Summary Article: Williams, William Carlos
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William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) was an American poet known for his direct style and interest in American idiom. Unlike other modernists, predominantly T. S. Eliot, Williams optimistically explored the seemingly mundane and particular with no overt attempt to capture the metaphysical and sublime. His best-known work on urban America is the epic poem *Paterson*, which appeared in five complete “books” and one partially finished one between 1946 and 1961.

Williams was born in Rutherford, New Jersey. His mother, Raquel Helene Hoheb, was a native of Puerto Rico; his father, William George Williams, a New York executive, was of British origins. Williams studied in Switzerland between 1897 and 1899 and graduated from high school in New York in 1902. Thereafter, he attended dental school at the University of Pennsylvania but soon transferred to the medical school. At the University of Pennsylvania, Williams met and established lifelong friendships with fellow modernists Ezra Pound, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), and the visual artist Charles Demuth.

Throughout his life, Williams simultaneously upheld the careers of doctor and poet. The two, in fact, cross-fertilized each other. Williams sought to capture the essence of his subjects by recording their idioms, verbal rhythms, and behaviors in a manner devoid of arcane literary references and tropes.

Williams's epic poem *Paterson*, about the New Jersey industrial town of the same name, explores the daily existence of his characters through the eyes of a doctor-poet. In this way, the poet forces his reader to seek the poetic and sublime in the pedestrian realities of 20th-century urbanity. Williams's collected poetry was published in two volumes in 1986 and 1988 and includes poems of similar themes and style; among them “This Is Just to Say” and “At the Ballgame.” Williams’s prose, likewise, sought the sublime in the typical in such works as *White Mule* (1938), *In the Money* (1940), and *The Build-Up* (1952).

Williams began to receive national recognition for his work upon receiving the National Book Award in 1950 for *Selected Poems* and *Paterson III*. In 1953, he received the Bollingen Prize for Poetry and was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1963. Williams's poetry and prose, with their concentration on American speech and sensibility, are akin to the works of Walt Whitman. Like Whitman, Williams had an acute influence on many poets in the second half of the 20th century. Among these, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, and Paul Blackburn exhibit elements of Williams's style.

See also
City in Literature

Further Readings and References

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