

trude and Alice—their dinners with Picasso and Fernande, their journey to Spain, Gertrude's quarrel with Hemingway—these are appropriate subjects for *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. But private life is different and demands a different language:

The author of all that is in there behind the door and that is entering in the morning. Explaining darkening and expecting relating is all of a piece.

(p. 499)

"*Tender Buttons*," says David Lodge, "is a feat of decreation: the familiar tired habits of ordinary discourse are shaken off by 'jolting words and phrases out of their expected contexts' and this is certainly exhilarating, but the treatment is so drastic that it kills the patient."⁴⁶

This seems to me not quite fair to Gertrude Stein, at least not the Gertrude Stein of *Tender Buttons*. Perhaps the best way to think of a text like this one is to compare it to an X-ray. Words are related so as to show what is there beneath the skin, what is *behind* the social and artistic surface presented with such wit and drama in Stein's more traditional works like *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Everybody's Autobiography*.

To read a text like *Tender Buttons* can be exasperating and boring if one expects to find actual descriptions of the objects denoted by the titles—a carafe, a cloak, eyeglasses, a cutlet, cranberries. But Stein's are by no means Imagist poems. Rather, the author offers us certain threads that take us into her verbal labyrinth, threads that never quite lead us out on the other side but that recreate what Ashbery calls "a way of happening." Gertrude Stein's linguistic codes are tentative and buried; her Surrealist transformations of events must be taken literally as vivid if indefinable presences. As she says in "Roastbeef," "Any time there is a surface there is a surface and every time there is a suggestion there is a suggestion."

⁴⁶ *Modes of Modern Writing*, p. 154.

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CHAPTER FOUR

"Lines Converging and Crossing"
 The "French" Decade
 of William Carlos Williams

—By form is meant everything in a work which relates to structural unity rather than to "meanings" dragged over from former associations.

—*Contact*, June 1923

—There is no need to explain or compare. Make it, and it is a poem.

—*The Descent of Winter*, 1928¹

IN THE SPRING of 1922, the *Little Review* published a special number devoted to Francis Picabia. Aside from Picabia's own Dada compositions (poems, paintings, the man-

¹ The following abbreviations for Williams' works are used throughout:

- SAA *Spring and All*, in *Imaginations*, ed. Webster Schott. (New York: New Directions, 1970).
 KH *Kora in Hell*, in *Imaginations*.
 DW *The Descent of Winter*, in *Imaginations*.
 IMAG All other shorter prose pieces in *Imaginations*.
 CEP *The Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1951).
 CLP *The Collected Later Poems of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1963).
 P *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963).
 PB *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1962).
 A *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1951).
 SE *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1954; rpt. New Directions, 1959).
 IWWP *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of A Poet*, ed. Edith Heal (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

ifesto "Anticoq"), the issue included such items as two Cocteau poems ("Saluant Picabia" and "Saluant Tzara"), Gertrude Stein's "Vacation in Brittany," Sherwood Anderson's essay, "The Work of Gertrude Stein," and the first installment of a translation of Apollinaire's *Les Peintres cubistes* (1913).

One of the most enthusiastic readers of the Picabia number was William Carlos Williams. "It gives me," he wrote in a letter to the editor, "the sense of being arrived, as of any efficient engine in motion." "I enjoyed thoroughly, absorbedly, Apollinaire's article."² Not surprisingly, *Spring and All*, published the following year in Paris by Robert McAlmon's Contact Editions, pays homage to Apollinaire's famous essay. Indeed, *Spring and All*, a book of twenty-seven lyrics dispersed among passages of prose of varying length and tone, is Williams' most "French" composition. It bears the imprint not only of Apollinaire's aesthetic but also of Dada improvisation, of Gertrude Stein's poetry and fiction, and of Rimbaud's *Season in Hell* and *Illuminations*, portions of which had appeared for the first time in English translation in the 1920 *Dial*, side by side with six of Williams' own shorter lyrics.³ *Spring and All* is, I think, Williams' most remarkable poetic sequence, a work so far ahead of its time that it was safely ignored until the sixties. "Nobody ever saw it," Williams recalled some thirty-five years after

² *Little Review*, 7 (Autumn, 1922), 59. Williams' first contact with Picabia, Duchamp, and other Dada painters and poets began in 1913 with the Armory Show. For a good discussion of Williams' ambivalent response to Dada in the decade that followed, see Dickran Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives, Dada and the American Avant-Garde, 1910-1925* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), pp. 86-90, 91-115.

³ *The Dial*, 69 (July 1920) contains a translation of *A Season in Hell* by J. Sibley Watson (pp. 1-26). The August 1920 issue has Watson's translations of the following prose poems in the *Illuminations*: "Town" ("Ville"), "Childhood" ("Enfance"), "Lives" ("Vies"), and "Departure" ("Depart"). This issue also contains six poems by Williams: "Portrait of a Lady," "To Waken an Old Lady," "The Desolate Field," "Willow Poem," "Blizzard," "Spring Storm." See pp. 162-165.

its publication, "it had no circulation at all—But I had a lot of fun with it."⁴

In assessing Williams' debt to the Apollinaire essay he had read so "absorbedly," we must remember that *The Cubist Painters* was not, despite its title, primarily a defense of Cubism. Indeed, the original title was *Méditations Esthétiques*, with the subtitle *Les Peintres cubistes*. It was the publisher who transposed the two titles, evidently in order to increase sales since Cubism was the fashionable topic of the day.⁵ But in the book itself, Apollinaire's aesthetic accommodates a wide variety of painters: Picabia and Duchamp (here called "Orphic Cubists") and the Douanier Rousseau, whose work is sui generis, as well as such "Scientific Cubists" as Braque and Gris. Picasso's painting was considered to be the meeting-ground of these different schools, ranging as it does from the neo-Romanticism of the Blue Period to the severities of Analytic Cubism to Surrealist fantasy. What all these painters had in common—and this is Apollinaire's point about "l'esprit nouveau"—was a rejection of an art that is primarily representational. The modern painters, he insists, "while they still look at nature, no longer imitate it, and carefully avoid any representation of natural scenes which they may have observed. . . . Real resemblance no longer has any importance, since everything is sacrificed by the artist to truth." Or again, "Cubism differs from the old schools of painting in that it aims, not at an art of imitation, but an art of conception, which tends to rise to the height of creation."⁶

In *Spring and All*, Williams echoes Apollinaire in his in-

⁴ IWWP, 36. See also Paul L. Mariani, *William Carlos Williams, The Poet and his Critics* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1975), pp. 16-17.

⁵ See Herschel B. Chipp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art, A Source Book By Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 220; Paul Waldo Schwartz, *Cubism* (New York: Praeger, 1971), pp. 59-65.

⁶ The text, translated and slightly abridged by Lionel Abel, is found in Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, pp. 221-248; see pp. 222, 227. All subsequent references to Apollinaire's *Les Peintres cubistes* are to this text.

sistence on "the falseness of attempting to 'copy' nature" (SAA, 107):

Such painting as that of Juan Gris, coming after the impressionists, the expressionists, Cezanne . . . points forward to what will prove the greatest painting yet produced.

—the illusion once dispensed with, painting has this problem before it: to replace not the forms but the reality of experience with its own—

up to now shapes and meanings but always the illusion relying on composition to give likeness to "nature". . . .

—It is not a matter of "representation"—which may be represented actually, but of separate existence. enlargement—revivification of values

(SAA, 117)

For Apollinaire, the rejection of mimesis meant the move toward "an entirely new art," "pure painting," as abstract as possible and relying "a good deal on mathematics" (p. 222):

The new painters do not propose, any more than did their predecessors, to be geometers. But it may be said that geometry is to the plastic arts what grammar is to the art of the writer. Today, scientists no longer limit themselves to the three dimensions of Euclid. The painters have been led quite naturally . . . to preoccupy themselves with new possibilities of spatial measurement which, in the language of the modern studios, are designated by the term *the fourth dimension*.

(p. 223)

This notion evidently appealed to the Williams of *Spring and All*:

And what is the fourth dimension? It is the endlessness of knowledge—

It is the imagination on which reality rides. . . . 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.

(SAA, 139)

And in a 1925 essay on Marianne Moore, Williams notes: "A course in mathematics would not be wasted on a poet, or a reader of poetry, if he remember no more from it than the geometric principle of the intersection of loci: from all angles lines converging and crossing establish points."⁷

These were lessons learned not only from the painters, as transmitted by Apollinaire, but also from certain writers, most notably Gertrude Stein. "The poem being an object (like a symphony or cubist painting)," says Williams in his *Autobiography*, recalling his role in the Objectivist movement of the early thirties, "it must be the purpose of the poet to make of his words a new form. . . . it was Gertrude Stein, for her formal insistence on words in their literal, structural quality of being words, who had strongly influenced us. . . . It all went with the newer appreciation, the matter of paint upon canvas as being of more importance than the literal appearance of the image depicted" (A, 265).

But Williams also understood that, in the case of poetry, and, for that matter, in the case of Cubist painting as well, pure abstraction was not the goal. As he observes in *Spring and All*:

. . . the writer of imagination would attain closest to the conditions of music not when his words are dissociated from natural objects and specified meanings but when they are liberated from the usual quality of that meaning by transposition into another medium, the imagination.

(SAA, 150)

⁷ This essay first appeared in *The Dial*, 78 (May 1925), 393-401. Reprinted in IMAG, 308-318. For this and all other bibliographical information, the reader should consult Emily Mitchell Wallace, *A Bibliography of William Carlos Williams* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1968).

Thus the Gertrude Stein of *Tender Buttons* (1914) "has completely unlinked [words] . . . from their former relationships in the sentence"; she "has gone systematically to work smashing every connotation that words have ever had, in order to get them back clean."⁸ Such decomposition is essential, for poetry, as Williams says in the Marianne Moore essay, is a matter of "wiping soiled words or cutting them clean out, removing the aureoles that have been pasted about them or taking them bodily from greasy contexts" (IMAG, 315-316).

"Removing the aureoles" is equivalent to removing the metaphoric or symbolic associations words have. So the poet of *Spring and All* declares: "Crude symbolism is to associate emotions with natural phenomena such as anger with lightning, flowers with love it goes further and associates certain textures with" (SAA, 100). The preposition here and elsewhere (the next paragraph contains a sentence that ends with the phrase "such a paper as") is not followed by an object because Williams repudiates analogy. "Empty" writing is "typified by use of the word 'like'" (SAA, 100), and he declares:

What I put down of value will have this value: an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from "reality". . . . The word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole. . . .

(SAA, 102)

"Not as a symbol of nature but a part." The implication of this distinction is that words will be related metonymically rather than metaphorically, that the poetic effect will depend less upon polyvalence (vertical relationships along the axis of similarity) than upon the "horizontal" arrangement of contiguous word groups. Just as the "Cubist"

⁸ "The Work of Gertrude Stein," *Pagany*, 1 (Winter 1930), 41-46; rpt. IMAG, 341-351; see 347; "A 1 Pound Stein," *The Rocking Horse*, II, 3 (1935), 3-5; rpt. SE, 162-166; see 163.

painter recognizes that, in Apollinaire's words, "You may paint with whatever material you please, with pipes, postage stamps, postcards or playing cards, candelabra, pieces of oil cloth, collars, painted paper, newspapers" (p. 232), so the verbal artist like Gertrude Stein takes words and *unlinks* them "from their former relationships in the sentence." One is reminded of Viktor Shklovsky's famed definition of art as *defamiliarization*, especially the idea that "An image is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through it; its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object."⁹

Williams' anti-Symbolist stance, his longing to annihilate "strained associations" can be understood by comparing a sample passage from *Kora in Hell*, his first experiment in improvisation, to the opening of Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," published in 1917 when Williams was half-way through the Prologue to *Kora*, and dismissed by him, with characteristically vehement exaggeration, as the work of a "subtle conformist," a mere "rehash" of Verlaine, Baudelaire, and Maeterlinck (*Kora*, 24).

(1) Eliot, "Prufrock," lines 1-12:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;

⁹ See Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism, Four Essays*, trans. and ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 18. The similarity of Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization to Williams' repeated insistence on "unlinking" the object from its normal relationships is not just coincidental. Early Formalist doctrine was framed as a defense of the new Futurist poetry against the predominant Symbolist aesthetic. Such Symbolist theorists as Aleksandr Potebnja held that "Symbolism in language may be regarded as its poetic value" and codified the notion that "poetry is thinking in verbal images." See Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism, History—Doctrine* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1955), pp. 7-9, 16-24, 145-154.

Thus the reaction of Formalist doctrine to Russian Symbolist poetry (e.g., Aleksandr Blok) prefigures the anti-Symbolism of a later generation of poets and critics of "the Other Tradition" in America.

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
 The muttering retreats
 Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
 And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
 Streets that follow like a tedious argument
 Of insidious intent
 To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .
 Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'
 Let us go and make our visit.¹⁰

(2) Williams, *Kora in Hell*, IV, 2 (pp. 36-37):

How smoothly the car runs. And these rows of celery,
 how they bitter the air—winter's authentic foretaste.
 Here among these farms how the year has aged, yet
 here's last year and the year before and all years. One
 might rest here time without end, watch out his stretch
 and see no other bending than spring to autumn, winter
 to summer and earth turning into leaves and leaves into
 earth and—how restful these long beet rows—the caress
 of the low clouds—the river lapping at the reeds. Was
 it ever so high as this, so full? How quickly we've come
 this far. Which way is north now? North now? why that
 way I think. Ah there's the house at last, here's April
 but—the blinds are down! It's all dark here. Scratch a
 hurried note. Slip it over the sill. Well, some other time.

How smoothly the car runs. This must be the road.
 Queer how a road juts in. How the dark catches among
 those trees! How the light clings to the canal! Yes, there's
 one table taken, we'll not be alone. This place has possi-
 bilities. Will you bring *her* here? Perhaps—and when
 we meet on the stair, shall we speak, say it is some ac-
 quaintance—or pass silent? Well, a jest's a jest but how
 poor this tea is. Think of a life in this place, here in these
 hills by these truck farms. Whose life? Why there, back
 of you. If a woman laughs a little loudly one always thinks
 that way of her. But how she bedizens the country-side.

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), p. 3.

Quite an old world glamour. If it were not for—but one
 cannot have everything. What poor tea it was. How cold
 it's grown. Cheering, a light is that way among the trees.
 That heavy laugh! How it will rattle these branches in
 six weeks' time.

Prufrock's journey through "half-deserted streets" is not,
 of course, a mere evening walk. It is the journey of a man
 who longs for, but has lost, all potency, all capacity to feel
 and to be. Eliot's carefully chosen images—the empty eve-
 ning sky, the "patient etherised upon a table," the streets
 that lead nowhere, the "sawdust restaurants with oyster
 shells"—create a symbolic complex that defines the an-
 aesthetized consciousness, the life-in-death of the man who
 speaks these words.

Williams' Improvisation is also "about" a journey, but
 here the particulars—rows of celery, bitter winter air, the
 caress of the low clouds, the river lapping at the reeds, the
 house with its blinds down, the light on the canal, the poor
 tea, the car rattling down the road—point to nothing *behind*
 them. The passage seems to be no more than a journal
 entry in which the poet-doctor describes a drive in the
 country, evidently after he has made a house-call at a local
 farm. Driving along, he has an erotic fantasy about a
 woman who lives nearby, a woman with whom he hopes
 to have an assignation. Finding her house dark, its blinds
 down, he decides to leave a note and makes his way back
 to town, stopping for tea at a roadside inn, the inn he hopes
 to bring her to at some future time, perhaps "six weeks
 hence" when he will evidently return to the area.

Prufrock too has his erotic fantasies, dreaming of "arms
 that are braceleted and white and bare / (But in the lamp-
 light downed with light brown hair!)" But it is implicit from
 the beginning of his speech that he will never bring these
 fantasies to life, that the mermaids will not sing to him.
 Williams' prose poem, on the other hand, remains seman-
 tically open. We don't know whether the poet will ever
 meet "her" or not, whether, for that matter, she has ex-
 pected his visit or whether he really leaves her a note or

only thinks about doing so. Nor does it matter. For Williams' aim here is to capture in *words* the actual process whereby a man, idly driving down a country road, is sexually aroused by the mental image of a desirable woman.

The "defamiliarizing" device in this case is repetition, both verbal and syntactic. Like Gertrude Stein, Williams begins with a seemingly innocuous word or phrase and then repeats that phrase in a series of altered contexts so that meanings are always shifting ground ever so slightly. Thus both paragraphs begin with the sentence, "How smoothly the car runs," but when we meet this sentence the second time around, we read it as an expression of lassitude rather than of eager anticipation; the absence of the expected exclamation point underscores this altered perception. In the first paragraph, the "how" clauses build up momentum, measuring the gradual arousal of the poet:

How smoothly the car runs
 how they [the rows of celery] bitter the air
 how the year has aged
 how restful these long beet rows
 how quickly we've come this far

These exclamatory utterances are embedded in statements in which the narrator tries to orient himself: he is "Here among these farms"; "here's last year," "One might rest here," "Ah there's the house at last, here's April but. . . ." He finds assurance among "these rows of celery," "these farms," "these long beet rows." But it is a false assurance for he becomes increasingly disoriented: "Which way is north now? North now?"

Thus the second "How smoothly the car runs" is deflationary, signalling a total change in mood. The poet has not found "her." Under such circumstances, one must be sensible; one must go home again. "This must be the road. Queer how a road juts in." Avoiding the dark that "catches among these trees," he makes a brief stop at "This place," and again his blood pressure seems to rise as he tries to imagine what it would be like to be there with "her." But

of course he knows that "a jest's a jest." And so objects in the environment are transformed and now the "how" slots are filled with unpleasant images: "how poor this tea is." The longing of "One might rest here time without end" (paragraph 1) is replaced by a more cynical, "Think of a life in this place, here in these hills by these truck farms. Whose life?" And soon the moment is over: "What poor tea it was. How cold it's grown." Still the light in the trees (like the references to the change of seasons in the first paragraph) brings on a measure of renewed hope and, as the passage ends, the poet is imagining "That heavy laugh" of the desired woman and projects: "How it will rattle these branches in six weeks' time."

"The purpose of art," says Shklovsky, "is not to make us perceive meaning but to create a special perception of the object." Apollinaire made much the same point about Cubist painting: "Representing planes to denote volumes, Picasso gives so complete and so decisive an enumeration of the various elements which make up the object that these do not take the shape of the object. This is largely due to the effort of the viewer, who is forced to see all the elements simultaneously just because of the way they have been arranged" (p. 118). So, in Williams' improvisation, there is no summing up of the protagonist's situation, no final epiphany that "human voices wake us and we drown." Rather we see "plane" after "plane," image after image, separately. In "Prufrock," the "taking of a toast and tea" is a symbolic food ritual, a debasement of the Eucharist; in *Kora*, drinking tea may be either good or bad depending on what has just happened or is about to happen. When the poet finds himself at nightfall alone at the inn without the desired woman, he naturally concludes: "what poor tea it was." The axis of contiguity thus replaces the axis of substitution.

By its very form, an improvisation like "How smoothly the car runs" is designed to emphasize inconsequentiality; Williams himself refers to his bedtime entries as "the reflection of the day's happenings more or less" (IWWP, 27),

that is, as bits of automatic writing that allow the unconscious to come into play.¹¹ Yet there are curious lapses in *Kora in Hell*. In the Prologue, Williams quotes a 1916 letter from his poet friend, H.D., who reproaches him for relying too much on a "hey-ding-ding touch," a "derivative tendency . . . as if you mocked at your own song" (KH, 13). Williams responds indignantly: "H.D. misses the entire intent of what I am doing. . . . It might be said that that touch is the prototype of the Improvisations" (KH, 13). But perhaps H.D. was right. Consider the commentary appended to Improvisation XV, no. 1:

Bla! Bla! Bla! Heavy talk is talk that waits upon a deed. Talk is servile that is set to inform. Words with the bloom on them run before the imagination like the saeter girls before Peer Gynt. It is talk with the patina of whim upon it makes action a bootlicker. So nowadays poets spit upon rhyme and rhetoric.

(KH, 17)

"The thing that saves your work," wrote Pound to Williams with reference to *Kora*, "is opacity, and don't forget it. Opacity is NOT an American quality. Fizz, swish, gabble, and verbiage, these are *echt americanish*" (KH, 11).¹² But *opacity* is precisely the quality the above passage lacks; it has, on the contrary, too much fizz, swish, gabble, and verbiage. "Bla! Bla! Bla!" is too obvious a way to stress the futility of discourse. The strained comparison of "Words with the bloom on them" to the "saeter girls before Peer Gynt" is excessively cute and oddly violates Williams' own credo, stated on the very next page, that "the coining of

¹¹ See David Jauss, "The Descent, the Dance, and the Wheel: The Aesthetic Theory of William Carlos Williams' *Kora in Hell*," *Boston University Journal*, (1977), 37; Sherman Paul, "A Sketchbook of the Artist in his 34th Year," in *The Shaken Realist: Essays in Modern Literature in Honor of Frederick J. Hoffman*, ed. Melvin J. Friedman and John B. Vickery (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), pp. 36-39.

¹² The letter Williams cites in *Kora* is dated 10 November 1917; see *Selected Letters 1907-1941 of Ezra Pound*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: New Directions, 1971), pp. 123-125.

similes is a pastime of a very low order" (KH, 18). Again, the metaphorical analogy between "the patina of whim" and a "bootlicker" is hardly an instance of "wiping soiled words" or "removing the aureoles." The "playful" tone of the passage, its air of Dada inconsequentiality, cannot disguise the poet's urge to *say* rather than to *make*. A related example can be found in the two sections that follow IV, 2 ("How smoothly the car runs . . ."):

The frontispiece is her portrait and further on—the obituary sermon: she held the school upon her shoulders. Did she. Well—turn in here then:—we found money in the blood and some in the room and on the stairs. My God I never knew a man had so much blood in his head! —and thirteen empty whisky bottles. I am sorry but those who come this way meet strange company. This is you see death's canticle.

A young woman who had excelled at intellectual pursuits, a person of great power in her sphere, died on the same night that a man was murdered in the next street, a fellow of very gross behavior. The poet takes advantage of this to send them on their way side by side without making the usual unhappy moral distinctions.

(KH, 37-38)

Despite the disclaimer of the last sentence, the poet has in fact made "the usual unhappy distinctions." In showing that rich and poor, educated and uneducated, female and male, meet the same sordid death, he is suggesting that such sex and class labels are meaningless. The lesson of "death's canticle" is, to put it baldly, don't judge a book by its cover. Such expository discourse runs counter to what Williams was to call, some years later, "the disjointing process."¹³ One reads much about *Kora* as a process poem, a "field of action in which the reader can read according to

¹³ *A Novelette and Other Prose* (Toulon, France: TO Publishers, 1932); rpt. in IMAG, 269-304; see 295.

whatever sequence he wishes," a "sequence of free variations on [the] theme of polarity."¹⁴ But the variations are only partly "free" and the text is not always a "field of action." *Kora in Hell* remains a fascinating experiment in eliminating such traditional features as plot, argument, linear continuity, and connectives. But Williams still hesitates between artistic alternatives, not yet certain how to bring his "Kora" out of her hell.

How can the poet infuse his compositions with the "power TO ESCAPE ILLUSION" (SAA, 112)? A power to be found, so the poet of *Spring and All* believes, in certain Cubist paintings, most notably those of Juan Gris.¹⁵ Williams, who was to remark in later life: "I would rather have been a painter than to bother with these god-damn words" (IWWP, 29), puzzled over this question for years. In the Marianne Moore essay, he observes:

Unlike the painters the poet has not resorted to distortions or the abstract in form. Miss Moore accomplishes a like result by rapidity of movement. A poem such as "Marriage" is an anthology of transit. It is a pleasure that can be held firm only by moving rapidly from one thing to the next. It gives the impression of a passage through. (IMAG, 311)

Spring and All, published three years after *Kora*, is just such an "anthology of transit": "from all angles lines converging and crossing establish points" (IMAG, 309). One chapter or poem opens up into the next; sentences are left hanging, as in

¹⁴ See respectively, Joseph Riddel, "The Wanderer and the Dance: William Carlos Williams' Early Poetics," in *The Shaken Realist*, p. 63; Bram Dijkstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 73; J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth Century Writers* (New York: Atheneum, 1966), p. 303.

¹⁵ See esp. SAA, 107, 110, 112, 117, and cf. *A Novelette* (1932), whose fourth section is called "Juan Gris" (IMAG, 283-286).

The farmer and the fisherman who read their own lives there have a practical corrective for—
(SAA, 100)

It is very typical of almost all that is done by the writers who fill the pages every month of such a paper as
(SAA, 100)

The poems themselves now display a kind of cutting new to Williams. Perhaps the first difference to note between the lyrics collected in *Sour Grapes* (1921) and those of *Spring and All* is that the ubiquitous exclamation point of the former book is now replaced by the dash. Within the space of twenty-seven poems, there is only a single instance of the exclamation point:

I was your nightgown
I watched!
(SAA, 115)

An exclamation point implies, of course, a momentary finality, a stop however ecstatic, whereas the dash stresses fluidity, a rapid shift from one thing to another. In *Sour Grapes*, the poetic surface is not yet broken; words are organized into complete sentences:

The sky has given over
its bitterness.
Out of the dark change
all day long
rain falls and falls
as if it would never end.
("Spring Storm," CEP, 202)

Or

They call me and I go.
It is a frozen road
past midnight, a dust
of snow caught

in the rigid wheeltracks.
The door opens.
I smile, enter and
shake off the cold.

("Complaint," CEP, 199)

In these poems, Williams has already discovered his characteristic imagery. As James Breslin notes: "he strips objects bare of all acquired associations"; "details do not combine into symbolic clusters but instead create a literal specificity."¹⁶ But between the writing of these sharply etched Imagist poems and the lyrics of *Spring and All*, a marked change has occurred. To call Williams' early poems "Cubist," as does Bram Djikstra, is, I think, to overstress the pictorial component of Cubist art. Djikstra maintains, for example, that "Spring Strains" (1916) "is an elaborate attempt at painting a Cubist picture in words":

It represents a visual plane, a visual field of action, within which objects are analyzed in a strictly pictorial fashion. They are isolated, intensified through compression, then broken into parts:

two blue-grey birds chasing
a third struggle in circles, angles
swift convergings to a point that bursts
instantly!

Williams shatters the forms in his picture just as a Cubist painter fragments his forms, and in doing so he achieves the "constructive dispersal of these fragments over the canvas" of his poem which Kandinsky mentions in discussing the work of Picasso.¹⁷

But in fact the structure of the passage cited is still essentially linear; form is not shattered and fragmented. "Spring

¹⁶ William Carlos Williams, *An American Artist* (New York: Oxford, 1970), pp. 78, 52.

¹⁷ *Hieroglyphics of a New Speech*, pp. 64-65.

Strains" is a highly pictorial poem, a sequence of clear visual images. In *Spring and All*, such images are not just "isolated" and "intensified through compression"; they are decomposed:

The red paper box
hinged with cloth

is lined
inside and out
with imitation
leather

It is the sun
the table
with dinner
on it for
these are the same—

Its twainch trays
have engineers
that convey glue
to airplanes

or for old ladies
that darn socks
paper clips
and red elastics—

What is the end
to insects
that suck gummed
labels?

for this is eternity
through its
dial we discover
transparent tissue
on a spool

But the stars
are round

cardboard
with a tin edge

and a ring
to fasten them
to a trunk
for the vacation—

(SAA, 123-124)

This is not as radical an experiment as Gertrude Stein's "box" poems in *Tender Buttons*,¹⁸ but its Cubist style recalls the fragmentation and superposition of planes, the tension between compositional game and representational reference that characterizes Stein's work. Juan Gris, Williams' "favorite painter" at this time (A, 318), uses geometric analogies to confound the absolute identities of objects and their spatial positions, but he does not submit his objects to the large-scale decomposition we find in, say, Picasso's *Ma Jolie*.

Consider *Still Life Before an Open Window: Place Ravignan*, painted in 1915 (Figure 4). Here we can identify the objects on the table—carafe, bowl of fruit, goblet, newspaper—and the window view—shuttered windows across the street, trees, balcony rails—quite easily. We can also make out the label "MEDOC" and the block letters of "LE JOURNAL." But Gris' "real" objects are seen as through a distorting lens; they are rigidly subordinated to the geometric structure of the painting: a complex set of interlocking triangles and rectangular planes whose spatial positions are ambig-

¹⁸ There are two poems called "A Box" in *Tender Buttons*. Here is the first:

Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same question, out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes painful cattle. So then the order is that a white way of being round is something suggesting a pin and it is disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again.

—"Objects," *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage, 1962), p. 463. See also pp. 465-466 for the second "A Box."

uous. Here structure calls attention to itself: carafe, tree trunks, window frames, an apple—all become relational parts of Gris' charged surface.

Just so, Williams' poem is not a "description" of a red paper box in the sense that "Spring Strains" presents the image of "two blue-grey birds" struggling in circles, against the backdrop of a "tissue-thin monotone of blue-grey buds." Like the mysterious boxes of Joseph Cornell, Williams' "box" immediately becomes a kind of open sesame, waiting to be entered:

The red paper box
hinged with cloth

is lined
inside and out
with imitation
leather

Each of the four-line stanzas that follows has the shape of a box, being roughly a small square centered on the wide empty space of the page.¹⁹ The squareness of the stanza is further enhanced by the pervasive presence of consonance at line ends:

or for old ladies
that darn socks
paper clips
and red elastics

On the other hand, syntactic units within a given stanza are regularly broken up by line breaks and internal alliteration as in

through its
dial we discover
transparent tissue
on a spool

¹⁹ Strictly speaking, stanzas 2 and 6 (following the opening couplet) have five rather than four lines, but the analogy to the box still holds.

Here the lineation urges us to take "dial we discover" as a separate semantic unit even though its meaning is totally dependent on the lines in which it is embedded.

The poem's particulars, moreover, refuse to cohere. The red *paper* box turns out to be "hinged with cloth." If it is lined "inside and out" (an odd description for lining usually refers to what is inside) not outside, with "imitation / leather," how can it be made of paper? If its "two-inch trays" have "engineers / that convey glue / to airplanes," it may have large hinges; if, on the other hand, it holds "paper clips / and red elastics" for "old ladies / that darn socks," it must be one of those delicate little boxes with tiny compartments and drawers. "What is the end," the poet asks, "to insects / that suck gummed labels"? But how do insects get at these drawers? And what is the "dial" by means of which "we discover / transparent tissue / on a spool"? Perhaps the combination lock of a jewelry box. But then, would a box that contains airplane glue have a lock? Finally, and most confusing, are the "stars" made of "round / cardboard / with a tin edge" inside the box or do they decorate its surface? How and why would one fasten "them" as opposed to "it" (the box) "to a trunk / for the vacation"?

By the time we reach the end of the poem with its deceptive "boxy" stanzas, we realize that the "box" is purely the poet's construction. We cannot visualize it. "If illusion," writes E. H. Gombrich, "is due to the interaction of clues and the absence of contradictory evidence, the only way to fight its transforming influence is to make the clues contradict each other and to prevent a coherent image of reality from destroying the pattern in the plane."²⁰ Like a

²⁰ *Art and Illusion, A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*: The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1956 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), p. 282. In *Skyscraper Primitives*, Dickran Tashjian argues that the lyrics in *Spring and All* are comparable to Duchamp's Readymades: thus the red wheelbarrow is a "readymade transposed into language through accurate, concise description and subtle phrasing. The wheelbarrow on the page gains its reality as an addition to nature because it already exists

Cubist painting, Williams' poem introduces contradictory clues that resist all attempts to apply the test of consistency. Thus the red paper box turns out to be made of cloth or leather; its "dial" may lead us to "eternity," but then again it may just be a ring attaching cardboard stars to a steamer trunk. For that matter, the box is also "the sun" and "the table / with dinner on it," not because there is a metaphoric analogy between these items but by sheer creative fiat. As Williams asserts in the prose section preceding this lyric, "The objects of his world were real to him because he could use them and use them with understanding to make his inventions" (SAA, 122).²¹ "The red paper box" begins with an image of a concrete object only to break that image into fragments, making of these fragments a new verbal construct. The form of the poem is one of calculated indeterminacy. One is reminded of the Gris painting in which the house front and trees ostensibly outside the painter's window are rendered as a brightly lit violet-blue plane that seems to be inside the room.

Poem after poem in *Spring and All* is characterized by such Cubist mobility and indeterminacy. No. V is a composition on wind:

Black winds from the north
enter black hearts. Barred from
seclusion in lilies they strike

to destroy—

Beastly humanity
where the wind breaks it—

(SAA, 102)

It is a conventional enough opening: the wind as Shel-

as a reality in human experience" (p. 108). I would argue that, on the contrary, Williams' "wheel / barrow" exists nowhere but in the words on the page.

²¹ Here Williams is referring to Shakespeare, but he is, of course, also talking about himself as artist.

leyan destroyer and preserver. Williams plays with this notion only to push it aside and replace it with one equally hackneyed—the wind that bloweth where it listeth:

salt winds—

Sold to them men knock blindly together
splitting their heads open

That is why boxing matches and
Chinese poems are the same—That is why
Hartley praises Miss Wirt.

(SAA, 103)

Vacant shuttles weave the wind. But Williams is not Eliot and he wants to be matter-of-fact, scientific. "There is nothing in the twist / of the wind but—dashes of cold rain."

If the poem ended here—and many Williams poems do end on such a "hard-boiled" note—it would be merely clever. But the poet of *Spring and All* refuses to take this easy way out. He wants to experience wind as fully as possible. In the erotically charged universe of *Spring and All*, the wind cannot remain a symbol, viewed from the outside:

Black wind, I have poured my heart out
to you until I am sick of it—

Now I run my hand over you feeling
the play of your body—the quiver
of its strength

(SAA, 103)

It is a striking transformation, the poem enacting the rejection of symbolism which has been the subject of the prose section that precedes it, a section that ends with the sentence: "The word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole—aware—civilized" (SAA, 102). All the talk of black winds entering black hearts, of beastly humanity broken by the wind, of day as the time of flower and rocks, and night as the time of hate, gives way to a sense of *living*. How can

the black wind be anything but an object of love, a female presence, waiting to be touched so that the "quiver / of its strength" can manifest itself?

"Black winds" also functions within the larger serial structure of *Spring and All*. The orchestration of symbolic images which characterizes a poem like *The Waste Land* gives way, in *Spring and All*, to what David Lodge has called a "field of contiguities."²² Williams' images—wind, flower, farmer, white, purple—are perfectly transparent; all are nature images, reflecting the sexual energy of the universe, the life force. They are images without depth, but in the shallow space in which they coexist, they create enormously varied configurations. Thus we first meet the word "wind" in the opening pages of *Spring and All*: "Houses crumble to ruin, cities disappear giving place to mounds of soil blown thither by the winds . . ." (SAA, 91). Here the wind is part of the holocaust, but when it next appears, it announces the coming of spring: "By the road to the contagious hospital / under the surge of the blue / mottled clouds driven from the / northeast—a cold wind" (SAA, 95). And again, some fifteen lines further into the poem, we meet "the cold, familiar wind." In poem III about the farmer, "A cold wind ruffles the water / among the browned weeds" (99). In IV, we have, by contrast, "dove-tame winds— / stars of tinsel" (99). And so on.

Each time we meet the word *wind*, two things happen. First, we experience the pleasure of recognition, coming, as we do, upon a familiar image we had almost forgotten we knew. Secondly, we distinguish this particular manifestation of the word from all others. As Williams had said in the Prologue to *Kora*, "the coining of similes is a pastime of a very low order. . . . Much more keen is that power which discovers in things those inimitable particles of dissimilarity to all other things which are the peculiar perfections of the thing in question" (*Kora*, 18).

²² *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Literature* (London: Edward Arnold), p. 107.

The final poem in *Spring and All*, which acts as a coda, provides what is perhaps the best clue to the structural dynamics of the serial poem.

XXVII

Black eyed susan
rich orange
round the purple core

the white daisy
is not
enough

Crowds are white
as farmers
who live poorly

But you
are rich
in savagery—

Arab
Indian
dark woman

(SAA, 151)

Read independently, this is no more than an attractive little flower poem in which the black-eyed susan is treated animistically as a "savagely" sensual woman. To compare flowers to women—what could be more hackneyed? Yet a reader who comes across this poem in an anthology and who does not know its context must surely wonder about the third tercet: what do white crowds and poor farmers have to do with the "savagery" of the "Arab / Indian / dark woman"?

Within the confines of poem XXVII, there is no particular connection. But in terms of the larger structure of *Spring and All*, every word has its place. The "Black eyed susan" has not appeared before, but the image brings to-

gether all the flower images in the sequence: the "stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf" (5), the "pink confused with white / flower" (96), the "lilacs and azalea trees in flower" (102-103), the metal or porcelain "rose" of VII, the "fields of goldenrod" (133), and the "two horned lilac blossoms" (135).

When the compound noun "Black eyed susan" is taken apart, further connections become visible. "Black" recalls the "long black trees" of the upside-down Chapter XIII (92), the "black orchards" of III, the "black" coronal of IV, the "black winds" and "black fish" of V. "Eyed" relates back to the "new cathedral" of Chapter XIII, which looks down from its towers "with great eyes" (92), the grocery boys who "let their hair grow long / in a curve over one eye" (136), and the "saffron eyeballs" of the "old / jaundiced woman" who "can't die" (130).

In lines 2-12, this deployment of "word echoes" becomes highly refined:

Rich orange: Everything
—windows, chairs
obscenely drunk, spinning—
white, blue, orange
—hot with our passion (114)

purple: All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees (95)

It is one with submarine vistas
purple and black fish turning
among undulant seaweed (103)

This is the time of year
when boys fifteen and seventeen
wear two horned lilac blossoms

- in their caps—or over one ear. . . .
 Horned purple (135-136)
- core* to solve the core
 (pun on *Kore*) of whirling flywheels (109)
- the *white* daisy: Pink confused with white
 flowers (196)
- breasts to see, white and blue—
 to hold in the hand, to nozzle (114)
- Everything
 —windows, chairs
 obscenely drunk, spinning—
 white, blue, orange
 —hot with our passion (224)
- beside the white
 chickens (138)
- the whitish moonlight
 tearfully
 assumes the attitudes
 of the afternoon (141)
- crowds*: Nightly the crowds
 with the closeness and
 universality of sand
 witness the selfspittle (128)

- The crowd at the ball game
 is moved uniformly
 by a spirit of uselessness
 which delights them— (147)
- It is summer, it is the solstice
 the crowd is
 cheering, the crowd is laughing
 in detail (149)
- farmers*: The farmer in deep thought
 is pacing through the rain. . . .
 the artist figure of
 the farmer—composing
 antagonist (98-99)
- the quality of the farmer's
 shoulders (118)

Against this backdrop of familiar images comes the astonishing ending:

Arab
 Indian
 dark woman

We have been introduced to the notion of "Indian" "savagery" in the reference to the "dash of Indian blood" that characterizes the poor slatternly Elsie of XVIII. "Arab" has not appeared earlier in the poem, but it harks back to the smiling gypsy of XXI and the "Gipsy lips pressed / to my own" of XXIV. "Dark" has, of course, occurred frequently, from the "dark" but "wholly gay" flowerpot of II, with its "darkened" petals, to the light which becomes "darkness and darkness light" of XIV. But although the word

"woman" has been used once or twice in the sequence, it is only at the very end of the poem that she is endowed with the attributes, *Arab, Indian, dark*. Furthermore, the conclusion of the lyric points back to its opening line, which contains the only mention of the word "susan" in the whole sequence. By relating these items, Williams thus suddenly opens up the text. For the "Arab / Indian / dark woman" who is also "susan" is verbally a *discovery* even if she has been present all along as a subliminal image. Only as we read the last words of the coda poem, do we suddenly see that this image of "rich . . . savagery" has been at the core of *Spring and All* from the beginning. But at this very moment, Williams abruptly breaks off his narrative, leaving it up to the reader to construct his own flower fantasies.

In retrospect, we find that expressions of sexual desire for a "dark woman" are ubiquitous in Williams' text:

round flamegreen throats
petal lays its glow upon petal (96)

Thither I would carry her
among the lights . . .
a crown for her head with
castles upon it (99)

Scheherazade, who lived under the threat (101)

some Elsie—
voluptuous water (132)

The sea that encloses her young body
ula lu la lu
is the sea of many arms

The blazing secrecy of noon is undone
and and and
the broken sand is the sound of love. . . .

In the sea the young flesh playing
floats with the cries of far off men
who rise in the sea

with green arms (136-137)

"Most of my life," says Williams in the prose section preceding poem X, "has been lived in hell—a hell of repression lit by flashes of inspiration" (116). *Spring and All* enacts the difficult process whereby this "hell" is "lit" by flashes of the "dark woman," the Kora who is waiting to be discovered. "Pink," first "confused with white," the "red wheel / barrow / glazed with rain / water / beside the white / chickens," the "rich orange / round the purple core" of the "Black eyed susan," seen in all its vibrancy in contrast to the "white daisy" which "is not / enough"—all these bleeding reds emerge from the dreary landscape of the "Interborough Rapid Transit Co." (147), from "the crowd / at the ball game" (147). The moon emerges from the "oak tree's crotch" (141). Even the "red paper box" with its cloth hinges seems to contain the dark woman in the form of "transparent tissue." Out of the "messy" and unwieldy prose, out of the disorder of language, the bland crowds and "patches of standing water," "dazed spring approaches."

The metonymic model of *Spring and All* looks ahead to the poetic sequences of our own time. Each lyric embedded in Williams' "free prose" sustains rival possibilities: it is at once self-reflexive and open-ended.²³ Thus the "red paper box" means one thing in the context of poem XII, but it is also part of a larger metonymic network which proceeds as follows:

reddish, purplish, forked upstanding, twiggy / stuff of
bushes
red where in whorls / petal lays its glow upon petal
red paper box
red elastic

and so on. Or again, the "outline of leaf" in "By the road

²³ On this point, see James E. Breslin, "William Carlos Williams and Charles Demuth: Cross-Fertilization in the Arts," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 6, no. 2 (April 1977), 256-258.

to the contagious hospital" has one function *inside* that poem and another when it is linked to "the round / and pointed leaves" of XXIII or to the "canopy of leaves" of XXIV. *Spring and All* thus fulfills Apollinaire's demand for an anti-illusionist art, for the referentiality of its images is subordinated to their compositional value. The poem enacts the process of coming into being, of flowering, of sexual arousal.

The pre-text of *Spring and All*, Hillis Miller has argued, is Rimbaud's *Illuminations*.²⁴ This seems at first a surprising statement for, of all Williams' works, it has been *Kora in Hell* that is frequently compared to Rimbaud's prose poems. The connection was first suggested by Pound, and in *The Great American Novel* (1923), Williams wryly comments: "Take the improvisations. What the French reader would say is *Oui, ça, j'ai déjà vu ça; ça c'est de Rimbaud.*"²⁵ In his study of the influence of French Symbolism on modern American poetry (1929), René Taupin insisted that the Improvisations resembled the *Illuminations* in their purposely random transcriptions of emotions, their imaginative freedom, their conjunction of "voyance" and irony, and their "opacity" as Pound calls it.²⁶ But Sherman Paul is surely right when he remarks that *Kora* is actually quite unlike Rimbaud's text, that Williams' nervous, casually framed, realistic improvisations have little in common with the highly structured "visionary" compositions of Rimbaud.²⁷

Spring and All, on the other hand, does contain interesting echoes of the *Illuminations*. Near the beginning of the book, we read:

²⁴ "Williams' *Spring and All* and the Progress of Poetry," *Daedalus*, 99 (Spring 1970), 415, 418.

²⁵ See IMAG, 167. Williams is referring to Pound's letter to him, 12 September 1920; see *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound*, pp. 160-161.

²⁶ *L'Influence du symbolisme français sur la poésie américaine (De 1910 à 1920)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1929), pp. 281-284.

²⁷ "A Sketchbook of the Artist in his Thirty-Fourth Year," *Shaken Realist*, p. 30.

Only a day is left, one miserable day, before the world comes into its own. Let us hurry! Why bother for this man or that? In the offices of the great newspapers a mad joy reigns as they prepare the final extras. Rushing about, men bump each other into the whirring presses. How funny it seems. All thought of misery has left us. Why should we care? Children laughingly fling themselves under the wheels of the street cars, airplanes crash gaily to the earth. Someone has written a poem.

(92)

This account of rebirth recalls "Après le déluge," especially the lines:

Dans la grande rue sale les étals se dressèrent, et l'on tira les barques vers la mer étagée là-haut comme sur les gravures. . . .

Dans la grande maison de vitres encore ruisselante, les enfants en deuil regardèrent les merveilleuses images.

(In the dirty main street, butcher's stalls rose up, and boats were hauled down to the sea, piled high as in engravings. . . .)

In the large house, its windowpanes still streaming, children in mourning looked at marvelous pictures.)²⁸

In the same chapter, Williams talks of "The new cathedral overlooking the park," which "looked down from its towers today, with great eyes, and saw by the decorative lake a group of people staring curiously at the corpse of a suicide" (92). One immediately thinks of "Enfance, III": "Il y a une cathédrale qui descend et un lac qui monte." ("There is a cathedral that descends and a lake that rises.") And the same image appears in poem XV:

The decay of cathedrals
is efflorescent

²⁸ Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, ed. Suzanne Bernard (Paris: Garnier, 1960), p. 253. Translations are my own.

through the phenomenal
growth of movie houses

whose catholicity is
progress since
destruction and creation
are simultaneous

(127)

This destruction-creation myth is central to *Spring and All* just as it is to the *Illuminations*. In "Conte," as Hillis Miller observes,²⁹ the bored prince tries to satisfy his superhuman longings by resorting to sadistic acts: he murders all his wives, cuts the throats of his pet animals, hacks his servants to pieces, and sets fire to his palaces, only to discover that "la foule, les toits d'or, les belles bêtes existaient encore." ("The crowds, the gold roofs, the splendid animals were still there.") The imagination is able to destroy everything but can then create only a repetition of what was there before: "Yes, the imagination, drunk with prohibitions, has destroyed and re-created everything afresh in the likeness of that which it was" (SAA, 93). "Like Rimbaud," writes Miller, "Williams must break down all cultural and natural forms, kill everyone, and destroy everything in order to return things to the primal chaos from which a reality without any antecedents may spring. . . . Once this monstrous act of demolition has been satisfactorily completed, the world will be new, and the imagination can turn from acts of destruction to acts of authentic creation."³⁰

In accord with this destruction-creation paradigm, Williams' imagery is recognizably Rimbaldian. Flowers, for example, are characterized not by their species—rose, lily, black-eyed susan, goldenrod—but by their genus: they are beings that *flower*, that blossom, that open up. "I expect," says Williams in the prose section that follows poem XXII, "to see values blossom" (140). There are, finally, only two

²⁹ *Daedalus*, 420.

³⁰ Miller, *Daedalus*, 421-422.

processes in nature as in art: birth ("the stark dignity of entrance") and death ("the waste of broad, muddy fields / brown with dried weeds"). But because "destruction and creation / are simultaneous," because the "barber" of poem XIV can invent "the newest / ways to grow hair / on bald death" (126), life and death are interdependent. The excitement is, then, to witness the moment of *change*, the movement over the *edge*. "Edge" is one of the key words in *Spring and All*, just as edges exist everywhere in Cubist painting. So,

The rose is obsolete
but each petal ends in
an edge, the double facet
cementing the grooved
columns of air—The edge
cuts without cutting. . . .

The place between the petal's
edge and the

From the petal's edge a line starts (107-108)

melon flowers that open
about the edge of refuse (117-118)

But the stars
are round
cardboard
with a tin edge (124)

Underneath the sea where it is dark
there is no edge (137)

The poet must define this edge, the place where one image or object reaches its terminus and another begins. As Williams says in *Kora*, "The stream of things having

composed itself into wiry strands that move in one fixed direction, the poet in desperation turns at right angles and cuts across current with startling results to his hangdog mood" (KH, 17).

But although things have edges and can be placed side by side, there is no center, no "reservoir of eternal models" as Miller puts it.³¹ There is only "the ubiquitous life force which gives rise to differences in objects appearing side by side or in sequence from an infinity of centers"—petals, flowers, flamegreen throats, black winds, transparent tissue, banjo jazz, waves of steel. "It is not a matter of 'representation' . . . but of separate existence" (SAA, 117).

Spring and All provides the paradigm for the serial poems Williams wrote throughout the following decade: for example, *The Descent of Winter* (1928) and *A Novelette* (1932). *The Descent of Winter*, begun on board the SS Pennland in the fall of 1927 when Williams was returning to America, having left behind his wife and sons who were to spend the entire year in Europe, was originally projected as a book of love poems to be called *Sacred and Profane*.³² But in its final form, *The Descent* turned out to be a more hybrid work, a collage of love poems, prose diatribes about American capitalism, anecdotes about the delivery of babies, and so on. Williams never did publish it as a separate book; it appeared in Ezra Pound's *Exile* in the Autumn of 1928.

Like *Spring and All*, *The Descent* is characterized by a discontinuous structure in which meaning is created by the resonance of contiguous images. But the condensation of the later work is much more radical and most critics have found it excessively obscure.³³ No doubt *The Descent of Winter* is an uneven book; certain prose sections like "A

³¹ *Daedalus*, 424.

³² See *Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, ed. John C. Thirwall (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957), p. 85.

³³ See, for example, Rod Townley, *The Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975, pp. 167-170). The best defense of the sequence is that of Thomas R. Whitaker in his *Williams* (New York: Twayne, 1968), pp. 68-69.

Morning Imagination of Russia" are not so much incoherent as they are boring in their naive didacticism. On the other hand, the sequence contains some of Williams' most brilliant writing. Here is the opening:

9/27

"What are these elations I have
at my own underwear?"

I touch it and it is strange
upon a strange thigh."

* * *

9/29

My bed is narrow
in a small room
at sea

The numbers are on
the wall
Arabic I

Berth No. 2
was empty above me
the steward

took it apart
and removed
it

only the number
remains
.2.

on an oval disc
of celluloid
tacked

to the whitenamed
woodwork
with

two bright nails
like stars
beside

the moon

(DW, 234-235)

The italicized section introduces a note of auto-eroticism that modulates into the bleaker solipsism of the second lyric.³⁴ "9/29" is like a hard-edged painting, but its general affinities are less with Cubism in its classical phase than with early Surrealism: the collages of Max Ernst, Kurt Schwitters, or René Magritte. Here it is not primarily a matter of breaking up objects and viewing them simultaneously as an organization of flat planes. Rather, the objects themselves undergo surprising transformations. The poem's structure is one of contraction-expansion. First everything contracts: "the narrow bed / in a small room / at sea" gives way to the empty upper berth and then to the arabic number 2 above it, "on an oval disc / of celluloid." The image is minimal and stark, reflecting the emptiness of the observer's consciousness, his total isolation. But as he contemplates this unimportant object silhouetted against "the whiteenameled / woodwork," he suddenly *sees* it freshly; the oval disc, tacked up by "two bright nails," becomes a "moon" supported by stars. In this case, less is more. Having stripped his world of all its trappings, he can once again bring it to life.

In the poems and prose passages that follow, these opposing images—empty berth and moonlight—reappear in a number of altered contexts. We can trace one chain of contiguities from "waves like words all broken" and the "coral island" of "9/30" to the "large rusty can wedged in the crotch" of the locust tree in "10/28," to the woman alone on the "railroad bridge support" of "11/10." At the

³⁴ Whitaker says: "The entire sequence may be seen as enacting a descent from auto-erotic and barren isolation . . . through expansive and fructifying movements toward a new discovery of community, the past, love, and the writer's vocation" (p. 69).

same time, the countermovement sets in: the "stars / beside / the moon" look ahead to the "orange flames" (237) the "yellow and red grass" (240), and the "leafless beechtree" that "shines like a cloud" (244). And then a few pages further on, we meet:

Dahlia—
What a red
and yellow and white
mirror to the sun, round
and petaled
is this she holds?

(249)

In the end, it is this "vividness alone" (247) that overcomes the poet's initial despair and solipsism. The sequence ends with the jaunty song of his Creole uncle: "*si j'étais roi de Bayaussi-e, tu serais reine-e par ma foi!*" (265).

The prose poems that alternate with the short lyrics of *The Descent of Winter* exhibit a discontinuity more radical than that of the earlier *Kora in Hell*. Here is "10/27":

And Coolidge said let there be imitation brass filigree fire fenders behind insured plateglass windows and yellow pine booths with the molasses-candygrain in the wood instead of the oldtime cake-like whitepine boards always cut thick their faces! the white porcelain trough is no doubt made of some certain blanched clay baked and glazed but how they do it, how they shape it soft and have it hold its shape for the oven I don't know nor how the cloth is woven, the grey and the black with the orange and green strips wound together diagonally across the grain artificial pneumothorax their faces! the stripe of shadow along the pavement edge, the brownstone steeple low among the office buildings dark windows with a white wooden cross upon them, lights like fuchsias, lights like bleeding hearts lights like columbines, cherry red danger and applegreen safety. Any hat in this window \$2.00 barred windows, wavy opaque glass, a block

of brownstone at the edge of the sidewalk crudely stippled on top for a footstep to a carriage, lights with sharp bright spikes, stick out round them their faces! STOP in black letters surrounded by a red glow, letters with each bulb a seed in the shaft of the L of the A lights on the river streaking the restless water lights upon pools of rainwater by the roadside a great pool of light full of overhanging sparks into whose lower edge a house looms its center marked by one yellow windowbright their faces!

(DW, 240-241)

In this surreal cityscape, objects in shop windows, seen from what is evidently the window of the poet's moving car, take on strange configurations. The "imitation brass filigree fire fenders," for example, are related syntactically to the "yellow pine booths with the molasses-candygrain in the wood," but whereas the former, placed behind "insured plateglass windows," are items for sale, the latter seem to be part of a candy store or café. Again, the "white porcelain trough" made of baked clay is somehow related to the dark cloth with its orange and green strips, the conjunction suggesting a display case of household goods. But the reference to "artificial pneumothorax" allows us to perceive the white porcelain trough as part of some hospital scene or perhaps a medical supply store. The scene, in any case, dissolves and we next see a "stripe of shadow along the pavement edge, the brownstone steeple low among the office buildings dark windows with a white wooden cross upon them." Seen retrospectively, the yellow pine booths now turn into church pews, and, in this context, the white porcelain trough calls up the image of a baptismal font.

We cannot, in short, locate the items named with any certainty, nor is it possible to define their relationships to one another. The blurring of focus is intentional, for Williams' emphasis is on the mobility and mystery of the city, and the text thus becomes what Charles Olson liked to call

an "energy discharge." So the colors of the cloth modulate into city lights—"lights like fuchsias, lights like bleeding hearts lights like columbines." The camera eye then moves farther away from the scene and we get a distance shot of "a great pool of light full of overhanging sparks into whose lower edge a house looms its center marked by one yellow windowbright their faces!"

Williams' modulation of light images is especially interesting. "10/27" begins, of course, as a parody of "And God said, 'Let there be light!'" ; here there is only the artificial light of the "imitation brass filigree fire fenders." But such lighting has its pleasures too; in the poet's verbal landscape, it coalesces with the bright neon lights of the city, the traffic lights ("cherry red danger and applegreen safety"), the red glow made by the bulbs around the STOP sign, the moving lights of the elevated train, the "restless water lights upon pools of rainwater," and finally the "great pool of light full of overhanging sparks into whose lower edge a house looms," a house whose "center" is marked by "one yellow windowbright" of faces.

This is perhaps as close as Williams ever came to the language constructions of Gertrude Stein or of her French predecessors. The poet does not give us a realistic or even an impressionist picture of the night-time scene. Rather, he wrenches words from their usual contexts and places them in new relationships. The juxtaposition of light images is one example of such stylization. Another can be found in the patterning of spatial forms. The roundness of the white porcelain trough is repeated in the circular traffic light and the STOP sign. These objects therefore seem to occupy the same space although, literally, some are indoors, some outdoors; some close to the ground, some high up, and so on. Again, the "yellow pine booths" seem to occupy the same space as the white wooden cross, and the "insured plateglass windows" of the storefront dissolve into the dark windows of office buildings, the barred windows of the hat shop, made of "wavy opaque

glass," and finally the "yellow" window of the isolated cheery house. The prose poem is a field of contiguities, what John Ashbery was to call a "hymn to possibility."

Read against the background of such verbal compositions, *Paterson*, whose first book appeared in 1946, comes as something of a surprise. *Paterson* is, of course, Williams' major work, the poem that finally made him famous. Paul Mariani calls it "the most radically experimental and successful long poem written in our time";³⁵ others have hailed it as the great American epic of the twentieth century. Yet the critical success of *Paterson* in the fifties was hardly coincidental. Many who had paid no attention to the shorter poems or to the serial works immediately responded to *Paterson*, no doubt because it satisfied the New Critical demands of the period: for all its seeming openness, it manifested a symbolic superstructure. This is not the place to discuss that network of symbols, which has been frequently explicated,³⁶ but let me cite just one commentary on the poem, made when Book Two of *Paterson* appeared in 1948. The critic I wish to cite is Robert Lowell, whose own *Lord Weary's Castle* had appeared just two years earlier:

Paterson, Book Two is an interior monologue. A man spends Sunday in the park at Paterson, New Jersey. He thinks and looks about him; his mind contemplates, describes, comments, associates, stops, stutters and shifts

³⁵ William Carlos Williams: *The Poet and his Critics*, p. 233.

³⁶ See, for example, Sr. M. Bernetta Quinn, "On *Paterson*, Book One," *The Metamorphic Tradition in Modern Poetry* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), pp. 89-129; rpt. in *William Carlos Williams, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), pp. 107-120; Glauco Cambon, "William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*," in *The Inclusive Flame* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), pp. 183-218; Louis L. Martz, "On the Road to *Paterson*," *Poetry New York*, No. 4 (1951); rpt. in *The Poem of the Mind, Essays on Poetry English and American* (New York: Oxford, 1969), pp. 125-146; Joel Conarroe, *William Carlos Williams' Paterson: Language and Landscape* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970); Walter Scott Peterson, *An Approach to Paterson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

like a firefly, bound only by its milieu. The man is Williams, anyone living in Paterson, the American, the masculine principle—a sort of Everyman. . . .

The Park is Everywoman, any woman, the feminine principle, America. The water roaring down the falls from the park to Paterson is the principle of life. The rock is death, negation, the *nul*; carved and given form, it stands for the imagination, "like a red basalt grasshopper, boot-long with window-eyes." The symbols are not allegorical, but loose, intuitive, and Protean.

Paterson, like Hart Crane's *Marriage of Faustus and Helen*, is about marriage. "Rigor of beauty is the quest." Everything in the poem is masculine or feminine, everything strains toward marriage, but the marriages never come off, except in the imagination, and there, attenuated, fragmentary and uncertain. "Divorce is the sign of knowledge in our time." The people "reflect no beauty but gross . . . Unless it is beauty / to be, anywhere; / so flagrant in desire. . . ."

Williams is noted as an imagist, a photographic eye; in Book One he has written "no ideas but in facts." This is misleading. His symbolic man and woman are Hegel's *thesis* and *antithesis*. They struggle toward synthesis—marriage. But fulness, if it exists at all, only exists in simple things, trees and animals; so Williams, like other Platonists, is thrown back on the "idea."³⁷

There could hardly be a better account of the meaning of *Paterson* II than Lowell's, and just because his is such an incisive analysis, it gives us pause for thought. The poet who began by saying that "The word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole" (SAA, 102), who praised Gertrude Stein "for her formal insistence on words in their literal, structural quality of being words" (A, 265), has now turned, whether

³⁷ *The Nation*, 166 (19 June 1948); rpt. in *William Carlos Williams, a Critical Anthology*, ed. Charles Tomlinson (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 165-166.

unwittingly or with the caution that may have come with age, to what is for him the alien rhetoric of Symbolism:

The scene's the Park
upon the rock,
female to the City

—upon whose body Paterson instructs his thoughts
(concretely)

From this opening, Book Two steadfastly juxtaposes symbols of marriage, fulfillment, creativity—"the flower of a day" (58), "a flight of empurpled wings" (62), the "grasshopper of red basalt" (62), "pouring water" (97), the "terrifying plunge" of the falls (100), a woman's "belly . . . like a white cloud" (105)—to those of divorce and sterility: the letters of the neurotic woman poet "C" which punctuate the lyric passages, the trapped mink (65), the evangelist (71-77), the Federal Reserve Bank (90-91), the Sunday afternoon picnickers (74), the "parasitic curd" (77)—all those features of modern life that tell us that "among / the working classes SOME sort / of breakdown / has occurred" (76-77).

It has been argued, most notably by James Breslin and Paul Mariani, that such thematic clusters, although present, are not the core of *Paterson*, that the poem is, in Mariani's words, "a process of unfolding, of discovery," or, as Breslin puts it, that "The poem . . . is the act of its creation, recording . . . the consciousness of its creator, whose dual fidelity to the *world* and to the *poem* constantly forces him to turn back and start all over again."³⁸ "Williams," Breslin argues, "takes an established literary genre, cuts away much of the complicated formal apparatus that makes it feel aloof and empty, and pushes it back toward the ground—where it can be filled with actuality."³⁹ Hence the constant dissolving of perspective and shifting of ground, and the

³⁸ Mariani, *William Carlos Williams, The Poet and the Critics*, p. 234; Breslin, *William Carlos Williams, An American Artist*, p. 171.

³⁹ *William Carlos Williams, An American Artist*, p. 171.

range of styles that makes *Paterson* a "pre-epic, a rough and profuse start from which some later summative genius may extract and polish . . . a beginning."⁴⁰

This is an attractive argument, but much as I would like to read *Paterson* as a "process of discovery," a "pre-epic," successive readings have convinced me that it is, in fact, a much more "closed" poem than either Williams or his best critics care to admit. The very cover of the first complete edition of *Paterson* (1963), with its impressionistic drawing of the Passaic Falls by Earl Horter,⁴¹ is oddly emblematic of Williams' partial return to his literary origins. Indeed, with the publication of *Paterson I*, the analogy of Williams' poetry to avant-garde painting—whether Cubist, Dada, or Surrealist—breaks down.

"Sunday in the Park" (Book Two, Part I), for example, has been read as the exploration of the poet's consciousness, his shifting moods punctuated by the repeated word "walking." Terms like "field of action" or "process poetics" imply that the "I" who is speaking quite literally doesn't know where he or she is going, that only in the course of the utterance is the path of entry chosen. David Antin's talk-poems are a good example of such a "process of discovery"; their stance, like John Ashbery's or Frank O'Hara's or Jackson Mac Low's, is that of the *improvisatore*. But a poem like "Sunday in the Park" is essentially pre-planned. The poet strolling through the park ostensibly records what he sees, observes, thinks, remembers, but in fact no detail is admitted into the space of the poem that does not relate to the central marriage-divorce tension that is the theme of the book. Lowell quite rightly talks of Hegelian thesis and antithesis here. Or, as Williams says in

⁴⁰ Breslin, *Williams*, p. 173.

⁴¹ The first edition of the complete collected *Paterson* (Books One to Five and notes for the projected Book Six) was published in October of 1963, some seven months after Williams' death. The Horter drawing thus comes as an afterthought, but its realism is nevertheless an embodiment of Williams' *Paterson*. See Emily Wallace, *A Bibliography of William Carlos Williams*, p. 102.

the closing line of Part I: "NO DOGS ALLOWED AT LARGE IN THIS PARK" (77).

It is no coincidence that the upbeat of the line, "He is led forward by their announcing wings" is followed by a particularly frustrated and accusatory letter from the poetess "C," or that the image of the peon "in the lost / Eisenstein film" ("Heavenly man!") is juxtaposed to the coarse and vulgar girl in the park: "the leg raised, verisimilitude. / even to the coarse contours of the leg, the / bovine touch!" (74). The arrangement of images and incidents, in short, follows an orderly plan. Accordingly, Williams' symbolic constructs demand to be taken seriously; such patterns as the man-city identity in Book One, the deployment of the four elements in Book Three, or the introduction in Book Four of Madame Curie as "pregnant" both literally and figuratively (in that she is about to discover radium)—all these devices hark back to the Symbolism of an earlier generation.

This Symbolist landscape, I would posit, was a world in which Williams never really felt at home. He had no Heavenly City to match Yeats's Byzantium, and when he tries, not very successfully, to introduce a comparable element in lines like "Chapultepec! grasshopper hill!" he must return to the exclamation point discarded a quarter of a century earlier in *Spring and All*, as if to impress us with the importance of this exotic site in Mexico City. Unlike Stevens, he had no "major man," no McCullough, so he talks of the "Heavenly man!" in the Eisenstein film, again using the exclamation point to emphasize the peon's significance. A poet characterized by what Robert Lowell calls a "secular knowingness," Williams knew only too well that fire is only fire and water, water, and so the images of fire and flood in Book Three remain peculiarly inert, quite unlike the complex fire and water symbols in *The Waste Land* or the *Four Quartets*.

Many readers of *Paterson* have remarked that the prose sections—for example, the letter about "Billie" by the half-wit (37-38), or the description of the dwarf as seen by

General Washington (18-19), are the most exciting passages in the poem. The documentary prose evidently resisted the poet's increasing tendency to turn image into symbol, "thing" into "idea of the thing," a tendency that came to a head in *Paterson*, Book Five (1958), where the fabled unicorn in the Cloisters tapestry becomes the ruling symbol for beauty, resurrection, the fulfillment of the artist's quest.

In one of the last poetry readings he was able to give, at Wellesley in 1956, Williams read "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower."⁴² Lowell movingly recalls the hush that fell over the enormous audience when the now-famous poet, "one whole side partly paralysed, his voice just audible," read this "triumph of simple confession":⁴³

And so
 with fear in my heart
 I drag it out

 and keep on talking
 for I dare not stop.
 Listen while I talk on

 against time.
 It will not be
 for long.

(PB, 154)

Like "Paterson, Five," "Asphodel" marks a return to tradition, in this case the pastoral love poem in which the penitent husband makes amends to his long-suffering wife. No more snatches of documentary prose, no Cubist or Surrealist superpositions or dislocations. The poem is stately and consistent, an autobiographical lyric in the Romantic tradition.

"Asphodel, that Greeny Flower" can be regarded as a

⁴² For Williams' own account of this reading, see IWWP, 94-95.

⁴³ "William Carlos Williams," *Hudson Review*, 14 (1961-1962); rpt. in *William Carlos Williams*, ed. J. Hillis Miller, p. 159. Cf. Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 89-91.

garland for the fifties. But the Williams who speaks to the poets of our own generation is, I think, less the loving, apologetic husband of "Asphodel" or the aspiring American bard of *Paterson* than he is a Voyager to Pagany, to the Paris of the twenties; he is the poet as passionate defender of the faith that "to engage roses / becomes a geometry."

CHAPTER FIVE

"No Edges, No Convexities" Ezra Pound and the Circle of Fragments

—the fragment is like the musical idea of a song cycle. . . . each piece is self-sufficient, and yet it is never anything but the interstice of its neighbors.

—*Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes

—Practically the whole development of the English verse-art has been achieved by steals from the French.

—Ezra Pound in *Poetry* (1913)

I

MY TITLE comes from W. B. Yeats, whose severe judgment of the *Cantos* in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) had, so said his old friend Ezra Pound, "done more to prevent people reading *Cantos* for what is *on the page* than any other smoke screen."¹ "Like other readers," said Yeats in his Preface, "I discover at present merely exquisite or grotesque fragments. He [Pound] hopes to give the impression that all is living, that there are no edges, no

The following abbreviations for Pound's works are used throughout this chapter: Where there are two dates, the first is that of original publication; the second, that of the New Directions (New York) edition used.

- P *Personae. The Collected Poems of Ezra Pound* (1926; 1949).
 C *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (1971). The designation (VIII, 30) means "Canto VIII, p. 30."
 GB *Gaudier-Brzeska* (1916; 1970).
 LE *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. with an introduction by T. S. Eliot (1954; 1968).
 SL *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound*, ed. D. D. Paige (1950).
 SP *Selected Prose 1909-1965* (1973).

¹ Letter to Hubert Creekmore, Rapallo 1939, SL, 321.