A SONG TO MAKE DEATH TOLERABLE:
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A study of Paterson

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by

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Paterson, by William Carlos Williams, is a poem about the failure of language. But even as it is a study of the failure of language, as a poem, fashioned from and a vehicle for language, it succeeds. Unwieldy and cumbersome as the structure of the poem initially appears, there nevertheless emerges an approximate three-part progression, which moves from the inability to communicate, the wordlessness of a newborn's cry, through an exploration of language, sometimes successful, sometimes floundering, and comes to rest in a final relinquishment of language, symbolized by a dance, also wordless. Simplified, the poem moves from a state that is essentially wordless, to a certain facility with words, and back to an essentially wordless state. The two wordless states, however, are vastly dissimilar. The wordlessness at the outset of Paterson is due to the inaccuracy of language, and the inability to use language with precision, whereas the wordlessness at the end of the poem is more a letting-go of language, through superior knowledge of the capacity of language to express concretely the experiences of humankind. Poet and reader learn, through the course of Paterson, that language, words themselves, simply fail in the attempt to capture some aspects of human experience, in
particular death and love. It is my intention in this paper to follow the progression which leads poet and reader to that conclusion and the final relinquishment of language.

In close relationship to that three-part progression of wordlessness is Williams' presentation and development of three major themes in *Paterson*. In order to follow the three-part cycle, one must connect that progression to the development and emergence of themes. All three major themes are presented in the early pages of the poem, but two of the themes tend to dominate the first section of the three-part structure, while the third emerges later and ultimately takes over the thrust of the poem. The themes can be seen relating to each other almost as Yeatsian interpenetrating gyres, with the two initial themes winding down as the third gains momentum and begins to dominate *Paterson*.

The first line of the introduction presents the first of these three themes. Williams writes:

"Rigor of beauty is the quest. But how will you find beauty when it is locked in the mind past all remonstrance?" \(^1\)

In this line, Williams expresses not only a major goal - "rigor of beauty" - but also the first of the three themes and a problem which the wordlessness cycle seeks
to solve. "Rigor of beauty," that is, an exactitude or precision or definition of beauty (O.E.D. I) is at the outset of the poem "locked" in the poet's mind. It does exist, however, and the successful search for the key to release this defined beauty, and then to express it in language, is central to the first portion of the three-part cycle. Williams sees that the beauty for which he is searching is indeed in the mind, but there is a problem in adequately expressing that beauty. Language exists, of course, from the beginning of the poem, as likewise does the urge to communicate; but the language, because it lacks specificity and concreteness, thwarts the urge to communicate, and therefore the overriding tone in the beginning is one of frustration and a certain amount of helplessness with the language.

The second major theme of Paterson is another search, related to Williams' search for rigor of beauty. This search is for a unification of experience. A problem in learning to express beauty is learning how to deal with unpleasantness, discovering how ugliness entwines with beauty, and reconciling the two within one's own mind. Williams' search is to discover a way to effect this unification through language of "the drunk the sober; the illustrious / the gross" (p. 4);
these adjectives are examples of the dissonance of experience which Williams seeks to harmonize in poetry. The third major theme is the search for a way to deal with death. Ultimately, it is the failure of language adequately to provide the needed answer to death that leads the cycle back to wordlessness -- the dance -- and completes the poem. This problem -- a way to "make death tolerable" (p. 107) -- is suggested only subtly in the beginning when Williams laments that humankind does "not know himself dying" (p. 4). This line could be interpreted to mean that man does not know that he is dying, or that man does not know himself, even at the moment of dying. In the first case, death itself is what man turns away from, and in the second case, it is knowing himself, even at the point of death, that man turns away from. At the moment of death, not knowing oneself takes on a tragic sense, because it becomes clear that at this point man will never know himself. In either case, however, although the theme of dealing with death is not stressed at all so early in the poem, Williams is concerned with the way in which humankind approaches death, and this concern develops during the course of the poem into an overriding obsession.
A few words more about the structure of the poem. Structurally and poetically, *Paterson* is not unflawed. It appears that the first two major themes are fairly well resolved in Book One, and the third major theme finally is resolved in Book Five. What, then, is the purpose of the central three books? The poem appears to lose direction. It is my belief that the middle three books are at first an attempt to utilize the language discovered in Book One. As the poem progresses, however, and perhaps as Williams himself grew closer to death, the new language he discovered seems to become inadequate again because language does not provide an answer to death. The poem wanders, but I believe it does so because there is always present a sense of the inadequacy of language, and it is not until Williams settles exactly what it is that language is inadequate to deal with -- death -- that the poem regains direction and comes to its conclusion. *Paterson*, therefore, succeeds because it graphically portrays the struggle, first to utilize language, and then to handle death, and it portrays the resolution of those struggles. Because *Paterson* is a poem about language, Williams' approach throughout is to search out solutions to his problems, both artistic.
and human -- the search for a way to express beauty and unification, and the search for something to "make death tolerable" -- through language, thus lending a unity of purpose and method to the poem. As one moves through *Paterson* and the three-part cycle unfolds itself, one is aware that Williams' struggle is with language, and the poem ends when the inadequacy of language becomes insurmountable.

The poem begins with a Preface in which the three major themes, as previously discussed, are introduced, the cyclic nature of *Paterson* is suggested, and the image which is a central symbol of the quality of wordlessness which pervades the first part of the three-part cycle are presented.

That *Paterson* is a cycle at all is revealed early. "For the beginning is assuredly / the end" (p. 3), Williams writes, and this line, although it initially appears to deny progression of any kind, does define a circle. At any given point, the beginning of progression around a circle is also the end of that progression. This does not deny movement but simply indicates that movement tends to be cyclical, as the movement in *Paterson* exemplifies by moving from wordlessness through language and back to wordlessness. That line and the
lines that follow, "since we know nothing, pure / and simple, beyond / our own complexities" (p. 3), also presage the whole poem and its conclusion. The facts that we know nothing, and that the beginning is the end indicate that the cycle will return to the starting point, and we will know no more than we did at the beginning, which knowledge amounts largely to an awareness of our own mystery. The cycle does indeed return to the starting point, but there is a difference. The dancer at the end of the poem is not the same as the infant at the beginning; the dancer's wordlessness is a wordlessness of superior knowledge, as opposed to the wordlessness at the beginning of the poem, a wordlessness characterized by inaccuracy.

The inarticulate infant is the major image of the first portion of the cycle. This is first presented in the Preface as "a nine months' wonder" (p. 3), and returns in Part Two of Book One.

Book One constitutes the first part of the three-part division. In it is described the initial wordlessness from which Williams seeks to escape, and in it also is the discovery that leads into the transition to a more succinct, more accurate language, a progression from silence to speech.
First, what is the quality of the initial wordlessness? It is characterized largely by a sense of urgency and a conviction that a language does exist. Williams asks, "What common language to unravel?" (p. 7). His question intimates that there exists some language waiting to be found. It is a "common" language, one that could serve the theme of unification. Yet,

> The language, the language
> fails them
> They do not know the words
> or have not
> The courage to use them. (p. 11)

Williams suggests here that "they" lack either the knowledge or the courage requisite to an adequate usage of language. What follows is an attempt:

> Life is sweet
> they say (p. 12)

Parts of life are sweet, to be sure, but to say that life is sweet is hardly the kind of accurate description Williams searches for. And side by side with sweetness can also be found foulness, equally part of life. How, then, to unify experience? How to express it accurately? Williams' speakers are not helpless or cowardly in their use of language -- they merely lack the knowledge to make clear their meaning, and language itself fails them because it is too vague, too general.
Another quality of the wordlessness of the first part is a sense of disorder, and a lack of dignity. One can appreciate the confusion and the frustration of the poet as he struggles with the lines.

A false language. A true. A false language, pouring -- a language (misunderstood) pouring (misinterpreted) without dignity, without minister, crashing upon a stone ear. (p. 15)

These lines exemplify and graphically portray the poet's linguistic struggle. So much to be said, so much that the language is "pouring," but there is no sense to the outpouring. This is chaos.

Chaos as the condition of human communication is, at the beginning of Paterson, revealed in Williams' allusion, at the opening of Part Two of Book One, to the "nine months' wonder" born in the Preface:

There is no direction. Whither? I cannot say. I cannot say more than how. The how (the howl) only is at my disposal (p. 18)

This howl, reminiscent of a newborn's howl, seems to embody all the frustration, inaccuracy, senselessness and despair that characterize Williams' early descriptions of the use of language. A newborn does not have command of language, and its attempts to communicate take the form of cries whose meaning can at best only
We sit and talk quietly, with long lapses of silence and I am aware of the stream that has no language, coursing beneath the quiet heaven of your eyes which has no speech. (p. 24)

Currents of feeling move under the surface, currents which defy definition. At this point, however, there is no indication that this wordlessness is the final state of things, but more of an interesting situation worthy of exploration, for this same current which runs beneath the woman's eyes also "brings in the rumors of separate / worlds," (p. 25) and suggests the theme of unification introduced in the Preface.

So, the wordlessness of the first part of the three-part cycle is not wordlessness per se, but more the recognition that language, at least as it stands at the outset of Paterson, is highly inaccurate and, when dealing with certain facets of experience, totally inadequate. Yet the problem of language is clarified: if one could only translate into words that current which courses wordless through the poet's mind, then language would triumph.

Discovering the meaning of, and then applying words of precision and clarity to that current is a process which must work itself out in the first portion.
of the cycle from wordlessness to speech and then back
to wordlessness, if that cycle is to have validity as
an approach to Paterson. And in Paterson, we can see
this process unfold in Book One.

Book One opens in a profound silence.
Paterson is "eternally asleep," and the waters of the
Passaic which form "the outline of his back," are
"spent" (p. 6). "Butterflies settle on his stone ear,"
connoting quiet and deafness (p. 6). The first sound
to break the silence of Paterson's slumber is the
"noise of the pouring river" (p. 6), the Passaic, whose
presence remains throughout the poem as another symbol
of wordlessness, a rushing, foreign sound that serves
first as reminder of the failure of language, and
ultimately as a relief from the struggle with language.²

However, at this point in Paterson, the
inarticulate river is transformed into the unformed
thoughts of the poet:

Jostled as are the waters approaching
the brink, his thoughts
interlace, repel and cut under,
rise rock-thwarted and turn aside
but forever strain forward. (p. 7)

The poet's thoughts here are on the brink of articula-
tion, but have not yet passed over into language. The
thought itself is described as "filling the void" which
existed in the initial silence (p. 8).

In order to move from unformed thought into language, two elements must be found -- the source of the language, and the form of the language. The source of the language is suggested in these early lines:

They may look at the torrent in their minds
And it is foreign to them.  (p. 12)

Although the mind is foreign, nevertheless it is from here that "they," the girls, move directly into language -- "Life is sweet / they say." The torrent in the mind, which has produced this utterance, is connected to the river, through the use of the word "torrent," and is wordless; but it is from the mind, from this torrent, that language must develop.

A little later on, Williams expresses a sense of impending discovery, and then seems to try to work out his idea, as he writes:

Only of late, late! begun to know, to
Know clearly (as through clear ice) whence
I draw my breath or how to employ it
clearly -- if not well:

Clearly!
speaks the red-breast his behest. Clearly!
clearly!  (p. 21)

Here it is then, the developing idea in Williams' mind -- that the employment of his breath, the source of which he is beginning to know to be his thoughts,
must be clear, and in clarity is implied precision and specificity. Shortly thereafter, Williams attempts to work out this specificity. He presents a list:

These terrible things they reflect: the snow falling into the water,
* * *
the bird alighting, that pushes its feet forward to take up the impetus and falls forward nevertheless among the twigs. The weak-necked daisy bending to the wind . . . (p. 23)

This list serves two purposes. First, it exemplifies the clear speech Williams seeks. Second, the sense of futility he expresses -- "these terrible things" -- is part of the unpleasant side of experience which must be unified with the beautiful. Perhaps a concrete list of actual things can express beauty and unity. That this sort of language may be the answer Williams seeks is possible, especially in view of the passage about the convent of the Little Sisters of Saint Ann, and the discovery that follows immediately.

In describing the convent of the Little Sisters of St. Ann, Williams is able, through language, to express his sense of both its beauty and the peaceful unification of all its elements, pleasant and hideous:

Plaster saints, glass jewels and those apt paper flowers, bafflingly complex -- have here their forthright beauty, beside:
Things, things unmentionable,  
the sink with the waste farina in it and  
lumps of rancid meat, milk-bottle tops:  
have here a tranquility and loveliness  
(pp. 38-39)

The "here" in both cases is "in his thoughts" (p. 39),  
and it becomes revealed to us that the beauty and the  
unity desired find their existence in the imaginative  
mind of the perceiver, the poet.

It is in the poet's imaginative mind that the  
source of speech is discovered. In a "moist chamber,  
shut from / the world," where "thought clambers up /  
snail like, upon the wet rocks," stands "shrouded there,  
in that din / Earth, the chatterer, father of all /  
speech . . ." (p. 39). So, to paraphrase, speech is  
created in the dark chambers of the mind, generated by  
thought. The success of the convent scene -- success-ful in that it manages to portray beauty and effect a  
unification solely with an almost stark clarity of  
language -- and the realization that this success has  
been achieved by reliance upon thought, leads directly  
into the discovery of speech, hidden in the caverns of  
the mind, and thus to the end of the first part of the  
three-part cycle of Paterson.

In summary, the Preface and Book One of  
Paterson, which together constitute the first part of
of this three-part cycle, set in motion two of the themes -- rigor of beauty and unification of experience -- and hint at the third, the problem of death. The first two themes or searches seem to find resolution at the end of Book One with the discovery of language, there being left only the working out, in practical poetic terms, of the language Williams has discovered. The third theme, so far, is all but forgotten, and does not resurface until Book Three.

The middle portion, Book Two and part of Book Three, concerns itself with the attempt to use the language that Williams has discovered in the first part, a language that is clear and precise, and that adequately expresses the beauty of life and the unity of experience. A new image or, more accurately, a new concept, the idea of marriage, becomes a central idea symbolizing both beauty and unification. Ironically, it is in the attempt to use marriage and love as symbolic answers to death that Williams flounders in his exploration of language, and begins the return to silence. The image of the river is constant in its enigmatic flow. In addition, several discoveries are made in this middle portion concerning the place and value of poetry in relation to the world, which
discoveries contribute to the relinquishment of language.

Book Two opens with Williams' announced intentions:

Outside outside myself there is a world which I approach (p. 43)

concretely

Using his newly-found concrete speech, Williams intends to take a look at the world outside himself. However, the fact that using this language is going to be a struggle becomes evident in the lines that follow. In describing the Park, Williams writes, "upon whose body Paterson instructs his thoughts / (concretely)" (p. 43). This "concretely" appears to be a reminder because the line jerks back abruptly to the center of the page to state a concrete fact:

-- late spring

a Sunday afternoon! (p. 43)

And then a little later, the medical textbook explanation of the forward momentum of walking is abandoned in mid-sentence, only to be picked up later and a new approach taken, this time filtered through the poet's imagination. Instead of being carried forward by "various muscles" (p. 45), the walker is "led forward by . . . announcing wings" (p. 48). These two examples
show, in the first case, a push away from metaphor toward straight description, and in the second case, the drive back into metaphor. Traditional "poetic" metaphor is blended with and contrasted to the concrete language Williams searches for.

In addition to rigor of beauty and its corresponding rigor of expression, the theme of unity is carried into the workings of the poem itself, as Williams attempts in the central portion to unify various kinds of language -- description, metaphor, prose, verse, lists. Nevertheless, Williams remains dissatisfied with the language he explores. It is still inadequate:

Caught (in mind)
beside the water he looks down, listens!
But discovers still no syllable in the confused uproar: Missing the sense (though he tries)
(p. 81)

The waters of the Passaic, connected as they are to thought and wordlessness, return here as a reminder of the inadequacies of poetry and language in general. Continually, the sense of things is obliterated by "a roar that (soundless) drowns the sense" (p. 97), to the extent that the struggle to find sense becomes overwhelming and Williams declares,
Go where all
mouths are rinsed: to the river for
an answer
for relief from "meaning" (p. 111)

Words carry "meaning," yet seem to miss the mark some-
how, as evidenced by the somewhat deprecating quotation
marks around the word "meaning." In spite of this,
however, the drive is to purge oneself of this
"meaning," to start fresh, to

begin to begin again,
turning the inside out: to find one phrase
that will
lie married beside another for delight
(p. 140)

Still searching for meaning, while at the same time
longing for relief from meaning, Williams uses his
marriage image, the image of the unification of two
people, to articulate his goal. This goal, although
it "seems beyond attainment" (p. 140); is not yet
abandoned. For Williams, at the end of Book Three,
reaffirms his "virgin purpose" (p. 187):

I must
find my meaning and lay it, white
beside the sliding water (p. 145)

Williams maintains his position, even here in what is
actually the third part of the cycle, that meaning can
yet be found.

Another question raised in this central section
is what the roles of poetry and the poet are in human life. "To write," Williams declares, "nine tenths of the problem / is to live" (p. 113): life is useful only as it provides material for writing. This position, however, contradicts a preceding statement:

Be reconciled, poet, with your world, it is the only truth!

Ha! (p. 84)

Here Williams derides the poet lost in his private world. This has the effect of reducing the importance of the role of poetry. Until now, the word and world of the poem has had primary position. The struggle was with syntax and words and Williams' attempt to "comb out the language" (p. 175), not to reflect the passing scene. The recognition that poetry must reflect the world is part of the transition back to wordlessness because in reflecting the world -- or dealing with the human condition -- one must consider death and the methods humankind devises to face or to avoid facing death.

A little later, Williams suggests poetry's more realistic function. Suggesting that poetry can itself only be a reflection of the outside world:

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.  (p. 99)

If the poem reflects the world, rather than creates it
in the mind of the poet, and that world is largely
wordless, what possible conclusion, then, but an ulti-
mate relinquishment of language? If in Book One, events
"surpass" language, and in Book Three human action is
seen as "voiceless" (p. 120), evidently Williams is
leaning toward his suspicion that language may ever be
inadequate.

If any of humankind's experience is wordless,
that experience must be death. Williams laments at the
very beginning of Paterson that man dies "incommunicado"
(p. 11), and part of his goal in the poem is to remedy
that by discovering language, to relieve humankind of
its silence. As this central segment develops and
explores language, however, the realization of a certain
futility, or even offensiveness, in writing, begins to
infiltrate the poem. He asks, "what is there to say?
save that / beauty is unheeded" (p. 106). Perhaps
there really is very little to say. This question is
followed immediately by another one:

What end but love, that stares death in the
eye? (p. 106)

Love, and from love, marriage, the union of two people,
are the only courageous answers to death. "Lacking love," "death stares" everything else "in the eye" (p. 107), but love seems to triumph over death, if only because it enables one to face death squarely.

These lines, and the lines that follow, mark, I believe, the emergence of the theme of facing death as an ultimately overwhelming concern. In this passage, the initial question is expanded and repeated:

A city, a marriage -- that stares death in the eye

The riddle of a man and a woman

For what is there but love, that stares death in the eye, love, begetting marriage -- not infamy, not death (p. 106)

Love, not language, is the answer to death that emerges in Paterson. It is at this point in Part One of Book Three that the direction of Paterson begins to shift from an experiment with language to a more urgent quest, perhaps the quest of an aging poet who is himself nearing death -- the quest for something to take the sting out of death. Williams writes:

Sing me a song to make death tolerable, a song
of a man and a woman: the riddle of a man and a woman.

What language could allay our thirsts,
what winds life us, what flood bear us past defeats
but song but deathless song? (p. 107)
This passage marks the end of the second segment of the three-part cycle of Paterson because of the shift in direction which it suggests. Still convinced, however, that language of some sort must be able to "make death tolerable," Williams has suggested song, poetry in union with music. But in the lines that follow begins the revelation that the union sought for, the marriage, is a silent union, leaving, perhaps, only the music:

The rock
married to the river
makes
no sound

(p. 107)

The union between rock and river is a completed union, a marriage, and yet is silent. So Williams chastises himself. "Give it up," he writes, "Quit it. Stop writing ... you will never / separate that stain of sense, / an offense / to love." (p. 108). The sense, the "meaning," of words is an insult to the reality of love, which far surpasses any attempt to verbalize it, and which generates a wordless union like that of the rock and the river.

To recapitulate, this central portion, whose end is marked by the emergence of the theme of a way to handle death in Book Three, has served as the testing ground for Williams' new manner of speech. That speech has been successful as an exploration of precision in
language and unification of disparate styles and perceptions, but has failed when asked to give an answer to the problem of death, which answer only love and silence seem able to provide.

"But somehow a man must lift himself / again" (p. 135) and so Williams does, at the end of Book Three, when he states that he must "comb out the language -- or succumb" (p. 145).

Book Four continues this theme of love, the only answer to death, in a series of dialogues and letters. Love, between parent and child, between man and woman, between two women, is explored, while at the same time, contrasting perspectives and manners of speaking continue to play out Williams' attempt to "comb out the language." However, these first two parts of Book Four are the last vestiges of Williams' original purpose. After these sections, the themes of rigor of beauty and unification of experience through language disappear completely, and in their place is the theme of the search for a way to handle death. While this abandonment of themes is a major structural flaw, this apparent loss of direction of the poem adds to the impact of its final statement. It is as if the two earlier themes are easy problems for language to
untangle, and so they are abandoned, but the last theme presents a problem which can only be solved by the abandonment of language.

In Part Three of Book Four comes the realization that the goals set for language at the beginning of Paterson will never be completely reached. "The brain is weak," Williams writes, "It fails mastery / never a fact" (p. 191). The exploration of language has ceased, and what takes place in the remainder of the last portion of the cycle is the transition back to an inevitable wordlessness. The poem quiets down and seems ready to dissolve into reminiscences. Images from the first portion of the cycle return to complete the full circle. The tone is one of defeat and resignation, until, in Book Five, Williams develops the concept of the dance, a wordless state, but not wordless out of ignorance, frustration or inaccuracy.

At the end of Book Four, Williams seems ready to quit. He reminisces about women he has known, "Nancy, with small / breasts," and asks, "You remember?" (p. 192). He gives what seems to be a final salute to that "nine months' wonder" whose howl reverberated in the first section:
Here's to the baby
May it thrive!
Here's to the labia
that rive
to give it place
in a stubborn world.
And here's to the peak
from which the seed was hurled! (p. 193)

Not only does Williams salute the infant, but also he praises the generative powers behind that infant. If one looks at the poem *Paterson* as the "baby," and Williams' own mind as the generative powers behind that baby, then the image is of Williams raising his glass in a final parting toast to his creation.

The river image also returns, but now it has run its course into the sea. Words "float" upon the surface of the water, having joined the other "wrack" that floats there too (p. 200). And Williams cannot renew the cycle; it seems it is spent. He writes:

-- you cannot believe
that it can begin again, again, here
again here (p. 200)

"The sea that sucks in all rivers" seems to have sucked in the poet's thought as well. Book Four closes with the visual image of a man who "was hung in full view of thousands" and a declaration that

This is the blast
the eternal close
the spiral
the final somersault
the end. (pp. 203-204)
However, it is not the end, because Book Five reveals the development of a new kind of wordlessness, one that does not lack order as did the wordlessness of the beginning. This wordlessness, the dance, comes about through a progression that begins with the poet's admission of his own state of wordlessness in the presence of his beloved. In searching for love and marriage as the answer to death, Williams has found that

It is this that rouses a tumult in my breast. At mere sight of you my voice falters, my tongue is broken. (p. 217)

The emotions felt here are inexpressible; speech is halted in their presence. The silent marriage of the rock and the river has now manifested itself in the speaker's own experience. And following this firsthand experience of a willing wordlessness is the description of a woman, of whom Williams asks the question, "have you read anything that I have written? It is all for you . . . or the birds . . . or Mezz Mezzrow [who wrote about music] . . . or the Satyrs" (pp. 220-221). And, Satyrs dance! all the deformities take wing. (p. 221)

Williams has moved from speechlessness in the presence of a beloved person, to an almost universal woman for whom all poetry has been written, to the image of
Satyrs, lusty and vigorous, dancing. Satyrs dancing is a final major image of Paterson, around which the very rhythm of the end of the poem revolves. As the Satyrs dance, the line length itself takes on a measured, staggered, dancing, three-part rhythm. At the end of this passage, Williams unites the "dance of my thoughts" to the dance of the Satyrs and the dance of the verse.

At the end of Paterson, this dancing rhythm returns, as Williams makes his final statement:

The measure intervenes, to measure is all we know
a choice among the measures . .
the measured dance

We know nothing and can know nothing . .
but
the dance, to dance to a measure contrapuntally,
Satyrically, the tragic foot.
(p. 239)

In the beginning, we know nothing beyond "our own complexities." Now, we know nothing but "the dance." It is a tragic dance because, like it or not, life ends in death, and wordless, too, but this final wordless dance has order and rhythm to it. Language has been set aside because after much struggle it has indeed been shown to be inadequate, confirming what Williams had suggested at the beginning. Poetry itself has been shown to be a reflection of the outside world, the
provider of the rhythm, the "song" perhaps; but life, the dance itself, lies outside the realm of the poem. The three-part cycle of Paterson is complete, having followed its course from the painful wordlessness of inaccuracy, through a difficult struggle with language, to end in another wordlessness, this one a rhythmical, willing, letting-go. The song to make death tolerable which Williams asked for in Book Three has evolved into a silent, tragic, but lusty dance.
NOTES:

1William Carlos Williams, Paterson, New York: New Directions, 1963. p. 3. All references are to this edition by page number.

2In his book, William Carlos Williams' Paterson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), Joel Conarroe treats the Passaic River in his chapter "The River." He makes the connection between the poet's thought and the progress of the Passaic, which I have expanded upon to include the sense of wordlessness which seems to pervade the symbology of the river.