

# “The Poem is the World”

## *Re-Thinking Environmental Crisis Through William Carlos Williams’ Paterson*

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In his 2002 book *Greening the Lyre: Environmental Poetics and Ethics*, David Gilcrest argues that our attitudes toward the natural environment will only change as a result of “environmental crisis” (22). Although this prediction is apt, as evidenced by the rise of resistance to environmentalism over the past two decades, it implies that such environmental crisis must physically devastate the Earth before action will be taken.<sup>1</sup> Such a model of apocalyptic environmental activism, however, has proven to be ineffective. Many contemporary readers are turned off by this brand of environmentalism because it predicts disaster without the hope of preventing it. As such, I would like to think about how Gilcrest’s claim can be examined through the poetry of William Carlos Williams, one of the best-known American poets of the twentieth century. In this paper I will argue that ecopoetics in William Carlos Williams’ long poem *Paterson* allows crisis to occur in a text, creating both a material and potentially allegorical poetic experience for the historically situated contemporary reader. I will consider how language becomes material in the text and argue that the physicality of the words, which appear to be formally and structurally impacted by the

natural disasters described in the text, may function as allegory for present-day environmental concerns. I will argue that *Paterson*’s power as both a material and allegorical text may resonate in ecopolitically meaningful ways.

William Carlos Williams is often seen as a proto-ecopoet. Writing well before the rise of mainstream environmentalism in America, Williams’ integration of ecological concern into his poetry is unparalleled by his contemporaries. In *Paterson*, one of Williams’ later book-length poems, the union of the imagined poetic world and environmental crisis is most evident. Divided into five books and set in Paterson, New Jersey, a neighbour to Williams’ hometown

of Rutherford, *Paterson* uses language as a physical force that is impacted on the page by the environmental catastrophes that plagued Paterson. In other words, Williams integrates real disasters into his imagined poetic world and allows the text’s meaning to be altered, confused, and sometimes destroyed by them. As the text is impacted by the poetic space and the historical documents embedded within it, readers are encouraged to intertwine the real and the poetic realms. In doing so, they become aware of the ways in which *Paterson* acts both materially and allegorically. Its material significance emerges through words that stand in as physical objects, thus demonstrating the interconnections between the

real and the imagined. The book’s allegorical power lies in its potential to evoke the historically situated reader’s responses to recent environmental disasters through the formal and linguistic havoc of poetic crises. As such, *Paterson* gains ecopolitical power by encouraging readers both to acknowledge the prospect of utter devastation through textual catastrophe and to allow the allegory to inform his or her interpretation of environmental threats.

Allegory has long been used as a tool for inspiring social and political change. In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, Ursula Heise considers allegory as a method of gauging perceptions of the environment and its future. Looking specifically at how the image of the blue planet has influenced contemporary environmental attitudes, Heise highlights the value of allegory to inspire such change. She argues that “the influence of the image of the Blue Planet floating in space is palpable in ... conceptualizations of Earth as a spaceship with finite resources for survival, an allegory that highlights the sophistication and fragility of this extremely complex system as much as its self-enclosure” (25). In this sense, a particular representation of the Earth reveals something that we had not

previously considered. Like Heise’s *Blue Planet*, Williams’ *Paterson* raises awareness about the frailty of the real world through an artistic project. In relation to environmentalism, allegory seems to be an effective strategy because it reveals the importance of change without becoming admonitory.

Despite the presence of allegory in environmentalist discourse, critics have not read Williams’ work as an allegory for current environmental crises because it was written before most pressing contemporary environmental issues became evident. To be clear, this article does not argue that Williams attempted to write an allegory of problems that were not yet realized during his time, but rather that the book’s themes of environmental destruction and crises may be useful in understanding the devastating consequences of the contemporary environmental crisis and in promoting personal and political change. Although most scholars have not yet read *Paterson* as an allegory, many have pointed toward both Williams’ concern for the environment and the connections

the ability of language to integrate human and city, nature and poem, material reality and text (115). The blurring of this distinction between the physical world and the poetic realm in *Paterson* and its material and allegorical impact on the reader who is thoroughly grounded in their own social, material, and historical context, allows him or her to more readily register the ongoing environmental problems that face the world today.

This fusion of the physical with the poetic environment in *Paterson* is largely explained by understanding how Williams fits within the genre of ecopoetics, a branch of nature poetry that typically uses unique formal structures to convey a lived experience in text. In a seminal text on ecopoetics, *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets*, Leonard Scigaj argues that ecopoets “record moments of nondualistic inhabitation in specific places where the experience occurs only when the noise of human ratiocination, including the fabrications of language, has been silenced” (8). Scigaj explains ecopoetry as a record of oneness between humans and their

contends that it is a mode of activism. In fact, ecopoetry is often somewhere in between these two poles. Ecopoets frequently seek environmental change, but they do so through radical new poetic forms and perspectives on nature. This is perhaps best illustrated in Williams’ writing as he deploys words as material objects, but in doing so, creates a poem with real-world implications. In earlier short poems like “The Wind Increases” and “Rain,” and in one of his most popular later poems—*Paterson*—language attains a materiality as Williams uses words as objects and allows natural forces to shape the spatial arrangement of the text. Through the poetic world, the reader sees the effects of disasters at the local level. Rather than witnessing a flood that obliterates an area too far removed from the viewer’s psyche to warrant real concern or action, the poem demonstrates the utter destruction brought on by disaster within the more accessible poetic world that the words create. For readers who are experiencing the ways in which climate change has been environmentally and socially devastating, *Paterson* may inspire ecopolitical awareness and action.

The interplay between the poem and its physical environment is represented both contextually and formally. In *Paterson*, poetic language and landscape become interrelated as reality is expressed through the imagination and the two forces begin to act upon each other:

The province of the poem is the world.  
When the sun rises, it rises in the poem  
and when it sets darkness comes down  
and the poem is dark (Williams 100)

The “sun rises” and “sets” on the poem, as it sets on the planet. The poem, then, is not only a space for words on the page, but it is a place in itself, a “world” of imagined reality. In *Metaphor in the Poetry of Williams, Pound, and Stevens*, Suzanne Juhasz observes that “the use of metaphor in this passage makes the point, too, by insisting that the world of the poem is the real world ... The poem stands halfway between the mind and the external world” (219). As the

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between the physical and the poetic worlds in *Paterson*. This critical attention signals the poet’s profound interest in the environmental disasters that occurred during his lifetime and allows for further extrapolation of how the historical events represented in the book might inform today’s reader as he or she confronts new waves of environmental devastation. Lawrence Buell and Lee Rozelle have interpreted Williams’ conflation of man and city as a shift from traditional anthropocentric writing to an ecocentric poetics in which the human body and the environment interrelate.<sup>2</sup> According to Buell, the poet’s “desire to break down fixed boundaries between man [sic], poet, [and] dog” reflects not only humanity’s union with nature but also

environment, in which reason, language, thought, and even the self are “silenced” (8). The ecopoem is, then, a place in which a moment in the materiality of the world is preserved. J. Scott Bryson, on the other hand, positions ecopoetics more in line with allegory when he argues that it is overtly political. In *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, Bryson observes that ecopoetics involves “an intense skepticism concerning hyperrationality, a skepticism that usually leads to an indictment of an overtechnologized world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe” (5-6). While Scigaj argues that ecopoetry is primarily about expressing an experience with as little distortion from human language and thought as possible, Bryson

external and imagined worlds become fused within poetry, they begin to interact. When the sun "rises" and "sets" on the poem it makes the poetic world "dark." The relationship between the poetic and physical worlds continues throughout "Book Three" of *Paterson*, making the boundaries between the physical and the imagined increasingly indefinable.

Throughout the book, pieces of the physical world, including documents from both the poet's personal collection and historical records of the city, are placed within the poem. In "William Carlos Williams: Value and Form," Jim Philip observes that in *Paterson* "we are offered a variety of other American languages, varying from local histories to political tracts to personal letters" (67). The included documents are not

the poet's imaginative creations but are records of individual experience and history. The inclusion of these materials places a piece of real-world experience within the world of the poem, once again conflating the real and the imagined. This deliberate obfuscation allows for critical thinking around the assumed realness of historical documents and the potential realness of the poetic realm. The direct impact of reality upon language is demonstrated in "Book Three" with the environmental crises of wind, fire, and flood, which appear to impact the words on the page. The placement of historical detail is important to consider. In *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked*, Paul Mariani explains that "Williams was only eighteen when fire destroyed nearly all of old Paterson, and what was left of the city the swollen, frenzied Passaic had swept away a month later when the spring thaws came" (583). This historical detail demonstrates that even the natural forces of the poem are based on the personal experiences of the people living in Paterson.

Words become more than symbolic representations; they become physical things when the language and form of the poem are shaped by the elements described within the text. This progression toward a language of physicality is explicated as a destructive fire runs through section two of "Book Three" and begins to alter poetic language:

like a mouse, like  
a red slipper, like  
a star, a geranium  
a cat's tongue or –

thought, thought  
that is a leaf, a  
pebble, an old man  
out of a story (Williams 117)

In this particular poem, the speaker departs from a language of pre-established meaning. Although Williams begins with a simile that equates the object with a symbolic meaning, the poet then grants those objects material substance. "Thought" becomes a "leaf," or a "pebble" rather



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than simply taking on the likeness of those things. In "The Eco-poetics of Perfection: Williams Carlos Williams and Nature in *Spring and All*," Josh Wallaert observes that "[F]or Williams the word is no longer (only) a sign, or a point of reference to the natural world. It is a thing in itself, a thing to be picked up, looked at, taken apart, laughed at and embraced in its materiality" (81). In this sense, as the fire grows more uncontrollable and more destructive, the words move closer to becoming the things themselves rather than representations of things.

The physical role of the words on the page becomes most significant in the final section of "Book Three." The speaker begins with a warning about the materiality of language: "It is dangerous to leave written that which is badly written. / A chance word, upon paper, may destroy the world" (129). In "A Poetics of Marginality and Resistance: The Objectivist Poets in Context," Burton Hatlen observes that the "word" has the power to "destroy" because Williams strives "to treat words not merely as symbols that stand in for things, but as things in their own right" (43). The word acts upon reality precisely in its role in the physical existence of the poem. This physicality continues to be represented in environmental terms: "Write carelessly so that nothing that is not / green will survive" (Williams 129). Thus, the poet advocates for the survival of all that is "green." Nature is not a subject of Williams' writing but a function of his poetics; for him, words are not merely representational but they are physical pieces of the natural world—pieces that can be changed, damaged, or even destroyed by natural disaster. Such materiality of words allows their destruction through environmental catastrophe in the poem to act as an allegory for the reader—as the material words in the poem are obliterated by disaster, the physical world is revealed as equally vulnerable.

The interrelated existence of imagination and reality is confirmed with the arrival of the flood in "Book Three" of *Paterson*. As Dr. Paterson, the physical manifestation of the city

that the poet refers to throughout the book, reads about the flood there is "a counterpart, of reading" which causes the written language to impact physical reality (130). This breakdown of the binary between the real and the imagined is exposed when reading about the flood and causes it to become a force in the poem and again as the poetry is integrated into the documents that surround it. Mariani argues that "the imagination is illuminated by the unstable processive activity of encountering the living gist of the matter" (583). Although these encounters with "living" matter occur throughout *Paterson*, this section integrates reality and imagination through immediate responses between the poetry and the prose. One such instance occurs in the third section of "Book Three" as the prose document states: "When the cat comes,' said he to his wife, 'do you point out just where it is, and I will shoot at that spot'" (133). The poetry directly responds to this prose: "What a picture of marital fidelity! Dreaming as one" (133). The intermingling of the prose documents taken from the city's past and the poet's own life with the imagined poetic world reveals the ways in which the two worlds can inform one another.

This interconnection of the real world and the poetic realm becomes a central concern of this section when Dr. Paterson's experience of reading about the flood begins to impact the poem: "the water two feet now on the turnpike / and still rising" (135). His reading continues to build until the speaker announces that the

Hi, open up a dozen, make  
it two dozen! Easy girl!  
You wanna blow a fuse?  
All manner of particularizations  
to stay the pocky moon :  
January sunshine .  
1949  
Wednesday, 11  
(10,000,000 times plus April)  
—a red-buttèd reversible minute-glass  
loaded with  
salt-like white crystals  
flowing  
for timing eggs

flood is "undermining the railroad embankment" (136). The water is, in fact, "undermining" the entire form of the poem. In the most radical formal shift of *Paterson*, the environmental crisis of a flood takes complete control over the text.

The primary point of interest in this section is its dramatic form. The "water" that has been building as Dr. Paterson reads finally becomes not only a linguistic force, but also a formal one. The words move beyond their linguistic associations and become unique in their placement upon the page. Just as the flood disrupts the "railroad embankment," it demolishes the structure of the page. Juhasz observes that "[Book Three] is the book of water and flood, which descends to the mud of the river bottom, not only to the divorce of language from object but to the depths of inarticulateness" (232). As words become enmeshed with the forces of nature, they are completely removed from their symbolic associations and begin to embody the force itself. The flood acts upon the physical structure of the words on the page just as a flood would act upon the physical environment.

Following the flood, the poem is disrupted when Williams inserts a letter and an historical record of water levels at a Paterson well (139). Although many things remain after the flood, everything has been radically altered: "When the water has receded most things have lost their / form. They lean in the direction the current went. Mud / covers them" (140). As the objects of Paterson lose their form they take on a new existence. In Williams' poetics, this shift in language is important because it illustrates his ongoing struggle to refresh words and escape the limitations of pre-established usages. However, I am more interested in how the flood's dramatic affect on the text allegorizes the environmental issues that we face today. In *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* John Felstiner asks the title question and concludes, "[f]or sure, person by person, our earthly challenge hangs on the sense and spirit that poems can awaken" (357). Poems awaken by making the reader aware of something

that he or she might otherwise miss. The utter destruction of form and structure that is acted on the poetic world by the flood highlights the extent to which an environmental crisis could overturn everything with which we are familiar. The flood, like the other environmental crises presented in *Paterson* acts as an allegory for the ways in which those potential crises could devastate our lives. Felstiner argues that this is possible in poetry specifically because it “hold[s] things still for a moment, [and] make[s] us mindful of fragile resilient life” (357). As *Paterson* holds the devastating effects of the flood still, crisis resonates with the reader in new ways whether or not they have experienced such a crisis firsthand, potentially inspiring the reader to enact preemptive change.

With this representation of the devastating effects of environmental crisis, the book also engages in a number of warnings regarding the acceptance and acknowledgment of crisis, which resonates with contemporary ongoing debates over environmental concerns like climate change. Both the fire and the flood, in their destruction, are forces that catalyze change rather than bring apocalypse. The flames do not eliminate matter, but instead the flames:

Of which we drink and are drunk and  
in the end  
are destroyed (as we feed). But the  
flames  
are flames with a requirement, a belly  
of their  
own that destroys – as there are fires  
that smolder  
smolder a lifetime and never burst  
into flame (117)

Pointing to the destructive elements of the fire, the speaker highlights its ability to slowly destroy. As he points to “fires that / smolder” but “never burst / into flame,” the speaker emphasizes the ability of a disaster to devastate without ever reaching a point where it demands attention. By never bursting into flame, the fire smolders undetected, continuing on its path of destruction.

To a contemporary reader, the ability of the fire to go ignored resembles the lack of attention given to the global warming crisis. In *Merchants of Doubt*, which addresses the seemingly mysterious inattention to climate change, Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway quote from a United States Supreme Court hearing in which Justice Antonin Scalia misspoke “at one point referring to the stratosphere when he meant the troposphere” (2). When a lawyer corrected him, Justice Scalia responded, “[t]roposphere, whatever. I told you before I’m not a scientist. That’s why I don’t want to deal with global warming” (qtd. in Oreskes and Conway 2). This moment reveals the appalling ambivalence to climate change that endures, especially in the most economically powerful nations. As the fire smolders in the poem, the speaker states: “You lethargic, waiting upon me, waiting for / the fire” (Williams 126). The addressee here is identified as lethargic and unwilling to take action. Instead, he or she awaits a solution while the fire moves closer. By pointing toward the lunacy of inaction, *Paterson* inspires the reader to consider his or her own choices as it juxtaposes the continued destruction that accompanies the willful ignorance to issues like climate change, evidenced by Justice Scalia’s dismissal of the problem as too difficult, with the possibility of positive change.

When read as an allegory, *Paterson* reveals the kind of devastation that the world is already experiencing and will continue to face in the future. Unprecedented storms and flooding have distressed much of the world and strange weather occurrences have become almost commonplace, yet many people continue to sit stagnant, waiting for a solution to appear with little effort and no inconvenience. Today, more than ever, the effects of climate change are becoming irrefutable. In Australia, the summer of 2012-2013 brought record high temperatures and an “ongoing heat wave that has sparked highly destructive wildfires, has forced weather forecasters to add new colours to their weather maps to indicate when the mercury rises above

50C” (McGrath). In the poem, such catastrophic environmental events bring not only the poetic destruction of comprehension, form, and individual words, but also words that act as physical objects. However, reading the book’s environmental crises allegorically allows us to recognize present day environmental concerns more readily and highlights the losses that lie ahead if we allow Gilcrest’s prediction of crisis to come true. The prevailing culture of environmental apathy in consumer society makes the threat of mass environmental devastation increasingly imminent. However, Williams’ material eco-poetics throughout *Paterson* allows the reader to imagine the consequences of such inaction and to rethink the ways in which they are implicated in environmental crisis. While *Paterson* is not inspired by a personal environmental activist impulse, the poem demonstrates Williams’ interest in the poetic movements of objectivism and imagism, and draws upon modernist literary traditions by investigating the boundaries of the physical and the imagined with particular attention to ecological thought. *Paterson* shows us that waiting for environmental apocalypse to force the world “to begin to begin again,” is an unsustainable model for the planet’s future (Williams 140). For the contemporary reader *Paterson* provides a unique material and allegorical experience. While Williams was aware that “a chance word, upon paper, may destroy the world” his poem gives the reader many words upon many pages that may do just the opposite (129).

## Notes

1. This resistance to scientific evidence of environmental issues is discussed at length in Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway’s 2011 book, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*, which examines how and why people resist global warming.
2. In *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (2001), Lawrence Buell argues that Williams utilizes “metaphor to convey symbiosis between human, biological, and artifactual, and ... learned

how to turn people into trees or flowers or beasts and back again, to turn a tumbling sheet of paper into a man and back again" (110). In this sense, Buell observes a link between material reality and text in Paterson. Lee Rozelle builds upon Buell's

argument in *Ecosublime: Environmental Awe and Terror from New World to Oddworld* (2006). He rightly argues that "[c]entral to Paterson is the idea that body, place, and city interrelate directly—the molecular, the natural, and the urban" (Rozelle 44).

Rozelle views the city as an extension of self and thus the integration of man and city is a shift toward a sustainable ecological poetics.

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