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Ready-mades and Other Measures: The Poetics of Marcel Duchamp and William Carlos Williams

[voir]

On peut regarder voir;
on ne peut pas entendre entendre.

Marcel Duchamp, *The Box of 1914*¹

IN LATE 1912, as Cubism was just beginning to gain an international notoriety—Apollinaire had just published *Les Peintres cubistes*, Gleizes and Metzinger their more highly theoretical *Du cubisme*, and the Armory Show was only months away—Marcel Duchamp turned his back on the movement which had nurtured his own notoriety. “I was finished with Cubism,” he would later say. “The whole trend of painting was something I didn’t care to continue. After ten years of painting I was bored with it.”² He began to plan what Charles Demuth, the American painter and close friend of William Carlos Williams, would call “the great picture of our time,” *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*, the so-called *Large Glass*.³ More construction than picture, as much projection of space as it is sculpture in space, *The Large Glass* began to take form in 1913 in Paris and reached its final “state of incompleteness” in 1923 in New York. In his *Autobiography* Williams

¹ Reproduced in Marcel Duchamp, *Notes and Projects for the Large Glass*, ed. Arturo Schwarz (Abrams, 1969), p. 179. The “[voir]” is Duchamp’s. Subsequent references to Duchamp’s notes cite this edition, abbreviated as *Notes and Projects*.

² Quoted by Calvin Tomkins in *The Bride and the Bachelors* (Viking, 1965), p. 24.

³ Letter dated February 5, 1929, from Demuth to Alfred Steiglitz, quoted in Dickran Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde, 1910–1925* (Wesleyan University Press, 1975), p. 209. Tashjian’s book is the best introduction to Duchamp’s impact on the American scene extant.

recalls seeing Duchamp at work on the *Glass* at Walter Arensberg's studio in New York: "It was in the studio as yet unfinished and was said to be a miracle of leaded-glass workmanship. I bumped through these periods like a yokel, narrow-eyed, feeling my own inadequacies, but burning with the lust to write."⁴

Williams' lust to write carried with it a certain resentment for Duchamp—if not resentment, then at least a biting sense that Duchamp represented the competition. He describes complimenting Duchamp on his painting *The Sisters*, saying how much he liked it, and Duchamp icily replying, "Do you?"

I could have sunk through the floor, ground my teeth, turned my back on him and spat. I don't think I ever gave him that chance again. I realized then and there that there wasn't a possibility of my ever saying anything to anyone in that gang from that moment to eternity—but that one of them, by God, would come to me and give me the same chance one day and that I should not fail to lay him cold—if I could. Watch and wait. Meanwhile work. (A, 137)

Soon after the non-appearance of Duchamp's ready-made urinal at the 1917 Independents Exhibition in New York (the "hanging" committee had hidden it from public view behind a partition), Williams would complain that ready-mades such as the urinal were indeed indefensible as art. He wrote that *The Blind Man*, the little magazine in which Duchamp had defended the urinal, "likes to reach out of the cabinet and to grab whatever it touches and to imagine it has hit upon a new thing . . . [but] *ici il n'y a pas grand chose*."⁵ Two years later, however, in the Prologue to *Kora in Hell*, he would insist that the "amusing controversy" surrounding the urinal "should not be allowed to sink into oblivion," that there was after all something of import in the entire affair (I, 9–10). And some thirty years later, he would damn the "silly committee" that had hidden the urinal, "asses that they were"; this "construction" of Duchamp's had been "magnificent," and it had represented, more importantly, "something new—something American" (A, 134).

This change in attitude toward the urinal reflects not just Williams' growing appreciation for modern art, but also his assimilation of mod-

⁴ *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New Directions, 1967), p. 137, henceforth cited in the text, abbreviated as A. Williams' other major works are cited in the text as follows: I—*Imaginations* (New Directions, 1970); IAG—*In the American Grain* (New Directions, 1956); P—*Paterson* (New Directions, 1963); PB—*Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (New Directions, 1962); SE—*Selected Essays* (New Directions, 1969); SL—*Selected Letters*, ed. John C. Thirlwall (McDowell, Obolensky, 1957). Page references to *Paterson* are to the 1969 fifth printing of the 1963 edition, which not only alters the poem's pagination substantially, but also corrects several errors.

⁵ "America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry," *The Poetry Journal*, VIII (November 1917), 34.

ern art's poetics—and Duchamp's in particular. If he could not, at first, admit Duchamp's genius, and his own shortcomings in the face of it, the admission was by 1950 an easy one. Williams believed that he had not only assimilated but overtaken and surpassed the genius of Marcel Duchamp, that he had not failed, in fact, to "lay him cold." What Williams believed distinguished his own achievement from Duchamp's was *work*, and his dedication to the creation of a new American poetry, spanning a lifetime, carried, he believed, far greater weight of significance than Duchamp's urinal, as "new" and as "American" as it had surely been.

As early as 1921, in *Contact*, the little magazine he edited with Robert McAlmon, he began to challenge Duchamp's position as high priest of the modern in an editorial entitled "Glorious Weather":

If the object of writing be to celebrate the triumph of sense, and if Marcel Duchamp be the apex of the modern sense, and if he continues in New York, silent . . .

We say only in view of Marcel's intelligent and devastating silence, etc., etc., Budapest, Argentina, Sinaloa, Siberia, West Coast of Africa—if, if, if,—etc., that

there is no comment on pictures but pictures, on music but music, poems but poetry:

if you do, you do
if you don't you don't

and that's all there is to that.⁶

By 1921 it was commonplace knowledge that Duchamp had given up "art." He had almost entirely ceased working on *The Large Glass*, which by 1923 he had decided to leave permanently unfinished. More and more of his time was dedicated to various amusements—he became something of a famous party-goer, while at the same time he established himself as a master chess player. He had created a masterpiece—the *Glass*—but he had also forsaken painting forever in the process. If he was, in 1921, the "apex of modern sense," he had left the way clear for others to overtake him. "A poet is a maker," Williams concluded the "Glorious Weather" essay, "and he who cannot make, that is invent, hath his name for nothing."

As Duchamp's "silence" continued through the thirties and forties, and as Williams began work on *Paterson*—the poem which he hoped would be his own masterpiece and toward which his writing had been directed since the late twenties—Williams numbered Duchamp among

⁶ "Glorious Weather," *Contact*, V (June 1923), n.p.

the "dead": ". . . Brancusi too old to work; Stieglitz dead; Hart Crane dead; Juan Gris—at one time my favorite painter—long since dead; Charles Demuth dead; Marsden Hartley dead; Marcel Duchamp idling in a telephoneless Fourteenth Street garret in New York; the Baroness dead; Jane Heap dead . . ." (A, 318). In a curiously italicized section of *Paterson*, Book II, the poet, wandering on Garret Mountain, confronts a voice that sounds very much like the voice of an idling Duchamp:

*I asked him, What do you do?
He smiled patiently, The typical American question. In Europe they
would ask, What are you doing? Or, What are you doing now?
What do I do? I listen, to the water falling. (No sound of it here but with
the wind!) This is my entire occupation. (P, 45)*

In the manuscript this passage is labeled the "Temple incident,"⁷ and it is as if Williams has entered the temple of Duchamp's intelligent and devastating silence, a temple of artistic death which is not unattractive to the poet of *Paterson* II. Struggling to communicate the language of the falls, Williams faces the destiny of a Sam Patch or a Mrs. Cummings, both of whom had leapt to their death because "speech had failed" them, "the word had been drained of its meaning" (P, 17):

a body next spring
frozen in an ice-cake; or a body
fished next day from the muddy swirl—

both silent, uncommunicative (P, 20–21)

Although "the theme" of his poem lies "asleep" and "unrecognized," like the unidentifiable corpse pulled from the river itself, he protests that its life nevertheless rests "in a wind that does not move the others" (P, 19). Williams envisions "a kind of springtime / toward which" the poem aspires, but which, because he cannot communicate it, remains "within himself—ice bound" (P, 36). *Paterson* is the record of his attempt to chop that ice away. "If you do, you do," he had written long before, "if you don't, you don't." The wind that did not appear to move the likes of Marcel Duchamp moved him at least. Williams thought of himself as a doer, a maker, above all else.

II

Williams defined the nature of his making, almost from the outset, in terms of poetic form. In the same 1917 article in which he attacked

⁷ Cited in Benjamin Sankey, *A Companion to William Carlos Williams' Paterson* (University of California Press, 1971), p. 76.

Duchamp's ready-mades, he admitted that Whitman's enumeration of things American, his willingness to reach out of the cabinet and grab whatever came to hand, was the "rock" upon which American poetry was founded, and that Whitman's greatest achievement was that in this enumeration he had "destroyed the forms antiquity decreed to him to take and use." Whitman's legacy, however, lay in the necessity for American poets to make "a new verse form" of his unruly democratic vistas:

American verse of today must have a certain quality of freedom, must be "free verse" in a sense. It must be new verse, in a new conscious form. But even more than that it must be free in that it is free to include all temperaments, all phases of our environment, physical as well as spiritual, mental and moral. It must be truly democratic, truly free for all—and yet it must be governed. This is no small demand to make of a new verse form. Its elements must not be too firmly cemented together as they are in the aristocratic forms of past civilizations. They must be perfectly concrete or they will escape through the fingers—but they must not be rigidly united. . . . The elements of the new form must be simple and single so that they are capable of every form of moulding.⁸

According to Williams' later testimony, in the *Autobiography*, this emphasis upon a new verse form separated his poetry early on from its Imagist roots. For a time he had followed Pound's Imagist rules, the famous "Don'ts," but he had done so "merely to fill out a standard form" (A, 148). And even the standard poetical forms of Imagism "ran quickly out":

[Imagism], though it had been useful in ridding the field of verbiage, had no formal necessity implicit in it. It had already dribbled off into so-called "free verse" which, as we saw, was a misnomer. There is no such thing as free verse! Verse is measure of some sort. "Free verse" was without measure and needed none for its projected objectifications. Thus the poem had run down and became formally non extant. (A, 264)

Giving free verse up, and with it Imagism, he allied himself with the painters—"Impressionism, dadaism, surrealism applied to both painting and the poem" (A, 148)—and he did so because modern art, first in the work of Cézanne and soon after in Cubism, had taken as its starting point the necessity for and the revelation of form. "Painting," Williams admits, "took the lead" (A, 133).

And it is only in the context of modern painting's formal necessity that a poem like "The Red Wheelbarrow" makes aesthetic sense. From the moment Cézanne admitted his distrust in "mere appearance," the modern painter had defined the experience of form (that which lies beneath

⁸ "America, Whitman . . ." pp. 29–31.

or beyond superficial appearance) as the quintessential experience of the human mind.⁹ In a section of his landmark *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which Pound had insisted be translated for *Blast* in 1914, Wassily Kandinsky spoke of the painter's revelation of form as the manifestation of an "inner necessity."¹⁰ The power of this inner necessity was so profound for Kandinsky, and many others, that he would conclude that "the object harmed my paintings."¹¹ Pound had himself been interested in Kandinsky's formulation because the Imagist poem, as he defined it, recorded that "instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself . . . into a thing inward and subjective." Thus his outward "faces in the crowd" are visualized imaginatively as "petals on a wet, black bough."¹² Though Williams' "Wheelbarrow" bows in the direction of the mind in its opening stanza—"so much depends / upon"—it never gives us the *kind* of verbal image that the second, "petals" line of Pound's "Station" gives us. It would seem, in fact, that Williams willfully refuses to visualize the mind in verbal terms; instead he seems to concentrate almost exclusively on verbalizing only material reality.

This refusal has generated a good deal of confusion about and misreading of not only "The Red Wheelbarrow," but Williams' entire poetic achievement. It has caused a critic as sensible as J. Hillis Miller to speak of Williams giving up the "ego" in order to "leap into things."¹³ Even more typical are James Guimond's assertion that "The Red Wheelbarrow" marks the beginning of a "Radical Imagism" which is "characterized by its extremely stark presentation of commonplace objects" to the exclusion of "inner realities" and Robert Bly's similar sense that Williams deals "with outward things—but no inward life."¹⁴ Guimond's reading comes as something of a surprise, since he is dealing with Williams in terms of modern art, specifically the painting of Charles Sheeler and the photography of Walker Evans. But he has, I think, fallen victim to a general trend in art historical discussions of American Modernism which, ignoring the fact that most of the so-called

⁹ For a good summary of Cézanne's thinking on this issue see Werner Haftmann, *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Praeger, 1965), I, pp. 32–34.

¹⁰ Edward Wadsworth, "Inner Necessity," review of *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* by Wassily Kandinsky ["Containing excerpts from Kandinsky's text translated into English"], *Blast*, I (June 20, 1914), 119–25.

¹¹ *Reminiscences*, in *Modern Artists on Art*, ed. and trans. Robert L. Herbert (Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 32.

¹² *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (1916: rpt. New Directions, 1970), p. 89.

¹³ *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (1965; rpt. Atheneum, 1969), p. 287.

¹⁴ "After Imagism," *Ohio Review*, XV (Fall 1973), 5, and *Choice*, III (1963), 35. Guimond, incidentally, quotes Bly's statement in his article.

Cubo-Realist or Precisionist American painters (most of whom Williams numbered among his friends) began painting in a purely abstract or formal vein, sees the Americans' interest in objective reality as a "dilution" of the formal (and inner) necessity they had inherited from European Modernism. Abraham A. Davidson, for instance, argues that the Americans were "unable to reconcile themselves to or even understand the ambiguities which were at the heart of European Cubism. . . . What emerges . . . is an uncertain *mélange* of Cubist passages which are never completely digested or integrated . . . a style marked by severe simplifications."¹⁵ To the contrary, the Americans' return to the object, spurred on by a return to the object in the work of those Europeans who came to America during World War I, particularly Picabia and Duchamp, can be read more productively as the extension, rather than dilution, of European formal exploration.

None of the American painters with whom Williams associated—not even the photographers—considered their admittedly "stark presentation of commonplace objects" to be an end in itself. "Anything that the poet can effectively lift from its dull bed by force of imagination becomes his material. Anything," Williams wrote. "The commonplace, the tawdry, the sordid all have their poetic uses if the imagination can lighten them."¹⁶ The same could be said of the American artist generally, but the point is that the imagination must work upon the object if the object is to be of use: art uses "the banal to escape the banal," as Williams put it in 1939 (*SE*, 236), and it escapes the banal by discovering form. The photographer Paul Strand saw in the vitalization of both photography and architecture by the American modern an expression of "the very necessity of evolving a new form."¹⁷ Alfred Stieglitz, the photographer who can be considered mentor to this entire generation of American artists, claimed that the inspiration for his pivotal 1907 photograph *The Steerage* lay in the fact that he "saw shapes related to one another—a picture of shapes."¹⁸ In reviewing an exhibition of Greek art for *The Arts* in 1925, Charles Sheeler described a similar interest in the formal foundation of the "objectively" presented object: "[The] geometric basis [of Greek art] was the internal structure, skill-

¹⁵ "John Marin: A Dynamism Codified," *Artforum*, IX (April 1971), 37.

¹⁶ "A Note on Poetry," *Oxford Anthology of American Literature*, eds. William Rose Benét and Norman Holmes Pearson (Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 1313.

¹⁷ "Photography," *Camera Work*, 49/50 (June 1917), p. 4.

¹⁸ Quoted in Dorothy Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer* (Random House, 1973), p. 76.

fully concealed, around which was built the objective aspect of nature with all its sensorial attributes."¹⁹ And he would say later of his 1929 painting *Upper Deck*: "This is what I had been getting ready for. I had come to feel that a picture could have incorporated in it the structural design implied in abstraction and be presented in a wholly realistic manner."²⁰

There is probably no better, nor more concise, a definition of the American extension of European formal exploration than Sheeler's. A close friend, Williams probably knew Sheeler's thinking. Certainly he was familiar with the gist of the argument. He would choose, for instance, to lead off the October 1932 number of *Contact* with an article by the painter Hilaire Hiler which argues:

Post Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Rayonism, Vorticism, Futurism, dadaism and surrealism . . . all had one thing in common, and this meeting ground furnishes perhaps the best definition of the spirit of modernism. . . . The painter had become preoccupied, consciously or unconsciously, with painting for its own sake, with problems of color form and composition of and for themselves: he was only secondarily if at all interested in the representation of nature.²¹

Juan Gris was Williams' "favorite painter" for a time because Gris began his work in the abstract. As Gris had written: "I try to make concrete that which is abstract. . . . I consider that the architectural element in painting is mathematics, the abstract side; I want to humanize it."²² Echoing Gris, Williams would write in a review of Walker Evans' photography that "it is the particularization of the universal that is important."²³ It is the humanization of the abstract, through making the abstract concrete, making the universal particular, that Williams sees as the major contribution of American Modernism.

If European Modernism had defined the aesthetic experience to be the manifestation and revelation of formal design, then Williams and his American contemporaries accepted this definition as a starting point and extended it by asserting the necessity to reveal the aesthetic dimension implicit in the experience of even the most commonplace object. It

¹⁹ "Notes on an Exhibition of Greek Art," rpt. in National Collection of Fine Arts, *Charles Sheeler* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1968), p. 94.

²⁰ Quoted in *Charles Sheeler*, p. 143.

²¹ "A Painter Tries to Articulate," p. 10.

²² Statement for *L'Esprit Nouveau*, no. 5 (1921), rpt. in Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Juan Gris: His Life and Work*, trans. Douglas Cooper (1947; rev. Abrams, 1969), p. 193. Williams wrote to Kay Boyle in 1932: "Why do we not read more of Juan Gris? He knew these things in painting and wrote well of them" (SL: 130).

²³ "Sermon With a Camera," *New Republic*, XCVI (October 12, 1938), 282.

is not sufficient, in short, to see American Modernism as a direct treatment of, or leap into, things, for the thing only matters as art insofar as its formal—and hence aesthetic—dimension is simultaneously revealed. The poet Mina Loy, for instance, concluded an essay on Gertrude Stein's *Geography and Plays* by emphasizing the geometrical and mathematical basis of Modernism generally:

Modernism is a prophet crying in the wilderness of stabilized culture that humanity is wasting its aesthetic time. . . . The flux of life is pouring its aesthetic aspect into your eyes, your ears—and you ignore it *because you are looking for your canons of beauty in some sort of frame or glass case of tradition*. . . . Would not life be lovelier if you were constantly overjoyed by the sublimely pure concavity of your wash bowls? The tubular dynamics of your cigarettes?²⁴

When Duchamp defends his ready-made urinal in the 1917 *Blind Man* by saying that “the only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges,” he redefines the canons of beauty in precisely Loy's terms.²⁵ And as Hugh Kenner has pointed out, when read as a simple statement of fact—“so much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens”—anybody could justifiably call “The Red Wheelbarrow” trivial.²⁶ But as a poem—four stanzas, two lines to a stanza, two stresses in each stanza's first line, one stress in each second line—the scope of this trivial statement is enlarged. So much depends upon the *form* Williams molds his material into, not the material itself. In *Spring and All*, immediately following the poem, Williams makes the distinction between “The Red Wheelbarrow” as prose statement and “The Red Wheelbarrow” as poem clear:

The curriculum of knowledge cannot but be divided into the sciences, the thousand and one groups of data—scientific, philosophic, or whatnot. In description words adhere to certain objects and have the effect on the sense of oysters or barnacles. These things exist, but in a different condition when energized by the imagination. . . . If prose is not accurately adjusted to the exposition of the facts it does not exist. Poetry is something quite different. Poetry has to do with the crystallization of the imagination—the perfection of new forms. (*l*, 140)

“The Red Wheelbarrow” in fact defines its own aesthetic significance in our experience of it as one of these new forms.

From this point of view, the material which composes Williams'

²⁴ “Gertrude Stein,” *transatlantic review*, II (December 1924), 430. Williams contributed to this issue of the magazine.

²⁵ “The Richard Mutt Case,” 2 (May 1917), p. 5.

²⁶ Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (Knopf, 1975), pp. 58–60.

poem, material chosen from Williams' position as artist, begins to take on the aura of Duchamp's ready-mades. Duchamp had written that the aesthetic dimension of the urinal rested in the fact that he had taken "an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object."²⁷ Just as Duchamp revitalizes our aesthetic sense by placing a urinal in the context of the museum, Williams places his material in an equally strange environment—the poem—and the wheelbarrow's accidental but very material presence in this new context invests it with a new dignity. It is crucial that Williams' material is banal, trivial: by placing this material in the poem, Williams underscores the distance the material has traveled, and the poem defines a radical split between the world of art and the world of barnyards, between a world which crystallizes the imagination and a world which is a mere exposition of the facts. When Duchamp first submitted his urinal to the Independents Exhibition, he did so under the pseudonym of "Richard Mutt." No one had ever heard of Richard Mutt, and hence no one was particularly worried about the fact that the urinal was hidden behind a partition. When people learned, however, that Richard Mutt was in fact Marcel Duchamp, the urinal literally transformed itself into art overnight. Both Williams' and Duchamp's works testify to the artist's role as magus and seer, the ability of the artist to give a mundane thing magical presence and to reveal to our uninitiated eyes what we would otherwise pass over as trivial or chaotic. "The Red Wheelbarrow" and the urinal *Fountain* not only measure the distance between art and the world it denotes, but, as they establish the artist as measurer and his making as measurement, they assert the authority that artistic vision holds over our lives.

III

The poetics of Duchamp and Williams are founded upon the authority they ask us to grant their visions. They claim to occupy a space between imaginative invention which manifests itself as their own realization of formal design and material existence which presents itself as our own experience of the world's lack of design. Fundamental to the poetics of each is the double sense that we are, as audience, barred from occupying the space they define for themselves, and that they, as artists, have purposefully separated themselves from us.

²⁷ Duchamp, "Richard Mutt," p. 5.

Williams' best expression of this artistic isolation is probably found in his treatment of Edgar Allan Poe in *In the American Grain*:

His greatness is in that he turned his back and faced inland, to originality, with the identical gesture of a Boone.

And for that reason he is unrecognized. . . . Poe must suffer by his originality. Invent that which is new, even if it be made of pine from your own yard, and there's none to know what you have done. It is because there's no name. This is the cause of Poe's lack of recognition. He was American. He was the astounding, inconceivable growth of his locality. Gape at him they did, and he at them in amazement. Afterward with mutual hatred; he in disgust, they in mistrust. It is only that which is under your nose which seems inexplicable. (*IAG*, 226)

Williams' desire to discover a "new measure" is a gesture identical to both Boone's and Poe's. For what his "new measure" would lack for many years was a name, and when he finally named it the "variable foot" in the midfifties, he could not satisfactorily explain it. For that reason, most of us still mistrust his poetics. Williams' reputation has suffered, I think, by virtue of his originality.

By his own testimony, Williams discovered his new measure in the portion of the third section of *Paterson II* which he would later publish separately as "The Descent":

Several years afterward in looking over the thing I realized I had hit upon a device (that is the practical focus of a device) which I could not name when I wrote it. My dissatisfaction with free verse came to a head in that I always wanted a verse that was ordered, so it came to me that the concept of the foot itself would have to be altered in our new relativistic world. It took me several years to get the concept clear. I had a feeling that there was somewhere an exact way to define it; the task was to find the word to describe it, to give it an epitaph, and I finally hit upon it. The foot not being fixed is only to be described as variable. If the foot itself is variable it allows order in so-called free verse. Thus the verse becomes not free at all but just simply variable, as all things in life properly are.²⁸

Occurring in *Paterson* in the context of Williams' growing despair over the possibility of ever breaking that ice away which blocks the advent of the "springtime" to which his poem aspires, the argument of "The Descent" is simply that in the descent which is despair the poet suddenly

realizes a new awakening:
which is a reversal
of despair. (*P*, 78)

²⁸ *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*, ed. Edith Heal (Beacon Press, 1958), p.82.

The third section of *Paterson* II in fact marks a reversal in the direction of the poem itself. Where the poet had heretofore sought to discover a *language* in the falls, he now admits that there is "no syllable in the confused / uproar" (*P*, 81), and that he is indeed "tongue-tied" in his effort to translate or communicate the falls' roar. The section ends with the poet more interested in form than words: "he sees, in the structure, something / of interest" (*P*, 85). From this moment on, Williams gives up trying to express the river in *words* and begins to express it as an imaginative *form*.

The sources of this shift are as enigmatic as they are complicated. Certainly the revelation of formal order in "The Red Wheelbarrow" demonstrates Williams' ability to articulate an imaginative presence which is at least as non-verbal as the falls. As expressive objects in the world, however, the falls, and more generally the river, are in a state of flux and change that is antipathetic to a wheelbarrow's stolid presence. The formal order Williams discovered in "The Red Wheelbarrow" was, in fact, so limited that he used it effectively only one more time, in the poem "Between Walls," written in the thirties. And it is, in part, Williams' inability or unwillingness to repeat the precise gesture of "The Red Wheelbarrow" that helps us to think of the poem in terms of the ready-made. Both the poem and the *Fountain* reflect a kind of chance encounter that is largely unrepeatable, and for that reason Williams' "Wheelbarrow" is as unique and startling an experience in the context of modern poetry as Duchamp's *Fountain* is in the context of modern art. What Williams needed to discover, and what until "The Descent" he had despaired of ever discovering, was not only a formal order capable of admitting into itself the flux and change of something like a river—to say nothing of the diversity of the American idiom—but also one which would not deny, in its repetition over the course of a long poem like *Paterson*, the sense of chance and surprise we encounter in the ready-made.

In both the *Large Glass* and the preliminary works which he later incorporated into it, Duchamp had discovered a way of admitting flux and change, chance and surprise, into the work of art that is strikingly similar to Williams' discovery in "The Descent." One of Duchamp's early projects for the *Glass* was a work called *3 stoppages étalon* (1913–14), an assemblage of three different "meter-sticks" fitted in a wooden box, each shaped along one edge to match the curve of a meter-long thread dropped three successive times onto a canvas from a height of one meter. Duchamp continued the theme in his 1914 canvas *Réseaux des stoppages*, in which nine curved lines, drawn using each of

the 3 *stoppages étalon* three times, are superimposed upon an unfinished and enlarged version of his 1911 *Young Man and Girl in Spring*. This "network" of *stoppages* would eventually find its way into the *Large Glass* as "the Capillary Tubes."²⁹ In a note included in *The Box of 1914*, the original of which was given to Walter Arensberg in 1915, Duchamp explains his interest in the *stoppages*:

the Idea of Fabrication

----- If a ^{horizontal} straight thread one meter long falls

from a height of one meter on to a horizontal plane
twisting as it pleases and creates
a new image of the unit of
length. -----

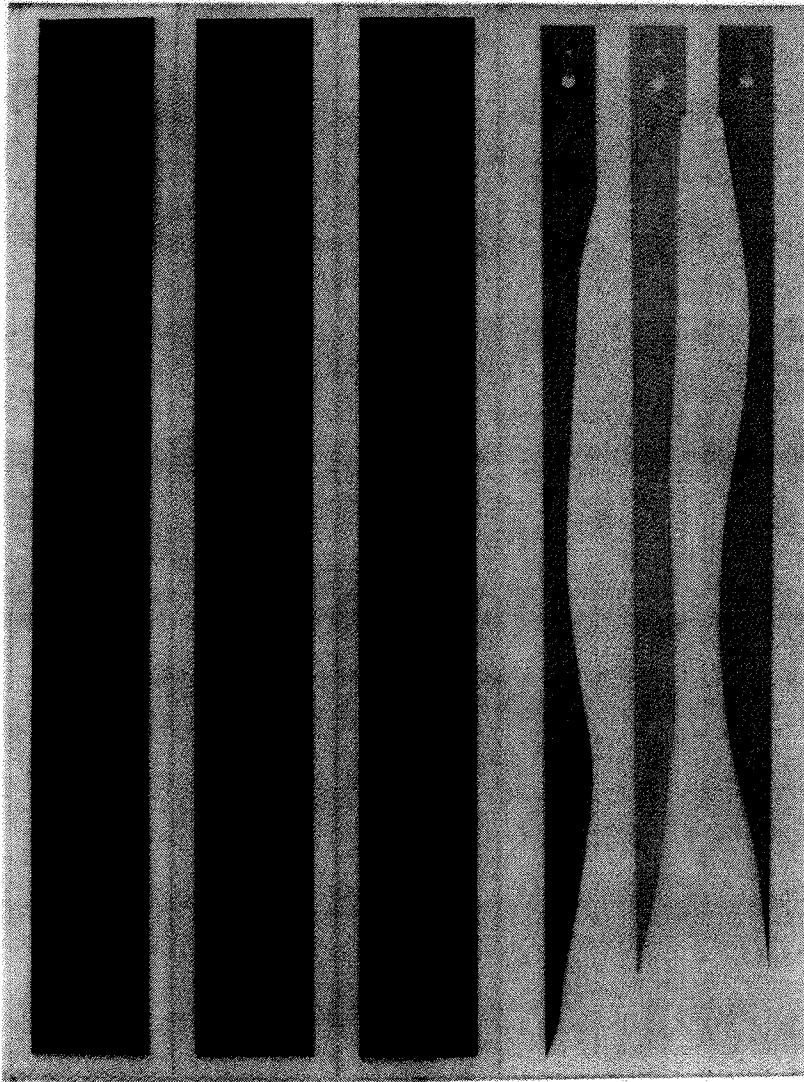
----- 3 samples obtained in more or less
similar conditions.

: considered in their relation to one another
they are an APPROXIMATE reconstitution of
the unit of length. (Notes and Projects, p. 150)

It was at Arensberg's studio that Williams first saw the *Large Glass*, and it is certainly possible that he saw this note in the course of one of his visits there. During these years he also met frequently with Man Ray, Duchamp's protégé, at Ray's shack in Ridgefield, New Jersey, about a mile from Williams' home, and it is certainly possible that Ray explained the *stoppages* to him.³⁰ It was, at any rate, in the late teens that Williams first began speaking of the necessity for creating "a new verse form," on the one hand "simple and single" and on the other "capable of every form of moulding." The simplicity and versatility of Duchamp's *stoppages* are an example of the kind of form Williams envisioned for poetry. The *stoppages* are in fact a version of the ready-made which overcomes the "simple and single" limitations endemic to the experience of a "Wheelbarrow" or a *Fountain*: they define the discovery and revelation of measure in terms of flux and change, chance and surprise. And finally, as the title to Duchamp's note implies, they assert that "*The Idea of Fabrication*"—that is, the idea of making—rests in measure itself.

²⁹ Detailed descriptions of each of these works can be found in Marcel Duchamp, ed. Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (Museum of Modern Art, 1973), pp. 272-274.

³⁰ See "Interview with Man Ray," in *New York Dada: Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia*, ed. Arturo Schwarz (München: Städtischen Galerie im Lenbachhaus, 1973), pp. 85-87.

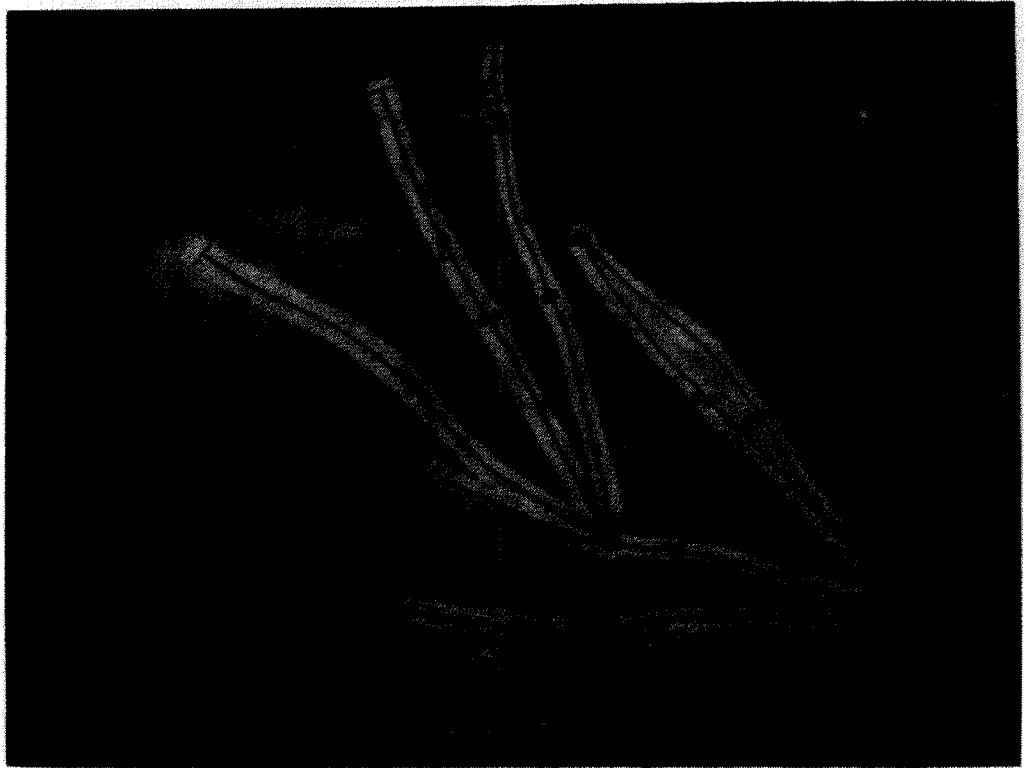


Marcel Duchamp, *3 Stoppages Étalon* (1913–14). Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Katherine S. Dreier Bequest.

After the French left New York at the end of World War I, and after his own visit to Paris in the midtwenties, Williams paid less and less attention to the example of French artists like Duchamp. But when the French returned to New York with the outbreak of World War II, they reasserted themselves as a force in the American art world which Williams could not afford to ignore. The young Robert Motherwell asked Williams to co-edit, with André Breton, the surrealist magazine *VVV*. Williams refused, but even the magazine with which he was perhaps most closely associated, Charles Henri Ford's and Parker Tyler's *View*, dedicated most of its energies to the Surrealist experiment. *View's* efforts were highlighted by a special number dedicated to the work of Duchamp, who had remained, through the years, both the spiritual and theoretical master of French Modernism. This was the first comprehensive assessment of Duchamp's work ever undertaken, and almost every critical study in the number emphasizes the centrality of the *stoppages* and related works to Duchamp's aesthetic.³¹ André Breton defines them

³¹ *View*, V (March 1945). Subsequent page references cite this number. The articles I cite are specifically: André Breton, "Lighthouse of the Bride"; Gabrielle Buffet, "Magic Circles"; and Harriet and Sidney Janis, "Marcel Duchamp: Anti-Artist."

Marcel Duchamp, *Network of Stoppages* (1914).
Collection, The
Museum of Modern
Art, New York. Abby
Aldrich Rockefeller
Fund and gift of Mrs.
William Sisler.



as an example of both Duchamp's originality—an originality, incidentally, which he specifically likens to Poe's—and his willingness to work on "the frontiers . . . of the most recent data of science," namely the theory of relativity (7–8). In her own explanation of the *stoppages*, Gabrielle Buffet notes that they define, in a gesture that seems to me related to Williams' refusal to verbally image the mind in "The Red Wheelbarrow," a refusal to "represent" the mind in art, and that they posit, instead, the revelation of *form* as an alternative to representation. It is this emphasis on form, she says, that explains the proposal Duchamp had published in his 1934 set of notes to the *Glass*, *The Green Box*: "take a Larousse encyclopedia and copy out all the abstract words, those which have no concrete reference, and compose a schematic sign which will designate each of these words" (16). And Harriet and Sidney Janis, translating Duchamp's note on "*Fabrication*" for themselves, see the *stoppages* as one of Duchamp's most important works, for in them "he arrives at 'a new unit of measure'" (53).

The thematic concerns of the *Large Glass*, as defined by the *View* articles, are also parallel to Williams' own. *Paterson* constantly returns to the theme of divorce, the separation of man from his world as epitomized by the separation of man from woman. It is, in fact, divorce which "blocks" the poem's fulfillment in "springtime." In the *Glass*, bride and bachelors are forever relegated to separate domains, defined by the section of glass in which they find themselves. The sterility and

impotence of this separation is heightened by Duchamp's ironic depiction of the bride and her bachelors as machine parts, a depiction of human intercourse drained of meaning by industrial society. As early as *In the American Grain*, Williams had attributed the lack of contact between man and woman, man and his world, to the machine's implicit puritanism:

Deanimated, that's the word; something the sound of "metronome," a mechanical means; Yankee inventions. Machines were not so much to save time as to save dignity that fears the animate touch. It is miraculous the energy that goes into inventions here. Do you know that it now takes just ten minutes to put a bushel of wheat on the market from planting to selling, whereas it took three hours in our colonial days? That's striking. It must have been a tremendous force that would do that. That force is fear that robs the emotions; a mechanism to increase the gap between touch and thing, *not* to have a contact. (*IAG*, 177)

Breton describes the *Glass* as "a mechanistic and cynical interpretation of the phenomenon of love" (9), and Harriet and Sidney Janis insist that it describes a world in which "the human operates like a machine and resembles a machine" (23). For both Duchamp and Williams, art must work to defeat this mechanical fear and trembling.

For the same reason that Williams descends into industrial Paterson, Duchamp descends into a world of mechanized and unfulfilled love: both see in the *descent* the promise of subsequent *ascent*. Breton ends his *View* article on Duchamp by citing a note from the *Green Box* in which Duchamp had written: "On the coupling of these two appearances of pure virginity, on their collision, all the blossoming depends, the higher whole and crown of the composition" (13). This is precisely the reconciliation Williams seeks, that flowering and marriage which he most successfully realizes in the late "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" (a poem, not coincidentally, written entirely in Williams' "new measure"). But in the *Glass*, Duchamp denies the bride and her bachelors their promised coupling. For this reason, Breton says, Duchamp chose to call the work a "delay in glass," and it is this sense of delay by which the *Glass* "manages to keep its power of anticipation" (13). For Williams, on the other hand, it is this delay—the fact that anticipation remains unfulfilled—that defines "The Descent":

For what we cannot accomplish, what
is denied to love,
what we have lost in the anticipation—
a descent follows (*P*, 79)

The poem takes up the things that Williams had forgotten. Through "memory" he sees a promise which was "heretofore unrealized" in the

"objectives" which "formerly . . . were abandoned" (P, 78). Now he sees that it is only when "love awakens" that "the ascent" follows (P, 78). The work that Duchamp's *delay* had abandoned, *Paterson* takes up again.

IV

Williams never knew it—no one did—but Marcel Duchamp had begun to work his *delay* towards completion at about the same time as Williams himself had begun to write *Paterson*. This "completion" of the *Glass*, which preoccupied Duchamp for his last twenty years as he secretly constructed it in New York, was called *Etant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage*. Inspired by the "Preface" to the *Green Box*, it is a realist response or counterstatement to the abstraction of the *Glass*. *Etant donnés* is in fact the landscape projected by Duchamp's *Glass*, an imaginative realization of the *Glass*'s implicit demand that we see something through its window and come to know that landscape for ourselves. *Etant donnés* represents, as Duchamp says in his "Preface," the realization of "a choice of possibilities" (*Notes and Projects*, p. 182). And by acting on that choice, fulfilling its abstract projection in objective terms, he makes it his own with an irony perhaps unsurpassed by any other twentieth-century work. We are allowed access to his vision by virtue of a knothole in a permanently closed door, a knothole which opens our own vision to the possibility of approaching Duchamp's bride as she lies spread-eagled before us in the landscape of the waterfall. But because we can never enter that door, we are denied the possibility. *Etant donnés* blocks us from access to the creative—and erotic—space it defines. It mocks our impotence, reduces us to voyeurs. And it establishes the authority—and desirability—of Duchamp's creative act: Duchamp has known intimately what we can only see. Knowing (the artist's domain) and seeing (the audience's) are of different orders altogether.

In this sense Duchamp defines art in terms of *delay* awaiting the completion of active response, and this is in many ways an almost perfect description of Williams' definition of art in *Paterson* V. For Book V is itself a response to "the *delay*" of Books I–IV, an admission on Williams' part that the poem had not been finished but had arrived only at a "state of incompleteness." Book V's theme—art and the survival of art—likewise defines Williams' artistic heritage, from medieval tapestries to Dada, in terms of Williams' own ability and willingness to actively respond to that heritage. The art he describes is "new born! / among the words" (P, 226). As he remakes tapestries and paintings into

poems, he defines art, his own and others', as a kind of delay or dormancy which, if it ever is to reawaken, wakens and necessitates response.

It is the "new measure" which dominates Williams' response, his remaking of art into poetry—not only in *Paterson V* but in the "Pictures from Brueghel" series as well—and it is his discovery of the "new measure" which makes his remaking possible. Like Duchamp's *stoppages*, the "new measure" admits chance and surprise into the world of measurement: its flexibility accommodates the singularity of Williams' imaginative purpose—the revelation of design—to the multiplicity of its world. In a note to the *Green Box* entitled *le Réseau des stoppages étalon*, Duchamp writes that his sign for the imagination, *le gaz d'éclairage*, "finds itself" by means of "the phenomenon of stretching in the unit of length," and he adds that "in the case of stretching, the unit of length is variable" (*Notes and Projects*, p. 154). The imagination is not static; its manifestation in a work of art must be through a design capable, as Williams puts it, "of every form of moulding." Williams' "variable foot" frees the imagination to find itself again and again in its encounters with a relativistic world. It provides, furthermore, as its usually triadic pattern repeats itself again and again, a *visual* record of that imaginative vision's consistent presence.

Perhaps because he believed that the variable foot captured the relative rhythms of the American idiom, when Williams first began to define his "new measure" he insisted that it could be *heard* as well as seen. In his 1948 "The Poem as Field of Action," for instance, he insists that the "new measure" originates in "what we *hear* in America" (*SE*, 290). He reiterates this thinking in a 1954 letter to Richard Eberhart, declaring that it is the "music in our ears" which the new measure captures (*SL*, 326). On the other hand, in *The Box of 1914*, Duchamp had warned that "One can see seeing; one cannot hear hearing."³² And the letter to Eberhart ends with an important qualification: "You may not agree with my ear," Williams writes, "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" (*SL*, 327). Williams is admitting that one can "hear" his measure only by virtue of its *visual* pattern, and further that what he "hears" others might not. By late in his career he had come to ignore the aural side of his measure almost wholly. He heartily agreed with interviewer Stanley Koehler's description of "The Descent" as "something

³² See the epigraph to this paper.

for the eye."³³ And he told Walter Sutton: "As I've grown older, I've attempted to fuse the poetry and painting to make it the same thing. . . . I don't care whether it's representational or not. But to give a design. A design in the poem and a design in the picture should make them more or less the same thing. . . . Music doesn't mean much to me. . . . Painting is much more my meat."³⁴ Williams' "new measure," then, is a *visual* measure, a design in space. It is a concrete *sign* for the imagination in which, like Duchamp's desire to compose a concrete sign for all the abstract words in the Larousse, Williams takes the abstract side of experience, the imagination which has no concrete reference, and composes a schematic sign which designates it. Notably, each line is itself a kind of delay, awaiting its completion in the next. And only when the lines are considered as a visual experience *in relation* to one another, does this design manifest itself.

This interest in the *visual* foundation of his poetic vision explains Williams' thematic interest in the visual arts in his later poetry. As the visual design of the "new measure" pays what Williams calls "Tribute to the Painters,"³⁵ it defines the basis of the creative act as measurement itself and the revelation of design through measure:

and there came to me
just now
the knowledge of
the tyranny of the image
and how
men
in their designs
have learned
to shatter it
whatever it may be,
that the trouble
in their minds
shall be quieted,
put to bed
again. (PB, 137)

³³ "The Art of Poetry," interview conducted in April 1962, *The Paris Review*, XXXII (Summer-Fall 1964), 120.

³⁴ "A Visit With William Carlos Williams," *Minnesota Review*, I (Spring 1961), 321-22.

³⁵ Williams' "Tribute to the Painters" can be found in *Paterson*, 221-224. When Williams gave these lines their title and published the poem in *Pictures from Brueghel*, he added the lines which I quote here to the end of the poem. Examination of the manuscripts indicates, however, that all early drafts of the "Tribute" section contain these lines. Williams chose to omit them in *Paterson* itself, perhaps because their argument is already implicit in the poem.

In the face of material reality's almost suffocating multiplicity, "The measure intervenes," Williams writes at the end of *Paterson V*, "to measure is all we know, / a choice among measures" (P, 239). To assume that we "know nothing," he continues, is to deny the imagination and to dedicate one's life, like the Duchamp he saw idling in his New York garret, to a

chess game
massively, "materially," compounded! (P, 239)

This is *Paterson's* concluding jibe, often assumed to refer to Eliot's "Game of Chess," but more likely an attack leveled at Duchamp, the man who had seemingly given up art for chess, even organized exhibitions of chess sets for New York galleries which implied that art was in fact little more than a kind of "chess game," a choice among moves in a material—and highly artificial—"world."

But what Williams ignores is that in a chess game one can see, as the moves develop in relation to one another, *knowing*, the player's imaginative intelligence at work. Duchamp's aphorism—"on peut voir voir; on ne peut pas entendre entendre"—is a complicated pun which points to the idea that only through the *visual* do we ever come to know knowing. "Entendre" not only means "hearing," but "knowing" as well: the idea that one cannot know knowing can be read as Duchamp's rationale for "giving up" art, or it can be taken, more productively, as a bold statement of artistic authority, a definition of the special space the creative artist establishes for his imaginative vision. And "voir" can also mean "knowing" in the same way that we ask "Do you see?" when we want to know if someone understands us. If it is true that "on ne peut pas entendre entendre," it is perfectly possible that "on peut voir entendre." Likewise, since we can never quite hear Williams' hearing in his new measure, we can either dismiss his hearing as a retreat from measure altogether, or, again more productively, accept it as an assertion of Williams' own imaginative authority, the hearing *and* knowledge of which we can only see. From Williams' point of view, Duchamp had abdicated his responsibility: he had failed to make a "choice" among the "possibilities" he had himself defined in the *Glass*; he had failed to make "a choice among measures" which would allow us to see what he *knew*. *Etant donnés* proved Williams wrong, but in taking up Duchamp's challenge and realizing in his own terms the landscape of the waterfall, Williams solidified his position as an aesthetic theorist and artistic innovator in every way Duchamp's equal. It is no accident that the two of them would assert so much influence on the American painters and poets of the succeeding generation.