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If Thus You Can Erase My Life: A Profile of Mrs. Paterson

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Skidmore College

If Thus You Can Erase My Life
—
A Profile of Mrs. Paterson

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Professor Bernard

EN 376: Senior Projects

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If thus, my love, you can
Erase my life re-writing it and bring
The sunlight to fifty years
That never knew the sun... (Nardi, *The Last Word*, 224)

After publishing the first installment in 1946, William Carlos Williams continued to work on his epic poem, *Paterson*, for the rest of his life, leaving it unfinished at his death in 1963.

It begins with a quest: “rigor of beauty” (*Paterson* 3) will inform the meandering course of Mr. Paterson’s roiling desire as he traverses the local landscape, “rolling up” (3) the “bloody loam” of the land into a general sum, a “finished product”(37).

In Book I, Williams sets out to describe “the elemental character”(xiv) that is to be projected into the epic form of a finished product. The elements of *Paterson* are one and all in a flux from the outset – they split, fork, furrow, and recoil, tossing about relentlessly (7). In this tumult, the poet is left to give an outline of the place. “The Delineaments of the Giants” brings together history, anecdote, and poetry with the imagination, forging a mythological image of the land:

A man like a city and a woman like a flower
–who are in love. Two women. Three women.
Innumerable women, each like a flower. (7)

In a statement about the poem, Williams writes that *Paterson* was conceived “upon the resemblance between the mind of modern man and a city” (xiii). Out of this comparison rises the giant, Paterson, with his head propped against the “innumerable women” that make up the natural landscape on the outskirts of the city. Williams’ long poem is a heroic tale formed around this mythological giant, a medley of American particulars weaved into the image of modern man as mind and

city. Being in love, however, Paterson is in himself incomplete. His quest – to reconcile man and woman, to find the language that will make communication possible: “woman is the object of the quest; it is with woman that Paterson wishes union... Marriage with her will effect the communion with beauty” (Rodgers 96).

In 1920, William Carlos Williams founded *Contact* magazine in opposition to “the post-war literati whose writing... had ‘lost contact with life.’” The magazine was to celebrate literature that had established “the essential contact between words and the locality that breeds them” (Sawin 331). The mastery of a local vernacular is necessary for the production of a language that can communicate; the language must have an identity. This emphasis on identity is more “than a simple cult of Amurricanism” (Newmann 52). The promise of contact drives the mythical affair between Paterson and the “flower” toward which his desire is directed. Williams’ work is consumed by sexuality; the story of the poet’s quest for beauty is a romance. Thus, Paterson aims at fulfillment in the attempt to make contact and form an identity in communion with “woman.” Through “the language”¹ of the text, *Paterson* may overcome the inconsolable difference between the imagination and nature, between man and woman.

“The Delineaments of the Giants” begins by bringing to life the personified form of the heroic Paterson, silhouetting the dreaming giant as he rests beside the falls. His body rises up out of the landscape and “[B]utterflies settle on his stone ear.” Though he “persists incognito” in the valley beneath the falls, he is stirred to life by the language of the text and figured as man in myth (*Paterson* 6). Here, there

¹ Throughout *Paterson* the poet insists that his quest is for “the language,” a phrase repeated throughout all five books.

is “only one man – like a city” (7). Mrs. Paterson, on the other hand, is scattered across the landscape. “Spangled with apple-blossoms,” she stretches out beyond him, “into / the back country” where she takes on the polymorphous form of innumerable flora (9).

Among the diversity of her forms, who is Mrs. Paterson? She is the natural complement of Mr. Paterson, his double: “there is a first wife / and a first beauty, complex, ovate.” She is the “Beautiful Thing” towards which man’s desire tends, “a flower within a flower” (21-22). In Book I, Williams introduces a phrase that was to become emblematic of his poetry:

-Say it, no ideas but in things-
nothing but the blank faces of the houses
and cylindrical trees. (6)

Ideas arise out of the things, the concrete particulars that make up a place – objectively. This is the material of the poem. The poet seeks out those objects that will bring ideas to life – we take the prowling dog for the poet (3), the waterfall for his song. The production of ideas in things is, therefore, the process by which beauty unfolds. However, amidst myriad particular things, where could one find that “first beauty” anticipated in the figure of Mrs. Paterson? There is a final, abstract “thing” for which the poet is endlessly on the hunt: Williams’ notion of the “Beautiful Thing” hints at the structure of his conception of the great poem. It is the aesthetic ideal around which Mr. Paterson’s quest is organized. This concept is reminiscent of the Kantian notion of Beauty. For Kant, when the “Genius” apprehends and communicates “Beauty,” he will paradoxically unify the tensions of the imagination and nature, finding in an original moment – ‘a stroke of genius’ – the transcendental

unity of experience.

For Williams, the poet, in seeking out and making contact with the Beautiful Thing, marries her and finds in their communion an identity: "Paterson is a man (since I am a man) who dives from cliffs and the edges of waterfalls, to his death – finally. But for all this he is a woman (since I am not a woman) who *is* the cliff and the waterfall" (Rodgers 115). The complete Paterson is both man and woman, in their union; "permeating the five books of *Paterson* and into the uncompleted sixth, there is a poignant nostalgia for an idyllic past when man and woman, nature and the creative imagination existed in perfect harmony" (Rodgers 95). *Paterson* consists not only of the language it begins, seeks, and achieves, but of the things which give it meaning: the elemental character of the place moves about the text as an undercurrent, "rolling up" poetry out of a living history (*Paterson* 4).

The fulfillment of *Paterson*, then, appears ultimately inaccessible. No matter the vitality of the poem, the ceaseless torrent of the falls cannot finally be subdued and rendered fully in language: "The vague accuracies of events dancing two / and two with language which they / forever surpass—and dawns / tangled in darkness" (23). The light of dawn emerges from out of a darkness from which the poet cannot recover a thing. The depth of experience has already outstripped the language that is to give it form. The poet acknowledges his limits: "I am aware of the stream / that has no language, coursing / beneath the quiet heaven of / your eyes" (23). That silent stream remains "locked in the mind" (3).

However, the poet's desire also surpasses all restrictions. Though the ideal is locked in the mind, the quest continues on. Book II bears the fruit of this frustration.

Blocked.

(Make a song out of that: concretely) (62)

While *Paterson* began with a lofty end in mind, the second installment draws on the inaccessibility of this end as a spring for a fresh creative direction. In Book II the poet is stuck, split between the process and purpose of the work. Though the craving for contact does not subside, the natural elements of *Paterson* continue to surpass the language – “the lame stands” (3) aimless, taking one step forward, one back. And so the poet spends a “Sunday in the Park” (43) in an attempt to overcome the stasis of creative blockage by walking, walking into the world that is outside, in pursuit of a new direction.

Book II is punctuated by letters from a female poet that expand the problem of creative blockage and cast doubt on the foundations of the project. The letters, signed “La votre C.” in an allusion to Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, come from Marcia Nardi, a woman with whom Williams had carried out a correspondence regarding her poetry. The Nardi letters serve two main functions. For one, they address the blockage that has weighed upon the poet in Book II. However, they also introduce a pivotal moment into the poem by forcing the ethical and aesthetic conundrums of the work to the fore. Nardi’s heavy influence on the architecture and substance of *Paterson* arises out of the contact she makes with the thematic center of the text; as Elizabeth Murrie O’Neil remarks, “her letters so perfectly echoed the themes of his poem: the failure of love, the failure of communication, the alienation of the poet” (*The Last Word* xiii). The Nardi letters passionately unfold these themes with a distinctive depth of attachment that *Paterson* otherwise lacks, despite its insistent cry for “contact.” Was it for this reason that Williams declared in his notes:

“She has the last word”? (*The Last Word* ix)

Without a doubt, the Nardi letters made a decisive impact on the work, despite the fact that Nardi and Williams held different expectations from their correspondence and different conceptions of poetry. Although the long letter that concludes Book II develops these disagreements in a moment of frustration, their early encounters seem sympathetic: the night Nardi stumbled out of a storm and into Williams’ clinic, drenched and in desperate need for help, a meaningful exchange took place. She left several poems behind, which Williams edited and sent back to her in a gesture of support and encouragement. The correspondence that ensued saw Nardi attempting to develop a closer relationship with Williams, as she shared the troubles of her personal life that had overwhelmed her attempts at making a successful literary career. Williams responded with reticence, not wishing to play the confidant. He eventually cut off all communication, avoiding having to delve deeper into the details of Nardi’s tumultuous personal life.

Feeling personally rejected, Nardi launched a critique against Williams as an artist. She wrote that his coldness towards her had resulted in the sudden foreclosure of her creative abilities and a feeling of utter alienation from herself. This devastating rejection was, according to Nardi, a consequence of the errant way Williams thought of himself as a man and poet. In an attempt to bring her personal life to the promise of contact with the literary world, Nardi had been ousted; “Those very ideas and feelings which make one a writer with some kind of new vision, are often the *very same ones* which, in living itself, make one clumsy, awkward, absurd, ungrateful, confidential where most people are reticent, and reticent where one

should be confidential" (*Paterson*, 87). In the "clumsy" prose of her impassioned reach towards Williams, the female poet finds the heart of the matter in the moment she is exiled and silenced – "And they *are* the very same ones – that's important, something to be remembered at all times, especially by writers like yourself who are so sheltered from life in the raw by the glass-walled conditions of their own safe lives." (87) Nardi charges that Williams is removed from life lived in the elements, writing away yet all the while repressing the real material of the work from the work itself. The blockage that leads the poet outside, walking through the park in search of that inaccessible flower, is the result of the same exclusion that has blocked the female poet. In the frenzied search for the language that will give the place a voice, the poet has risked letting slip away the elements out of which his myths rise – the "silent stream," whose depth dwarfs even the towering falls above, has been neglected: "You've never had to live, Dr. P – not in any of the by-ways and dark underground passages where life so often has to be tested." (90) Out on his epic quest, Paterson is all too heroic.

Williams was happy to help Nardi with her poetry, offering himself as an ally in her uphill battle to make something of her literary career. Yet rejection followed when she asked for more than he could offer. With the inclusion of her letters in the work, however, Nardi's personal crisis is dialectically reversed into a crisis for Williams' art. Life and art have been split and face a confrontation, as the poem's collapse into extended prose at the conclusion of Book II reflects. Nardi charges in her letter: "If that situation with you... had belonged to the inevitable *lacrimae rerum*... its result could not have been (as it *has* been) to destroy the validity for me

myself of myself" (48). The things of which *Paterson* is composed are rolled up into the romantic myths at its center. The "tears of things," the "silent stream," are suppressed in the movement of Paterson's quest for completion; the demand for completion can only ruin the work;² the poem risks becoming stale if it cannot recapture the "life in the raw" out of which it emerges. Thus, woman's exclusion from the text becomes its central problem. Nardi responds to her exclusion with anger: "You might as well take all your own literature and everyone else's and toss it into one of those big garbage trucks of the Sanitation Department" (82). Williams responds ironically, including her letter in his great poem.³

But how could it be said that the female poet is excluded from the poem, given the powerful role the Nardi letters evidently play in the text? In a letter written several years after Book II was published, Williams wrote that Nardi's letters constituted "the 'woman's reply' to the hero of his poem and... that the writer... could conceivably be called 'Mrs. Paterson'" (*The Last Word* xiv). Nardi's voice then holds a pivotal role in the poem, but this voice is usurped by the roaring movement of the language developed throughout the work. Nardi's passion cannot withstand the rising strength of myth. In a letter included in Book I, Nardi describes herself as "more the woman than the poet" (*Paterson* 7). Mrs. Paterson is more concerned with living (7), she surpasses the language and is thus erased from the

² *Paterson*. 37: "P. Your interest is in the bloody loam but what / I'm after is the finished product. / I. Leadership passes into empire; empire begets in- / solence; insolence brings ruin."

³ In a letter to Horace Gregory, from Williams: "The purpose of the long letter at the end is partly ironic, partly 'writing' to make it plain that even poetry is writing and nothing else – so that there's a logical continuity in the art, prose, verse: an identity." From: *The Last Word*, 128.

text.

In a letter to a friend, Williams offers up his view of the role of the Nardi letters in his *Paterson*:

It is, as you see, an attack, a personal attack upon me by a woman. It seemed a legitimate one... In the first place it was a reply from the female side to my male pretensions. It was a strong reply, a reply which sought to destroy me. It was just that it should have its opportunity to destroy. If I hid the reply it would be a confession of weakness on my part (*The Last Word* xix)

Williams, finding the content of the attack carried out against him to be relevant, gives Nardi's letters an opportunity to strike by including them in the poem. However, the inclusion of the letters also poses a challenge to Nardi's "attack," which, despite its power, is overcome by the poet who has withstood the attack and appropriated the content for his own art. As Sandra Gilbert points out, Williams "adopted the brilliant strategy of Poe's Minister D – concealing the threat implied by the dangerous letters he had "purloined" by placing them so frankly in the open that no one would ever suspect their power" (Gilbert 9). The real content of the exchange between Williams and Nardi is shrouded in secrecy, though out in the open; the ironic challenge posed to Nardi by Williams is a test of whether or not the negativity of her critique can disrupt the romantic direction of Williams work. The violence of Nardi's attack has been subdued by her transformation "into a *character* and thus into a creature he could control, a creation of his own imagination" (9).

The romantic direction of *Paterson* is implied by its core aesthetic elements. This 'direction' is the reconciling ambition of a work focused on making contact between man and woman and thereby unifying the tensions within the work of art. The result of this reconciliation would be a poem "perfect in the special sense of the

poem" (*Autobiography* 391). This is the purpose of the creation of a character of the imagination that could subsume the polemical tensions of life under the perfection of a poetic myth. In a Kantian 'stroke of genius,' the great poet can access a "Beautiful Thing" in the originality of his language, in the process unifying the imagination with the locality and the particulars that give it form. Kant's aesthetic philosophy of the Genius had a heavy influence on the Romantic conception of nature; for the Romantics, the natural landscape held the moral and aesthetic character of 'man' himself within. Williams, by figuring the natural landscape through a lustful, romantic mythology of man's desire for woman, repeats the Romantic ideal of natural beauty and offers therein a classic conception of the "perfect poem." Mr. Paterson is, at least ideally, the Genius of Williams' work, striving for completion and fulfillment in his romantic quest for The Beautiful Thing. It is in this sense that I will be using the word "romantic" with regard to *Paterson*, despite the many clear differences between his work and classic Romanticism.

The passion and anger of Nardi's letters upend the initial romantic comfort in which Mr. Paterson begins his quest; Nardi's view of her role in *Paterson* differs from Williams' in the essentials: "(Williams) was aware of me *only* as a poet and not at all as a person, a human being – which is what the *Paterson* letters are all about, without his even realizing the nature of my 'attack' on him" (*The Last Word* xxiv). For Nardi, the attack against Williams was a matter of his failure to see her as a human being. The critique she poses cannot be reduced to the function of the woman's voice of the work responding to the male pretensions of the poet. Williams continues to miss the crucial content of the letters by *characterizing* her as Mrs.

Paterson; as Nardi writes with outrage, “My attitude towards woman’s wretched position in society and my ideas about all the changes necessary there, were interesting to you, weren’t they, in so far as they made for *literature*?” (*Paterson* 87). It was because Williams viewed her as a quintessentially female voice, rather than simply as a fellow poet and human being, that he neglected and crushed Nardi. Reflecting back on Williams’ neglect later in life, she asserted that the cause was the lack of sexual desire she provoked in Williams (*The Last Word* xxv) This strikes at the heart of Williams’ conception of the imagination; in Paterson, erotic desire is at the root of all possibility for contact. *Paterson* makes an attempt to craft a love story, between “a man like a city and a woman like a flower.”

The myth of Kore had long held a central place in Williams’ romantic conception of poetry. For Williams, it was an image central to the workings of the imagination, figuring in the succession of seasons a dialectic between defilement and purity, death and creative rejuvenation. In the tale of Kore, the vitality of nature becomes embedded with these antinomies of the human psyche, representing the contradictions of desire in the very lay of the land: “As Persephone, Bride of Hades, the figure became associated with the evils of the nether world, but as the Kore maiden she returns at springtime, reborn in her innocent virginity” (Rodgers 13). The return of springtime offers the promise of reconciliation with innocence, a possible collapse in the dual nature of femininity that would allow for the fulfillment of man’s desire.⁴ Thus, in the season of the imagination, the natural landscape rises

⁴ Rodgers details the symbolic structure of the opposites virgin and whore, and their figuration in Williams’ conception of the course of desire, as it is forked between perfections and particulars, purity and defilement.

up into a symbol of possible reconciliation between man and woman, the very symbol of beauty. However, this movement towards reconciliation is originally set in motion by an act of violence.⁵

In the romantic conception of nature the poet accesses beauty and truth at once, in a stroke of reconciling genius. Yet, in Paterson, “woman” strikes back with a blow of her own, undoing the pretensions to unity which structure the epic poem. The heroic view of the romantic poet offers up a conception of art that holds the possibility of subsuming the tragedy and violence of Kore’s tale into the redeeming beauty of the work. According to Williams, *Paterson* “shows the perverse conclusions that come of failure to untangle the language and make it our own as both man and woman are carried helplessly toward the sea (of blood) which, by their failure of speech awaits them. The poet alone in this world holds the key to their final rescue” (Rodgers 110). However, this final rescue proves ultimately impossible – the omniscience of the romantic poet is a delusion, a decorated veil under which the unbridled force of nature is concealed. Nardi’s impassioned letters violently disrupt the movement of the poet’s desire and demonstrate, in their raw emotional impact, those delusions. For the heroic Mr. Paterson, the contradictions of man, if given an identity, may give way to transcendence – through the imagination. The poet stands outside of man and woman, offering to rescue them with a language capable of making their aggrieved desires vocal. However, Nardi herself stands

⁵ “Williams believed the female principle provided the stimulus for the poetic imagination, as it had provided a stimulus for the courageous, sometimes rapacious, heroes who sought to capture the land – always female. The conquest of the new world... is the tale of Hades’ rape of Kore repeated unendingly in the subjugation of the American soil” (Rodgers 31).

outside of this formation, as a *female poet*. “Woman” emerges out of the text with a violent blow to the ego of Mr. P, rending the fabric of myth.

Thus, the inclusion of the Nardi letters pushes the poem in a radical direction. In *Paterson*, the relationship between man and woman has become polemical. The two are not in love, joined together happily in communion. Moreover: with the Nardi letters, we can no longer be said to be dealing merely with the frustration of *his* desire – *her* desire has been thwarted as well. In Book II, frustration becomes the condition for creative production. “Woman” is there not merely to console but to critique the resting giant caught unaware as he dreams. A woman’s voice has cut through the orphic fantasy into which Paterson had slipped, “head near the thunder / of the waters filling his dreams!” (*Paterson* 6). She is the source of critique, emanating negativity into the romantic world of Williams’ work.

To be sure, the heroic proportions of *Paterson* do not disappear with the introduction of “Mrs. Paterson.” The heroic stature of Mr. Paterson animates the entirety of the text, giving vitality to its romantic ambitions: as Rodgers notes, “permeating the five books of *Paterson* and into the uncompleted sixth, there is a poignant nostalgia for an idyllic past when man and woman, nature and the creative imagination existed in perfect harmony” (Rodgers 95). The artwork still strives for fulfillment, seeking its ideal despite the obstacles which give it pause – for Williams, “in the very lay of the syllables Paterson as Paterson would be discovered perfect, perfect in the special sense of the poem” (*Autobiography* 391). Yet what makes *Paterson* remarkable are its imperfections. Williams’ decision to tack a fifth book to the first four, despite their “achievement” of the initial ideal of the work, and to

continue work on the unfinished sixth installment, bears witness to the imperfect, incomplete character of *Paterson* which give it vitality.

When we speak the word "life", it must be understood we are not referring to life as we know it from the surface of fact, but to that fragile, fluctuating center which forms never reach. And if there is one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames (Artaud, "The Theater and it's Double").

Although Antonin Artaud has little historical relevance to Williams, his conception of art is germane to the critique of *Paterson* offered by Nardi. The passionate letters included in Book II challenge the poet to give life to art, to emphasize the "fluctuating center" of the text rather than play comfortably with its form.

In Book I, another letter is included that critiques Williams' conception of the poet. The writer is Edward Dahlberg, an American man of letters with an obvious penchant for unbridled writing. Dahlberg castigates Williams: "With you the book is one thing, and the man who wrote it another" (*Paterson* 28). If this separation were to be complete, the center of the work would all but disappear, becoming innocuous. "I have said the artist is an Ishmael... Ishmael means affliction" (28). For Dr. P the poet treats of the afflictions around which art is formed, offering in a Beautiful Thing a structure to repair the tears in the fabric of his world. The poet dallies with forms in order to find the proper treatment for affliction, a new formation to return the hysteria of particulars to perfection. In the process the poet forms a myth. Rising up out of the local in order to speak, the myth is all the more beautiful for its ephemeral form. Yet it remains hopelessly romantic to the core, striving to make contact and

find completion in a pure moment of rejuvenation, in the full uproar of spring – all the while the work erases life, banishing to obscurity the affliction around which it revolves. The Beautiful Thing is, in the end, equivalent to truth. But in this romantic formulation, beauty becomes boring – Artaud had it right: the beautiful should be blasphemous, singing through the leaping, flickering flames on the stake. As the Beautiful Thing is reduced to a form purified of its content and abstracted from its source, we find ourselves healed in an image, though this leaves the work unable to affect life. The real interest of art is to be found in the negativity it holds. Thus, Nardi's presence in *Paterson* – whether Williams intends it or not – functions as an opening onto the negative, afflicted center of the text, and thereby infinitely enlarges the work.

* * * * *

Appendix

(in the manner of Paterson, an interpolated letter)

Dear Professor,

To make a start – I'll write from affliction. And not for the sake of thetic consistency, nor out of a playful desire for self-reflexive control. I have to write from the first person simply because it's the only way salvage meaning (and maybe a dint of beauty!) out of this arduous writing process.

Ironically, the real inspiration of Nardi's letters lay in their form – they spill secrecy into Williams' text, giving a voice to the hysteria of particulars, though that voice remains "incommunicado." However fanciful it may sound on its surface,

O'Hara is right to say that writing must exist between two people, not two pages.

Nardi could only have broken through the text as she did, in the personal address of a letter. And so I write to you, April, out of real admiration and gratitude.

The "silent stream" of events dances about in a multitude of directions, going forth, crossing over, welling up and cutting back to its source – a moment of contact takes shape over time, building its meaning in a series of reflections and revisions. It's Sunday afternoon; I'm rushing to compose this letter and can't be sure of how it will come together, much less how it will be received. But I've grown convinced over the last couple weeks, as I've compiled my work on *Paterson* and felt it begin to course over the events unfolding in my life, that I've learned something truly significant from you, some mark was made – a root's been uprear'd and I want to thank you. I'll try to explain...

Under the weight of rejection, Nardi writes that she has been exiled from herself. The result for her was confusion of the will and total creative paralysis. This feeling is all too familiar and really requires no elaboration. Recently, I've been unable to read or write; my daily life has taken on that mechanistic exasperation of which Nardi speaks. I was worried (even somewhat embarrassed) that this problem would block my ability to do any justice to this paper and the work we've done all semester. But the other night, while I was reading one of her letters to Williams, I had a realization. It was a "Beautiful Thing," though it played out in a "minor" key, in the sense of including a finite and secret experience of beauty, as we had discussed during our last meeting. In any case, it was a fairly insignificant and speculative idea that had struck me, but I'm convinced of its essential content. I'll quote the letter in

full:

Whatever your reasons were for that note of yours and for your indifferent evasion of my letters just previous to that note – the one thing that I still wish more than any other is that I could see you. It's tied up with even more than I've said here. And more importantly, it is the *one* impulse I have that breaks through that film, that crust, which has gathered there so fatally between my true self and that which can make only mechanical gestures of living. But even if you should grant it, I wouldn't want to see you unless with some little warmth of friendliness and friendship on your part... Nor should I want to see you at your office under any circumstances. That is not what I mean (because I have no specific matter to see you about now as I had when I first called upon you as a complete stranger, nor as I could have had, just before your last note when I wanted so badly to have you go over some of my most faulty poems with me), I have been feeling (with that feeling increasingly stronger) that I shall never again be able to recapture any sense of my own personal identity (without which I cannot write, of course – but in itself far more important than the writing) until I can recapture some faith in the reality of my own thoughts and ideas and problems which were turned into dry sand by your attitude towards those letters and by that note of yours later. That is why I cannot throw off my desire to see you – not impersonally, but in the most personal ways since I could never have written you at all in a completely impersonal fashion (*Paterson* 76).

It matters little whether or not her desire was sexual or romantic in a conventional sense; Nardi here is telling Williams that she needs him more than anything, that she *loves* him. I'm absolutely convinced of it, although it's not an interpretation that can be made 'within the text' in any definitive way – it's just an intuition, although a very strong one. In any case, the uncertainty of this contact, or its concealment beneath the lay of the letters, is an imperfection responsible for the real force and complexity the Nardi letters introduce to the work. As I realized this, I felt the beauty of Nardi's letter reverberate in my own situation – it had been weeks (at least) since I had last been able to sit contented with a book, undistracted by a flood of externals. And it had been even longer, at least a number of months, since I had

been able to form a real discovery or moment for myself entirely alone, without a witness. The beauty of Nardi's letter, preserved though submerged in the text, is that – despite its secrecy, its negativity, its complete unfulfillment – it remains.

I thought back to the poems you shared with me, in particular “The root uprear'd shall be,” and the conversation we had about them. I said at the time that the poem had really struck me (in the way a great poem can feel like a personal address, without needing to force that frame – as in this letter), and not merely in a conceptual way. But I could only grasp this conceptually at the time in order to make it communicable: for me, it was the clear alternative to the abstractions of Williams' romantic notion of Beauty. It seems obvious that Beauty is not a general sum, a truth rolled up out of symbols and made accessible to the eye. Beauty is not bare, it must be explored and dug-up. Moreover, the craving for perfection destroys beauty, to be sure.

But then what is it? In the omniscience of a truly private moment, the “Beautiful Thing” emerges, though it is not immediate or accessible; it is auratic, a remainder of an operation undertaken alone. It is a product of affliction. It is the silent admission submerged in the “lacrimae” of Nardi's letter to Williams. And it is always developing, seasonally, as it goes forward, crosses over, wells up and cuts back to its source.

I hope it is not too forward to admit that I feel right now that this realization has saved me. That's what I mean when I say that I've grasped it non-conceptually. Recently, the craving for perfection had grown too strong, I had lost my “negative capability” and couldn't see how to make something of that “nothing” which is left

behind in the wake of grief. I've desperately needed a new perspective, a total revision. And this "realization" has left me with that feeling of equanimity distinctly related to the apprehension of beauty, which always happens afterwards, fluttering about in multiple directions (through time) before it alights on that treasured moment of clarity. *This waste's a richness yet.*

Thanks a million for working with me on Paterson this semester, it's been such a pleasure.

Yours,
Elliot

* * * * *

An unpublished poem by April Bernard:

"The root uprear'd shall be"

from a poem by Elizabeth I of England

Fingerlings that clawed the earth
and made of life a living death
in cataclysmic rainstorm jolt
and yank and, losing, loose their hold.
A crack: the parent fir-trees fall,
exposing root-fringe, dripping shawl.
Below, an opened cavern curls
into the singing underworld:
a beetle's buzzing purple back,
a chipmunk's whistle, and one black
eye in a hissing toothy face
that quickly disappears. A trace
of silver green, the lichen's pocked
fan, spreads across granitic rock;
bark sags from trunks, ribbands
loosened off the roll. The woodland
where these spires stood for centuries
has lost its faith: Now drizzle sees
the monuments dissolve, as every dint
and dimple, in fainting print
upon the path, wells up and smears.
Monarchs, firs, and saints are cleared
from childhood's familiar copse.
It's time to saw and split and lop
the branches. Ah--! Sunlight spills a jet
of gold. This waste's a richness, yet.

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