

THE PROTAGONIST OF *PATERSON*: CONTINUITY AND CONTINUATION

MARTA SIENICKA

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

Most of criticism dealing with William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* shows little or no concern with the possible continuation of the epic. This silence may be partly accounted for by the fact that a great number of critical works had appeared before the poem was extended by the addition of Book V. More recent criticism, however, either briefly mentions Book V and classifies it as a kind of thematic coda to the poem, structurally superfluous (W. S. Peterson) or limits the discussion solely to new themes emerging in Book V, without placing it in the overall structure of the poem (L. Martz). The project of Book VI has been negligibly ignored. This disregard indicates a serious gap in the discussion of the poem by belittling if not completely leaving out the question of its structural unity or wholeness. It is significant, however, that fragments of Williams' notes have been included in the last edition of *Paterson* (New Directions, 1963).

Certain basic difficulties in treating *Paterson* as a coherent whole are due to the shift in the principal assumption as to the character of the poem which from the originally planned tetralogy has grown into an open sequence similar to Pound's *Cantos*. And Williams himself has given the reasons for the alteration of his initial idea:

After *Paterson* IV ten years have elapsed. In that period I have come to understand not only that many changes have occurred in me and the world but I have been forced to recognize that there can be no end to such a story as I have envisioned with the terms which I had laid down for myself. I had to take the world of *Paterson* into a new dimension if I wanted to give it imaginative validity. Yet I wanted to keep it whole, as it is to me. As I mulled the thing over in my mind the composition began to assume form which you see in the present poem, keeping, I fondly hope a unity directly continuous with the *Paterson* of *Paterson* I to IV. (Williams 1958).

Moreover, the idea of the open sequence structure seems to be organically embedded in the poem's symbolism. When the river, symbolically representing the process of the poem, flows into the ocean, the poem reaches the point where, according to Williams' original idea, it was to end. However, in spite of the apparently final "the end" at the close of Book IV, the idea of continuing *Paterson* seems to have forced itself logically upon Williams. There are several indications in the earlier books that the work is to be an open sequence rather than a closed unit. The seemingly sudden reversal of movement, which is a turning point in the protagonist's quest and not an end, is actually foreshadowed in the Preface:

wash of seas-

.....

floating mists, to be rained down and
regathered into a river that flows
and encircles:

(Williams 1963:13)

The image of the river, starting from the sea and not, as in reality, from the source, implies a cyclic movement in the river as well as in the poem. Starting from the sea of imagination (the urge of poetic inspiration), the poet reaches down to the facts of real life for his source materials. In the course of the poetic process he embraces them, just as the river flowing through the country passes by various instances of real life encircling "shells and animalcules". Thus, following the river, the poet is able to see various facets of life and to ground his poetic performance in reality. Finally, at the end of Book IV, as he comes back to the initial phase, to the sea, the first circle of the cycle is closed. However, he does not end there, nor does he follow the river back to its source. He leaves the river and goes back inland. The first movement of the cycle represents the process of life, the poet taking an active part in it and, simultaneously, engaged in writing poetry. The return to the sea and plunging into its waters takes him back to the world of imagination and art. Yet, he does not stay away from life. After immersing in the Ocean, which in the language of the poem symbolizes death, not of the imagination but of that art which deliberately detaches itself from life, the protagonist of the poem goes back to the process of living. The different route pursued by the protagonist, which avoids the repetition of the previous cycle, suggests a different region to which the poetic inspiration takes him. He will dedicate himself to the quest for the understanding of life through art rather than action. The fact that he stays on earth is a guarantee that he will not abandon reality and will continue to root his ideas in facts. Moreover, the image of the man *moving* inland, implies that he is going to carry on with his quest, which he does in Book V.

Talking to Thirwall about the possible continuation of the poem, Williams said:

First I took the river to ocean, end, death. But you might logically say there should be an end. If I believe that life ends at a *certain time*, with a *certain completion of certain events*, then there should be an end. But as you recollect, as you look back to find a meaning, nobody knows anything about death and whether it is an end. It's a possibility that there's something more to be said. And so a poet writing about a possible consequence of his life after it has quieted down and lost its violence and, in recollection at least, ...there is something conceivable of thought. You reverse the reel... and play it again and listen to the overtones... When the river ended in the sea I had no place to go but back in life. I had to take the spirit of the river up in the air. (Thirwall 1959:69 - 70).

In following the river, the poet attempted to suggest "the completion of certain events" "at a certain time". He presented a process of actual living in time and space, and tried to understand it. Then, as an old man (when writing Book V, Williams was 65) with most of his life behind him, he abandoned the river of living, but continued his attempt to find the meaning of life. With vivid memories of the past, he reverses the cyclic reel and focuses on the world of imagination and art.

The ending of the river in the Ocean may suggest the death of the body (emphasized by the notion of the sea of blood). The man's emergence, however, suggests rebirth and survival. Consequently, Book V deals with the survival of imagination embodied in works of art and expresses artist's victory over physical death.

The main theme of Book V is "the world of art which through the years has survived" — art, both past and contemporary, European and American. The book is significantly dedicated to Toulouse-Lautrec. The unifying theme is the series of unicorn tapestries from the Cloisters Museum of New York City. Both the tapestries and Toulouse-Lautrec were mentioned in Book III part 2 and 1. These two are placed among generally unfavourable references to old art, which is an attitude characteristic of Book III. However, they are presented in a positive light.

The partial victory which the protagonist's imagination achieved in Book III, leads to the full recognition and the just appraisal of immortal works of art in Book V. The tapestries and Lautrec's paintings also provide major structural and thematic elements of Book V. These references to a few specific works of art suggest the broader theme of art in general and establish a basis for the introduction of the paintings of Breughel, Picasso, Juan Gris, Pollock, Ben Shan, Audubon, the plays of Lorca, the music of Beethoven, etc.

Furthermore, the subject matter of both Lautrec and tapestries help to continue the theme of male-female relationship and that of love and marriage. There is strong and unprecedented modification of Williams' use of

the female principle in the motif of virgin-whore which is taken from the tapestries and the art of Lautrec. The unicorn tapestries celebrate, in all probability, the marriage of Ann of Brittany to Louis XII. Ann is presented as the young wife and at the same time as the virgin of the unicorn legend. According to the legend the virgin was the only person in whose presence the otherwise extremely violent and unconquerable unicorn would become tame and easy to capture. Another meaning of the unicorn legend is associated with the Christian allegory of Incarnation: the unicorn symbolizing Christ, and the Virgin — Mary. There are various indications on the tapestries themselves that both interpretations were part of the original intent of the anonymous artists. The last (seventh) tapestry of the series represents the resurrected unicorn alone; with the visible signs of recent wounds he symbolizes the risen Christ; the enclosure symbolizes Virgin Mary and the Incarnation; the golden chain with which the unicorn is leashed is a symbol of marriage and the pomegranate trees symbolize fertility. Thus, side by side in the tapestries, we find both the Christian allegory and the celebration of the consummation of marriage (Rorimer 1963 : 162 - 75).

Williams' treatment of Breughel's presentation of the Nativity strengthens the link between virgin and whore. The art of Lautrec also contributes to the whore motif. All these themes, related to the various works of art, bring into focus certain human problems about love and sex which Williams consequently discusses. The virgin-whore identity is summed up in: "no woman is virtuous who does not give herself to her lover".

As has been pointed out the main point of interest of the protagonist of Book V lies in the treatment of problems concerning art. A considerable stress is put on the close relationship between the great art of any time and land and its local sources. This, in turn leads to a consideration of genuine and valid American art. Eventually, Paterson, himself an old poet, concentrates on the situation in modern American poetry, its future development, its relation to American reality (past and present) and to the American language. These passages on the Americans continue the poetic exploration of the artist and his problems, that is the theme which has run continuously throughout the poem starting with Book I.

The poem ends with the affirmation that poetry should be grounded in local reality and should function in accordance with the organic laws of a spoken, living language. This is, for Williams as well as for his protagonist, the only guarantee for the everlasting and universal import of poetry, as well as the only means of acquiring knowledge of life.

In the light of the poem one important reservation should be made: the stage of awareness at which the protagonist arrives at the end of Book V, although it expresses a final and conclusive truth, does not indicate the end of the quest. So long as life lasts one is in no position to reach final conclu-

sions or to attain a full knowledge of reality. Similarly, poetic form, which must reflect reality in order to be valid, is bound to undergo constant changes that are parallel to the process of life.

Williams made vague suggestions as to the possible extension of *Paterson* by adding Book VI as early as in 1952. In a letter to Louis Ginsberg of February 14, 1952 he mentions a bar on River Street in Paterson, New Jersey where Allen Ginsberg intended to take him, and plans to make it a central locale of this section of the poem. Moreover, in the letter of February 27, 1952 Williams adds that Allen Ginsberg "will be the center" and "*Metaphysics* at the head (as Tom (S. Eliot?) uses a quotation from some helpless Greek — in Greek — to precede his poem)" (Williams 1952). Yet, nothing of the facts mentioned above was employed in Williams' work-sheets for Book VI. These were discovered after his death.

The fact that Williams started to work on Book VI proves that he himself like his protagonist believed in the need for continuous revision of his opinions about life and art — in the reversal of the reel and listening to the overtones. A perpetual reappraisal of the human experience was, for Williams, the very springboard of artistic creation. Williams commented on the relative kind of ending he gave to *Paterson*: "we get to the end of the story and people expected perhaps a triumphal development at the end, which does not occur in life and will not occur in the poem" (Thirwall 1959 : 69 - 70).

To speculate on the possible character of the next persona of the protagonist and further development of his quest does not seem pointless in the light of the evidence of Williams' letters to Louis Ginsberg. Since Williams intended to make Allen Ginsberg the central figure of "this section of the poem", in all probability the young poet was meant as the next incarnation of Paterson. Nor does the choice seem haphazard. First of all, Ginsberg is strongly connected with the city since he was born and spent, at least, some time in Paterson, N. J. Secondly, he is a significant figure among the poets of the younger generation. Moreover, he has already appeared in Book V and, actually in the role of a young poet: namely, as the author of a letter to Paterson (explicitly to Williams) asking him, among others, to read his poem "Sunflower Sutra".

From these several points of view Ginsberg does continue the hitherto congruencies of the protagonist by being physically connected with the city as were all the previous personae, and by being a conscious poet like Paterson of Book V. The fact that in Book V he appears as a young poet asking advice on his own writings and obviously highly valuing the older poet, is significant for further elucidation of the nature of the prospective persona. After presenting the whole life cycle of Paterson — his past and present (the city's past and present, and the man's lifelong quest) it is possible that Williams foreseeing his physical death, planned to move into future with Ginsberg

becoming his spiritual son and artistic inheritor and himself acquiring the nature of Joycean consubstantial father.

As can be seen from the above, the structure and the theme of the protagonist would not collapse with such a continuation. To the contrary, the idea of a child has been present in the poem ever since the Preface, and looked at from the perspective of the present position, becomes more meaningful than at the outset of the poem. The following fragment seems to a foreshadowing of this direction of Paterson's progression:

It is the ignorant sun
 rising in the slot of
 hollow suns risen, so that never in this
 world will a man live well in his body
 save dying — and not know himself
 dying; yet that is
 the design. Renews himself

(Williams 1963:12)

In fact, at the end of Book V the protagonist has reached old age and expects death. His earlier attempts at finding clear-cut answers to his problems are wound up by a statement of relativity of all knowledge and accepting it as the only knowledge. „The design” and the renewal ring back “the ignorant sun” which at the beginning of the poem referred to Paterson of Books I - V, and now may be sensibly applied to a new sun (son), the earlier becoming the father who at the same time is one of the hollow suns (older sons of the immortal giant). The father-son interdependence re-appearing at this stage emphasizes the structural consistency of the poem not only by continuing one of the chief characteristics of the giant's nature but also by pointing again to the peculiar relevance of the Latin and Germanic “father” and “son” of the title.

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