

# A Restoration Drama

Review by Troy Jollimore

## Repair

C. K. Williams

Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

128 pp. \$22.00

ISBN: 0-374-24932-6

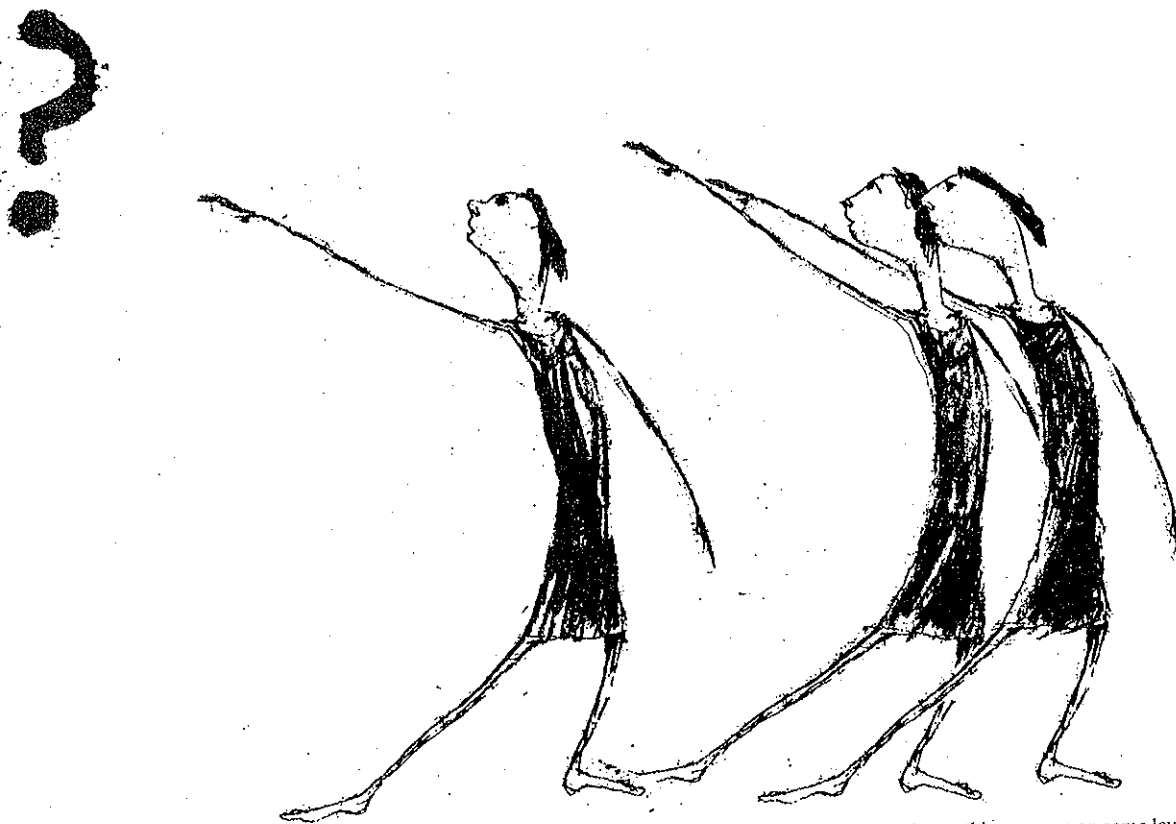
It is possible that no poet now writing is fonder of the question mark than is C. K. Williams. At times, one almost feels interrogated by his work—though ultimately, it is not the reader but the world itself that Williams means to interrogate: “But if one believed such things, what wouldn’t be a sign?”; “Could real love ever come to me? / Would I distort it if it did?”; “What was I doing to myself? Or she to me?”; “What might heal you?”; “Would he take this as a defeat? Whose, though? And what would a victory have been?” That Williams’ excellent new book, *Repair*, is riddled with such questions helps explain why its poems are instantly recognizable as his, even though many of them are not written in the extended poetic line that has characterized his work for over two decades. Formally, these new poems mark a departure. Underneath, though, they are driven by the familiar Williams sensibility: intelligent, restless, perpetually unsatisfied, always wanting to know and understand more.

Thematically, *Repair* is Williams’ most cohesive book: every poem returns us in some way to the profoundly ambiguous title theme. (That the poems are nonetheless highly various makes this all the more impressive.) To see the world in terms of repair

they might be refrozen and the mass reconstituted, with precious little of its brilliance lost, just this lucent shimmer on the rough, raised grain of water-rotten floor, just this single drop, as sweet and warm as blood, evaporating on your tongue.

The idea that a vanished world or passed moment might somehow be “reconstituted, with precious little of its brilliance lost” is the essential hope of art. But this hope, necessary as it is, is clearly in vain: a shattered block of ice cannot be restored to anything like its original form and, by implication, the world cannot be preserved in words or any other medium. Through a dialectical process typical of Williams’ work, an initially inspiring image becomes a cause for despair. If this is what constitutes repair, then the world is essentially irreparable.

Moreover, the attempt to fix the world—or oneself—can be painful and even potentially annihilating. In “House,” the renovation of a house becomes a metaphor for the recreation of the self. As with “Ice,” the metaphor is initially optimistic—and Williams,



can be fundamentally either positive or negative, depending on whether one focuses on the need for, or the possibility of, repair. The former sees the world as something broken; the latter, as something that is at least potentially good. The drama inheres in the poet’s fluctuation between these two poles, his attempt to define a middle ground optimistic enough to keep him from despair, yet realistic enough to withstand the world’s repeated attempts to prove itself a sad, frightening, and lonely place.

For Williams, the repair of the world, the maintenance of the self, and the creation of art are aspects of one fundamental process: the achievement of meaning in the midst of complexity and chaos. This restorative process is all that stands between society’s descent into anarchy or oppression, or, on an individual level, the dissolution of the self. Our resources, however, may be insufficient to the task. Here is the final stanza of the opening poem, “Ice”:

Imagine how even if it shattered and began to liquefy  
the hope would still remain that if you quickly gathered up the slithery,  
nervously skittish chips.

who revels in ambiguity, clearly endorses this response on some level. Yet the image also disturbs us, partly because it recalls an earlier poem, “After Auschwitz,” in which the poet is surprised to discover that the buildings of a quaint German town are merely “deft / replicas of what / they must have been before / the war, before the Allied / bombers flattened them.” Both poems anticipate the stunning “Not Soul,” which envisions the entire overdeveloped world as “a kind of reservation, a museum / of land, plants, houses, even people” in which “the very shape and hue and texture of reality, / the sheen of surface, depth of shadow, / seem unfocused now, hollowed out.” The poet is torn between the desire to eliminate his imperfections, and the fear that once the process is complete, there will be nothing left to play the role of self: one will have improved oneself out of existence.

Of course, the very idea of an end to the process is illusory. New damage is constantly being inflicted—worse yet, we are constantly inflicting it. The damage we do to each other is depicted in “King,” which sets a personal incident against the backdrop of the

continued on next page

A RESTORATION DRAMA/JOLLIMORE  
continued from previous page

Martin Luther King assassination, and in "The Blow." In the latter poem a man, touched by a beggar, unthinkingly strikes him in response. He must then choose how to act—apologize? Give money? Take refuge in self-righteous anger? But none of these will erase the harm done to the beggar, or restore the man's image of himself. At this point the beggar disappears from the poem altogether, leaving us with the man's reflections:

How we toil, he mused,  
from this aimless hour  
to that, from one intractable  
quandary to the next, until  
we're left only a horrible  
fear of our own existence.

Ultimately the man succumbs entirely to this fear, and is left "beholding his own mind / flickering desperately over / the great gush of the real, / to no end, to no avail."

The poet's response to such horrors is often to long for simpler states of consciousness, modes of being that evade the complex social realities of human life and thereby avoid life's potential for unintended and often unexpected harm. Thus, in "The Train" the poet imagines the life of a hare he has glimpsed from the window of a stalled train. In "Bone," he is fascinated by the microbes that live and feed on a piece of bone, finding the purity and simplicity of their existence appealing: "Such sweetness, such savor: luxury, satiety, and no repentance, no regret." And in "The Dress," he recalls finding the ways of adults so frighteningly incomprehensible that he would pretend to be an animal:

Or you could go out by yourself even to a half-block-long empty lot, into the  
bushes:  
like a creature of leaves you'd lurk, crouched, crawling, simplified, savage,  
alone;  
already there was wanting to be simpler, wanting when they called you, never to  
go back.

In this collection, civilization's demands tend to be represented by authoritarian mother figures: the "Mamah" who won't let him keep the "filthy" bone in "Bone"; the grandmother in "Dirt" who washes his mouth out with soap; and the women of "The Dress," whom the poet remembers finding "so unknowable and forbidding." But if the book's female figures prevent one form of escape—the return to an animal state of being—they compensate by offering another. We can find relief not by abandoning human society but by touching the consciousness of another human being—usually, for Williams, a female lover.

Thus, while "Lost Wax" shares with "The Blow" the image of life as an interminable series of attempts to (quite literally) pull one's self together, it ends very differently:

Was ever truth so malleable?  
Arid, inadhesive bits of matter.  
What might heal you? Love.  
What make you whole? Love. My love.

Using love to rescue us from an otherwise impossible situation would strike us as a *deus ex machina* if not for the fact that Williams, in his previous work and in *Repair* (in "Archetypes," "Dream," and "Biopsy," among others) has so profoundly chronicled the barriers to love, the flaws, insecurities, and psychic wounds that prevent us from loving and being loved, and which leave us open at every turn to the forces of fragmentation and despair.

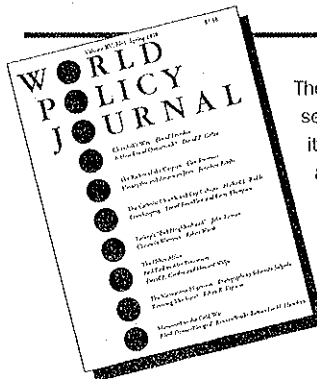
The book concludes with "Invisible Mending," in which three women "old as angels" mend damaged garments:

Their hands as hard as horn,  
their eyes as keen as steel,  
the threads they worked with  
must have seemed as thick  
as ropes on ships, as cables  
on a crane, but still their heads  
would lower, their teeth bare  
to nip away the raveled ends.

This precise, very physical image contrasts sharply with the abstract, idealized process envisioned in "Ice." Here, then, is a form of repair to which finite, mortal human beings might aspire: imperfect, yes, and slow, but attainable, and therefore a source of inspiration rather than a cause for lamentation. But whether this process will prove sufficient in the face of annihilating time and the quandaries of social life—whether the vision of "Invisible Mending" and "Lost Wax" will win out over that of "The Blow"—is not a matter Williams intends to settle here. Rather, like everything in his world, it remains a subject for further investigation.

Troy Jollimore teaches philosophy at Georgetown University. □

# We'll change your view of the world — and we'll do it for free.



The WORLD POLICY JOURNAL. Spirited, serious, and compulsively readable, it's the compelling publication that's actually making sense of today's most urgent social and political issues! Here's your chance to experience an issue FREE — and, if you like it, to stay with us at 40% savings.

## They're raving about the WORLD POLICY JOURNAL!

- The *New York Times* calls it a "leading publication" devoted to international affairs.
- The *Nation* praises it "for being willing to question the fundamental assumptions of the establishment's post-Cold War consensus."
- The *Utne Reader* says, "Proving that lofty aims and a serious tone can coexist with lively writing and creative thinking, the WORLD POLICY JOURNAL sets a new standard for intellectual journals."

### FREE-ISSUE ACCEPTANCE COUPON

YES. Send me the next issue of the WORLD POLICY JOURNAL, and enter my subscription for a full year at just \$17.95. If the WORLD POLICY JOURNAL isn't everything you've promised, I'll simply write "cancel" when I get your invoice, and keep that first issue FREE. Otherwise, I'll receive a total of four issues at more than 40% off the regular newsstand rate!

Name

Address

City/State/Zip

Bill me later.  I'd rather enclose a check now.

Charge my: VISA  MasterCard

Card No.  Exp. Date /

Signature

Allow 6-8 weeks for first issue delivery. The WORLD POLICY JOURNAL is a publication of the World Policy Institute at New School University, 65 Fifth Avenue, Suite 413, New York, NY 10003.

# j. w. hickey the bloodshed ring a novel

Girl Meets Ring.  
Girl Loses Ring.  
Ring Gets Girl.

Imagine a campfire story told by Carl Jung,  
Luis Bunuel, William James, and Anne Rice.

Imagine a murder mystery about Free Will.  
About Loss. About Time.

www.bloodshedring.com  
paper prism press • new york