

decisively—to make us sound every word and syllable—so that each word assume/resume its life—which is ours. If the imagination occur.

It is the imagination on which reality ((our pet)) rides—It is the imagination—It is a cleavage through everything by a force that does not exist in the mass and therefore can never be discovered by its anatomization.

Poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it—It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore, since reality needs no personal support but exists free from human action . . . it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but—

As birds' wings beat the solid air without which none could fly so words freed by the imagination affirm reality by their flight.

And he sees too that the issue of poetry is not in likening it to music—but within the act of language itself—

as if the earth under our feet
were
an excrement of some sky

and we degraded prisoners
destined
to hunger until we eat filth

while the imagination strains
after deer
going by fields of goldenrod in

the stifling heat of September
Somehow
it seems to destroy us

It is only in isolate flecks that
something
is given off

No one
to witness
and adjust, no one to drive the car

You can find here ground that Bronk and Creeley mined.
And Olson.

I'm sorry: you are going to have to read the book yourself.
That's what it's here for. You.

William Carlos Williams:
Man and Poet
ed Carroll F Terrell
Orono ME
Natural Poetry
Foundation
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MARJORIE PERLOFF

"TO GIVE A DESIGN": WILLIAMS AND THE VISUALIZATION OF POETRY

William Carlos Williams, aged 73, in conversation with Edith Heal about his characteristic verse forms:

Free verse wasn't verse at all to me. All art is orderly.... From the beginning I knew that the American language must shape the pattern; later I rejected the word language and spoke of the American idiom—this was a better word than language, less academic, more identified with speech. As I went through the poems I noticed many brief poems, always arranged in couplet or quatrain form. I noticed also that I was peculiarly fascinated by another pattern: the dividing of the little paragraphs in lines of three. I remembered writing several poems as quatrains at first, then in the normal process of concentrating the poem, getting rid of redundancies in the line—and in the attempt to make it go faster—the quatrain changed into a three line stanza, or a five line stanza became a quatrain, as in:

The Nightingales

Original version
My shoes as I lean
unlacing them
stand out upon
flat worsted flowers
under my feet.

Nimble the shadows
of my fingers play
unlacing
over shoes and flowers.

See how much better it conforms to the page, how much better it looks?¹

Revised version
My shoes as I lean
unlacing them
stand out upon
flat worsted flowers.

Nimble the shadows
of my fingers play
unlacing
over shoes and flowers.

1. *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*, reported and edited by Edith Heal (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), pp. 66-67. Subsequently cited as IWWP.

Like most of Williams' attempts to account for his own prosodic inventions, to theorize about verse, this one is confusing and contradictory. "Free verse isn't verse to me"—over and over again, Williams made this declaration,² and yet the fact is that "The Nightingales" is written in "free verse," there being no measurable recurrence of phonic elements—the stress count ranges from 1 ("unlacing") to 3 ("flat worsted flowers"); the syllable count from 3 to 6—no definable pattern of word repetition or even of syntactic parallelism. Again, Williams' repeated insistence that his poetry is written in "the American idiom"—"the language as spoken"³—belies what is actually on the page, for what conceivable voice speaks this way?

My shoes as I lean unlacing them stand out upon flat worsted flowers under my feet. Nimbly the shadows of my fingers play unlacing over shoes and flowers.

From the "as" clause, awkwardly embedded between subject and verb, to the gratuitous repetition of "unlacing" and especially that final curious locution "unlacing over" where we would expect a direct object, this surely is *not* the natural American idiom. Nor does Williams' reference to tempo make much sense: the elimination of a single short line, "under my feet," from a nine-line poem cannot make it appreciably "go faster"; indeed, when we listen to the second version read aloud, we may well distinguish

2. As early as 1913, Williams declared: "I do not believe in *vers libre*, this contradiction in terms. Either the motion continues or it does not continue, either there is rhythm or no rhythm. *Vers libre* is prose." See Mike Weaver, *William Carlos Williams: The American Background* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 82. Weaver produces the whole unpublished essay "Speech Rhythm," submitted to *Poetry* but returned by Harriet Monroe as being incomprehensible: see pp. 82-83. For other important versions of this argument, see *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, ed. John C. Thirwall (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957), p. 129; "Studiously Unprepared: Notes for Various Talks and Readings: May 1940 to April 1941," ed. Paul Mariani, in *Sulfur*, (1982): 12-13; Walter Sutton, "A Visit with William Carlos Williams" (1961), in *Interviews with William Carlos Williams*, ed. Linda Wagner (New York: New Directions, 1976), pp. 38-39; and William Carlos Williams, "Free Verse," in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 288-290. Ironically, it is customary to treat Williams as one of the inventors of free verse: see Charles O. Hartman, *Free Verse, An Essay on Prosody* (Princeton: University Press, 1980), pp. 93-106, and *passim*.

3. IWWP, p. 75. See also, "Note: The American Language and the New Poetry, so called," enclosed with a letter to H.L. Mencken, 17 December 1934, cited by Weaver, p. 81; Williams, "Interview with Mike Wallace" (1957), in Wagner, *Interviews*, p. 74; Williams, "Some Hints Toward the Enjoyment of Modern Verse" (1952), in *Quarterly Review of Literature* (1953); rpt. in *Contemporary Poetry, A Retrospective from the Quarterly Review of Literature*, ed. Theodore Weiss and Renée Weiss (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 125.

As is the case with free verse, most commentators take Williams at his word. Thus David Perkins writes: "the lines are arranged to enact the movement of the voice speaking: they reinforce the natural rhythm by linear notion," *A History of Modern Poetry from the 1890s to Pound, Eliot and Yeats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 316.

the absence of meter and rhyme, the brevity of the line-units, the preponderance of monosyllables, and so on, but the overall sound structure remains almost the same.

What, then, is the difference that so excites Williams: The *look*, of course. ("See how much better it conforms to the page, how much better it looks?"). The verse of "The Nightingales" is not, Williams would have it, "free" because its look on the page is that of two symmetrical units; indeed, in the revised version, we see two quatrains, almost square in shape. This symmetrical form provides stability against which the words of the little poem push and jostle, just as in, say, an Elizabethan sonnet, the actual rhythm is played off against the chosen metrical base and rhyme scheme. The visual shape also directs our attention to particular words and the relationships between them. "My shoes," for example, does not get a line to itself because it is not, in fact, the subject of the poem; rather, the emphasis is on what happens when something—"unlacing"—is done to them as the poet "leans" in their direction. "Lean" and "unlacing" share the letters *l* and *n*: the act "stands out" visually as well as semantically in juxtaposition to the longer line "flat worsted flowers," with its repetition of *fl* and *t* and the chiasmus of *wo-ow*. In the second stanza, expectation is again raised and deferred. "Nimbly the shadows" must wait for the second line and in turn the third and fourth before we understand what it is that is happening. "Unlacing" gets a line all to itself because it is the key word, and the unlacing now takes on a different meaning as the play of shadows takes precedence over the act. Indeed, the "shoes" previously "stand[ing] out upon/ flat worsted flowers" now become equated with them. In the imaginative metamorphosis of the poem, the shadows of the poet's fingers have become birds—the nightingales of the title—flying through space. Accordingly, the second reference to "flowers," which corresponds visually to the first, no longer means the same thing. The look of the poem on the page thus creates a play of sameness and difference, identity and change.

I do not mean to imply that sound plays no part in this pattern or that the poem is to be perceived instantaneously as a "spatial form."⁴ Clearly, the words must be perceived in time as our eye moves from line to line; just as clearly, the visual arrangement foregrounds certain sounds—for example, the voiced spirant endings in shoes, as, flowers, fingers, shoes, flowers (7 of the 25 words or almost one-third); or the three nasals in a vertical row at

4. See Cary Nelson, "Suffused-Encircling Shapes of Mind: Inhabited Space in Williams," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 1, no. 4 (May 1971): 549-564.

line endings in the first quatrain: *lean, them, upon*. All the same, these are, in Hugh Kenner's words, "stanzas you can't quite hear,"⁵ in that sentence rhythm (one declarative sentence per stanza) overrides all line endings and that there is no marked rhythm to oppose its forward push. Rather, "The Nightingales" is written in what Kenner calls "stanzas to see": indeed, they could not have existed prior to the invention of the typewriter, an invention that made it possible for the poet to compose directly for the printed page with no intermediary process of transposition.

Stanzas to see—it is interesting that Williams himself never quite understood the workings of his own prosody. Thus when, in an interview of 1950, John W. Gerber asked the poet what it is that makes "This Is Just To Say" a poem, Williams replied, "In the first place, it's metrically absolutely regular.... So, dogmatically speaking, it has to be a poem because it goes that way, don't you see!"⁶ But the poem actually goes like this:

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold⁷

The stanzas exhibit no regularity of stress or of syllable count; indeed, except for lines 2 and 5 (each an iamb) and lines 8 and 9 (each an amphibrach), no two lines have the same metrical form. What then can Williams mean when he says, "It's metrically absolutely regular"? Again, he mistakes sight for sound: on the page, the three little quatrains look alike; they have roughly the same physical shape. It is typography rather than any kind of phonemic recurrence that provides directions for the speaking voice (or for

5. *A Homemade World, The American Modernist Writers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 58.

6. John W. Gerber and Emily W. Wallace, "An Interview with William Carlos Williams" (1950), in Wagner, *Interviews*, p. 17. Subsequently cited as INTS.

7. My notation is a simplified version of the standard Trager-Smith scansion using 4 stresses: primary (/), secondary (\), tertiary (/ \), and weak (). A strong pause is indicated by the standard caesura (||), a lesser pause, (|). The poem appears in *The Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1951), p. 354. Subsequently cited as CEP.

the eye that reads the lines silently) and that teases out the poem's meanings.

Williams did not hit upon this visual mode without a good bit of struggle, although in his later years, he wanted his readers to think otherwise. By 1950, he was telling the following story about his poetic beginnings:

My first poem was born like a bolt out of the blue. It came unsolicited and broke a spell of disillusion and suicidal despondency. Here it is:

A black, black cloud
flew over the sun
driven by fierce flying
rain.

The joy I felt, the mysterious, soul-satisfying joy that swept over me at that moment was only mitigated by the critical comment which immediately followed it: How could the clouds be driven by the rain? Stupid.

But the joy remained. From that moment I was a poet.⁸

The spell of "disillusion and suicidal despondency" to which Williams refers was evidently brought on by an episode of heart strain that ended his adolescent dreams of becoming a track star. He was eighteen at the time. Appreciative biographers and critics have repeatedly cited Williams' little story as an instance of the poet's early premonition of his future poetic power.⁹ I hope, therefore, that I shall not be thought too irreverent if I suggest that, like so much of the self-invention that characterizes the *Autobiography*,¹⁰

8. *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 47; subsequently cited as AUTO. Cf. the slightly different versions Williams gives in IWWP, p. 4, and INTS, p. 8.

9. In *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1981), pp. 30-31, Paul Mariani, commenting on the cardiac episode, writes:

Williams was shattered. He had fondly hoped that he would at least shine as a track star, and now he went into a black depression. It was ironically, this touching bottom, this first descent into his private hell, that turned out to yield an unlooked-for gift: the gift of the poem. It was, as far as he could remember, the first poem he had ever written, a short, spontaneous thing, a single sentence containing a symbol of his own despondency. But writing it brought with it a sense of relief, of delight, as though he had done something truly extraordinary.

And Mariani quotes the four lines of the poem.

Similarly, Rod Townley, commenting on the awkwardness of Williams' early verse and exclamatory rhetoric, writes: "But these are all half-measures; none of the poems resulting from them has the clean quiet shock value of the enjambment that concludes the first poem Williams wrote: 'driven by fierce flying/ rain'." See *The Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 63. Townley does not ask himself the question: how would the poet who used those "half-measures" as late as 1913, have devised the "clean quiet shock value of...enjambment" as early as 1900?

10. See, on this point, Herbert Leibowitz, "You Can't Bear Innocence: *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*," *American Poetry Review*, 10, no. 2 (March/April 1981): 35-47.

this charming account may well be acrocryphal. It provides a myth of origins for what was in fact a confusing trial-and-error process; I say "myth" because, judging from the poems Williams was to publish a full decade later in *Poems* (1909) and *The Tempers* (1913), it is doubtful that he would have known of a convention according to which the four short lines in question could possibly qualify as a "poem," and therefore equally doubtful that the young Williams would have preserved them as such.¹¹ Indeed, his wholly distinctive visual prosody came into being only gradually as he put first conventional metrics and then Imagist free verse behind him and began to place poetry in the context of the visual arts, as those arts were practiced by his great French contemporaries. How this process took place and how the resulting visualization of the "poetic page" has changed our concept of the lyric—this is my subject.

II

Surely few first volumes give as little indication of a poet's future direction as does *Poems* (1909), published when Williams was twenty-six. Of its twenty-six (is the number a coincidence?) poems, fourteen are sonnets, all but three Petrarchan. Here is a representative octave:

Sweet Lady, sure it seems a thousand years
 Since last you honored me with gentle speech.
 Yet, when, forsaking fantasy, I reach
 With memory's index o'er the stretching tiers
 Of minutes wasted, counting, (as who fears
 Strict-chiding reason, lest it should impeach
 All utterance, must) a mighty, gaping breach
 'Twixt truth and seeming verity appears.¹²

Williams was to recall five decades later that the early poems were much "preoccupied with the studied elegance of Keats" (IWWP, p. 8), but the fact is that the sonnets, quatrains, ballad stanzas, heroic couplets, and hexameters of *Poems* are not appreciably different from hundreds of other lyrics published in this period: for example, Madison Cawein's "The Yellow Puccoon" or Percy MacKaye's "In the Bohemian Redwoods," both of which appeared side by side with seven of Williams' poems in the special American

11. According to Emily M. Wallace, Williams' bibliographer (see note 13) and the editor of the Williams Correspondence now in progress, the original manuscript of this poem has not yet been found.

12. *Poems* (Rutherford, N.J.: Reid Howell, 1909), p. 14.

Poetry number of *The Poetry Review* (October 1912).¹³ It is as if the poet had not yet been born; indeed, Williams did not reprint a single poem from his first volume.

Williams' second book, *The Tempers* (1913), replaces the Poetic Diction and mechanical verse forms of the genteel poets of the 1900s with the Ezra Pound of *Personae* (1909) and *Ripostes* (1912), the latter dedicated to Williams. The results are curious. Here is the first stanza of "Postlude," a poem H.D. called "a Niké, supreme among your poems," and Pound, "splendid":¹⁴

Nów that I have coóled to yóu
 Lét there be góld of tárnished másonry,
 Témplés sóothed by the sún to ruín
 That sléep utterly.
 Gíve me hánd for the dánces,
 Rípples at Philáe, in and out,
 And líps, my Lésbían,
 Wáll flówers that ónce were fláme. (CEP, p. 16)

Williams' earliest free verse is distinguished by its slow phrasal rhythm, its end-stopping and frequent mid-line pauses ("And líps, my Lésbían"), its conjunction of syntactic and line units, its alliteration, assonance, and open vowel sounds. All these are features found in Pound's early free verse, for example:

Williams:	Lét there be góld of tárnished másonry
Pound:	Lét us búild hère an éxquisite friendship
Williams:	Témplés sóothed by the sún to ruín
Pound:	Góds of the wingéd shóe
Williams:	Rípples at Philáe, in and out
Pound:	Álgæ reach úp and out, beneath
Williams:	And líps, my Lésbían
Pound:	My City, my belóved... ¹⁵

13. See *The Poetry Review*, I, x (October 1912): 479-81. Williams' poems in this volume are a selection from *The Tempers*, introduced by Ezra Pound, but the poems included in this selection are still very close to those in *Poems* (1909). For a list of these poems and for all subsequent bibliographical information on book and magazine publication, see Emily Mitchell Wallace's indispensable *A Bibliography of William Carlos Williams* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1968).

14. H.D.'s comment is made in a letter of 14 August 1916 which Williams reprints in the Preface to *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920); rpt. in *Imaginations*, ed. Webster Schott (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 13. Subsequently cited as IMAG. H.D.'s letter then goes on to object to the "flippancies" and "hey-ding-ding touch of a slightly later poem, "March," and Williams responds with some asperity, IMAG, p. 13.

For Pound's comment, see his review of *The Tempers* in *New Freewoman*, I, no. 11 (December 1913); rpt. in *William Carlos Williams: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Charles Doyle (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 53, and in this volume, pp. 139-140. Subsequently cited as Doyle. At Pound's request, "Postlude" was published in the June 1913 number of *Poetry* by Harriet Monroe; see Mariani, *A New World Naked*, p. 105. 15. The lines come respectively from "Und Drang," "The Return," "Sub Mare," and "N.Y.": see *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1976), pp. 173, 198, 194, and 185.

By 1916, a vintage year in which Williams published twenty-two poems in *Others* and six in *Poetry*, he had mastered this cutting technique. It is interesting, in this connection, to compare Williams' own poems of 1916 to the free-verse poems included in the July issue of *Others*, which Williams edited. The issue opens with Marianne Moore's "Critics and Connoisseurs," a poem designed, like those of Williams, to be seen rather than heard, its intricate symmetrical stanzas created by complex typographical and syllable-counting rules. The volume ends with Pound's Fenollosa's poem "To-Em-Mei's 'The Unmoving Cloud'," in which almost every line is a subject-verb-object unit, complete in itself, rhythmic units recurring with delicate variation:

I st^op in my r^oom toward the E^ast, qui^et, qui^et,
I p^at my n^ew c^as^k of wine.
My fri^ends are estr^anged, or f^ar dist^ant...¹⁹

Pound and Moore have obviously devised ways of structuring the poem that Williams admires, but their ways are not his, any more than is Wallace Stevens', whose "The Worms at Heaven's Gate," written in blank verse, is included in Williams' selection for *Others*. Rather, we must look at the free verse of such poets as Skipwith Cannell, Alfred Kreyborg, Maxwell Bodenheim, Helen Hoyt, Mina Loy, and Conrad Aiken, free verse that superficially does look like Williams' own and which the audience of 1916 would not have distinguished from his. Consider the following examples:

(1) Helen Hoyt, "Damask"

White blossoms,
Frail tracery,
Born of whiteness
In a white world,
You are more shadowy than frost flowers
Growing in your smooth atmosphere,
Vivid for a moment,
Then palely
Dimmed again:
White lost in white.

(*Others*, p. 10)

(2) Conrad Aiken, "Illusions"

Green fingers lifting a pebble,
green fingers uncurling,
the slant and splash of a waterdrop
between eternities;
earth slipping from old roots,
and the stealth of white petals in the sun
all day long;

19. *Others*, 3 (1916-1917): 31. Marianne Moore's poem appears on pages 4-5.

brown chimney pots
descending against a cloud
in silence;
between walls
the dry whirl of a sparrow's wings...
am I these, or more?

(*Others*, p. 16)

(3) Williams, "Love Song":

the stain of love
is upon the world!
Yellow, yellow, yellow
it eats into the leaves,
smears with saffron
the horned branches that lean
heavily
against a smooth purple sky!
There is no light
only a honey-thick stain
that drips from leaf to leaf
and limb to limb
spoilⁱng the colors
of the whole world—
you far off there under
the wine-red selvage of the west!²⁰

All three poems are written in short free-verse lines, the stress count ranging between 2 and 4; in all three, there is much trochaic or spondaic rhythm ("White blossoms"; "green fingers"; "smears with saffron"), but not enough to establish a clear-cut metrical figure. But where Hoyt and Aiken consistently use end-stopped lines and simple repetition of syntactic and rhythmic units, Williams avoids the repeat, cuts in odd places, and positions his words on the page so as to create an effect of what might be called studied clumsiness. Aiken, for example, relies heavily on the noun phrase—

Gr^een fⁱngers lⁱfting a p^ebble
gr^een fⁱngers un^curling . . .

ear^th slⁱpping from o^ld r^oots . . .
whⁱte p^etals in the s^un . . .
br^own chⁱmney p^ots— . . .

20. Hoyt's "Damask" appears in *Others*, p. 10; Aiken's "Illusions" on p. 16. The first version of Williams' "Love Song" adds three lines at the beginning ("What have I to say to you/ When we shall meet?/ Yet—") and fifteen more lines after "spoilⁱng the colors/ Of the whole world"; it does not have the final couplet. See *Poetry*, 9 (November 1916) 81-82; and CEP, p. 173-174. The second version first appeared in *Al-Que Quiere* (1917); see CEP, p. 174.

Hoyt, on participial modifiers:

B^orn of whit^eness
 G^ro^wing in your sm^ooth at^mos^ph^ere
 Dim^med ag^ain....

The result, in both cases, is a certain laxity as phrase is piled upon phrase with little variety or tension.

Williams' three and four-stress lines are quite different. For one thing, he opens with an isolated line—a single, straightforward sentence, five of its six words monosyllables, its rhythm choppy and abrupt:

I lie h^ere thinking of y^ou:—

Then another simple sentence, but this time draped over two lines:

the stain of love
 is upon the world!

The first line here needs the second to complete it and even then we are left in a quandary. For unlike Hoyt's "white blossoms" (the damask) or Aiken's "green fingers" (tree branches), Williams' "stain of love" is less a metaphor than a surrealistic image of eroticism, the poet's semen becoming a mysterious flood that covers all, eating into the leaves and finally "spoiling the colors/ of the whole world." In this context, the repetition "Yellow, yellow, yellow!" is not a descriptive tag like Hoyt's "White blossoms ...Born of whiteness/ In a white world" or Aiken's "green fingers," but an exclamatory particle, the verbalization of the poet's frustrated desire.

Williams' strategy is to isolate words rather than to blend them in symmetrical rhythmic phrases: no two lines have the same stress pattern, and yet key words are carefully linked by alliteration—"smears with saffron," "horned heavily," "smooth sky"—and assonance—"eats," "leaves," "smears," "lean"—as well as by what we might call, on the analogy to eye rhyme, "eye assonance" as in "world!" / "yellow" and "lean" / "heavily". The word "heavily" gets a line all to itself in what is one of Williams' nicest effects in the poem:

the h^orn^ed br^an^ch^es that l^ean
 h^eavily
 ag^ainst a sm^ooth p^urp^le sk^y!

Thus isolated, "heavily" gets heavy stress, as if to suggest the weight of phallic power pressing against the "smooth purple sky." But "heavily," placed precisely at the mid-point of the stanza (the seventh of fourteen lines) refers, not only to the horned branches

but to the "stain of love...upon the world" above it on the page as well as to the "honey-thick stain/ that drips from leaf to leaf" a few lines below. "Love Song" thus becomes a design around a center, and yet the center is displaced as the narrative suddenly breaks off and gives way to the final exclamation:

y^ou f^ar off th^ere under
 the wine-r^ed s^elvage of the w^est!

Conrad Aiken, not surprisingly, was not keen on such asymmetries. Reviewing *Al Que Quiere* (1917) he remarks: "Beauty of sound [Williams] denies himself, beauty of prosodic arrangement too: the cadences are prose cadences, the line-lengths are more or less arbitrary, and only seldom, in a short-winded manner, are they effective."²¹ These charges were echoed by other critics over the years: as late as 1950, Hayden Carruth complained that Williams' lines "are not run over, in the Elizabethan sense; nor are they rove over, in the Hopkinsian sense; they are hung over, like a Dali watch." The distinction is not incorrect, but for Carruth, the "hung over" quality of the lines must be a fault: "If this is done for typographical effect, as it sometimes appears, it is inexcusable, for it interferes with our reading."²² A remarkable misunderstanding, implying, as it does, that typography is *detachable* from the poem, that lineation is just a nuisance, "interfer[ing] with our reading" of the poem for its substance.

But of course the typography *is* in many ways the poem's substance. Take a poem like "The Young Housewife," a short lyric often praised for what James Breslin has called its "tough colloquial flatness," its "matter-of-fact" verse,²³ but which, more precisely, uses that flatness for playful purposes:

At ten A.M. the young housewife
 moves about in negligee behind
 the wooden walls of her husband's house.
 I pass solitary in my car.

Then again she comes to the curb
 to call the ice-man, fish-man, and stands
 shy, uncorseted, tucking in
 stray ends of hair, and I compare her
 to a fallen leaf.

21. "Mr. Williams and His Caviar of Excessive Individualism," *Skepticisms: Notes on Contemporary Poetry* (New York, 1919); rpt. in Doyle, p. 58.

22. Review of Paterson, *Book Three*, in *Nation* (8 April 1950); rpt. in Doyle, p. 221.

23. William Carlos Williams, *An American Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 52.

The noiseless wheels of my car
 rush with a crackling sound over
 dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling. (CEP, p. 136)²⁴

Here the three stanzas are parody stanzas, the first, a neat-looking quatrain that has neither rhyme nor meter but slyly designates the young housewife by the same rhythmic group we find in "At ten A.M.":

At tén Á. M. the yóung hóusewífe

The second line, with its odd construction "in negligee" on the model of "in furs" or "in silks," is cut after the word "behind," a word that thus gets construed as a noun (her "in negligee behind") rather than as a preposition. The same sexual innuendo occurs in line 7:

shý, uncórseted, túcking in

where the separation of the verb from its object ("stray ends of hair") makes us expect a reference to what one usually tucks into a corset. The next line produces even greater surprise:

stráy énds of háir, and Í compáre her

To what, we wonder?

to a fálleñ léaf.

An absurd comparison, since surely the young housewife—she is constantly doing things, moving about, calling the ice-man or fish-man, tucking in stray ends of hair—is the very opposite of a fallen leaf. Or is she? Never mind the parody period after "leaf": the tercet now brings it all out into the open:

The nóiseless w héels of my cár
 rúsh with a crackling sound óver
 dried léaves as I bów and pass smiling.

In his erotic fantasy, the poet wants to make this attractive housewife a "fallen leaf" to the "noiseless wheels of his car," to "rush with a crackling sound over/ her dried leaves." But it is, after all, only a daydream; normal life must continue and so "I bow and pass smiling." The tercet has lines of 7, 8, and 9 syllables (3, 4, and 5 stresses) respectively; the diagonal created by its line endings thus presents an image of one-step-at-a-time accretion, as if to say that, fantasize all we like, we must get on with it. Typography, in a case like this, is destiny.

24. "The Young Housewife" first appeared in the December 1916 issue of *Others*.

III

How did the poet of *The Tempers* (1913)—

Lady of dusk-wood fastnesses
 Thou art my Lady— (CEP, p. 17)

become, within three or four short years, the poet of "Love Song" and "The Young Housewife"? The Imagist movement clearly made a difference, but then, as we have seen, *The Tempers* is the book that pays the greatest homage to Pound; by 1917 when *Al Que Quiere* was published, Pound's imprint was no longer decisive; neither, for that matter, was that of H.D. or of Conrad Aiken or Carl Sandburg. Rather, the poems of the late teens represent Williams' first attempt to create verbal-visual counterparts to the paintings and drawings exhibited by the Photo-Secession (291) Gallery and reproduced in the pages of Alfred Stieglitz's *Camera Work* and later in 291 in the years preceding the entrance of the United States into the Great War. Williams' relationship to the visual artists of his time has been studied frequently, most notably by Bram Dijkstra and Dikran Tashjian,²⁵ and I do not wish to rehearse the story of his reaction to the Armory Show and of his acquaintance with Stieglitz and the Arensberg Circle (Duchamp, Picabia, Man Ray, and others) again here. What I do want to suggest is that when we speak of the Cubist or Dada element in Williams' poetry, we must look, not only at the imagery and semantic patterning of the poems, as most critics, including myself, have done,²⁶ but also at the actual look of the poem on the page, the distribution of black letters in white space. The *mise en question* of the representability of the sign, raised by Picasso and Picabia as early as 1912-13, is not prominent in Williams' work before *Kora in Hell* (1920); but the visualization of the stanza, and the line cut comparable to the visual cut in Cubist or

25. Bram Dijkstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); Dikran Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde, 1910-1925* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1975). See also, Bram Dijkstra (ed.), *A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists* (New York: New Directions, 1978); and, for an account of Williams' relationship with American artists in the twenties and thirties, Dikran Tashjian, *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).

26. See my *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), Chapter Four; Ruth Grogan, "The Influence of Painting on William Carlos Williams" (1969), in *William Carlos Williams, A Critical Anthology*, ed. Charles Tomlinson (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 265-298; Henry Sayre, "Ready-Mades and Other Measures: The Poetics of Marcel Duchamp and William Carlos Williams," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 8 (1980): 3-22. An excellent essay that does relate Williams' verse form to Cubist art is James E. Breslin's "William Carlos Williams and Charles Demuth: Cross-Fertilization in the Arts," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 6, no. 2 (April 1977): 248-63.

Dada collage—these begin to appear, as I noted earlier, in poems like "The Revelation" (1914); and *Al Que Quiere* is, among other things, an homage to the typewriter.

Picabia's "object-portraits" of 1915, a number of which were reproduced in *291*, present an interesting analogy to Williams' verse. These pen-and-ink drawings of isolated technological objects, many endowed with legends that identify them as particular personalities, look, at first glance, like the mail-order catalogue illustrations and newspaper ads on which they were, in fact, based.²⁷ Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia recalls:

They drew inspiration from rudimentary, mechanical or geometric forms, and were executed with the dryness of blueprints. The colors are sober and few; Picabia sometimes added to his paintings strange substances, wood which created relief, gold and silver powders, and particularly poetic quotations which are integrated in the composition and indicate the title of the work... The whole develops in an imaginary realm, where the relations between words and forms have no objective, representational intent, but recreate among themselves their own intrinsic relations.²⁸

Consider *Ici C'est Ici Stieglitz/ Foi et Amour* (Figure 1), a drawing Williams surely knew since it appeared on the cover of *291* in 1915. The top and bottom of what seems to be Steiglitz's own folding camera are rendered realistically, as they might be in an illustrated catalogue. But what is inside this frame has a nice ambiguity. In one sense, Picabia gives us a drawing of magnified camera parts: the bellows, shutter, hinge, flashbulb. But the distortion of scale is such that we also seem to be looking at what is seen *by* the camera: a staircase on the left, a walking-stick and street lamp on the right. Or again, as in all of Picabia's drawings of the period, most obviously in the picture of a spark-plug called *Portrait D'Une Jeune Fille Américaine Dans L'État De Nudité*, the "portrait" of Stieglitz has erotic overtones, reenforced by the words *FOI ET AMOUR* of the title and especially by the word *IDÉALE*, placed over the hole which is also the lens.

In Picabia's drawings, as in a Picasso collage, the verbal is thus incorporated as a commentary on the visual: indeed, the picture must be "read" as well as seen. A similar attempt to fuse word and image is found in Gertrude Stein's verbal portraits, two of which—"Matisse" and "Picasso"—appeared in the special August 1912 issue of *Camera Work*, and a third, "Portrait of Mabel

27. See William S. Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and their Heritage* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968), p. 27.

28. "Some Memories of Pre-Dada: Picabia and Duchamp" (1949), in *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Motherwell (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1951), p. 261.



Dodge at the Villa Curonia," in the June 1913 issue. The latter also has a piece by Mabel Dodge herself called "Speculations," in which she observes that "In a large studio in Paris, hung with paintings by Renoir, Matisse and Picasso, Gertrude Stein is doing with words what Picasso is doing with paint." And again, "In Gertrude Stein's writing every word lives."²⁹

Every word lives: Williams, who was to follow Stein in what he called her "unlink[ing]" of words "form their former relationships in the sentence,"³⁰ surely learned from an artist like Picabia that, if the visual work can also have a verbal dimension, why not the other way around? And so he began to experiment with the visual placement of words in lines: here is "Good Night," first published in *Others* in December 1916:

In brilliant gas light
I turn the kitchen spigot
and watch the water splash
into the clean white sink.
On the grooved drain-board
to one side is
a glass filled with parsley—
crisped green.

Waiting
for the water to freshen—
I glance at the spotless floor—:
a pair of rubber sandals
lie side by side
under the wall-table
all is in order for the night....

(CEP, p. 145)

Here it is lineation rather than the pattern of stresses that guides the reader's eye so that objects stand out, one by one, as in a series of film shots: first the gas light, then the spigot, then the splash of water, and finally the sink itself. The eye moves slowly so as to take in each monosyllable (all but 4 of the 19 words in the first lines, all but 12 of the 67 words in the whole verse paragraph): *in, gas, light, turn, the, and, watch*.... The sixth line, "to one side is," is what Hayden Carruth calls "hung over": it asks the question, what is it that is located "to one side"? The next line tells us: "A glass filled with parsley—." But what does the parsley look like? Again a new line:

Crisped green.

29. *Camera Work*, Special Number: June 1913, pp. 6-8. See *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, Chapter Three.

30. "The Work of Gertrude Stein" (1931), in *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1954), p. 116. Subsequently cited as SE.

Next there is a wait as the water runs from the tap, and so "Waiting" gets a line to itself and a prominent line at that because it is moved over toward the jagged right margin of the poem. Notice that the poem would *sound* exactly the same if "waiting" were aligned with "crisped" and "for" at the left margin; the effect, in other words, is entirely visual. And again, the ensuing lines are characterized by suspension: a "pair of rubber sandals" (line 12) do what? They "lie side by side" (line 13). But where?

Under the wall-table

As in Picabia's *Ici C'est Ici Stieglitz*, ordinary objects are granted a curious sexual power.

If we look at the sound repetitions in Williams' poem, we immediately note the alliteration of *t*'s and *w*'s and the assonance of *i*'s. But again, the visualization of these phonemes creates a stronger "echo structure" than does their sound. The first letter in the poem, for example, appears ten times in the 19 words of the first sentence: *in-brilliant-light-I-kitchen-spigot-into-white-sink*. The first line-ending, "light," gets a nice response from "spigot" in the slightly longer second line; it further chimes with "spotless" (line 11) and with the final word of the stanza, "night." From "light" to "night"—one would think that Williams had written a sonnet or Spenserian stanza. "A design in the poem," as he tells Walter Sutton, "and a design in the picture should make them more or less the same thing" (INTS, p. 53). Thus designed, "Good Night" provides us, quite literally with the pleasure of the text. Each line waits for its fulfillment from the next, with "Waiting," coming, as it does, after "crisped green," exerting the central pull. Like "Love Song," "Good Night" is a poem about desire, its "hung over" words reaching for the other even as the poet daydreams about the young girls he saw at the opera:

full of smells and
the resulting sounds of
cloth rubbing on cloth and
little slippers on carpet—

IV

I have been suggesting that *Al Que Quiere* is Williams' first significant tribute to the printed page as poetic unit; its poems embody the recognition, not shared by many of Williams' contemporaries, that a poem is "a small machine made of words" (SE, p. 256), a verbal text to be *seen* at least as much as to be heard. Steiglitz's photographs, *The Aeroplane* and *The Dirigible*, had appeared in *Camera Work* as early as 1911, and Picabia's machine

drawings as well as Duchamp's readymades surely helped to bring the lesson home: the typographical lay-out of the page was not a sideline, some sort of secondary support structure, but a central fact of poetic discourse. Once this basic premise is understood, Williams' later prosodies become much easier to comprehend. Let me comment briefly on three developments in William's poetry.

1

From *Spring and All* (1923) through the thirties, the main thrust is to condense and to refine the principles of cut, displacement, and formal design adumbrated in the poems of the previous decade. Thus the long and slightly shaggy stanza of "Good Night" or of "Love Song" gives way to much smaller, disjunctive units—to very short lines, often no more than three syllables long, arranged in couplets ("At the Ball Game"), or tercets ("To Elsie"), or quatrains ("Death of the Barber").³¹ This drive toward minimalism culminates in such poems of the mid-thirties as "Between Walls":

the back wings
of the
hospital where
nothing
will grow lie
cinders
in which shine
the broken
pieces of a green
bottle

(CEP, p. 343)

If we insert two small function words, "the" in the title and "of" at the beginning of the first line, and place a comma after "grow," we have here a perfectly normal sentence:

Between the walls of the back wings of the hospital where nothing will grow, lie cinders in which shine the broken pieces of a green bottle.

An independent clause, its subject and verb inverted, embedded in multiple prepositional modifiers. Williams drapes this sentence across ten lines so that each and every word is taken out of its proper syntactic slot and hence defamiliarized:

of the . . .
will grow lie . . .
in which shine . . .

31. See *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, Chapter Three, *passim*.

and so on. But there is something further. The visual pattern—five symmetrical couplets in which the long line is regularly followed by a short one, contradicts the aural one. Compare, for example, the first and third couplets:

the back wings will grow lie
of the cinders

On the page, these are matching couplets, each having a syllable count of 3-2. The first two lines, moreover, each have three monosyllables almost identical in size. But when the words of the poem are spoken, "of the" (line 2) receives no stress at all whereas line 5 is scanned as follows-

will grow lie

The result is that the first visual stanza has the stress pattern 2-0, the second, 3-1. What looks symmetrical is in fact disparate and other. The poem means, Williams tells Babette Deutsch, "that in a waste of cinders loveliness, in the form of color, stands up alive."³² But, as so often, the poem Williams wrote is much better than the portentous meaning he ascribes to it. For what we admire in "Between Walls" is surely less the idea that beauty can be found even among the trash, than the way this small observation is turned into a "field of action" in which line plays against syntax, visual against aural form, creating what Charles Olson was to call an energy-discharge, or projectile. Words are "unlink[ed] from their former relationships in the sentence" and recombined so that the poem becomes a kind of hymn to linguistic possibility.

2

The poems of Williams' last decade are written almost exclusively in what has been called the triadic stanza or three-step line:

The smell of the heat is boxwood
when rousing us
a movement of the air...³³

Discussion of this triad has been confused by Williams' own claim that he is now using a unit called the "variable foot," which he defines as a foot "that has been expanded so that more syllables, words, or phrases can be admitted into its confines."³⁴ As such, the variable foot is, of course, a contradiction in terms, rather like

32. Letter of May 25, 1948: see *Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, p. 265. Subsequently cited as SL.

33. "To Daphne and Virginia," in *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 75. Subsequently cited as PB.

34. "Free Verse," *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 289. Cf. John C. Thirwall, "Ten Years of a New Rhythm," PB, pp. 183-184.

an elastic inch.³⁵ It has been argued, most recently by Charles O. Hartman, that the three-line units of the triad are isochronous. Here Hartman is following Williams himself, who explained his "new measure" to Richard Eberhart with the following example:

(count):—not that I ever count when writing but, at best, the lines must be capable of being counted, that is to say, *measured*—(believe it or not).—At that I may, half consciously, even count the measure under my breath as I write.—(approximate example)

- (1) The smell of the heat is boxwood
 (2) when rousing us
 (3) a movement of the air
 (4) stirs our thoughts
 (5) that had no life in them
 (6) to a life, a life in which

(or)

- (1) Mother of God! Our Lady!
 (2) the heart
 (3) is an unruly master:
 (4) Forgive us our sins
 (5) as we
 (6) forgive
 (7) those who have sinned against

Count a single beat to each numeral. You may not agree with my ear, but that is the way I count the line. Over the whole poem it gives a pattern to the meter that can be felt as a new measure.³⁶

Hartman comments: "The prosody works for two reasons. First it builds on the convention of line division, essential to and recognized in all verse. Second, Williams became sufficiently well-known so that through letters and essays he could establish single-handedly the convention that all lines take the same time—though only for his poems."³⁷

Here Hartman bases his argument on the linguist Kenneth Pike's theorem that "the time-lapse between any two primary stresses tends to be the same irrespective of the number of syllables and the junctures between them" (p. 42). But the problem is that, in the example from "For Eleanor and Bill Monahan" that Williams gives Eberhart, the line "Mother of God! Our Lady!" has three primary stresses, whereas the next line, "the heart," has only one. If I insist on making these two lines isochronous, I have to make a wholly unnatural speech pause after "the heart":

35. See Alan Stephens, "Dr. Williams and Tradition," *Poetry*, 101 (February 1963): 361; A. Kingsley Weatherhead, "William Carlos Williams: Prose, Form, and Measure," *ELH*, 33 (1966): 118-131.

36. Williams, letter to Richard Eberhart, May 23, 1954, in *SL*, pp. 326-327.

37. *Free Verse*, p. 35, and cf. p. 69.

Mother of God! Our Lady!
 the heart - - -
 is an unruly master....

The argument for isochrony thus seems to me to be no more satisfactory than an argument for a measure made up of "feet" that are somehow "variable." In the interview with Walter Sutton, Williams makes a more helpful comment about the triad. When Sutton asks him whether he thinks of feet in terms of stresses, Williams replies: "Not, as stresses, but as spaces in between the various spaces of the verse" (*INTS*, p. 39). This is, it seems to me, the point. Take the following passage from Book II of "Of Asphodel, That Greeny Flower":

So to know, what I have to know
 about my own death
 if it be real
 I have to take it apart.
 What does your generation think
 Of Cézanne?
 I asked a young artist.
 The abstractions of Hindu painting,
 he replied,
 is all at the moment which interests me.
 He liked my poem
 about the parts
 of a broken bottle,
 lying green in the cinders
 of a hospital courtyard.
 There was also, to his mind,
 the one on gay wallpaper
 which he had heard about
 but not read.
 I was grateful to him
 for his interest. (PB, pp. 162-163)

The line units here are related neither by stress count nor by isochrony: there is, for example, no way to equalize "What does your generation think" and the next line, "of Cézanne?". But on the page, the three-step line creates an attractive shape; it gives Williams a definite frame within which to lay out his sentences, a successor to such visual stanzas as the quatrains of "The Nightingales" and "This Is Just To Say."

My own sense, however, is that this particular frame does not have the complexity and tension of Williams' earlier visual forms; on the contrary, the three-step grid is an externally imposed geometric form, a kind of cookie cutter. For what happens is this. The locutions of prose ("There was also, to his mind, the one on gay wallpaper which he had heard about but not read") are forced

into the triadic mold without sufficient attention to the relation between positioning and line-cut on the one hand and the structure of meanings on the other. Compare, for example, Williams' little poem "Between Walls," which I discussed earlier, to the reference to that poem in lines 11-15 above, and the difference will become clear. Syntactic units now break predictably enough at the point of natural juncture:

about the parts
of a broken bottle,
 lying green in the cinders
 of a hospital courtyard.

In the case of "Between Walls," a change of word placement or the elimination of a single word would destroy the poet's mobile, the machine made of words which is the poem. In the case of "Asphodel," we read on pleasantly enough, but the sequence of words about the broken bottle or about the gay wallpaper has no inevitability, no sense of interacting force-field.

Such comparisons help us to understand that visual prosody is, after all, just as difficult as any other. In the wake of Williams, we have now lived through three decades of American poems that claim our attention by the sheer irregularity of pattern: words spread all over the page, words capitalized and in small letters and italics, lines that step up or down or go sideways. But just as a poem written in traditional meter—say, a Shakespeare sonnet—depends for its effectiveness on the relation of the phonemic to the semantic, so the visualization of the poem, the anchoring of its lines on the printed page, demands more than a typographical frame.

3

The premise that the poetic unit is no longer the metrical stanza or even the individual line but rather the printed page itself stands behind what is surely one of Williams' central contributions to American poetics: namely, the alternation and juxtaposition of "verse" to "prose." Williams began to experiment with the prose-verse page as early as *Spring and All* (1923) and *The Descent of Winter* (1928): in these works, lyrics are inserted into expository and narrative prose passages of some length. In *Paterson*, the opposite happens: the basic frame is the long free-verse stanza, and that frame is "cut," even as the line is cut in the earlier poems, by prose passages—documentary accounts of the history of Paterson, letters from friends like Allen Ginsberg, Edward Dahlberg and Marcia Nardi, case reports about patients, fictional narrative, and so on.

Critical speculation on the relation of prose to verse in *Paterson* has not been very helpful, the tendency being to assume that prose and verse must represent some sort of clear-cut dichotomy: for example, the dichotomy between the world of hard facts or "things" (prose) and the world of their imaginative transformation (verse).³⁸ Williams' own comments, however, stress fusion rather than difference. Thus he writes to Parker Tyler on October 3, 1948:

All the prose [in *Paterson*] including the tail which would have liked to have wagged the dog, has primarily the purpose of giving a metrical meaning to or of emphasizing a metrical continuity between all word use. It is *not* an antipoetic device.... It is that prose and verse are both *writing*, both a matter of words and an interrelation between words for the purpose of exposition, or other better defined purpose of *the art*.... I want to say that prose and verse are to me the same thing, that verse (as in Chaucer's tales) belongs *with* prose.... Poetry does not *have* to be kept away from prose as Mr. Eliot might insist....

And in the same year, to Horace Gregory:

The truth is that there's an identity between prose and verse, not an antithesis. It all rests on the same base, the same measure... the long letter [at the end of *Paterson*, Book One] is definitely germane to the rest of the text.³⁹

In what sense can there be "an identity between prose and verse"; in what sense does their juxtaposition emphasize "a metrical continuity between all word use"? What Williams means, I think, is that once the *page* rather than the foot or line or stanza becomes the unit of measure, the typographic composition of that page can consist of prose as easily as of verse, provided that there is some juxtaposition of the two so as to create visual interest, provided that, in Hugh Kenner's words, "art lifts the saying out of the zone of things said."⁴⁰ Poetry, in this larger sense that would include both "verse" and "prose," is a form of writing, of *écriture*, that calls attention to words as words rather than as referents to a particular reality.

Take, for example, the passage in Book One, Part III in which the poet meditates on the fragmentation of self:

Let it rot, at my center.
Whose center?
I stand and surpass
youth's leanness.

38. See, for example, Walter Peterson, *An Approach to Paterson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), *passim*.

39. Cited by James Laughlin in "William Carlos Williams and the Making of *Paterson*: A Memoir," *Yale Review*, 71 (Spring 1982): 193-94.

40. *A Homemade World*, p. 60.

My surface is myself.
Under which
to witness, youth is
buried. Roots?

Everybody has roots.⁴¹

Abrupt quatrains full of word repetition give way to open tercets, in which Williams lashes out at the university, a place ruled by "clerks/ got out of hand forgetting for the most part/ to whom they are beholden." The passage concludes with the single line:

Something else, something else the same. (P, p. 44)

What is that "something else" which is the same as the *trahison des clerics*? We now read the following prose passage, printed in reduced type:

He was more concerned, much more concerned, with detaching the label from a discarded mayonnaise jar, the glass jar in which some patient had brought a specimen for examination, than to examine and treat the twenty and more infants taking their turn from the outer office, their mothers tormented and jabbering. He'd stand in the alcove pretending to wash, the jar at the bottom of the sink well out of sight and, as the rod of water came down, work with his fingernail in the splash at the edge of the colored label striving to loose the tightly glued paper. It must have been varnished over, he argued, to have it stick that way. One corner of it he'd got loose in spite of all and would get the rest presently: talking pleasantly the while and with great skill to the anxious parent.

And this in turn gives way to four long free-verse lines, lines distinguished from normal prose only by the jagged right margin:

Will you give me a baby? asked the young colored woman
in a small voice standing naked by the bed. Refused
she shrank within herself. She too refused. It makes me
too nervous, she said, and pulled the covers round her.

The three visual units—lyric (quatrains and tercets), prose narrative, and free-verse block—are thematically related: they all center on the nature of "divorce," of alienation from others and from one's work, of the search for and loss of "roots." But the change in prosody signals a change in tone: if the lyric poet of the first part speaks to us directly, ruminating on the universal nature of pain—"Youth is/ buried. Roots?"—the subject of the prose passage is that same poet carefully distanced by an urbane voice that uses the language of the lab report or case study, recording the poet-doctor's compulsive-neurotic behavior, his bizarre concentration on the label of the mayonnaise jar as an

41. *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), pp. 32-33.

escape from all human contact. The intrusion of the free-verse passage:

Will you give me a baby? asked the young colored woman provides a third perspective: the personal account, evidently given by the doctor to whom the question is addressed, gives us a sense of what it is that the man obsessed with the mayonnaise jar (who is, of course, the same poet-doctor) is afraid of: the confrontation with another, "the young colored woman" whose demands he cannot satisfy.

Each of the three passages in question might have been in "verse" or "prose": it is not their metrical (or non-metrical) status or even their lineation (or non-lineation) that matters, but the very fact of transition from an A to a B and C, the shift in typographical format signalling a change in perspective, in tone, in mood. Thus the personal pathos of the lyric ("we go on living, we permit ourselves/ to continue") gives way to the macabre humor of the mayonnaise-jar story, and in turn to the intimacy of the free-verse passage with its embedded speech.

Such consistent shifting of ground, such change in perspective propels the reader forward through the poem. Try to imagine *Paterson* without such prose-verse alternation, try to imagine all the prose anecdotes and letters and documentary catalogues absorbed into the larger free-verse fabric or vice-versa, and the point will become apparent. The difference between Williams' "verse" and his "prose" is thus *not*, as he rightly says, meter; it is the manipulation of tone implicit in the visual presentation of a small stanza versus a prose paragraph with justified left and right margins, and so on. The page is to be seen, its contrasting juxtaposed elements recalling the bits of newspaper or photographs pasted into Cubist or Dada collage.

4

James Laughlin has recently suggested that the influence of modern painting, regularly cited with respect to such earlier works as *Kora in Hell*, "extended to the composition of *Paterson*": "In the revolutionary works of those French painters he saw ways to revolutionize the very nature of writing in English."⁴² Certainly,

42. Cf. Eleanor Berry, "Williams' Development Of A New Prosodic Form—Not The 'Variable Foot,' But The Sight-Stanza," *William Carlos Williams Review*, 7, no. 2 (Fall 1981): 28. Berry writes: "The sense of regularity, sometimes, indeed, monotony, that is induced by Williams' triadic-line verse would seem to be due to the fact that the intervals between the prominent syllables of successive intonational units in spoken English tend to be perceived as equal." As I have argued above, I question the isochrony of the three

the collage-structure of *Paterson* would not have been possible without the Cubist or Dada model. Indeed, I would posit that when Williams exchanged this particular visual paradigm for the simple numerical grid of the geometer, as he was to do in the step-triads of his last decade, he denied himself the possibility of the *play* that makes poems of his middle years like "Between Walls" and "The Gay Wallpaper" so remarkable. The prosodic trick was to de-center, or, as Williams put it in "The Attic Which Is Desire":

Here
 from the street
 by
 * * *
 * S *
 * O *
 * D *
 * A *
 * * *
 ringed with
 running lights
 the darkened
 pane
 exactly
 down the center
 is
 transfixed

(CEP, p. 353)

parts of the Williams triad, but I do agree with Berry that this form is "essentially antithetical to the sight stanza [e.g., the quatrain or tercet used in the earlier poetry] in its operation."

For an interesting counter-argument, in which the variable foot is related to the rhythm of Theocritus' idylls, which Williams was reading closely in the early fifties, see Emily Mitchell Wallace, "A Musing in the Highlands and Valleys: The Poetry of Gratwick Farm," *William Carlos Williams Review*, 8, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 27-30.

DIANA COLLECOTT SURMAN

TOWARDS THE CRYSTAL:
 ART AND SCIENCE IN WILLIAMS' POETIC

1. *To make a start . . .*

In Paris in 1925, two Cubist painters, Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (better known as the architect Le Corbusier) published a book on modern painting, in which they discerned "a tendency towards the crystal."¹ This treatise issued from a crisis in Cubist aesthetics, occasioned by the almost simultaneous appearance in different artistic centres of the western world of anarchistic individuals such as Tristan Tzara and Marcel Duchamp, who aimed to bring the experimentalism, spontaneity and "lawlessness" of Picasso's art into the public sphere by a programmatic mystification known as Dada. Ozenfant and Jeanneret reacted against these chaotic tendencies by developing Purism, which insisted on the more rigorous style of synthetic Cubism, stressed the laws of structure and composition, and envisaged a new culture based on technology and "planning." "The crystal, in nature, is one of the phenomena that touch us most" they argued in *La Peinture moderne*, "because it clearly exemplifies to us this movement towards geometrical organization." The sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska expressed a similar tendency when he wrote in 1914:

. . . we have crystallized the sphere into a cube, we have made a combination of all the possible-shaped masses.²

Edward Fry has described the aesthetic attitude of Ozenfant and Jeanneret as a "Calvinistic Cubism" since it replaced the resonant organicism of an artist like Cézanne, with an intellectual exercise which deliberately reflected the mechanistic aspects of

1. Ozenfant and Jeanneret, *La Peinture moderne* (1925); translation from Edward F. Fry ed., *Cubism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966) p. 170.

2. "Vortex Gaudier-Brzeska," *Blast* (1914); repr. in Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: a memoir* (Hessel, E. Yorks: The Marvell Press, 1960; orig. publ. 1916), p. 31; (New York: New Directions), p. 24.