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MAKING *CONTACT*: WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS' AMERICAN LITERARY AESTHETIC

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With the publication of *Contact* magazine in 1920–1921, American poet William Carlos Williams promoted a distinctive avant-garde literary aesthetic that was centered on “contact”—a concrete connection between literature and the vocabulary, cadence and feel of the everyday language of people. Though initially well received by expatriate authors representing the American avant-garde, Williams’ contact aesthetic was soon eclipsed by T. S. Eliot’s poetry, his magazine *Criterion*, and its New Criticism methods that celebrated classical allusions and advocated a detachment of texts from their subjects. This aesthetic shift within the modernist literary aesthetic frustrated Williams, who, with the onset of the Great Depression, was convinced that his contact-based aesthetic was an essential response to the times. The result was the revival of *Contact* magazine in 1932. Though the publication did not last long (only three editions), it did allow Williams to re-establish a distinctive contact-based “other” aesthetic for American poetry that profoundly influenced later American poets and writers.

Key Words: William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, *Contact* Magazine, Nathanael West, Literary Aesthetic, Little Magazines, American Avant-garde, Great Depression

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In December 1920, Robert McAlmon and William Carlos Williams founded the “little magazine” *Contact* as a statement against the post-war literati whose writing, in their opinion, had “lost contact with life”. In their first issue they argued for the power of local language, insisting on “that which we have not found insisted upon before, the essential contact between words and the locality that breeds them...” (Williams 1920: 1). This aesthetic gained traction among the avant-garde writers of the time, for though its first two issues were cheaply printed mimeographed copies, *Contact*’s stories, poems and comments were widely respected in the Lost Generation circles of New York and Paris. Further, among the books McAlmon and Williams printed via Contact Editions in the early 1920s were some of the era’s most important authors such as Ford Madox Ford, Gertrude Stein, and Ernest Hemingway. In 1922, however, London-based expatriated American poet T. S. Eliot published *The Waste Land*, and its blurred combination of classical

and contemporary imagery quickly established a new aesthetic style, which came to be seen as the quintessentially “modern” aesthetic. To help explain and promote his literary ideas, Eliot founded the magazine *Criterion* in 1922, and through it and his editorial influence at the literary publishing firm Faber and Gwyer, he established himself as the leading literary light of the time, heavily influencing the New Criticism movement that would dominate literary aesthetics for decades to come.

This sudden aesthetic shift shocked and horrified Williams, who referred to the publication of *The Waste Land* as “the great catastrophe”, noting that before it there had been “heat in us, a core and a drive that was gathering headway upon the theme of a rediscovery of a primary impetus, the elementary principle of all art, in the local conditions” (Williams 1951: 146). After *The Waste Land*, Williams saw his contact-based aesthetic—which stressed the everyday vernacular language and rhythms of ordinary people—fade, as contemporary writers and publishers increasingly favored Eliot’s high modernist style. Reflecting on this years later, Williams wrote, “Our work staggered to a halt for a moment under the blast of Eliot’s genius which gave the poem back to the academics. We did not know how to answer him” (146).

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As the 1920s progressed, Eliot’s literary reputation continued to grow, as he wrote and lectured in Europe’s premier academic institutions. Meanwhile, Williams continued publishing works such as *Spring and All* (1923) and *In the American Grain* (1925), which pushed a contrary aesthetic, seeking to be “attuned to the social upheavals that transformed the physical spaces of America” (White 2012: 249). Initially these publications and the contact-based aesthetic they promoted were largely ignored, but by the end of the decade, the world had changed. The sudden economic collapse of 1929 sent global markets tumbling into the Great Depression, and in the midst of the resulting chaos and human suffering, Williams was convinced more than ever that a poetic aesthetic based on the lives and language of real people was essential. He equated Eliot’s esoteric language and detached literary aesthetic with the abstract economic theories that had led to the economic crash—both he felt were completely bankrupt. In response, as he had done a decade before, Williams turned to little magazines to promote his ideas, first with the new magazine, *Pagany* in 1930, and then more forcefully with the publication of *Contact: An American Quarterly* in 1932.

Williams’ resurrection of *Contact* marked an important moment in the history of modernism. Tyrus Miller’s *Late Modernism* (1999) argues that, by the time the Great Depression began, late modernists were “divested,

by political and economic forces, of the cultural ‘cosmos’ and saw “high modernism as ruin”. Thus, “[i]n the empty spaces left by high modernism’s dissolution, late modernists reassembled fragments into disfigured likenesses of modernist masterpieces: the unlovely allegories of a world’s end” (14). In his 2013 study of modernism and the avant-garde, Eric White builds on Miller’s assessment of late modernism and finds that Williams and the “new localists” who he championed were writing “in response to the cultural crises brewing in the late-1920s America. Driven by a sense of impending disaster... [they] chronicled their own self-defining praxes” and “retained a consistent series of aesthetic and critical emphases that persisted into the final issues of *Contact: An American Quarterly*” (174–75). This publication was “one of the key textual arenas in which the liminal aesthetics of late modernism (and, unsurprisingly, new localism) began to coagulate”. It also heavily influenced future movements because it “mediated the long tail-end of imagist aestheticism, the rise of the objectivists movement, and the intensely partisan modernist writing that coalesced in the leftist reviews of the 1930s” (174). White concluded that Williams and the contact-based new localism he championed in the 1932 editions of *Contact* ultimately “marked a transitional moment in literary modernism in which several generations of American writers temporarily converged to address the unfinished business of the first localist avant-garde” (175) that Williams and McAlmon had championed in the original *Contact* magazine of 1920–1921. The following is an historical examination of this “transitional moment”, providing a chronological look at the context and issues that drove Williams’ re-establishment of *Contact* in 1932, and a careful examination of the contact-based aesthetic he championed, which defined the American avant-garde in the United States during the early years of the Great Depression.

During the mid-1920s, though he continued to vehemently oppose the academically elite high modernism promoted in T. S. Eliot’s *Criterion* magazine, William Carlos Williams’ time was dominated by “real life”. As a small-town New Jersey medical doctor with hundreds of patients and a young family clamoring for his attention, he struggled to remain fully invested in the transatlantic literary debates that occupied the time of his less encumbered literary peers. Because his energy was focused on the activities of daily life, his poetic ideas remained only partially articulated, and thus at the edge of American literary circles. It was hard for him to find time to read and write, and even harder to find publishers for his work and the work of like-minded poets who were doing the sort of vernacular-based writing he championed. Williams found this situation infuriating, because

as he struggled to find a voice Eliot's reputation continued to grow, and it represented the antithesis of everything he thought writing should be. Eliot's verse was aloof and unattached, and his New Criticism's theories of "impersonality" and "dissociation of sensibility" were exactly the opposite of Williams' theory of "contact", which insisted that good writing could only stem from close attention to the everyday language of life. Reflecting on this time years later, Williams noted that Eliot's influence set his efforts "back twenty years". As he explained, "Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself—rooted in the locality which should give it fruit" (Williams 1951: 174).

At the time itself, Williams expressed a similar fear. In a 1929 letter to his young protégé, poet Louis Zukofsky, he raged against the "static academic" who measured all new poetry against "the 'perfection' of a few exquisite (dead) sonnets or hexameter lines". He exclaimed, "Why must the new always be considered an outcast measure? Can't it be... that the new is the living coral that leaves the academic, the classic so called, behind[?]" Williams viewed true, living poetry as a constantly changing experiment, but he was beginning to understand that this was also what kept his poetry from gaining acceptance in larger literary circles. "I suppose it's purely a matter of time, the space of years between 'success' of some one man and the time it takes the rest of the world to catch up to him", he stated. "The academic never moves" so the truly avant-garde poetic tendency "must always 'fail' as it is always moving and must always move to keep out of its own shit—so to speak, to keep alive—a thing the static academic does not need to bother with since its 'life' is purely a question of aesthetics and not actuality" (Williams and Zukofsky 2003: 31–2).

This belief in the importance of moving meant that living language was both the core of Williams' writing and the cause of his obscurity. In his study of the American avant-garde tradition, critic John Lowney notes that Williams "inverts the critical premises of aestheticism" established by Eliot, and that instead of "the ascent from the local to the transcendent category of the aesthetic, Williams stresses the descent from the realm of the aesthetic to the reformulation of the local conditions that give rise" to poetic work (18). Thus Williams distinguished himself from "Eliot's high modernist aesthetics" through "his insistence on a 'localist' avant-gardism, which correlates indigenous diction and forms with the rejection of European aesthetic models" (Lowney 1997: 18). Believing that poetry must "move to keep alive", Williams' verse was constantly changing. Though he had been

actively publishing for several decades, his ever-changing style made him a perpetually "new" writer—his metaphorical "living coral" growing too fast for the academy to build upon. This avant-garde experimentation, based on changing local landscapes and lexicons, gained Williams praise from the little magazines¹ because his style resembled, and was often a model for, the newest generation of writers they published. It was this same trait that prevented him from attracting the attention and praise of the more conservative, slow-moving academic presses.

As the 1920s came to a close, Williams began to despise his literary obscurity. Contemporaries like Eliot and Ernest Hemingway had, despite their expatriation, become American literary heroes, while his own work—which he believed to be truly American and truly important—went largely unnoticed. Zukofsky worked with Williams to convince established presses to accept their writings, but though publishers expressed some interest in Williams' work, they ultimately passed on it. As rejection letters piled up, Williams wrote Zukofsky in August 1929 and suggested that printing their own work, though a "mad idea... may be the only way" to get their voices heard (Williams and Zukofsky 2003: 32). Williams continued to pursue potential publishers for another year, but was fed up by July 1930. He wrote Zukofsky, "Imagine, it will be July 4th pretty soon—and still no appreciation of what it means to be alive in America". A week later he fumed, "God damn it, we're sunk, can't you see that? as far as any present day knowledge of our work is concerned" (Williams and Zukofsky 2003: 67–8).

In his 2013 book, *Transatlantic Avant-Gardes: Little Magazines and Localist Modernism*, Eric White notes the dominance of Eliot's high modernism, but also stresses the "transatlantic crosstalk generated by the localist and expatriate networks" which, by the late 1920s and early 1930s, had organized itself to the point where it could create "a new localist counter-narrative ... in the transatlantic slipstream of the dominant strains of high modernism" (173). Given his unique position as both a member of America's early modernist writers and a respected figure among young writers, by 1930 Williams was at the center of this "localist" pushback against Eliot's strain of high modernism.

During the 1920s, William Carlos Williams' name had appeared on the mastheads of many magazines, but he had not exercised editorial control over a journal since the original *Contact* folded in 1921. Then, in the summer of

¹ Williams' works were frequently found in such publications as *Broom*, *The Little Review*, *The American Mercury*, *New Masses*, and *The Dial*.

1929, he received a letter from Richard Johns, the well-read son of a wealthy Boston industrialist, offering him associate editorship of a new quarterly. This offer piqued Williams' interest. Johns, a fan of Williams' 1928 novel, *A Voyage to Pagany*, wanted to begin a "native quarterly" in January of 1930 and name it "Pagany" in homage to Williams' book. He offered to print "a good bit" of Williams' work and promised that "the entire content shall be submitted to you for approval and decision" (Halpert and Johns 1969: 3). Given his frustration with the literary presses and journals of the time, Williams found this offer too good to be true. He replied, "Nothing would please me more than a quarterly such as you suggest" (3) but to ensure that it would not fold before his ideas could be fully realized, he insisted that he would only lend his efforts to the new magazine if Johns could promise at least two years of publication. Though he doubted Johns' ability to pull off such a venture, Williams could not control his enthusiasm. He wrote Johns that he had a "vivid perception" of what might be done with literature in the United States, and that he would "be instantly raised into heaven could I be sure that I would have a quarterly at my disposal that I could make the fulcrum... [and], in the course of the next ten years, pry things so loose here that we could breathe again in an enlightened air and not in this stink of stupidity and ignorance where we live now" (4). He assured Johns that if he could fulfill his promise, "I'd back it and it would be the center of every literary interest after.... I'd expect to give it my life — in short" (4).

Johns promised that he had the money and energy to guarantee publication for at least two years, but in his reply on July 12 1929, Williams changed his conditions slightly: "Yes, I am with you.... My suggestion is that I write for each quarterly a few pages, five to twenty, in which I shall be permitted to develop a theme, slowly and steadily". He then explained, however, that "the pages I write will be signed and published on my own responsibility, not that of the magazine" (11). Johns refused to accept this idea. He wanted Williams as a partner, not an independent columnist. The two men were at odds, and though Williams remained supportive, his next letter from August 1929 referred to *Pagany* not by name, but as "your quarterly" (11, 32). Williams' contribution to the first issue was a long article, "The Work of Gertrude Stein" and a one paragraph "Manifesto", dedicating the magazine "To the word ... in which great, virtuous and at present little realized potency we hereby manifest our belief" (Williams 1930: 1).

Though he was glad of the exposure, *Pagany* was not the voice Williams wanted. To establish himself among the literary public he needed to discuss big ideas that could only be developed "slowly and steadily". If he could not

have full editorial control over his own section, he feared his agenda would be distorted. Over the next two years, Williams continued to contribute to *Pagany*, but only through creative works—most significantly the early chapters of his next novel, *The White Mule* (See White 2012: 258–65).

By the fall of 1930, Williams' life had changed, and he was able to dedicate more time to literary efforts. His two sons were in high school and no longer demanded so much of his time; his medical practice slowed due to the economic realities of the Great Depression; and he renovated his attic, turning it into a private study where he could write undisturbed. This period ended nine months of writer's block, as Williams pounded out chapters of *The White Mule* as well as the short stories that became *The Knife of the Times*. Consolidating his efforts of the past decade, he also gathered his poems from the many little magazines that had printed them, in an effort to have a collected works published—a task he soon turned over to Louis Zukofsky (See Mariani 1981: 297–310).²

In early 1931, wealthy New York booksellers David Moss and Martin Kamin contacted Williams and asked him to lecture on his ideas of contact and American avant-garde poetry at their luxurious up-town Manhattan bookstore. Williams jumped at this opportunity and presented a talk entitled "The Logic of Modern Letters" which was followed by an elegant and well-catered party attended by New York's literary elite. Moss and Kamin liked Williams and his poetic aesthetic, but their reasons for funding this lavish event were more business than literary—they wanted to acquire Williams and McAlmon's Contact Press and its back-catalog, and hoped that Williams could help them secure the venture. They had already contacted Robert McAlmon about such an acquisition, but he had ignored their requests (Mariani 1981: 312). Williams' lecture was well received, and in April Moss and Kamin built on this success, inviting him to meet them in New York to discuss Contact Editions and the possible restart of *Contact* magazine. Williams described this meeting to Zukofsky in a letter on April 29. He found Kamin charming and cultured but "most irresponsible", and felt that Moss was determined to get things done but was "futilely eccentric". In his opinion, Kamin's wife, Sally, was the only level-headed member of the crew. But despite their naïveté about the literary world in general, they did have extensive experience with New York writers, Moss having been an

² Williams wanted to make this work a complete collection of his poetry, but Edmund Brown's Four Seas Company held the copyright to his works before 1921, and were not willing to turn them over for less than \$500.

owner of the popular writer's hangout, Gotham Book Mart. Though not ideal, Williams decided they were not "bastards", and as he wrote Zukofsky, "modern work is written to be printed and cannot be considered to exist until it is so". They promised him full editorial control over all issues of the magazine and guaranteed the funds to see it through. Williams told Zukofsky he was willing to enter the venture for the sake of the ignored writers of America, himself certainly included (Williams and Zukofsky 2003: 86).

At this time, Williams was still helping Johns in his selection of manuscripts for *Pagany*, and this process soon reminded him of the dangers of conflicting opinion. McAlmon, whom Williams held as one of the best prose writers of the time, submitted a piece that Johns rejected. Livid, Williams wrote Johns that he had just thrown away some of the best writing he was likely to see in the next twenty years: "What in the hell is the matter with you younger chaps? Are you hunting for 'beauty' or a 'solution of the universe' or what in God's name is it you want anyway. It surely isn't writing you're after" (Halpert and Johns 1969: 274, emphasis in the original). This conflict, coming only three days after his meeting with Moss and Kamin, made Williams wary of the "full editorial control" they offered—after all, they were holding the purse strings.

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The circumstances of Williams' life also added to his doubts. He was 48 years old, had two sons preparing to enter college, an invalid mother to support, a medical practice to tend to, and, as the graph on his study wall showed, his finances were still suffering after the 1929 stock market crash. Given these realities, Williams knew he would need an assistant to help with the magazine. With his support, Moss and Kamin again approached McAlmon about *Contact*, offering to reunite Williams and McAlmon as editors. This time McAlmon did respond and agreed to turn over *Contact* Editions to Moss and Kamin, but he expressed no interest in editing a magazine. Moss and Kamin then proposed another assistant editor, the young writer Nathanael West. They had printed West's first novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, earlier that year and felt he would be enthusiastic about *Contact* because he was already spending long hours in the New York Public Library, assembling a bibliography of the little magazines (Mariani 1981: 319–20). Williams agreed to meet with him.

Nathanael West, born in 1903 as Nathan Weinstein to Russian Jewish immigrant parents, was a native of New York City, familiar with its writers, and a fan of Williams' contact-based aesthetic. As a young man, West had dropped out of Tufts University but managed to enter Brown University in 1922, by using the transcript of a different Nathan Weinstein. This transcript

gave him two years' college credits, including the science requirements he despised. He excelled at Brown and became a literary presence on campus, along with his good friend S. J. Perelman, who later became a prominent humorist, author and screenwriter. Perelman also married West's sister, Laura, making them brothers-in-law as well. Upon graduation in 1924, West convinced his father, a successful contractor, to send him to Europe where he spent two years living in Paris. He returned and went to work for his father's business, but when it was threatened by the pressure of the Great Depression he took a job as assistant manager at the Kenmore Hall Hotel: a position which gave him more time to read and write. A few months later, he took a similar job at the more exclusive Sutton Club Hotel on East 56th Street. This was advantageous not only to West's own writing, but also to that of many other young writers, including Perelman, Erskine Caldwell, Dashiell Hammett, James T. Farrell, and Julian Shapiro (John Sanford), whom West was able to provide with accommodation, either free or at substantially reduced rates. During his time at the Sutton, West re-wrote *Balso Snell* and, uncomfortable with his Jewish identity, published it as Nathanael West, the name he adopted for the remainder of his life (See Madden 1973: 2–5).

On October 1 1931, Williams went to New York to seek Zukofsky's opinions on the idea of a new *Contact* magazine and cooperation with West. Zukofsky, though twenty years his junior, had become Williams' closest literary ally since their introduction through Ezra Pound in 1928.³ He encouraged Williams to go ahead with *Contact* for, as he had written in an article for *Poetry* in February of 1931, "[t]he small magazines are to be praised for standing on their own against the business of the publishing racket, the 'pseudo-kulchuh' of certain national liberal weeklies published in New York, and the guidance of the American university" (Zukofsky 1931: 271). The next day Williams met with Moss and Kamin who introduced him to Nathanael West. West impressed Williams by showing knowledge of his past efforts and, according to Williams, "talk[ing] to me of what a shame it was that the name, 'Contact', had been allowed to lapse" (Williams 1958: 75). West's new novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, was an honest and often brutal account that mirrored the language of actual newspaper stories. This dedication to the living vernacular language assured Williams that he

³ It seems strange that Williams never suggested Zukofsky as his assistant editor, but such an offer is never mentioned in any critical texts, nor in the letters between Zukofsky and Williams during this time.

and West would share many of the same editorial opinions (See Williams 1933: 5–8). Moss and Kamin agreed that the first issue of *Contact* would appear in January 1932, with Williams as editor and West and McAlmon as associate editors—a fact McAlmon, then in Munich, was not informed of until some time later (Mariani 1981: 321). Though encouraged by West's enthusiasm and Moss and Kamin's seemingly bottomless pockets, Williams recognized several potential problems. West was eager to find room for his Sutton Hotel friends' work, of which Williams knew little. And, as Moss and Kamin were trying to establish a literary reputation for themselves, they too were certain to push their own publishing agenda. In late October Williams wrote Zukofsky, "Oh yes, the new quarterly is beginning to look as if it might begin to look like something if somebody doesn't do something to it when I'm not looking. But if they do you can bet they won't have my lyrical cognomen marking the cover of the second issue—or any work of mine in it either" (Williams and Zukofsky 2003: 107).

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In November, Johns heard through their mutual literary friends that Williams was editing *Contact* and wrote him a concerned letter. Williams promised him that he was "at your service as long as you shall want me" but then asked, "Do you want me so long?" He reminded Johns, "You you[r] self told me you didn't want a thing of mine other than *White Mule* so long as that was issuing. Hell, I can't close myself down that way" (Halpert and Johns 1969: 364). He also told Johns that the strength of *Pagany* was its broad sweep, whereas in *Contact* he was planning to "narrow the choice" of submissions (364). His intent was just that: to gather poems and stories that represented only the "contact" writing that he wanted to address.

As they began to accept works for the first issue, Williams made it clear that if he were not *the editor*, he would leave. Initially he solicited pieces that would support his "Comment"—an editorial he wrote for each issue. A piece by New York lawyer and writer Charles Reznikoff, which consisted exclusively of excerpts of actual law reports from the American South (complete with graphic violence and sex), fit his agenda perfectly. Moss and Kamin found it objectionable and encouraged Williams not to include it, but he refused to back down. This early threat to his editorial power, however, made him doubt the venture once more. He wrote Zukofsky that if it were not for the Reznikoff piece, he would quit the "Kamin quarterly" immediately. He explained, "I'm holding on only long enough to see if I can put over the first issue. Maybe I won't even last as long as that" (Williams and Zukofsky 2003: 111). In early December 1931, Williams wrote his old friend Ezra Pound and, in the humorous and irreverent "'merican" dialect

they often used in their letters, continued to complain about Moss and Kamin, "I'm just the, you know, editor—until we meet again or something. All I does is to pick out what goes into the magazine—if it ain't too dirty or lood, whatever that means" (Williams 1957: 117–8).

West and Williams also had an early run-in. West's longtime friend, Julian Shapiro, submitted a short story entitled "Once in a Sedan, Twice Standing Up". Williams admired the work and accepted it, but asked Shapiro to change the title to something less suggestive. When Shapiro refused, Williams cut the piece. He informed Shapiro, "I decided that I just didn't want the emphasis your title gave to the sex phase of our first issue. I didn't want the casual but possibly favorable reader to believe that we were stressing the pornographic". He explained, "The story I was willing to use—but the title was a red flag I had to sacrifice" (Sanford and Williams 1984: 18). West, though frustrated by this, did not put up a fight.

Shapiro's story was mild in comparison to Reznikoff's work, so Williams' refusal to print it seems odd, especially considering his constant demand for reality and good writing, both of which Shapiro provided. This incident does, however, make sense in the context of Williams' larger literary goals. First, Williams wanted to make sure that *Contact* was *his* magazine and so flexed his editorial muscle to see if West would back down. Second, Williams knew that if he hoped to make an impact on the larger literary community, he could not afford to scare off his audience before they heard what he had to say. The violence in Reznikoff's story was appropriate because it came from real court documents, and its title, "My Country 'Tis of Thee", was a statement on society, not a glorification of the sensational. Shapiro's piece (about a minister who shocks a community through his humble confession of adultery) also made the kind of real-life statement Williams valued, but its scandalous title misplaced the message. With that title, Shapiro's intent was not to comment on reality, but rather to shock. Williams liked the story but was not willing to risk loss of audience for the sake of a young writer's insistence on a lewd title.

In late December, while making final selections for the first issue, Williams received a letter from Pound announcing T. S. Eliot's appointment as professor of poetry at Harvard. Infuriated, Williams wrote Johns over Christmas, "Eliot has been appointed Prof. of Poetry at Harvard—and P[ound] want us to give him sweet welcome.... I can't for the life of me understand why we should. For of all the beshitten—he is the beshattest.... Well, I'll be damned if I will.... We neither need him or want him" (Halpert and Johns 1969: 372). A week later he added, "About Eliot... I see no reason

for welcoming him to America. I resent his intrusion here and wish that he might stay in England till he shall be dead and buried" (378).

There is no need to guess at Williams' opinion of Eliot. With him on American soil, Williams feared that he could exercise even greater control over American literature, corrupting the next generation with his detached "New Criticism". Eliot, for his part, largely ignored Williams, but did fan the flames of animosity when, during a public lecture at Harvard, he damned Williams with faint praise, referring to him as a poet "of some local interest, perhaps". Williams' biographer, Paul Mariani, noted that this one remark kept "Williams' hatred of Eliot at white-heat pitch for the next twenty years" (Mariani 1981: 323).

Trying to secure his aesthetic ground in the battle for the American avant-garde, Williams sought assurance from Johns that *Pagany* would not succumb to Eliot. He told him that he was "perfectly willing to read and to admire [Eliot's] verse", but that he could see no reason to embrace him as an American poet or scholar. He ended his letter with praise for Johns and his "effective good taste in selecting material the hide bound minds of present day publishers have muffed"—a direct shot at Eliot and the academic publishing world he represented (Halpert and Johns 1969: 378).

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Williams firmly believed that he was in a direct battle against Eliot for the soul of American poetry, and that this war would be fought in literary journals and little magazines. It is not surprising, then, that in this same letter Williams also told Johns of his goals for *Contact*: "I want to bear down more... on the significance of the word, as material. One feature of *C[ontact]* will be my own Comments". He acknowledged that "[p]erhaps this is sheer vanity", but willingly admitted that it was "the thing that has made me want to take the trouble to go on" (Halpert and Johns 1969: 378). *Contact's* first edition was only half printed as of early January, so it is difficult to know whether Williams wrote his "Comment" before or after learning of Eliot's appointment. In either case, though he was ostensibly addressing all writing of the time, his "Comment" was certainly aimed specifically at Eliot. Williams asked, "What in the world is writing good for anyway?" (Williams 1932a: 7) He addressed this question first to himself and *Contact* specifically, noting, "Why not take the money there is for a magazine like this and give it away—as food—to the bums, for instance, living in packing cases over near the East River these winter nights?" (8) Williams used this question to create an analogy between the suffering of the Great Depression and "bad writing". He wrote, "there's food enough rotting now in the world, even within sight of the place where these men are hanging out, to feed them

every day in the year". But giving these bums money would not help them, as "[m]oney has nothing to do with it". Ending bad writing could, however, because bad writing comes from "the same sort of stupidity" that caused these economic hardships. "[T]hose who wish to link religion, science and above all philosophy in a masterly synthesis and to express it beautifully" (8) do the world no good. "There's no sense in slobbering at the mouth over humanity and writing that way. We die every day, cheated—and with written promises of great good in our hands.... that's not writing" (8). Good writing required words that "must stand and fall as men", the writer pouring into them "all he feels and has to say ... regardless of anything that may come of it" (9). And though these words "cannot be eaten or made into cloth or built into a roof", they can stand with the people and endure "the same rigors which they suffer and the same joys which they were born out of their mothers' bellies to share" (9).

This was Williams' guiding criterion for *Contact*, and his goal for the American avant-garde—real words about real events, be they tragic, euphoric, or simply mundane, just like life. And who better to write such words than a small town doctor who delivered babies, consoled the suffering, aided the dying, and paused only to jot down poems on the back of a prescription pad? Certainly not Eliot, a Lloyds of London bank clerk turned academic publisher and Harvard professor. Williams' "Comment" was originally to have accompanied a 3,000-word "letter" to Kay Boyle that further explained his thoughts on literature. Although Williams ultimately cut it for space issues, this letter's content provided the governing principles of *Contact* and Williams' poetic aesthetic. In it he argued that writers must develop a new form for poetry and that it must come from the common speech patterns of everyday people. This "contact" was the core of all true expression as, "art can be made of anything—provided it be seen, smelt, touched, apprehended and understood to be what it is—the flesh of a constantly repeated permanence" (Williams 1957: 130).

After a month's printing delay, *Contact* appeared in February featuring thirteen selections and West's bibliography of little magazines printed between 1900 and 1932. Williams dominated this first issue, which began with his "Comment" and ended with "The Advance Guard Magazine", in which he provided a brief history of little magazines from Alfred Stieglitz's 1902 *Camera Work* to the 1932 revival of *Contact*, stopping briefly to mention Eliot's "apparently well informed but rather hasty *Criterion*". The subsequent bibliography of little magazines also dutifully mentioned *Criterion*, but managed to misspell Eliot's name (Williams 1932a: 88, 94).

This article served as an introduction to the bibliography, but its last paragraph shows that its true agenda was to promote Williams: "Nothing could be more useful to the present day writer, [and] the alert critic than to read and re-read the actual work produced by those who have made the 'small magazine' during the past thirty years" (90). As Zukofsky had just finished scouring hundreds of these small magazines to gather, compile and edit Williams' *Collected Poems*, this closing remark was an appeal to the populace to start clamoring for just such a work.

Between his two articles, Williams placed examples of what his "Comment" described as "good writing". Four numbered poems by E. E. Cummings begin the issue, the first seemingly in Williams' voice and humorously but emphatically pushing out his agenda for *Contact*.

1.

"let's start a magazine
to hell with literature
we want something redblooded

lousy with pure
reeking with stark
and fearlessly obscene

but really clean
get what I mean
let's not spoil it
let's make it serious

something authentic and delirious
you know something genuine like a mark
in a toilet

graced with g-ts and g-tted
with grace"

squeeze your n-ts and open your face (10)

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Reznikoff's "My Country" and a Ben Hecht poem mocking the "squawking hams" of Hollywood follow Cummings' poems, and Diego Rivera's "Mickey Mouse and American Art" proposes that rather than formal art, cartoons, piñatas and other art works that serve as "playthings for children and grown-ups", actually hold the "greatest plastic value". With incredible foresight (Mickey Mouse had first appeared just four years

earlier, in 1928) Rivera argues that a future generation "will find Mickey Mouse was one of the genuine heroes of American art in the first half of the 20th Century" (38). Zukofsky's two poems, "Ferry" and "Madison, Wis." use American dialect to address Europe's influence on America. S. J. Perelman's "Scenario" mixes stage directions, descriptions of film footage, and the personal lives of actors and crewmembers in an unbroken seven-page paragraph portraying the blurred nature of fiction and fact, and character and real-life in Hollywood. The final poem of the issue, Parker Tyler's "Idiot in Love", ebbs and flows for five pages with images of passionate lips, starfish, and sea foam repeating in an ocean-like rhythm.

The last half of the issue consisted of stories by the editors: Williams' "The Colored Girls of Passenack"; a chapter of West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*; and, McAlmon's "It's All Very Complicated". Williams' confessional story traces his experiences with black women from childhood to the present in a casual, first person narrative, emphasizing the exotic and erotic qualities of "the negress" that are "like nothing the white can offer".⁴ McAlmon's short story follows the bisexual Mona Jefferson through multiple Parisian liaisons, culminating in her relationship with a womanizing Southerner who leaves her upon realizing that she has "tumbled" more women than he has. West's six pages introduce his new novel's protagonist, "Miss Lonelyhearts" column writer Thomas Matlock, who finds himself unable to remain emotionally detached from the woes of those writing him for advice. After an alcohol-inspired theological debate, Matlock and two friends buy a lamb, which they attempt to sacrifice in the woods. They botch the job, and Matlock tries to put it out of its misery. In the end he cannot bring himself to, and ultimately watches it painfully bleed to death.

Though furious with Moss and Kamin over their sloppy printing job, Williams was content with *Contact*'s first issue. He had stated his case before the literary public and they had responded. Hart Crane, the young, critically acclaimed poet (whose 1930 work *The Bridge* was a counter to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, described by Hart as "good, ... but so damned dead" [Murphy 2007: 476]) wrote to tell Williams that he liked his portion of the first issue, but that he found McAlmon's story too overtly sexual (Weber

⁴ This story was inspired by Nancy Cunard, and eventually appeared in her anthology of black culture, *Negro* (1934). Cunard and her black lover, jazz drummer Henry Crowder, had been guests at the Williams' house in the summer of 1931. Williams' biographer Mariani notes a romantic interest between Williams and Cunard, and speculates that this may have inspired the erotic nature of the piece he wrote for her.

1952: 51). The July 1932 issue of Eliot's *Criterion* also responded, attacking *Contact*'s "unnecessary violence". Commenting on its motto, "To cut a trail through the American jungle without the use of a European compass" *Criterion* wrote, "The use of an American compass has involved most of the contributors in violence". Eliot's journal was especially bothered by West's cold "photographic reproduction" of the dying lamb. "[I]f it really happened, then it must be regretted that Mr. West feels like that about it; if, on the other hand, it is imaginary, as it seems to be, then it is almost pathological" (Siegel 1994: 48). Williams defended his young partner, explaining that West, concerned with "the terrible moral impoverishment of our youth in the cities" addressed the issue through the "dialect natural to such a condition ... the idiom of the reporters, the tough men of the newspapers". He also used this response to take a shot at *Criterion*, noting that "The cities are rotten and desperate—so is most polite, 'literary' literature". What could remedy such travesties? "Only a little review that publishes good material" (Siegel 1994: 49).

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Encouraged by West's talent, Williams began gathering work by other young writers. While awaiting the birth of a baby, he scrawled a note to Johns, who had published a piece by Shapiro that had impressed him with its "fresh observation, acute thought, courage, [and] ... sheer use of the word". He also asked about Erskine Caldwell who regularly appeared in *Pagany*. Johns agreed to put them in touch and soon Williams had submissions from both writers (Halpert and Johns 1969: 416–17).

This effort to "discover" new writers generated a tremendous number of manuscripts, some of which Williams accepted, but many of which he did not. Though the effort to read and respond to each of these began to strain Williams' already busy schedule, he made time to encourage and instruct, even in his rejection letters. He wrote young writer T. C. Wilson, "[W]e've got to keep away from the adolescent emotions.... Your intelligence doesn't have to be mellow—sophisticated ... but it must at least realize what we are up against. Let's at least probe our immediate hells to the bottom" (Williams 1957: 120). This language explains Williams' appeal to the younger generation; even in a rejection letter, he created a working relationship—"we need to ...". As a family physician who primarily made house calls, Williams' caring bedside manner blurred into his dealings with young writers. Reflecting on his acquaintance with Williams, Johns wrote, "As a doctor, Williams displayed a warm confidence which relaxed and gave assurance ... both as a person and as a literary mentor to a young man" (See Halpert and Johns 1969: 273–75).

Again delayed by a month, the next issue of *Contact* did not appear until May 1932. The contents of this issue were inverted: Williams' "Comment" was last, Reznikoff's continuation of "My Country" moved back, and the next two chapters of West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* came to the front. Williams contributed two poems, including a slightly revised version of his previously published "The Cod Head", and McAlmon provided an excerpt from "Mexican Interval", a Hemingway-like account of the gentility of village life, complete with murder, rape and revolution. Besides a few poems by old friends, Nancy Cunard and Marsden Hartley, Williams dedicated the rest of the issue to young writers.

Shapiro finally appeared and, as a disillusioned lawyer-turned-writer, used "Fire at the Catholic Church" to comment on small-town New York and the injustice of the court system. Erskine Caldwell was also included, as a result of Johns' help and fickle editing staff at Scribner's. After printing *Tobacco Road*, Scribner's doubted the potential for success of *God's Little Acre*, a novel about Caldwell's native South, and instead asked him to write a piece about Maine. He did, and they rejected it. "Over the Green Mountain"—a humorous tale about Maine's marriage "shift-laws"—appears to have come from that effort. The issue also featured the stories of four other young writers: Nathan Asch, son of well-known Yiddish writer Sholem Asch, who wrote about his experiences in Texas; Dutch-born David Cornel DeJong, a regular contributor to *Pagany* who lived in Michigan; Eugene Joffe, a "very young writer who resides in Brooklyn"; and Charles Kendall O'Neill, whom McAlmon recruited while in Majorca. Each of their stories gave vivid accounts of people whose lives the authors knew intimately (See *Contact* 1, 2).

Using his inclusive "we", Williams embraced the young writers and their various backgrounds in his "Comment" section of the second issue: "In only one thing have we grounds for belief: the multiple object of our life itself" (Williams 1932b: 109). These writers, though young, understood his call to probe their "immediate hells to the bottom", and he praised them for being "[e]ye to eye with some of the figures of our country and epoch" and for using their "well-schooled senses... to pick up the essentials of a meaning" (109). Williams declared literary independence, proclaiming, "There is nothing to help us but ourselves. If we cannot find virtue in the object of our lives, then for us there is none anywhere" (109). He then addressed in advance the criticism he knew this type of writing would receive: "[A]t this point, some blank idiot cries out, 'Regionalism'! Good God, is there no intelligence left on earth. Shall we never differentiate the regional in letters from the objective immediacy of our hand to mouth, eye to brain existence?"

(109) Directly addressing poetic verse, he argued that, “by inversion and cliché, bad observation and pig-headedness, we can somehow make verse look something ‘like’ the classic” (109). He suggested that while such poetry impressed the literary elite, it was hollow at its core. Williams then launched into a rally-cry for his contact-based aesthetic, stating, “We can only, holding firm to the vernacular, seek that difficult form which cannot be an imitation.... Clichés must disappear; the simple profound difficulties of art then become clear to us”. And what is the goal of this writing? “It is to represent what is before us that dead stylisms disappear.... By this we are able to learn from the thing itself the ways of its own most profound implications, as all artists, everywhere, must be doing” (110). He concluded by addressing the suicide of Hart Crane who, just a month earlier on April 27 1932, had thrown himself overboard a ship in the Gulf of Mexico. Williams noted that Crane’s literary fate now lay in the hands of other young writers and their assessment of his work and “record of his annihilation” (110), a statement Williams also knew to be true of his own fate—young writers would embrace or abandon his poetry and aesthetic, determining whether he would be immortalized or forgotten.

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In the months before Williams began preparing for the third issue of *Contact*, Moss and Kamin started pressuring him to include more communist material. Williams resisted. He wrote West in July of 1932, “All we’ll get by a Communist issue is a reputation for radicalism and not for good writing—which is our real aim.... [T]hat’s the way I feel. Hope you’ll back me” (Williams 1957: 125). Though West himself had communist leanings, he agreed, probably primarily for aesthetic reasons. West admired Williams and appreciated his support of young artists, but was not completely convinced by Williams’ mission for *Contact*. In late April 1932, just before the second issue of *Contact* was released, West wrote Milton Abernathy, the editor of the North Carolina based little magazine, *Contempo*, saying, “I don’t like *Contact* much. We had an idea in the beginning but it looks as though we’ll drift into the old ‘regionalism.’ You know the Blue Denim stuff they print in *Pagany* and *Hound and Horn*”. He was interested in the idea of the third issue “going Communist”, but doubted it would improve the writing. He told Abernathy, “I suppose even then we won’t find anything to print except lyric stuff about yellow cornfields winding up with ‘And Ho for the World Revolution’” (Hutchisson 1998: 87).

Unaware of West’s sentiments, Williams continued to push his aesthetic agenda. Though his *Collected Poems* still lay on his desk without a publisher, two of his other books were printed that year: *A Novelette and Other*

Prose, and *The Knife of the Times and Other Stories*. These small successes encouraged him to keep writing and to keep defending America's young writers from Eliot's corrupting influence. Having recently published a poem in Harvard's literary quarterly, *Hound and Horn*, Williams wrote its editor, Lincoln Kirstein, a letter of thanks that quickly turned into an anti-Eliot/pro-*Contact* diatribe: "There is a fundamental misapprehension... emanating from men who occupy teaching positions in universities and who attempt to criticize new work, work created by conditions with which they do not have an opportunity to come inexorably into contact". Instead, these men "fall back on ... an ideal criticism ... more related to what might be wished than to anything that is" (Williams 1957: 127–28).

Despite these positive developments, however, Moss and Kamin's insistence on a communist slant frustrated Williams, and caused him to delay the third issue of *Contact*, which he and West did not begin planning until August, three months after the second issue. Though he agreed to accept communist material, he insisted that quality must come before ideology. He wrote West, "This new *Contact* (if there is to be one)... must not be dull, at all costs.... [E]verything must be put aside for the sake of interest to the reader. Ruthlessly we've got to turn down anything that doesn't fit that purpose" (Williams 1957: 128).

The third issue came out in October and began with an eight-page article by painter Hilaire Hiler, condemning those critics who explain art through words, and holding up painters' experiences as the only legitimate source of art. Williams' contact argument thus moved into the world of painting. As always, the issue included works by McAlmon and Williams as well as another chapter of West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Caldwell submitted another story, this time of his native South, and Shapiro's "Once in a Sedan, Twice Standing Up" finally made *Contact*'s pages, with its title intact. Besides two more poems by Zukofsky, another story by Joffe, and a humorous sketch by Perelman, the rest of the pieces were by new authors. Among these were works by: critic Yvor Winters, who had maintained a love/hate relationship with Williams for years; Carl Rakosi, who became head of the Objectivist Press that printed Williams' *Collected Poems* in 1934; and revolutionary socialist and Sutton Hotel resident, James T. Farrell (See *Contact* 1, 3).

Though none of the issues were overtly communist, Williams tied communism to good writing in his "Comment". He announced that "through academic fostering" (which he explained in a footnote as "T. S. Eliot's recent appointment at Harvard") young writers were being taught that "poetry increases in virtue as it is removed from contact with the

vulgar world". Stopping this "heresy" was one reason Williams was willing to "welcome communism", as its revolutionary spirit would not "speak its piece to please, not even to please 'communism'" (Williams 1932c: 131–32). Williams' "Comment" was followed by "Some Notes on Violence" by West, which used *Criterion's* attack on his article as a way of explaining the differences between American and European writing: "[A] European writer often needs three hundred pages to motivate one little murder," West explained, "But not so the American writer". American writers and readers are accustomed to the brutalities of life and do not need the "naturalism of Zola or the realism of Flaubert to make writing seem 'artistically true'" (West 1932a: 132–33).

350 Though he liked the issue, Williams suspected it would be the last. Moss and Kamin were spending vast sums of money on radio promotions and elegant parties for contributors, but West and Williams, along with the rest of the literary community, recognized this for what it was: not a promotion of good writing, but two men with more money than taste trying to become respected figures in the publishing world. Feeling that *Contact's* purpose was being undermined and that he was merely a front for Moss and Kamin's publicity, Williams resigned. He wrote Johns, "We have worked hard to make it worthwhile but recently we've felt that for various reasons we can't go on giving our time any longer" (Halpert and Johns 1969: 478). Williams was more blunt with his friend Marsden Hartley, "I have just ended an editorship of [*Contact*] with the resolution never to do that sort of thing again. People who have money to put up for such ventures are too slippery for me and my time is too limited" (Williams 1957: 121–22). After taking several months to be "just" a doctor, Williams wrote Zukofsky, "I am only beginning to feel alert again. What a mountain of ashes buries one when he tries to really do anything. The task becomes titanic" (Williams and Zukofsky 2003: 146).

Though he continued to contribute to their pages for the rest of his life, Williams never again edited a little magazine. What effect, then, did his editorship of these three issues of *Contact* have on his future success? Judging from publication and sales statistics alone, not much. Two books appeared in 1932, the result of his efforts of 1931, but he had no books published in 1933 because *Contact* had occupied all his time the year before. For the remainder of the decade he averaged one book a year with his *Collected Poems 1921–1931* published in 1934, and *The Complete Collected Poems 1906–1938*, four years later. The total number of volumes printed of all seven of his books during the 1930s was less than 5,000 copies—hardly a literary success (See Wallace 1968).

But his efforts did alter the future of poetry in American literature, and the study of English literature worldwide for decades to come. Williams established himself as the leader of the “other” poets, the members of literary society who wrote without regard for the latest movement or “ism”. Soon after they began the original *Contact*, McAlmon wrote Williams in 1921, “[I]t isn’t lack of contact that condemns most writing.... It’s lack of an individual quality that makes the stuff worth reading, and presence of too much desire to be a ‘literary figure’” (McAlmon and Boyle 1984: 23–4). By the mid-1930s most of Williams’ contemporaries had exhausted their “individual quality” and stagnated long enough to become either forgotten or famous. Though he longed for recognition, Williams’ already full life never allowed him to slow down enough to become a “literary figure”. An embodiment of the “modernist tendency” he had described to Zukofsky, Williams was “always moving... to keep alive” (Williams and Zukofsky 2003: 31–2). His efforts in the pages of *Contact* were radical and new, so rather than bring him popular recognition they propelled him into the next generation of obscurity—the leader of another unknown group of writers, this time the Objectivists,⁵ a group of poets led by Louis Zukofsky that sought to view the world with sincerity and clarity and saw poems as objects in and of themselves. Success would not come to Williams until the late 1940s and early 1950s, by which time he had spent over a decade on his five-part poem, *Paterson*, a project that slowed him down long enough for academia to catch him. Even then he remained on the edge, embraced mainly by the fringe Black Mountain Projectivist poets, who wrote improvisational “open field” poetry, and later the Beat poets of the 1950s. In a letter to old friend Marsden Hartley late in 1932 that announced the end of *Contact*, Williams recognized that though fame eluded him, a future did not:

All I seem to find time for is work at my practice and work at my writing. Meanwhile the old head goes on refining itself, I believe, and the zest grows stronger—every sort of zest I’ve ever taken a delight in.... I can’t get published very easily, which may be my saving for all I know. I look forward to twenty years of continued development, however, with time for summation and reminiscences after that. (Williams 1957: 122)

This self-assessment proved to be largely true. His three issues of *Contact* in 1932 provided a fringe but powerful voice that continued to define and

⁵ Though they share a name with the philosophy of Ayn Rand, they were in no way related to her ideas and, in fact, directly opposed them.

redefine modernism and, in many ways, set the stage for later ideas of postmodernity. The 1932 issues of *Contact* did not bring William Carlos Williams fame, but they did bring him, and American literature, a future.

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