faced American writers who wished to write the "Great American Novel," Williams seems to offer *The Great American Novel* as *both* a sardonic commentary on the impossibility of writing a new American novel within the old models *and* a new form of novel, which on some levels, must be taken seriously.

In one sense, the novel offers a number of satiric solutions to the anxiety of influence or the metafictional "desperate sense of possible redundancy and irrelevance of the artist"(Waugh 8). Because intertextuality is inevitable, especially in the American novel at the time, the novelist ends up with a final product that is a collage composed of predominantly borrowed, unoriginal material. In some instances, sections seem to be taken word for word from (or at least to be collations of different versions of) letters, advertisements, newspaper articles, and ethnological reports and other materials we have previously mentioned. As Hugh Witemeyer proves in a 1997 article in *William Carlos Williams Review,* "Most of [chapter XVII of *TGAN*] is lifted without acknowledgment from an article by Winifred Kirkland entitled 'Mountain Mothers' in *The Ladies' Home Journal* for December 1920" (3). This plagiarism seems oddly out of place in a work that condemns derivation, but as Witemeyer concludes, "*The Great American Novel* enacts the fallen linguistic plight of modernity by suggesting that plagiarism and its attendant guilt are inescapable conditions of verbal construction in a belated and impoverished world" (11). Thus, paradoxically, the novelist so intent upon originality seems to solve his search for a word, not by beating the "Traditionalists of Plagiarism" as they are called in *Spring and All,* but by joining them.

A second ironic solution to the dilemma of intertextuality is parody. The novelist of *The Great American Novel* realizes that like the words that are worn out, the traditional novel form and formulas are depleted and stale. For example, as Waugh points out, "Pure detective fiction is extremely resistant to literary change" (82), so it is particularly fitting that this novelist parodies one of his contemporaries who would mindlessly follow the easy formula to create a detective novel: "Yet to have a novel—Oh catch up a dozen good smelly names and find some reason for murder, it will do" (I 159). There is nothing novel, in any sense of the word, about following such formulaic means of creating literature.

Similarly, with his attention in chapter I to types of light, the novelist may also be satirizing Nathaniel Hawthorne's conventional views of the romance novel by writing in direct contradiction to them. Hawthorne had abandoned the American setting in his later works because, as Sergio Perosa explains, he "put forth the idea that that atmosphere of fairyland and of strange enchantment so crucially needed by the romancer was lacking in America" (57). Hawthorne's use of imagination to create a fantasy world distanced from reality directly opposes Williams's hope of closer contact with actual things through the imagination. Hawthorne favored using moonlight in his fictional setting because, as he states even as early in his novel-writing as in his Custom-House Introduction to *The Scarlet Letter,* moonlight causes objects to become "spiritualized" and "to lose their actual substance,

and become things of intellect" (Perosa 54). Again, this technique opposes that of Williams, who desired a fiction that would facilitate, as he states in *Paterson,* "no *ideas* but in *things*" (6, italics mine). Thus, Williams's attention to light in the narrative section that closes chapter I might well be a conscious critique of Hawthorne's use of moonlight. Williams's novelist writes:

> [F]or a moment they remained in the shadow cast by the moon. A fog had arisen in which the egg-shaped white moon was fixed—so it seemed. . . . The [car] windshield was opaque with the water in minute droplets on it—through which the moon shone with its inadequate light. That is, our eyes being used to the sun the moon's light is inadequate for us to see by. But certain bats and owls find it even too strong, preferring the starlight. The stars were also out . . . On the highway . . . nothing could be seen but the white billows of [fog] crossed in front by the flares of the headlights . . . [I]n his own bed-room . . . his wife's head [was] on the pillow in the perfectly clear electric light. The light shone brightest on the corner of her right eye, which was nearest it, also on the prominences of her face. (I 160–1)

Interestingly, this novelist prefers the harsh clarity of electric lighting to the traditionally romantic softness of moonlight, which he refers to as inadequate. In his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables,* Hawthorne further states that assigning specific localities to one's narrative "exposes the Romance to an inflexible and exceedingly dangerous species of criticism, by bringing his fancy-pictures almost into positive contact with the realities of the moment" (4). Perhaps Williams has Hawthorne's philosophy, or at least a similarly romantic one, privileging moonlit ambiguity over electric reality, in mind in passages like that above.

In addition to this parody and his sentimental romance story of the female Ford car who falls in love with a mack truck, the novelist also writes more extensive parodies of the idealizations of historical accounts, such as the story of the Mormon migration "on foot 20,000 miles along what later became known as Emigration Trail" (I 189); and the accounts of fighting between Indians and settlers in the typical pioneer novel, as seen in his crass description of an American engineer who had been killed: "Looked just like a pin-cushion, with the feathered arrows that were in him" (184). Such ironic uses of previously validated forms of stories seem to anticipate the notion in John Barth's definitive 1967 essay entitled "The Literature of Exhaustion" that "the genres of literature are exhausted and must be played against parodically by any genuinely original contemporary

writer" (Dipple 46). Thus, the American novelist of *The Great American Novel* has resorted to the pastiche that takes segments of preexisting writing and pastes them together in a new context that often satirizes their original one.

In doing so, the novelist is like the rag merchant in the end of his "novel" who proclaims, "Our main specialty is shoddy" (I 226). The passage on shoddy that ends *The Great American Novel* is ingenious, for it succinctly pulls together all of the themes and dilemmas with which the novelist has struggled throughout the work. The rag merchant declares, "Our main speciality is shoddy," with the straightforward intention of explaining the primary product manufactured by his company. The word "shoddy" was used at least as early as 1832, and throughout the nineteenth century, to describe cloth made from the shredding of old rags to make new material. Over the course of the century, though, the term also came to describe anything having a deceptive appearance of superior quality, or something cheap, inferior, or shabby ("Shoddy"). Thus, the pun is that, in the American cultural, industrial, and literary context, the word "shoddy" takes on both meanings: a product woven from other materials *and* a product that is inferior. It is also ironic that the merchant says "our main *specialty,*" meaning the product in which we supposedly excel, is "shoddy," meaning (beyond his intention) of inferior quality.

The passage alludes to the manufacture of literary products, both those being produced in Williams's time and those that would be produced in the future. As the rag merchant details the process of creating shoddy cloth, we sense an attitude of ambiguity on the part of the novelist, and Williams. On the one hand, the description provides an implicit critique of some literary works created like the shoddy cloth. To create the various types of shoddy, the old materials may be washed, dried, burned with gas, drained of color, broken, stretched and turned into skeins, even sometimes having loose bits of wool blown into a cotton mesh on a loom. If we think of these processes as referring to the measures that American writers were taking to wash, drain, and stretch clichés and worn out conventions and to pass them off as original fiction, the pun is quite humorous, and the statement, "Our main specialty is shoddy" takes on a whole new meaning. The observation that "one man made a million . . . by making cheap quilts" from filthy rags fluffed up and mechanically fed to an assembly line where "a girl simply sat there with an electric sewing device [with] which she . . . drew in the designs" points to the commodification of literature, the selling of cheap, unimaginative literary products taking place in American popular magazines, publishing industries, and even the growing film industry.

On the other hand, there is a sort of admiration for the ingenuity of the method

of producing shoddy, which breaks up the old and patches it together into something new, like the hard edges of modern art: "It's all wool but the fibre has been broken. It makes a hard material not like the soft new woven woolens but it's wool, all of it" (226). Similarly, the man who used rags to make a million "took any kind of rags just as they were collected, filth or grease right on them the way they were and teased them up into a fluffy stuff which he put through a rolling process and made into sheets of wadding" (227). Such passages call attention to the collage techniques that have created this "novel" (techniques that Williams would later use in *Paterson*). In 1950, Williams praised Picasso for breaking faces, for creating faces with hard edges rather than "a meat of set color and contour" (RI 224). There is, then, a certain fascination with the harsh, violent, mechanized process that creates shoddy because it represents so much of modernity, even its best art. At the same time, though, by ending his metafictional collage with the description of the collagelike process that creates shoddy, the novelist is foregrounding the bind that he is in: because of the state of fixed referentiality in language and the state of cultural stagnation in America, he must create an art that is fragmented and that makes its own creation the primary concern. In order to create something new, he has been forced into this literary patchwork. Many postmodern novelists, such as Donald Barthelme, Ronald Sukenick, Kurt Vonnegut, B. S. Johnson, Thomas Pynchon, and Clarence Major, would follow suit, using metafictional collage to "explicitly create 'anxious objects', works of art which have a suspicion they may be piles of rubbish" (Waugh 144).

Taken seriously, therefore, *The Great American Novel* is a forward-looking work. In chapter XII, the novelist quotes Vachel Lindsay as stating, "America needs the flamboyant to save her soul" (I 200). The chapter describes the appeal of flamboyant forms of entertainment such as the circus, Jazz, flappers, and the movies, and makes the claim that "Flamboyance . . . is at least the beginning of art" (200–1). This idea is illustrated throughout the novel, with the father's exclamation of "Shit" at the birth of another son, which places a familiar expletive in an unlikely context, therefore making it new (162); with the "shower of colored glass" that refers to Duchamp's belief that a shattered stained glass window lying in pieces on the ground is more beautiful than the whole one in the wall (170); with the allusions to radical experimentalists such as Serge Voronoff, a Russian doctor criticized for grafting monkey sex organs into humans to lengthen the life of sexual capability (172); and with references to revolutionary figures such as Kropotkin, one of Russia's most prominent anarchists (170). Such references call for a dramatic revolution in art, led by the imagination of radical artists.

For Williams, this revolution must necessarily be a violent one, like the Dada-

style destruction of the world by imagination in the opening passage of *Spring and All:* "The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill. The imagination is supreme" (CP1 179). The novelist of *The Great American Novel* observes the fact that in many instances, in the natural world, destruction is a viable form of creation. For example, he notices a swarm of dragonflies that were catching and eating gnats: "Swiftly the gnats *progressed* into the dragon flies, swiftly coalescing—and from time to time a droplet of stuff fell from the vent of a feeding dragon fly,—and the little sound of this stuff striking the earth could not be heard with its true poetic force" (I 164–5, italics mine). The dragonflies' excrement is poetic because it is new. The same concept is behind the passage in which the novelist describes the great Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto, who, knowing he is dying, is pleased at the prospect of being absorbed into the land of the great Mississippi River: "Should he die his body should be given to this last resting place. Into it Europe should pass as into a new world" (204). The absorption goes further, though, when the novelist adds, "there at the edge of that mighty river he had seen those little fish who would soon be eating him, he, De Soto the mighty explorer—He smiled quietly to himself with a curious satisfaction" (204). Like the gnats devoured by the dragonflies, De Soto will be eaten by the fish of the Mississippi, and he is satisfied by the notion of being destroyed, digested even, in order to become something new.

This notion of progress that comes from destruction may also be seen in the novelist's aversion to literary monarchism in any form. He apparently believes that for new creative endeavors to be productive, the literary fathers must be willing to be digested like the gnats, to be broken up like the rag fibers, so that something new may emerge. Elizabeth Dipple notes "Postmodernism's longing to smash the pieties of literary history" (46), and Williams's novelist's exclamation "Oh to hell with Masters and the rest of them" (I 176) demonstrates such a longing, even to crush the complacencies of recent American literary success. Edgar Lee Masters, with his 1915 publication of *The Spoon River Anthology* in bound volume, had become internationally successful, earning accolades even from Ezra Pound, who exclaimed in January 1915, in *The Egoist:* "AT LAST! At last America has discovered a poet" (qtd. in Russell). The stark poetic monologues spoken in free verse by the small town Americans created or recreated by Masters in *Spoon River* had broken many of the conventional poetic rules and seemed truly new. However, subsequent to the success of this volume, in 1916–21, Masters lived during these years as the best-known American poet, based solely on the phenomenon of *Spoon River.* Between 1920 and 1924, he published five nov-

els, none of them truly novel, so even the success of his poetic innovations had failed to bring about the continual revolutions in technique that Williams called for in the damning of literary "masters" (such as Masters, specifically). Of course, Williams did not exempt even himself from the piety-smashing; the novelist actually follows his statement condemning Masters by adding, "To hell with everything I have myself ever written" (I 176). As Schmidt explains, "Williams's Dadaist disgust . . . was not merely self-righteously directed at literary history or contemporary society; it involved a harsh judgment of his own earlier work" (149).

On many levels, Williams's *The Great American Novel* succeeds in the quest for a truly new American novel. Because of its capricious selection of content and sporadic compositional technique, the work cannot be traced to any formula. Likewise, the sheer number of parodies, references, and allusions to other works contained in *The Great American Novel* prevent it from easily becoming subject to parody itself; most likely, *The Great American Novel* will remain one of a kind. It is a work that resists classification and critical commentary that would make it stale. The very nature of the work, with its wealth of subjects, ensures that it will continually become new upon each reading. But let us not become too complacent about the work's measure of artistic success. The final line of the novel which states, "O vida tan dulce!" means "Life is so sweet," but the irony is that at the end of the novel, the line comes immediately after a description of congoleum, a new floor covering made from "Nothing but building paper with a coating of enamel" (227). Thus, the exclamation that "Life is so sweet" can be read as a bitterly ironic gloss on the traditional happy ending; a sardonic acknowledgment that in an age of mechanical reproduction, shoddy products can be produced indefinitely; and a recognition that new products, literary and otherwise, can and will be produced only from old. Though *The Great American Novel* does reach a type of compromise with the factors that limit its own creation, it also comes from Williams's genuine sense of despair at being caught in the paradox, the prison house (to borrow Nietzsche's term), that is language.

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