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Writing Dialogues, Reading Myths: Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and the Publication of *Kora in Hell*

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Between 1909 and 1920, William Carlos Williams published in many literary magazines and managed to produce three books of poems despite his busy professional life as a doctor. However, the publication of the book *Kora in Hell* in 1920 marked a turning point in Williams' career, as the volume, a collection of poetic prose fragments dedicated to Williams' wife, Florence Herman, inaugurated a new creative period for the poet. The texts gathered in *Kora in Hell* resemble the prose poems written by the French symbolists, and reflect diverse genres and influences that expand the boundaries of traditional conceptions of the literary text. The history of *Kora in Hell*'s writing and publication shows the influence of literary dialogues exchanged with Ezra Pound, and of writers such as Arthur Rimbaud, Pietro Metastasio, E.W. Sutton Pickhardt, and Homer, in whose "Hymn to Demeter" lies the explanation of the myth of Kora, a disturbing evocation of spring and fertility.

In October 1917, the American literary magazine *The Little Review*, edited by Margaret Anderson, published three prose fragments by Williams, under the title "Improvisations" (IV. 7: 19). By this time, Williams was no stranger to the literary world. Before the publication of the Improvisations in *The Little Review*, he had already published the book *Poems* in 1909 at his own expense, *The Tempers* in 1913, and *Al Que Quiere!* in 1917, and participated actively in poetry readings and theatre performances in Rutherford (New Jersey), his hometown, where he lived and practised medicine. He was no stranger to English and American literary periodicals either, as his poems had been published in the "little magazines" *The Poetry Review*, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, *Rogue*, *The New Freewoman*, *The Poetry Journal*, *The Egoist*, *Others*, and *The Masses*.

Three months later, in the January 1918 issue of *The Little Review*, Margaret Anderson published some more "Improvisations" by Williams, which occupied the first seven pages of the magazine (IV. 9: 3-9) and a prologue followed in two parts in April and May 1919.[1] In June 1919, *The Little Review* published some more Improvisations, but this time with explanatory remarks by the author (VI. 2: 52-59). To the Improvisations printed in *The Little Review* between 1917 and 1919, Williams added unpublished fragments and a revised prologue, and sent the volume to the Four Seas Company, in Boston, for publication. The book came out on 1 September 1920, with the title *Kora in Hell*. A few years before his death,

in an interview given to Edith Heal, gathered in the volume *I Wanted to Write a Poem* (1958), Williams described how the Improvisations were written:

> For a year I used to come home and no matter how late it was before I went to bed I would write something. And I kept writing, writing, even if it were only a few words, and at the end of the year there were 365 entries. Even if I had nothing in my mind at all I put something down, and as may be expected, some of the entries were pure nonsense and were rejected when the time for publication came. They were a reflection of the day's happenings more or less, and what I had had to do with them (Williams 1978, 27).

Unlike the previous poems, written as early as 1906, characterised by strong influences of poets such as John Keats or Percy Bysshe Shelley, and late romantic imagery and tropes, the Improvisations turned out to be, as Joseph Riddel described, "exemplary avant garde art, and … deconstructions of the tradition" (20). *Kora in Hell* consisted of twenty-seven sections of mainly three parts (section XI is the only exception with only two parts) followed usually by a text in italics. Originally, it was Williams' intention to write one fragment a day, and publish the collected texts as such. Later, he decided to write an explanatory remark on each fragment, a technique shown in the June 1919 issue of *The Little Review*. The choice of a specific structure for the book, as well as broader semantic influences, stemmed from conversations and epistolary dialogues on things literary with the poet Ezra Pound, a close friend of Williams'.

Williams and Pound met in 1902 when they were both students at the University of Pennsylvania, and they developed a friendship marked by controversy, but one that would last until Williams' death in 1963.[2] Although Pound moved to Europe in 1908, the two poets kept in touch, and Pound played a paramount part in Williams' initial literary education. In a letter to Pound dated 22 April 1954, Williams, at seventy-one years of age, acknowledged the importance of their literary friendship with these words:

> Ain't it enuf that you so deeply influenced my formative years without your wanting to influence also my later ones?… You are a reader, a man who has looked into almost every book that exists, while I at best have been an imperfect reader (Thirlwall 324).

Pound's advice to Williams was present in many of Williams' early writings. Although most critics admit that *Kora in Hell* seems to initiate a new period in Williams' career, at all levels more independent from Pound, it still shows the influence of the author of the *Cantos*. Pound's reading recommendations influenced the structure the Improvisations acquired in the book form, as Williams recalls:

> I was groping around to find a way to include the interpretations when I came upon a book Pound had left in the house, *Varie Poesie* dell' Abate Pietro Metastasio, Venice, 1795. I took the method used by the Abbot of drawing a line to separate my material. First came the Improvisations, those more or less incomprehensible statements, then the dividing line and, in italics, my interpretation of the Improvisations. The book was broken into chapters, headed by Roman numerals; each Improvisation numbered in Arabic (Williams 1978, 26-27).

However, the interpretations were not helpful in reading the Improvisations, as Williams acknowledged in a new prologue to an edition of the book by the San Francisco publishing house, City Lights, published on 1 August 1957.[3] In a letter to Williams, dated 11 September 1920, Pound stated, after reading *Kora in Hell*, that "[t]he italics at any rate don't detract. Not that they, in many cases, much explain the matter either" (Witemeyer 41). The explanatory commentaries, that sometimes interrupted the Improvisations, were not necessarily related to the fragments, and became part of the literary innovation Williams was seeking. The first fragment of part XI is a good example of the new techniques Williams was searching for:

> Why pretend to remember the weather two years back? Why not? Listen close then repeat after others what they have just said and win a reputation for vivacity. Oh feed upon petals of edelweiss! one dew drop, if it be from the right flower, is five years' drink!
>
> *Having once taken the plunge the situation that preceded it becomes obsolete which a moment before was alive with malignant rigidities* (Williams 1970, 51).

In the Improvisation, the process of evoking different times and spaces is articulated as an exercise of memory needed for writing the literary text. The poetic originality does not really exist, as everything that is written is a way of "repeat[ing] after others what they have just said," but the conscious process of drawing from texts written by others lead to the admiration of individual "vivacity." By the moment the new text is published, the one that influenced it (and probably written "five years" before) becomes "obsolete" as the interpretation suggests. Nevertheless, the interpretation stands as a comment outside the temporal and spatial dimensions of critical analysis as it suggests that any literary text becomes obsolete insofar as it influences a new text by a later writer. The "malignant rigidities," which can be interpreted as the commendation of the texts by critics and poets, are superseded by new interpretations and criticism on a new text by a new author. In this sense, the conscious articulation of literary influences, as Williams clearly acknowledged by admitting to the influence of several writers, is a way to overcome the obsolete concept of literary originality.

Joseph Riddel describes the process of awareness of literary expression used in the Improvisations thus:

> If *Kora* progresses by the alternation of improvisation and commentary, the latter does not clarify or illuminate the former. On the contrary, the commentary more often complicates than simplifies the improvisation, by giving it a meaning which distorts its original openness and opaqueness. As it brings the improvisation to the order of explanation, it destroys the coherent nonsense of the verbal play, that unity of sense which is the concealed unity (passion) of expression itself (218-19).

When it comes to the debate about the Improvisations, the writings of Pietro Metastasio that inspired the division between Improvisation and commentary were not the only influence in terms of form. The prose poems by the French symbolists also played a paramount role as influences of what others "have just said" concerning poetic diction. In the same letter from 11 September 1920, Pound declares that *Kora in Hell* was "more incoherent than Rimbaud's Saison en Enfer … " (Witemeyer 41). Similarly, in 1929, in the book *L'Influence du Symbolisme Français Sur La Poésie Américaine*, René Taupin admits that Williams depended on Pound for news on contemporary French poetry, and that the Improvisations were written "very much in the manner of the *Illuminations* of Rimbaud" (240). Williams himself acknowledged this influence in 1923, in *The Great American Novel*, by admitting, once more, the recurrent cycles of literary influence in terms of form:

> Take the improvisations: What the French reader would say : *Oui, ça; j'ai déjà vu ça; ça c'est de Rimbaud*. Finis.
>
> Representative American verse will be that which will appear new to the French … prose the same (Williams 1970, 167).

This influence would also be acknowledged in the 1957 prologue, when Williams confirmed that he had been "familiar with the typically French prose poem … " (Williams 1970, 29).

It is unquestionable that Williams was familiar with the descriptions of personal dejection in the prose fragments of *Les Illuminations*. Rimbaud's book had been written between 1873 and 1875 with the significant title of *Poèmes en Prose*, and was published in

1886 by Publications de la Vogue with a short introduction by Paul Verlaine. It seems clear that Williams followed Rimbaud's structure in the first edition of *Les Illuminations*, as this edition is also divided into sections of texts that could, in some cases, show sub-divisions with Roman numerals, comprising different genres, such as prose, lyrics, and drama.

Williams may have had his first contact with Rimbaud through Pound, or he might have read the original in French, as English translations of Rimbaud's poems were apparently not published until 1920. In her discussion of Rimbaud's influence in Williams' *Kora in Hell*, in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, Marjorie Perloff declares, "Rimbaud's *Season in Hell* and *Illuminations* … appeared for the first time in English translation in the [July] 1920 *Dial*, side by side with six of Williams' own shorter lyrics" (110). Mike Weaver mentions an English translation of *Les Illuminations* by Helen Rootham, but does not offer a date for its publication, and fails to clarify if Williams had been familiar with such editions (42).

Undoubtedly, the most important text to influence *Kora in Hell* was the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter." The hymn played a crucial role in the selection of a title for the volume, and for the ubiquitous images of regeneration of nature. Joseph Riddel acknowledges that "Homer, the figurative first poet, is central to Williams' thematic" (5), and it is most certain that Williams was familiar with Homer and the story of the goddess Demeter and her daughter Kora, or Persephone, through his contact with Ezra Pound, who had studied the Greek myths and used them in his poetry. In 1911, Pound published the book *Canzoni*, in London, with an epigraph by Propertius, "Quos ego Persephone maxima dona feram," and dedicated the volume to Olivia and Dorothy Shakespeare, his future wife and mother-in-law. Throughout the "canzoni" of the book, Pound explored the theme of the connection between mother and daughter as inspired by Demeter and Persephone.

Homer's hymn had been translated into English more than once and it was widely available to English and American readerships. There had been a translation of Homer's Hymns in 1625 by George Chapman, and two of the "Hymn to Demeter" in 1781, by Richard Hole, and R. Lucas. Both Hole and Lucas used a defective edition of the hymn published in Leiden in 1780 that omitted 21 lines. It was not until 1891 that J. Edgar published *The Homeric Hymns Translated into English Prose*, in Edinburgh, with a new complete version. However, the most famous translation, and the one that probably Pound and Williams read, was by Andrew Lang, published in London in 1899.

According to the story told in the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter," Kora, Demeter's daughter by Zeus, was abducted by Hades, her father's brother, with the assent of Zeus himself, while picking flowers in a meadow, and was taken to the Underworld, or Hell, where she was to rule as queen. After being told by Hecate of the abduction, Demeter searched for Kora but did not succeed in bringing her back. When Demeter withheld seasons and crops, causing hunger and thirst to the humans, Zeus sent Hermes to the Underworld, and Hermes managed to rescue Kora. However, Hades had tricked his wife by making her eat some sweet pomegranate seeds that would make her stay. After learning from this situation, the gods decided that Kora was to spend a third part of the year with him in the Underworld and two third parts of the year with her mother in the upper world.[4]

The myth of Persephone is an interpretation of the cycle of the seasons, and of the alternation between life and death. For the months of winter, when Kora lives in the Underworld, nature lies dead and fruit is frozen; but when she ascends from the darkness of Hades to keep her mother company on earth, she brings spring with her, and nature celebrates her arrival and is reborn. Kora's abduction and rape by Hades was described in cults throughout the Greek world, where she also stood as a representation of the predicaments of

marriage from the viewpoint of the young girl. Her marriage to Hades was worshipped and she was regarded as the protector of marriage and the woman's sphere, including the protection of children.

In the prologue to the 1957 edition of *Kora in Hell*, Williams admitted that the rape of Persephone or Kora had been familiar to him from an early age, but to Edith Heal Williams confessed that he was "indebted to Pound for the title. We had talked about Kora, the Greek parallel of Persephone, the legend of Springtime captured and taken into Hades" (Williams 1978, 29).

Williams was also familiar with John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where the myth of Kora is mentioned. Milton locates the abduction of Persephone in Enna, Sicily, resorting to the Roman version of the myth, where Persephone is named Proserpine, Demeter becomes Ceres, and Hades is Dis:

> Not that fair field
>
> Of Enna, where Proserpine gath'ring flow'rs,
>
> Herself a fairer flow'r by gloomy Dis
>
> Was gather'd, which cost Ceres all that pain
>
> To seek her through the world … (86).

Mike Weaver asserts that the conversation between Pound and Williams that would produce the title took place in March 1910, ten years before the publication of the book, when Williams visited Pound in London. Weaver adds that Pound's "source of their discussion of the myth of Persephone was a long-forgotten poem by E.W. Sutton Pickhardt, 'Ariadne Diainomene'" (6). Pickhardt's poem, that only briefly (in a dialogue between Artemis and the Chorus) mentions the myth of Proserpine, the Roman equivalent of Persephone or Kora, could not have been that "long-forgotten," as Weaver claims, as it was published in London in 1908 by Elkin Mathews, the same publisher of Pound's books and Williams' *The Tempers*. However, it is more probable that Williams and Pound discussed the myth bearing in mind the 1899 translation by Lang or Jane Ellen Harrison's treatment of the figure of Kora, as Pound was familiar with the studies conducted by this scholar on Hellenic mythology.

Although Harrison had published the books *Myths of the Odissey in Art and Literature* in 1882, and *Introductory Studies in Greek Art* in 1885, she became famous with the book *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, published by Cambridge University in 1903. In this study, she analyses the representations of Demeter and Persephone in Homer's "Hymn to Demeter" and the importance the text had for the rites of the Eleusian mysteries.

Williams' reading of this myth is more complex than it seems. While discussing *Kora in Hell*, Marjorie Perloff declares it "remains a fascinating experiment in eliminating such traditional features as plot, argument, linear continuity, and connectives. But Williams still hesitates between artistic alternatives, not yet certain how to bring his 'Kora' out of her hell" (122). Perloff's use of pronouns in this last sentence is significant in that it underlines Williams' personal interpretation and appropriation of the myth, and the concomitant view of himself as a Kora who has to be defined according to his personal experiences and literary knowledge. In this sense, the reference to Kora in the title ought to be read as a way for the poet to describe himself and his role in the world. Williams interpreted the book as a revelation of his abilities as a writer, and the writing of the Improvisations as a form of catharsis for his problems. He recalls the book as "the one book I have enjoyed referring to more than any others. It reveals myself to me and perhaps that is why I have kept it to myself"

(Williams 1978, 26). In his autobiography, Williams declares that the book was about "Persephone gone into Hades, into hell. Kora was the springtime of the year; my year, my self was being slaughtered" (Williams 1961, 158).

Because of Williams' personal uncertainty in facing the world, like a Kora thrown into the world out of hell, the actual myth of Kora or Persephone is not actually developed in the Improvisations. Nevertheless, the lack of explicit references becomes more than a mere technique to deconstruct traditional expectations entailed in the process of reading a literary text. The slaughter of the poet's self is not only present in the formal presentation of the Improvisations, but also in the description of fragmentation of images of femaleness. In the article "William Carlos Williams and the Singular Woman", Joan Nay analyses how the image of woman in the Improvisations is fragmented into diverse depictions:

> *Kora in Hell* (1920) is a full mixture of daughters, hags, wives, whores, temptresses, beauty, disease, and ugliness. It is filled with the presence of frightening women, fantasies of females who are licentious daughters, soiled virgins, diseased grandmothers or animal-like women who attempt to seduce, control or make fools of man … But the hell is composed of the females who figuratively jostle and crowd the searcher's every step, and the quest is ultimately for the Kora within himself (51).

The search for the myth of the raped girl within the male self is significant to understand the way Williams perceived himself and represented social relations between the sexes. Most studies on Williams' poetic representation of gender and sexuality fail to pay attention to the relevance of Williams' acknowledgement of a feminine side of his personality as a way to balance the male biological determinism of his body from his first days as a writer. He admitted to this in several poems and letters addressed to Hilda Doolittle and Viola Baxter, and regarded femininity as part of his creative life.[5]

In the poem "Transitional", published in the magazine *The Egoist* in December 1914, the lines "It is the woman in us / That makes us write: / Let us acknowledge it, / Men would be silent" (*Egoist* I. 23: 444) reinforce a feminine side of personality that Williams would claim for the formation of human psychology. Conversely, the letter he entitled as "The Great Sex Spiral" (1917) addressed to Dora Marsden, the editor of *The Egoist*, vouches for a balance between essentialist conceptions of maleness and femaleness. In it, Williams acknowledges the importance of the German Otto Weininger's ideas of male superiority in the controversial book *Sex and Character* (1901) to oppose Marsden's opinion that women are superior to men.[6]

By the late 1910s, Williams was becoming a reasonably known poet, and *Kora in Hell* marked the beginning of his awareness of himself as a poet put into writing. Moreover, the poet started acknowledging his role in the world as a seer, following on the footsteps of the British romantics and the French Symbolists, but taking this role one step further by being conscious of his self-reliance. As he put it to Edith Heal,[6]

> Perhaps this wanting to appear more literary than I really was, borrowing from the Greek for my title, and borrowing from the Abbot for the form on the page, was pretentious, but I was proud to be associated with writers of the past (Williams 1978, 31).

The awareness of himself as a poet and the text as poem is best seen in the 1919 prologue, where the origin of literature is discussed. In the comment to the third Improvisation of section XX, Williams stated, "[*a*] *poem can be made of anything*" (Williams 1970, 70), and in the prologue he admits that,

> [t]here is nothing sacred about literature, it is damned from one end to the other. There is nothing in literature but change and change is mockery. I'll write whatever I damn please, whenever I damn please and as I damn please and it'll be good if the authentic spirit of change is on it (*Little Review* V. 11: 13).

These words were the first to advance Williams' opinion that any language is good material for poetry, as he would show repeatedly. In Book V of the long poem *Paterson*, published in 1958, a work characterized by the inclusion of the most diverse linguistic and literary genres, Williams includes an extract of an interview with Mike Wallace for *The New York Post* published in 18 October 1957, where he reiterates his conviction on this subject:

> Q. Well – is it poetry?
>
> A. We poets have to talk in a language which is not English. It is the American idiom. Rhythmically it's organized as a sample of the American idiom. It has as much originality as jazz. If you say "2 partridges, 2 mallard ducks, a Dunganese crab" – if you treat that rhythmically, ignoring the practical sense, it forms a jagged pattern. It is, to my mind, poetry.
>
> Q. But if you don't "ignore the practical sense" . . . you agree that it is a fashionable grocery list?
>
> A. Yes. Anything is good material for poetry. Anything. I've said it time and time again (Williams 1992, 222).

In the prologue to the Improvisations, Williams also quotes from letters sent to him by Pound, Hilda Doolittle, and Wallace Stevens, and openly criticises Pound as "the best enemy United States verse has" (Williams 1970, 26). The fact that Williams starts refuting Pound's literary opinion for the first time shows a daring attitude towards traditional conceptions of literature, and a self-reliant position in the literary canon. The same can be said for the way he starts regarding the poem as an object to be freely dismantled and reconstructed, an assumption that he would develop in the talk "The Poem as Field of Action", given at the University of Washington, in 1948. By admitting that his Improvisations had so many influences, Williams acknowledges his debt to other writers, but proudly, defiantly, and for the first time establishes his place in the world alongside them.

In a way, with *Kora in Hell*, Williams was beginning to establish the importance of imagination in the perception of the poetic text, by both the writer and the reader. Throughout his subsequent writings, the concept of "imagination" and its definition would always be present as a way to justify the fragmented nature of the processes of writing and reading. The return of Kora from Hell, and the re-establishing of nature and seasons marks the beginning of a career concerned with poetry from the creative viewpoint, and ubiquitous images of spring, regeneration, and fertility associated with the female body. As such, it comes as no surprise that Williams' next book would be titled *Spring and All* (1921), and the posthumous volume that gathered these two books would be published under the title *Imaginations*, an adroit tribute to a writer whose work was mainly concerned with representations of life, either as doctor who helped giving birth to children, or as a creative writer of poetry.

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[1] William Carlos Williams, "Prologue", *The Little Review* V. 11 (April 1919), 1-10; and VI. 1 (May 1919), pp.74-80. In the two parts of the prologue, Williams discusses diverse subjects, such as the conceptualisation of art (by evoking Marcel Duchamps' painting "Nude Descending a Staircase" and sculpture "Fountaine"), the role of the artist (namely as defined by Wassily Kandinsky in *Über das Geistige in Art*), literature (by way of inserting and commenting on a letter by Wallace Stevens on the poems in Williams' 1917 book *Al Que Quiere!*, or his opinion on T.S. Eliot, who had recently published "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"), relationships with friend poets (Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, Alfred Kreymbourg), and with his wife, Florence Herman.

[2] Williams registered in medicine at Penn with the initial intention to specialise in "oral surgery" (i.e., dentistry), but kept a deep interest in the arts throughout his college years. On 30 September 1902, a mutual male friend, Morrison Robb Van Cleve, a music student at Penn, introduced Williams to Pound. Although Pound was two years younger than Williams, he already had a reputation as a fiery poet and womaniser at college that preceded him. The flamboyance that Pound exuded soon had Williams captivated, and the two young men would discover similar interests in discussing poetry

and women. For a good biographical account of Williams' life, see Paul Mariani's *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981).

[3] "I added notes of explanation, often more dense than the first writing. The whole seemed satisfactory to me when I gathered it together because to explain further what I intended would be tautological, the surface appearance of the whole would please all the ablest I was approaching." (Williams 1970, 29) The two-page prologue of the 1957 edition replaced the twenty-two-page prologue of 1920.

[4] A thorough study of the hymn can be found in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, edition by N. J. Richardson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

[5] In a letter to Edgar, dated 12 April 1905, Williams described what he felt for Doolittle thus,

> Oh, Edgar, but she is a fine girl, no simple nonsense about her, no false modesty and all that, she is absolutely free and innocent. We talked of the finest things: of Shakespeare, of flowers, trees, books, & pictures and meanwhile climbed fences and walked through woods and climbed little hills till it began to grow just dusky when we arrived at our destination. We had by this time, as you imagine, gotten pretty well acquainted. She said I was Rosalind in *As You Like It*, and she was Celia, so I called her that, although her real name is Hilda (Williams 1961, 9).

The acceptance of himself as a female character is also seen in letters to Viola Baxter, years later. Besides the discussion of private matters, the letters exchanged between Williams and Baxter focused many times on the ongoing public debate of the woman's movement. Williams felt much at ease to discuss sex and gender roles with a woman who seemed to have so much in common with him, as he would state in a letter from 6 January 1911 to her:

> You are quite right, Viola, quite right, men are not strong enough to "bat air" with women. That forever proves to me I am not a man; they, men, disgust men and if I must say it fill me with awe and admiration. I am too much of a woman. (Weaver 22).

[6] Dora Marsden started a series of philosophical, psychological, and sociological editorials in July 1916 (*Egoist* III. 7), with the essay "Lingual Psychology: A New Conception of the Function of Philosophical Inquiry". The series of editorials that followed for the next years, published in an anarchic way, entailed irregular sub-divisions, titles, and numbers, and did not seem to captivate readerships. Williams responded to Marsden's editorials in a letter entitled "The Great Sex Spiral: A Criticism of Miss Marsden's 'Lingual Psychology'", which was published in the "Correspondence" section of the magazine in two parts, in April and August 1917