"MY TOUGHEST MENTOR": WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS AND THEODORE ROETHKE (1943-44)

Few poets achieve the continuity and direction of their major poems without some inner conflict, and many exorcise their uncertainty by developing a "reader" whose sense of the future they can trust. In modern poetry, the best known example is T.S. Eliot's showing a draft of The Waste Land to Ezra Pound, but we know that Yeats, Joyce, H.D., and William Carlos Williams also brought their work to Pound, who spoke for the next generation of critics in his notations. Williams once compared his first meeting with Pound to the difference between "B.C. and A.D.," and he repeated one of Pound's many vocations by becoming a prolific commentator on the work of young poets, several of whom were just discovering a language they could claim as their own. Allen Ginsberg and Denise Levertov have spoken at length of Williams's involvement with decisive changes in their work, but Williams offers a longer, more complicated and interesting history than even their stories can measure. In the fall of 1957, when Robert Lowell was bringing such poems as "Skunk Hour" and "Memories of West Street and Lepke" closer to the immediacy of conversation, he wrote Williams a series of warm, personal letters, saying at the close of one: "I feel more and more technically indebted to you, growing young in my forties." And Theodore Roethke, exploring the instinctive sources of his language during the years of World War II, has left an important record of Williams's discernment and support. The correspondence between them, much of it still unpublished, shows us the sense of risk they brought to their art, especially within the milieu of the forties; it records, incompletely but still with an obvious flourish, the vision displayed in Paterson and Roethke's greenhouse poems; most of all, it clarifies Williams's attempt to make Roethke aware of his own critical perspective.

All this was a larger enterprise than Roethke suspected, involving nothing less than the encounter with those forms of confinement—social, literary and often distinctly personal—that inhibit the energies of language. For Williams, the poem always mattered. He brought all of his history and all of his anger to the reading, and he was not often charitable or forbearing. Two years after their first meeting, Roethke called him "my toughest mentor," a phrase built on Williams's resistance to the voice in Roethke's poems that self-protectively encloses an event without having released its power. Yet Roethke never saw himself as trapped within one voice, and this largely accounts for his genius. Even as he wrote these words, he was allowing his turbulent, unaccommodated side to speak in ways more liberal than Williams—or anyone else—imagined.

1 William Carlos Williams, I Wanted to Write a Poem (New Directions, 1978), p. 5.
"All My Lights Go Dark," David Wagoner's selection from Roethke's notebooks (1943-47), shows us a poet who is not only reaching back but starting over, discovering at once a personal history and the multiplied resources of language. Metaphor as magic, incantatory syntax, oracular questions, paradoxes, quips and satires fill out Roethke's private record; clearly, he is establishing a more spacious personality than the voice of Open House announced. With a phrase he would use in writing to Williams and others, Roethke called this the whole process of "loosening up," and it is a phrase which almost all of the notebook entries quoted by Wagoner define. Roethke wants, as he says, to "make the language take really desperate jumps," to write "a poem that is the shape of the psyche itself." In a host of voices, he would pursue this shape for the rest of his life.

The word "shape" in Roethke's vocabulary carries meanings of "something cut out," and his preoccupation with shape during the years of the war was more central than the variant title for his second book, The Shape of the Fire, suggests. Poems such as "Cuttings" and "Cuttings (later)" offer a record of involvement and drama that he could not satisfactorily explain. Led by dreams of the greenhouse to recover his earliest memories, Roethke increasingly identified the growth of the self with the buried life of plants, their strategies claiming his voice in unpredictable ways. The two "Cuttings" poems now so easily trace the arc of Roethke's development that they appear to be the products of someone who has understood his direction. When Roethke showed them to Williams in July 1944, however, they were as tentatively offered as the cuttings they describe:

CUTTINGS

Sticks-in-a-drowse droop over sugary loam,
Their intricate stem-fur dries;
But still the delicate slips keep coaxing up water;
The small cells bulge;

One nub of growth
Nudges a sand-crumble loose,
Pokes through a musty sheath
Its pale tendrilous horn.

CUTTINGS

I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,
(later)

This urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks,
Cut stems struggling to put down feet,
What saint strained so much,
Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?

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5 Roethke, Letters, p. 122.
6 Roethke, Straw, pp. 171, 178.
I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,
In my veins, in my bones I feel it,—
The small waters seeping upward,
The tight grains parting at last.
When sprouts break out,
Slippery as fish,
I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet.

Part of the achievement of both poems lies in the leap between the stanzas, a space occupied by what Williams had called, in an early letter to Roethke, “the less known side” of the self. In “Cuttings” the second stanza resolves the paradox of the first by focusing on a “nub of growth” that lives beyond contradiction in an entirely unself-conscious way. In the absence of speech, the speaker’s “less known side” fills in the image of its own growth, the willingness to believe in a life so small in its workings and so large in the mystery of its work that it resists a merely reasonable first thought. “Cuttings (later)” makes the whole process more explicit. In the silence that follows the question of verse one, the speaker crosses the border between world and self, proposing at once the carnal, unvoiced language of cuttings for the beginnings of his own “shape.” As the second verse doubles the activity of growth with the movements of the “I,” the cuttings become “something cut out,” and the final version of the self emerges within the event of its own identifications. These exchanges would have been especially alive to Williams, who in poems such as “The Yachts” moves so powerfully from sight to vision that the shift in language has the force of an invasion.

In April 1943, Roethke moved from Penn State to Bennington and met Kenneth Burke, “a good guy of the verbose Irish type,” as he would say to Allan Seager. Burke had known Williams since the 1920s and had become, by Williams’s own account in the Autobiography, one of those irreducible voices that set his poems in motion. Williams’s name undoubtedly came up in an early conversation between Roethke and Burke; probably at the urging of both, Williams was invited to give a “talk” at Bennington on June 30, 1944. Although no record of the talk has been preserved, the engagements of Williams’s mind can be understood from his letters and the general account of the trip itself. Bennington was one stop on a three-week vacation that he and Floss had planned, a trip on which he brought a copy of Finnegans Wake and the materials for Paterson, intending to further the relationships among man, city and falls. Clearly, it was a time to expand. Whatever Finnegans Wake may have meant for specific passages in Paterson, Williams’s reading of it gave him the assurance that his most radical thoughts about form were paralleled by Joyce’s inventions in language. At its best, the trip went beyond his expectations in the sudden reach of conversation with strangers: “So much

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8 William Carlos Williams, Correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Theodore Roethke, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Hereafter designated as Yale. The letter is dated September 26, 1951. Previously unpublished material by William Carlos Williams Copyright © 1985 by William Eric Williams and Paul H. Williams; used by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation, agents.
9 Roethke, Letters, p. 111.
of his traveling for thirty years now had been done driving alone in a car that he'd nearly forgot what Chaucer found on his way to Canterbury, that people are delightful when on a journey, footloose and therefore volatile." And the paradox of releasing himself from the environment of Paterson while confronting its history in poetry and prose gave him that sense of the work as a succession of durable moments, each one contributing to a larger, unfolding, recurrent pattern. Involuntarily, he too had become "footloose" and "voluble," as large as his poem. Near the end of his vacation, he could write to Horace Gregory that he was "steadily aligning the mass of material I had collected for it Paterson until now all is in order for the first draught."  

When Williams met Roethke at Bennington in 1944, then, both poets were discovering the range and design of those poems that would define their careers. Williams's reputation was better established, but the sustained effort that would bend the language in his direction—and away from Eliot—was for the first time at hand. His confidence, in the assimilations of Paterson, in tracing the giant from the pattern of his steps, background his relationship to Roethke, and his willingness to consider Roethke's new poems in an extended way comes from that one resource he rarely possessed: time. "There could never be a better time for sending them than now," he wrote to Roethke two days after the Bennington reading. Roethke responded immediately, sending as least four poems—the two "Cuttings" pieces, "The Return" and "Visitation"—and inquiring whether Williams could be a resident at Bennington for a year. The letter which Williams wrote back, full of encouragement without yielding an inch, depends for its effect not only on the perspicacity of the comment, but on the way it was received. For Roethke, it became a sacred object:

These are the best things of yours that I've seen. Some of them are distinguished, you've emerged to a full and characteristic expression; they are good but they are, more important, you end with distinction as I have said. It is the search for this distinctive, thoroughly mastered, full tone—a 'cello note, one of the lower strings but near its upper register—that at your best makes you ONE, a member of the orchestra, that you are approaching.

That's a pretty flowery first paragraph but it's not an unconsidered statement. I begin to see you separate yourself from the others, it's a tough upgrade. Here you appear as an entity. You've mastered the words and the form (not so well as the words but what the hell, who has?) You've shaken off a constraint in the form. Now it's the concentration on the distinctive, the YOU that must follow. I'm keeping the poems and shall read them again later and several times then, possibly, write you again.

Specifically, by all means keep both the poems "Cuttings" in the group, they are both among your best and each, at the same time, has its own excellence. That's where you still have some trouble, an unwillingness to risk putting too much of a thing, of a situation before a reader. It comes of a natural unwillingness to offend by over-statement—but hell, what the Hell difference does it make to YOU so long as You see an emphasis, a different aspect of the object, a needed variant of the stress. You've got to have more confidence in the willingness of the reader to be led. He WANTS you to stress, to point, to repeat where necessary to clear the point you are making.

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12 Williams to Roethke, July 2, 1944, Yale.
13 Mariani, p. 822 n91.
14 Williams to Roethke, July 2, 1944, Yale.
The thing sought is the essence and for this we need release in our technical and emotional resources, we need to security, confidence in the need to be saying (as poets!) what we are saying. But in releasing ourselves, in that feeling of confident release the difficulty is that we say too much, we say more than is distinctively ourselves, we slop over a little. It is the usual dilemma. Particularly I’d omit Visitation—it’s too God damned like masturbation. I don’t like it. Whereas the next poem Return is hard as nails without being hard technically and one of the best.

You suggest Stephens with an important difference of closer knit reasoning, less brick-a-brack and a bitter ironic note, almost a sardonic note—framing a much greater tenderness than Stephens ever knew. That’s where your difficulty lies, you do not dare to be tender, you fear it. Well, you’d better fear it but to your credit, your great contribution to modern poetry may well be that you have found or are finding a way to express that generosity of spirit in a polished steel mesh or frame that can and must hold it against injury. If you can continue to make poems along that line, as you have shown you can do in this batch of poems, there is no reason why you should not become one of the most distinguished poets of the day. I think here and there you have already done the trick.

The obligation before you is to continue to write with an increasing lack of self consciousness—because of your fear yourself as a great big sloppy looking son-of-a-bitch whom a bastard like Untermyer can smear with a quip so that you have to get drunk to recover from it—with the full warmth and breadth of feeling which is yourself caught in a steel mesh so God damned abrasive, so indestructible that it gives you the only security an artist can ever feel—that in his art lies his only protection. 15

The abundant praise of Williams’s opening paragraph, the first offered to Roethke after four years of correspondence, was by no means “unconsidered.” Williams typically defended his own best work as a rebellion against the “herd,” and he cultivated, as he knew, exactly the kind of intelligence which Plato would never have allowed inside the gates of his city. With this background, Williams’s saying, “I begin to see you separate yourself from the others,” becomes something more than encouragement: it represents a value shared and a welcome to the company of outsiders. It also suggests the kind of situation Williams commonly described himself. From “Spring and All” to “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” Williams involved himself in the struggle of growth and, more precisely, with the point at which things, often startlingly, take on a distinctive shape. “I must tell you this young tree,” the opening lines of “Young Sycamore,” tell not only of the necessity of speaking out, but of the suddenly distinguishable entity before us all. For its first-time readers, Paterson offers a series of discoveries, won by exclamation points, capitals and unexpected line breaks from what would surely be Paterson’s shadowy and unexciting past if written by a conventional observer. A constituent voice of Paterson is, in fact, the voice of someone rescuing “things” from their unmarked graves. In this context, “Say it, no ideas but in things” is still a remarkable statement, not only for the magnitude of its exclusions, but for its commitment to finding meanings in places where they have not been established.

Williams’s willingness to find meaning in these new poems was especially welcome to Roethke, who in 1944 was not having the kind of success he had come to expect from the reception of his first book. What Roethke came to appreciate in Williams’s

15 Williams to Roethke, July 14, 1944, Yale.
letter, however, was something less tangible, which became available only when his skill in discovering the borders of his art made the meanings clear. Interspersed with his comments on Roethke's poems, Williams concerns himself with the poem Roethke has not written, and his attitude is more strongly established than the casual syntax of the letter suggests. From their first meeting, Williams had located a defensive posture in Roethke's work that stopped individual poems short of their larger resolutions. In an early letter, he did not hesitate to call this "form," meaning Roethke's use of traditional structures such as the ballad that confirmed a "stable social order" beyond whatever radical statement they might hold. In this letter, however, he locates it differently—in Roethke's fragile "less known side," where the image of the self asserts its control in the most immediately gratifying way. Williams's illustration is Roethke's drunkenness in the face of Untermeier's remark, but there is a better example in the letter, an example with implications for Roethke's work that both of them would have understood. It is the poem "Visitation," included with other poems which Roethke wanted Williams to read:

Stood poised on the stair,
What gliding shape
Beckoning through halls
Stood poised on the stair,

Fell dreamily down?
From the mouths of jugs
Perched on many shelves,
I saw substance flowing
That cold morning.

Like a slither of eels
That watery cheek
As my tongue kissed
My lips awake.17

In his bristling armory of dismissals, Williams's comparing this poem to masturbation has its own distinctive place; it is certainly a comment he knew Roethke would not dismiss. Compared with the two "Cuttings" pieces and "The Return," poems in which the reader is asked to engage the energy of another life, "Visitation" does in fact stand out as a relatively thin and self-congratulating event. Under the best conditions, the last word, "awake," could extend the life of the poem, but here it abruptly takes back whatever the poem has summoned. "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow," the first line of Roethke's well-known villanelle, might have been written to restore what the last line of "Visitation" misses. Over the course of his career, Roethke revised at length, often by allowing a later poem to finish what an earlier had begun. Williams already had some evidence of this with the two "Cuttings" poems before him.

Williams's preference for both of those poems, his resistance to the conclusion of "Visitation," and his critical emphasis on the self-limiting boundaries of understatement

16 Williams to Roethke, June 30, 1940, Yale
18 Roethke, Poems, p. 108.
in Roethke's work suggest what he probably had already said to Roethke in conversation: that longer, more open forms would allow full range to those feelings now only partially realized in the text. At least this is what Roethke would remember. Four years after the Bennington meeting, when he found it necessary to describe Williams's special contribution to his development, he recalled Williams's "jibing me in conversation and by letter to get out of small forms," and he would add, in a statement more than casually revealing, that he inherited his rhythms not from Williams, but from "Mother Goose & Skelton (maybe Blake in his epigrams)." Roethke's acknowledgement of a debt to Williams on this occasion is in itself surprising, since he was defending himself against Selden Rodman's observation that his style "derived from Williams." The larger point, however, is that Roethke's experiments with longer forms were prompted by Williams, by Kenneth Burke, and probably by Allan Seager; he also allowed his language to abandon the task of the sentence, to experience its own growth—an effect comparable to life in a greenhouse. In this state, every object, no matter how stunted or ingrown, has a claim on the space it inhabits: one of the better illustrations of this tendency is "The Lost Son," whose fragments were in Roethke's notebooks as early as 1943. Here, the passion for recovering the past—and for inventing the terms that will dramatize its value—is ostensibly spurred by reflections of its loss. So little is "lost" in the "The Lost Son," however, that Williams must have been surprised at what was saved. Not only does Roethke record the prodigal energy, the colliding images and distortions of childhood; he also revives a language that had been apparently "lost," including one sequence of lines which Williams thought had been permanently buried. In Part III of "The Lost Son," Roethke brings back three stanzas of the poem Williams knew as "Visitacion," stanzas now embedded in a large—and largely unstated-series of relationships. In effect, Roethke turns "Visitacion" back into a fragment, letting the body of the poem speak without the burden of a title or a last line that pretends to conclude the experience. The questions that follow—"Is this the storm's heart?... Do the bones cast out their fire?—suggest that all answers are clear only as the entire action of the poem makes them clear." In its length, its deferral of an immediately satisfying order, its pursuit of the luminous event and its trust of "the less known side," "The Lost Son" assimilates several directions of Williams's criticism and makes of them an object which Williams could barely have foreseen from the work in front of him in June 1944.

"The only reason I haven't written sooner is that I was afraid I would over-whelm you with gratitude, like a St Bernard," Roethke wrote to Williams in the late fall of 1944. "In fact, I carried the letter around for a time: something to hold against the world." The "world," in this case, was centered in the opinions of John Crowe Ransom and the editors of Poetry, who had just rejected several of the same poems that Williams

19 Roethke, Letters, p. 146.
20 Ralph Mills, in his note to this letter, quotes this sentence from Rodman's Introduction to 100 American Poems, "Roethke, like Kenneth Rexroth and Byron Vazakas, and to a lesser extent Elizabeth Bishop, derived his undressed and deceptively simple style from the cross-grained imagist, William Carlos Williams." Roethke, Letters, p. 146n3.
22 Roethke, Straw, pp. 147-169.
23 Roethke, Poems, p. 56.
24 Roethke, Letters, p. 111.
had praised. As with most poets whose work has been turned down, Roethke could describe the forces that opposed him with exceptional facility. "I do think the conceptual boys are too much in the saddle: anything observed or simple or sensuous or personal is suspect right now. Anything with images equals Imagism equals Old Hat." Although Ransom himself could hardly be reduced to the size he is given in Roethke's phrase "conceptual boys," there is enough evidence in his choices for the Kenyon Review in 1944 to suggest that Roethke had grasped the principle that excluded him. As an example of the kind of poem that Roethke's work was measured against, Allen Tate's "Seasons of Soul," the first poem in the 1944 volume of the Kenyon Review, invites the reader to participate in its symmetries: four sections, four seasons, four elements, rhyme made emphatic by the brevity of the trimeter line, and a repeated last word in each of six stanzas that make up the sections. Within the boundaries it sets for itself, it is a faultless performance: witty, continuously surprising in the latitude of its reference, unrelenting in the kind of equations it proposes for states of soul, the elements and the seasons. The design is explored with exceptional and thoroughgoing assurance. Placed next to "Seasons of Soul," Roethke's greenhouse poems, which Ransom read in the middle of 1944, must have looked not just simple and sensuous and personal but partial, slight, abrupt, broken. Whether Roethke quite realized this or not, the tone of resignation in his letter to Williams ("Oh well, you know all that. . . .") asks for some kind of personal reassurance, or at least for agreement that the language characterizing the difference has been rightly understood. And his language does hold some unacknowledged meanings. Below Roethke's phrase, "conceptual boys" lies Thoreau's "things in the saddle. . . ." and if that sentence is allowed its full weight, then Roethke is distinguishing between a poetry that is spiritless, limited and fully resolved, and one that renews itself by those ranges of association grouped around the surprises of the earth. In the greenhouse poems, Roethke was clearly alive to those surprises, and it is paradoxically true that he needed rejection as a means of keeping himself close to the source of his imagined birth as a flower or a tree. It is also clear that several of the greenhouse poems enact the drama of survival, and it may be that Roethke, who was often his own best analyst, mentioned these rejections as a way of preserving the opposition which he knew would elicit a further response. The speculations are endless, but then with Roethke, so are the impulses that provoke them. He may have wanted Williams to invent praises he had not yet heard.

Williams, of course, could not be predicted. He was obviously capable of bringing several private histories to bear on the problem of the Kenyon Review, but when he read Roethke's letters, he customarily resisted all kinds of pressures—here the pressure to become merely stoical and forbearing. If Roethke expected a letter that recommended patience, he had not read Williams closely enough. In his reply, all the more radical because it encourages Roethke to persist with the kind of poem that had failed to interest

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26 Allen Tate, "Seasons of the Soul," Kenyon Review, VI, 1 (Winter 1944), pp. 1-9. Radcliffe Squires, in giving this poem a careful and sympathetic reading, concludes with this statement: "Seasons of the Soul" is not only a profound and distinguished poem. It is, at a level of formal art, one of the century's most magnificently sustained poems. And as one considers it in progress beginning with 'More Sonnets at Christmas,' he sees that Tate upheld the technical ante with each poem, as if he supposed that the confusions of self and of the world could only be ordered by the most rigorous formality of art." (Radcliffe Squires, Allen Tate, [Pegasus, 1971], pp. 173-174.)
Ransom, Williams begins by offering a caricature that separates the vitality of children—Roethke and himself—from the mentality of "them Taters." What is remarkable about this letter is that it never rests in the comforts of an imagined reward. In effect, it asks the fool to continue his folly without promising him wisdom—or, if there is wisdom to be had, it may be the kind of wisdom that will cost him his job at Bennington. For the risks it asks Roethke to take, for its announcement of a journey that may be life-long and for its prescience in urging Roethke to confront the meanings of the greenhouse, this letter is one of the best that Williams ever wrote:

Serves you right for trying to play around with them Taters. Couldn't you just feel how proud, righteous and uppity they are? Po' chil'un like us aint for them people from the big house. Now don't you never go where they are again. You hear?

I can see what you mean about imagism as a reason for their wanting to print you, if this is true. A poem, for them, as you suggest, must have a modern concept as a core before it can be used. Of course they're right but it doesn't have to be dry bone. But they have swallowed the Eliot bait at last (much disguised of course) and from now on poetry, like the owl, will have no serviceable ass hole.

You can't of course, go on developing the hot-house image indefinitely without facing it finally and the result in that case ain't for anybody teaching in a female seminary. As far as I can see the point for you would be to beat those philosophic punks to it by driving your sensuality to an extreme. It can't be done, as I have said, while you are teaching. Then you'll have to give up teaching—but write as you are writing but more so. Make it drunker, hotter, drippier, more unashamed and truer to an adult memory, truer to actual love, to whatever the hell you want to call it.

I'll be looking for the Gugg material but I warn you I'm poison to them guys. Better look for someone else to back you, someone in collegiate circles would have more influence, much more influence than I.

What the various magazines find against you is no doubt what you yourself suggest, a definite—or lack of a definite intellectual concept about which to correlate your images. You are not definite enough as to what the greenhouse means to you as an overall idea. And you must relate the images, finally, if the full significance is to be seized. Try the Quarterly Review of Literature at Chapel Hill. A man named T. Weiss operates it, he is a damned good critic.27

Wallace Stevens' comment on In the American Grain, "What Columbus discovered is nothing to what Williams is looking for,"28 is particularly apt here because Williams is recommending the exploration of a continent beyond that which Ransom and Tate have discovered. In fact, the Williams of In the American Grain distinguishes between two kinds of explorers, figures that lend a special energy to this letter. The first, who often acts more as the barely conscious purveyor of a tradition than as an individual, always begins by holding something back: robust, curious, sincere, he is incapable of understanding the promise because he brings a latent model of civilization to the discovery. With this principle, Williams finds unexpected similarities among Cortez, the Columbus of the later voyages, Cotton Mather, Hamilton, Franklin, and Washington. The second

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27 Williams to Roethke, November 14, 1944, Yale.
kind of explorer, whose story disappears from narrowly official histories, represents the
ground of a natively “American” character. He is true to the discovery in the only way
which Williams considers important: he allows it to change him so radically that he
can never return to the self-limiting conventions of the society that he has left behind.
Like Daniel Boone, he chooses to live miles beyond the edge of civilization, knowing
that the wilderness alone has the power to define him; like Sebastian Rasles, he recog-
nizes the superiority of a language that has grown up inside the environment it presents;
like Aaron Burr, he is misunderstood by his mostly unadventurous contemporaries.29
Not directly stated, this distinction nevertheless contributes to Williams’s encoura-
gement in the letter to Roethke, and it divides the predictable gestures of “them Taters”
from the poet Roethke might become.

It also suggests that Williams, along with his encouragement, is issuing both an
immediate and an ultimate challenge, as if he had suddenly met that part of himself
that could never be satisfied with enclosures. To invent a “concept” is to engage the
Kenyon Review right at the point of “Seasons of Soul.” But this reasonable advice is
not at all reasonable if we allow Williams’s letter its full range. In asking Roethke to
confront the greenhouse, Williams is asking him to go beyond it, to test that meaning
with a language that is more sensuous, energetic and threatening than anything he had
yet seen. Clearly, language here is not a way of civilizing the wilderness, but the
wilderness itself explored by something as mysteriously composed as the poem. Al-
though Williams’s advice can be as immediately useful as a prescription (“Try T.
Weiss . . . .”), the voice that addresses Roethke’s future is as radical as any that speaks
In the American Grain. Without sounding capricious, Williams dismantles the houses
in Roethke’s letter, and in effect he asks Roethke to do the same. Neither the “big
house,” with its modernist appearance and ante-bellum heritage, nor the greenhouse,
still incomplete because it has not been “faced,” is enough to satisfy him. The only
house left is the one not yet built. It is Roethke’s next poem.

ROBERT KUSCH
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY, RUTGERS

29 William Carlos Williams, In the American Grain (New Directions, 1956), pp. 9, 29, 113, 121, 137, 140,
157, 195, 200. See also William Carlos Williams, Selected Essays (New Directions, 1969), pp. 140-141.