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Bibliographic

Author: Bloom, Harold.; Hobby, Blake.

OCLC: 261343135

Title: The American dream /

FREE

Imprint: New York, NY : Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009

ISBN: 9780791098011 (hc : alk. paper)

Uniform Title:

ISSN:

Series:

Volume:

Dissertation:

Issue:

Edition:

Date:

Verified: 0-7910-9801-X pqil:mla (Via SFX)WorldCat Desc: xvi,

Pages: 141-2152

Article: Miller, James "My Antonia (Willa Cather): 'My Antonia and the American Dream'"

Location

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*Bloom's Literary Themes*

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THE  
AMERICAN DREAM

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*Edited and with an introduction by*  
Harold Bloom  
Sterling Professor of the Humanities  
Yale University

*Volume Editor*  
Blake Hobby

## **Bloom's Literary Themes: The American Dream**

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Bloom's Literary Criticism

An imprint of Infobase Publishing

132 West 31st Street

New York NY 10001

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

The American dream / edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom ; volume editor, Blake Hobby.

p. cm. — (Bloom's literary themes)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7910-9801-1 (hc : alk. paper) 1. American literature—History and criticism. 2. American Dream in literature. I. Bloom, Harold. II. Hobby, Blake.

PS169.A49A44 2009

810.9'35873—dc22

2008042987

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You can find Bloom's Literary Criticism on the World Wide Web at <http://www.chelseahouse.com>

Text Design by Kerry Casey

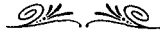
Cover design by Takeshi Takahashi

Printed in the United States of America

IBT EJB 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

*MY ÁNTONIA*  
(WILLA CATHER)



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*"My Ántonia and the American Dream"*

by James E. Miller, Jr.,  
in *Prairie Schooner* (1974)

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## INTRODUCTION

In "My Ántonia and the American Dream," James Miller considers Willa Cather's novel as a work appreciated for the wrong reasons. He explains that *My Ántonia* reveals much about the disparity between the American Dream and the American experience as pioneers settled westward during the late nineteenth century. Miller contends that Cather's novel shares the concerns of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and William Carlos Williams' epic poem *Paterson*. These works all question how and when Americans lost touch with the dream for a better world. Jim Burden, the narrator and protagonist of *My Ántonia*, has attained material success and achieved the American Dream, yet he continues to look back to his time on the prairie, seeking the vitality he lost in his quest for prosperity. Like Fitzgerald and Williams, Cather meditates upon the sense of incompleteness, feelings of loss, and lack of

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Miller, James E., Jr. "My Ántonia and the American Dream." *Prairie Schooner* 48, no. 2 (Summer 1974): 112-23.

fulfillment that often plague those who strive for worldly success.



Some books in our literature, like Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun also Rises*, assume a greater importance in our culture than their literary merit seems (at least at first glance) to justify. These are usually books that appear to reveal more about ourselves, our dreams and our despairs, than we had ever before recognized. Frequently these books are neglected on first appearance, or valued for reasons quite other than those that give them their later fame. It is quite possible that the authors wrote out of intense personal feeling and passion that had very little, at least on the conscious level, to do with the meanings we have come to recognize as the chief and enduring value of the books.

I would like to examine Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*<sup>1</sup> as a book of this kind, offering perhaps an explanation for the way it often clings tenaciously in the mind, and even comes to haunt the reader long after he has put it down. Like the Fitzgerald and Hemingway novels, *My Ántonia* is, I believe, a commentary on the American experience, the American dream, and the American reality. It is the novel, after *Alexander's Bridge*, *O Pioneers!*, and *The Song of the Lark*, in which Willa Cather hit her stride in her own native material, and, in it, she penetrated more deeply, I think, into the dark recesses of the American psyche than in any of her later novels—though some of them might be more richly and complexly woven.

I would like to begin with an aspect of *My Ántonia* that helps burn it into the memory. Willa Cather in effect commented on the technique within the book, when she had Jim Burden say near the end, after his final visit to Ántonia on the Nebraska prairie: "Ántonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade—that grew stronger with time. In my memory there was a succession of such pictures, fixed there like the old woodcuts of one's first primer" (pp. 352–53). It takes little imagination to transfer this statement to the novel itself, as we recall the strong and vivid images that it creates over and over again, usually in a few simple and seemingly effortless strokes.

One of these brilliant images stands in the heart of the book, and comes at the end of "The Hired Girls," the idyl placed near the end of Book II. That this episode represents also the emotional heart of the book is suggested by its derivation from the earlier 1909 story, "The Enchanted Bluff"—a story which, as Mildred Bennett has pointed out in her Introduction to *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction, 1892-1912*, filters with emotional intensity through much of Cather's fiction. Jim Burden and the girls have spent the day out on the embankment of the prairie river, and as they seat themselves on a height overlooking the lands that have both threatened and succored them, they begin to talk about the future and the past. They fall slowly silent: "The breeze sank to stillness. In the ravine a ringdove mourned plaintively, and somewhere off in the bushes an owl hooted" (p. 244). Gradually the land itself becomes transfigured before their very eyes:

Presently we saw a curious thing: There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disk rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes toward it. In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.

Even while we whispered about it, our vision disappeared; the ball dropped and dropped until the red tip went beneath the earth. The fields below us were dark, the sky was growing pale, and that forgotten plough had sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie. [P. 245]

Most readers of *My Antonia* have that black plow silhouetted against the red sun deeply etched in their minds. And they are likely to remember its heroic size and its hieroglyphic nature as a "picture writing on the sun"—as though left by some primitive race of giants who lived long ago in a heroic age and left their enigmatic mark and

their obscure meaning in a scrawl on the heavenly body that served as their deity. But you will have noticed that I have quoted the paragraph that follows this vivid and suggestive imagery, describing simply the disappearance of the "vision." The plow that was a moment before so heroic and full of hidden meaning suddenly sinks back "to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie," and becomes "forgotten."

Too often, I suspect, we remember only that hieroglyphic plow etched into the sun, and forget Willa Cather's description of its swift shrinkage and disappearance, both from sight and from memory. In these succeeding images, we are, I want to suggest, near the heart not only of the book but of its hieroglyphic meaning. The novel is, in some sense, about a national experience—the frontier or pioneer experience—and its rapid diminishment and disappearance from the national memory. But more than an experience is involved and at stake. Obscurely related to the experience and its consequences is the American dream. Was it a trivial or mistaken impulse all along, magnified in the imagination beyond its possibilities? Was it a reality that was in some blundering way betrayed by us all? Or was it, perhaps, an illusion, created out of nothing, and, finally, disappearing into nothing, and well forgotten. I do not want to suggest that *My Antonia* provides precise answers for these questions, inasmuch as it is a novel and not a tract. But I do want to indicate that the novel evokes these questions and explores them dramatically, leaving the reader to struggle with his own answers.

The image of the plow first magnified and then shrunk and then obliterated may stand as a paradigm for a recurrent pattern in *My Antonia*, embodied most strikingly in the narrator, Jim Burden. For Jim the book might be described as a search for that lost and forgotten plow, or better, perhaps, a quest for understanding the experience that caused the plow to magnify into a brilliant presence, and then to fade into insignificance and triviality. In brief, Jim is in search of the American past, his past, in an attempt to determine what went wrong, and perhaps as well what was right, with the dream. His is an attempt to read that "picture writing on the sun," and unravel the reasons for his own, and his country's anguished sense of loss. His loss is personal, because he, like the plow, once glowed in the sun and felt the expansion of life within him, life with all its promise and possibilities. But by the time we encounter him as the nostalgic narrator of *My Antonia*,



his life has diminished and faded, and he himself seems to feel the dark descend.

But of course no one with the name of Jim Burden could be a totally *unallegorical* figure. He carries with him not only his acute sense of personal loss but also a deep sense of national unease, a *burden* of guilt for having missed a chance, for having passed up an opportunity, for having watched with apathy as the dream dissipated in the rapidly disappearing past. The social burden may be all the heavier for Jim Burden because he has assigned himself the task of spokesman in the quest for what went wrong, or, better, what was missed, at a crucial moment of the national history. With him as the narrator of the book, we find out nearly everything about his past, but almost nothing about his present. The novel's "Introduction" provides one glimpse into his current unhappy state, given by his long-time friend and fellow Nebraskan: "Although Jim Burden and I both live in New York, I do not see much of him there. He is legal counsel for one of the great Western railways and is often away from his office for weeks together. That is one reason why we seldom meet. Another is that I do not like his wife. She is handsome, energetic, executive, but to me she seems unimpressible and temperamentally incapable of enthusiasm. Her husband's quiet tastes irritate her, I think, and she finds it worth while to play the patroness to a group of young poets and painters of advanced ideas and mediocre ability. She has her own fortune and lives her own life. For some reason, she wishes to remain Mrs. James Burden" (p. viii).

Although the glimpse is brief, it is sufficient to reveal an empty marriage, an artificial, even superficial, and trivialized life. Mrs. James Burden is destined to remain a shadowy character throughout the novel, but even so an important if only hovering presence, contrasting sharply in her vacuous super-sophistication with the women of the novel's action, and particularly with Jim's—or "my"—*Antonia*. For it is she, the writer of the "Introduction" tells us, who has come to mean "the country, the conditions, the whole adventure" of their childhood. Thus as Jim recreates the story of his and, in part, the country's past, he envisions it through the disillusion of his—and, in part, his country's—unhappy present. It is, perhaps, only such disillusionment that enables Jim to recount the past without falsifying the brutalizing nature of the pioneer experience. All the first book of *My Antonia*,

entitled "The Shimerdas," is filled with animal imagery which suggests the diminishment of the lives of the people who have left their countries, their civilizations, their cultures behind and who have been reduced to confronting a hostile environment much as the animals confront it, scratching and scabbling for the barest necessities of life itself. If the plow silhouetted against the sun somehow encompasses the free and open spirit embodied in *Ántonia*, it must be remembered that that plow also was the lure and background that ended in the suicide of old Mr. Shimerda and which turned Mrs. Shimerda into an envious scold and soured *Ántonia*'s brother, Ambrosch, into a sullen sneak and brute. Many other lesser characters were demeaned and hardened by their cruel experiences. The entire first part of *My Ántonia* is remarkable for nostalgically evoking the past without blurring its harshness and its brutalizing weight. *Ántonia* is thus all the more remarkable for preserving her free and generous spirit in the face of all the crushing blows of the virgin prairie experience.

Thus *My Ántonia* does not portray, in any meaningful sense, the fulfillment of the American dream. By and large, the dreams of the pioneers lie shattered, their lives broken by the hardness of wilderness life. Even those who achieve, after long struggle, some kind of secure life are diminished in the genuine stuff of life. For example, in one of his accounts that reach into the future beyond the present action, Jim Burden tells us of the eventual fate of the vivacious Tiny Soderball, one of the few to achieve "solid worldly success." She had a series of exciting adventures in Alaska, ending up with a large fortune. But later, when Jim encountered her in Salt Lake City, she was a "thin, hard-faced woman . . . She was satisfied with her success, but not elated. She was like someone in whom the faculty of becoming interested is worn out" (pp. 301-302).

One of the major material successes of the book is Jim Burden, and in many ways the novel traces his rise in position and wealth. As most of the characters of the book travel west, his is a journey east, and, in the process, the acquisition of education, wealth, social position. In short, Jim has all the appearances of one who has lived the American dream and achieved fulfillment. But the material fulfillment has not brought the happiness promised. The entire novel is suffused with his melancholy at the loss of something precious—something that existed back in the hard times, now lost amidst comfort and wealth. The

whole promise of the dream has somehow slipped through his fingers right at the moment it appeared within his grasp. Why? The question brings us around to a central problem in the novel: Why has Jim, so appreciative of the vitality and freedom represented by the hired girls, ended up in a marriage so empty of meaning?

Perhaps Jim's melancholy itself tells us the reason. The book in a way represents his confession, a confession of unaware betrayal of the dream. In looking back from his vantage point in time, Jim can come to the full realization of what the hired girls (especially such as *Ántonia* Shimerda and Lena Lingard) represented and what they have come to symbolize: simply all that is best, all that survives of worth, of the faded dream. Some critics have seen in Jim's obtuseness in his male-female relationship with *Ántonia* and Lena a defect in the book's construction. On the contrary, this theme is very much a part of the book's intention. Jim looking back from the wisdom of his later years and the unhappiness of his meaningless marriage can come to a much sharper awareness of precisely what he missed in his ambitious movement eastward and upward.

In Book II, "The Hired Girls," we are in a way witness to the dream turning sour: "The daughters of Black Hawk merchants had a confident, unenquiring belief that they were 'refined,' and that the country girls, who 'worked out,' were not" (p. 199). "The country girls were considered a menace to the social order. Their beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background. But anxious mothers need have felt no alarm. They mistook the mettle of their sons. The respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth" (p. 201-202). Jim Burden remembered his roaming the streets of Black Hawk at night, looking at the "sleeping houses": "for all their frailness, how much jealousy and envy and unhappiness some of them managed to contain! The life that went on in them seemed to me made up of evasions and negations; shifts to save cooking, to save washing and cleaning, devices to propitiate the tongue of gossip. This guarded mode of existence was like living under a tyranny. People's speech, their voices, their very glances, became furtive and repressed. Every individual taste, every natural appetite, was bridled by caution" (p. 219).

"Respect for respectability" is, perhaps, the cancer battening at the heart of the dream (a theme that William Faulkner was to emphasize

later in his Snopes trilogy), and the reader may wonder to what extent Jim Burden himself had been infected, especially in view of the brittle wife he had acquired at some stage in his rise to the top. Moreover, Jim was strongly attracted to the vitality of the hired girls, consciously and unconsciously, as revealed in a recurring dream he had: "One dream I dreamed a great many times, and it was always the same. I was in a harvest-field full of shocks, and I was lying against one of them. Lena Lingard came across the stubble barefoot, in a short skirt, with a curved reaping-hook in her hand, and she was flushed like the dawn, with a kind of luminous rosiness all about her. She sat down beside me, turned to me with a soft sigh and said, 'Now they are all gone, and I can kiss you as much as I like'" (pp. 225-26). After this remarkable sexual revelation, Jim adds: "I used to wish I could have this flattering dream about Ántonia, but I never did." Sister-like Ántonia cannot be transfigured, even in dream, to sexual figure. Her role in the book, and in Jim's psyche, is destined to be more idealized, more mythic.

But Lena Lingard is the subject of an entire book of *My Ántonia*. And that book works out metaphorically the meaning of the novel's epigraph from Virgil as well as the specific personal relation of Jim and Lena, this latter through symbolic use of a play they both attend, Dumas's *Camille*. The epigraph for *My Ántonia* is drawn from Virgil's *Georgics*, and reads: "*Optima dies . . . prima fugit.*" This phrase comes into the novel in Book III, after Jim has entered the University of Nebraska and begun his study of Latin, translating the phrase "the best days are the first to flee." As Lena Lingard, now with a dress-making shop in Lincoln, brings to mind for Jim all the vitality of the hired girls of Black Hawk, he makes the connection between them and the haunting phrase from Virgil: "It came over me, as it had never done before, the relation between girls like those and the poetry of Virgil. If there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry. I understand that clearly, for the first time. This revelation seemed to me inestimably precious. I clung to it as if it might suddenly vanish" (p. 270).

But if Lena (along with Ántonia and the others) is equated with poetry, she is also a breathing physical reality to Jim, and Book III brings Jim as close physically to one of the hired girls as the novel permits. A large part of the Book is taken up with a description of

Jim's and Lena's attendance at a performance of *Camille*, the sentimental but highly effective drama by Dumas *filis*. As Jim remarks: "A couple of jack-rabbits, run in off the prairie, could not have been more innocent of what awaited them than were Lena and I" (p. 272). Although some critics see the long account of theatre-going as a kind of inserted story or intrusion, in fact it provides a kind of sophisticated mirror image in literature for the thematic dilemma posed in the novel itself—and particularly the dilemma Jim faces in his attraction to Lena. Only a few pages before this episode, he has come to the insight equating the hired girls, in all their vitality and freedom, with poetry. Now he is confronted with the physical presence of one for whom he feels a strong attraction.

The hired girls are not, of course, Camilles, but they have some of the same kind of magic, poetry, freedom, love of life that attracted Armand to Camille—and that attract Jim to Lena. As Jim and Lena find themselves drawn closer and closer together in Lincoln, their conversation turns more and more to marriage—but only obliquely do they hint of anything deeper than friendship between themselves. Lena, pressed by Jim about her future, says she will never marry, that she prefers to be "lonesome," that the experience of marriage as she has witnessed it is even repellent. Jim answers, "But it's not all like that." Lena replies: "Near enough. It's all being under somebody's thumb. What's on your mind, Jim? Are you afraid I'll want you to marry me some day?" Jim's immediate remark after this, to the reader, is: "Then I told her I was going away" (p. 292). The moment has passed, the future for Jim has been, in a sense, determined. Lena will go on her successful, "lonesome" way; Jim will go on to his considerable achievement and position—and his disastrous marriage.

What happened to the dream—to Jim's dream of Lena, to the larger dream of personal fulfillment? Was his failure in not seeing some connection between the dreams? Was Jim's destiny in some obscure sense a self-betrayal? And is this America's destiny, a self-betrayal of the possibilities of the dream? There are many literary texts that could be cited for parallels, but I want to limit myself to two that will, I hope, prove suggestive. The first is F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*. There is, of course, a wide gulf between Jay Gatsby and Jim Burden (and in many ways Jim's function more

nearly parallels Nick Carroway's), but Gatsby and Burden share in common a profound innocence and also, perhaps, a colossal illusion, a dream. And within themselves they carry the seeds of their own disaster or defeat. Gatsby's Daisy is not worthy of his dream, while Jim's *Ántonia* is perhaps worth more than his: but the point to be made is that both women are transfigured in the imagination to mythic dimensions, and become embodiments of the dream that is somehow, in the progress of both fictions, betrayed. At the end of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carroway sits on Gatsby's lawn meditating on Gatsby's life and death. In the deepening darkness he envisions the place as it must have looked to the first explorers and settlers: "Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder."<sup>2</sup> The problem with Gatsby, Nick realizes, is that he did not know that his dream "was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night."

William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* is, as an epic poem, far different in structure and effect from either *My Ántonia* or *The Great Gatsby*. But thematically it touches on some of the same vital matters. The protagonist of the poem is in search throughout for *Beautiful Thing*, whether in the historical Paterson, New Jersey, or in the modern industrial city that shows all the signs of the contemporary waste land. Only gradually does the reader come to realize that the search for Beautiful Thing is destined—probably—to be futile, because it has disappeared with the very past itself. A full understanding of the poem and the phrase will carry the reader back to Williams's earlier book, *In the American Grain*, and his inclusion of one of Columbus's accounts of his discovery of the New World. The account ends: "On shore I sent the people for water, some with arms, and others with casks; and as it was some little distance, I waited two hours for them. During that time I walked among the trees which was the most *beautiful thing* which I had ever seen."<sup>3</sup>

This same short passage is quoted by Williams some twenty-five years later, in *Paterson*. The protagonist of *Paterson* is in quest of that lost promise of the New World which Columbus found in the wilderness—among the trees—some centuries before.

Early in my discussion, I described one of Willa Cather's basic techniques as imagistic, and cited the example of the plow that stands out sharply etched, and then disappears. Such images cluster near the end of *My Ántonia*, one of them characterizing *Ántonia* herself—or rather *Ántonia* as transfigured by Jim Burden's imagination. When, after many years have passed, Jim pays *Ántonia* his final visit—in Book V, "Cuzak's Boys,"—*Ántonia* takes Jim out to see her fruit cave, and there Jim witnesses all her children dash out of the cave: "a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight" (p. 339). This image of affirmation and vitality remains with Jim as somehow symbolic of all that *Ántonia* stands for—and all that he himself has somehow missed.

But the final image to be etched on the mind of the reader comes at the end of the book, as Jim wanders over the prairie after his final parting from *Ántonia*. It is a "bit of the first road that went from Black Hawk out to the north country"; "this half-mile or so within the pasture fence was all that was left of that old road which used to run like a wild thing across the open prairie." Jim begins to follow the road as far as he can: "On the level land the tracks had almost disappeared—were mere shadings in the grass, and a stranger would not have noticed them. But wherever the road had crossed a draw, it was easy to find. The rains had made channels of the wheel-ruts and washed them so deeply that the sod had never healed over them. They looked like gashes torn by a grizzly's claws, on the slopes where the farm-wagons used to lurch up out of the hollows with a pull that brought curling muscles on the smooth hips of the horses. I sat down and watched the haystacks turn rosy in the slanting sunlight" (pp. 370–71).

This road is not, of course, simply Jim's and *Ántonia*'s road. It is America's road, leading not into the future, but into the past, fast fading from the landscape, fast fading from memory. Like Gatsby's dream that lies somewhere out there already lost in the vastness of the continent, like *Paterson*'s Beautiful Thing that appeared only for a brief moment as Columbus walked among the New World trees—the

road beckons but eludes simultaneously. It is Jim's and Antonia's—and perhaps America's—"road of Destiny":

This was the road over which Antonia and I came on that night when we got off the train at Black Hawk and were bedded down in the straw, wondering children, being taken we knew not whither. I had only to close my eyes to hear the rumbling of the wagons in the dark, and to be again overcome by that obliterating strangeness. The feelings of that night were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand. I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is. For Antonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past. [Pp. 371-72]

As Americans who have dreamed the dream, we might say with Jim: "Whatever we have missed, we possess together the precious, the incommunicable past." In some dark sense, Jim's experience is the American experience, his melancholy sense of loss also his country's, his longing for something missed in the past a national longing.

The lost promise, the misplaced vision, is America's loss—our loss—and it haunts us all, still.

## NOTES

1. First published by Houghton Mifflin Company in 1918. All page references are to the Sentry Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).
2. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p. 182.
3. *In the American Grain: Essays by William Carlos Williams* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1956), p. 26.