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

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

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

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

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

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

and we degraded prisoners
destined
to hunger until we eat filth

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

the stifling heat of September
Somehow
it seems to destroy us

It is only in isolate flecks that
something
is given off

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

You can find here ground that Bronk and Creeley mined.

And Olson.

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

MARJORIE PERLOFF

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

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

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

The Nightingales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original version</th>
<th>Revised version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My shoes as I lean unlace them stand out upon flat worsted flowers under my feet.</td>
<td>My shoes as I lean unlace them stand out upon flat worsted flowers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nimbly the shadows of my fingers play unlace over shoes and flowers.</td>
<td>Nimbly the shadows of my fingers play unlace over shoes and flowers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

"To Give a Design"

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

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

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


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


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

What, then, is the difference that so excites Williams: The look, of course. ("See how much better it conforms to the page, how much better it looks?"). The verse of "The Nightingales" is not, Williams would have it, "free" because its look on the page is that of two symmetrical units; indeed, in the revised version, we see two quatrains, almost square in shape. This symmetrical form provides stability against which the words of the little poem push and jostle, just as in, say, an Elizabethan sonnet, the actual rhythm is played off against the chosen metrical base and rhyme scheme.

The visual shape also directs our attention to particular words and the relationships between them. "My shoes," for example, does not get a line to itself because it is not, in fact, the subject of the poem; rather, the emphasis is on what happens when something—"unlacing"—is done to them as the poet "leans" in their direction. "Lean" and "unlacing" share the letters 1 and n: the act "stands out" visually as well as semantically in juxtaposition to the longer line "flat worsted flowers," with its repetition of fl and t and the chiasmus of wo–ow. In the second stanza, expectation is again raised and deferred. "Nimbly the shadows" must wait for the second line and in turn the third and fourth before we understand what it is that is happening. "Unlacing" gets a line all to itself because it is the key word, and the unlacing now takes on a different meaning as the play of shadows takes precedence over the act. Indeed, the "shoes" previously "stand[ing] out upon/ flat worsted flowers" now become equalized with them. In the imaginative metamorphosis of the poem, the shadows of the poet's fingers become birds—the nightingales of the title—flying through space. Accordingly, the second reference to "flowers," which corresponds visually to the first, no longer means the same thing. The look of the poem on the page thus creates a play of sameness and difference, identity and change.

I do not mean to imply that sound plays no part in this pattern or that the poem is to be perceived instantaneously as a "spatial form." Clearly, the words must be perceived in time as our eye moves from line to line; just as clearly, the visual arrangement foregrounds certain sounds—for example, the voiced spirant endings in shoes, as, flowers, fingers, shoes, flowers (7 of the 25 words or almost one-third); or the three nasals in a vertical row at
line endings in the first quatrain: lean, them, upon. All the same, these are, in Hugh Kenner's words, "stanzas you can't quite hear," in that sentence rhythm (one declarative sentence per stanza) overrides all line endings and that there is no marked rhythm to oppose its forward push. Rather, "The Nightingales" is written in what Kenner calls "stanzas to see"; indeed, they could not have existed prior to the invention of the typewriter, an invention that made it possible for the poet to compose directly for the printed page with no intermediary process of transposition.

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

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast
Forgive me,
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


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

And Mariani quotes the four lines of the poem.

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

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

II

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

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

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


For Pound, the line as unit, composed “in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome,” was to remain the basic building block of poetry; his are, moreover, lines to be heard as well as seen, their rhythm being highly pronounced and frequently repeated with delicate variations in successive lines:

\[
\text{Ear, ear for the sea-surge;}
\]
\[
\text{rattle of old men’s voices.}
\]
\[
\text{And then the phantom Rome,
marble narrow for seats...} \quad \text{(Canto VII)}^{16}
\]

Williams’ free verse is of a different order. Having begun with Poundian line units:

\[
\text{O crimson salamander,
Because of love’s whim}
\]
\[
\text{sacred!} \quad \text{(CEP, p. 23)}
\]

he soon shifts to a syntax that purposely goes against the line, blocking its integrity. The single line heard as musical phrase is replaced by the set of lines as “suspension system,”\(^1\)

\[
\text{7 whose guiding principle is the syntactic opening or cut that decomposes}
\]
\[
\text{sentences and recombines words into new structures.}
\]

In *The Egoist* of 15 August 1914, for example, Williams published nine poems, only three of which (“My townspeople, beyond in the great world” later titled “Gulls,” “In Harbour” and “The Revelation”) he later chose to reprint. Most of the rejected poems are again written in imitation of Pound: for example, “Rendezvous,” which begins:

\[
\text{My song! It is time!}
\]
\[
\text{Wilder! Bolder! Spread the arms!}
\]
\[
\text{Have done with finger pointing.}^{18}
\]

Others bring to mind the Imagist lyrics of Richard Aldington or John Gould Fletcher:

\[
\text{Slowly rising, slowly strengthening moon,
Pardon us our fear in pride:}
\]
\[
\text{Pardon us our troubled quietnesses!}
\]

But the final poem in the selection, “The Revelation,” which Williams was to reprint in *Collected Poems 1921-1931*, contains what are probably the first intimations of Williams’ own prosody.

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\(^{17}\) The phrase is Hugh Kenner’s: see *A Homemade World*, p. 59.  
\(^{18}\) *The Egoist*, 16, no. 1 (1914): 307-308.
By 1916, a vintage year in which Williams published twenty-two poems in *Others* and six in *Poetry*, he had mastered this cutting technique. It is interesting, in this connection, to compare Williams' own poems of 1916 to the free-verse poems included in the July issue of *Others*, which Williams edited. The issue opens with Marianne Moore's "Critics and Connoisseurs," a poem designed, like those of Williams, to be seen rather than heard, its intricate symmetrical stanzas created by complex typographical and syllable-counting rules. The volume ends with Pound's Fenollosa's poem "To-Em-Mei's 'The Unmoving Cloud'," in which almost every line is a subject-verb-object unit, complete in itself, rhythmic units recurring with delicate variation:

I step in my room toward the East, quiet, quiet,
I pat my new cask of wine.
My friends are estranged, or far distant....  

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

1. Helen Hoyt, "Damask"

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

   (Others, p. 10)

2. Conrad Aiken, "Illusions"

   Green fingers lifting a pebble,
   green fingers uncurling...
   earth slipping from old roots...
   white petals in the sun...
   brown chimney pots...

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

(3) Williams, "Love Song":

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

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

Green fingers lifting a pebble
green fingers uncurling...
earth slipping from old roots...
white petals in the sun...
brown chimney pots...

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

Hoyt, on participial modifiers:

Born of whiteness
Growing in your smooth atmosphere
Dimmed again...

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

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

I lie here thinking of you:—

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

the stain of love
is upon the world!

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

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

the horned branches that lean
heavily
against a smooth purple sky!

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

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

you far off there under
the wine-red salvia of the west!

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

shy, uncorseted tucking in
where the separation of the verb from its object (“stray ends of hair”) makes us expect a reference to one usually tucks into a corset. The next line produces even greater surprise:

stray ends of hair, and I compare her
To what, we wonder?

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

The noiseless wheels of my car
rush with a crackling sound over,
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling.

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

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III

How did the poet of The Tempers (1913)—
Lady of dusk-wood fastnesses
Thou art my Lady—

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Waiting
for the water to freshen—
I glance at the spotless floor—:
a pair of rubber sandals
lie side by side
under the wall-table
all in order for the night... (CEP, p. 145)

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

Crisped green.

Marjorie Perloff

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

Under the wall-table

As in Picabia’s Ici C’est Ici Steiglitz, ordinary objects are granted a curious sexual power.

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

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

IV

I have been suggesting that Al Que Quierc is Williams’ first significant tribute to the printed page as poetic unit; its poems embody the recognition, not shared by many of Williams’ contemporaries, that a poem is “a small machine made of words” (SE, p. 256), a verbal text to be seen at least as much as to be heard. Steiglitz’s photographs, The Aeroplane and The Dirigible, had appeared in Camera Work as early as 1911, and Picabia’s machine
drawings as well as Duchamp’s readymades surely helped to bring the lesson home: the typographical lay-out of the page was not a sideline, some sort of secondary support structure, but a central fact of poetic discourse. Once this basic premise is understood, Williams’ later prosodies become much easier to comprehend. Let me comment briefly on three developments in William’s poetry.

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

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

*(CEF, p. 343)*

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

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

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

```
of the...
will grow lie...
in which shine...
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*31. See *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, Chapter Three, passim.*

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

```
the back wings
of the
will grow lie
cinders
```

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

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

2

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

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

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

*32. Letter of May 25, 1948; see *Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, p. 266.
an elastic inch. \(^{35}\) It has been argued, most recently by Charles O. Hartman, that the three-line units of the triad are isochronous. Here Hartman is following Williams himself, who explained his "new measure" to Richard Eberhart with the following example:

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

(average example)

(i) The smell of the heat is boxwood
(ii) when rousing us
(iii) a movement of the air

(iv) stirs our thoughts
(v) that had no life in them
(vi) to a life, a life in which

(or)

(i) Mother of God! Our Lady!
(ii) the heart

(iii) is an unruly master:

(iv) Forgive us our sins
(v) as we

(vi) forgive

(vii) those who have sinned against

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

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

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


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

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

So to know, what I have to know
about my own death
if it be real

I have to take it apart.
What does your generation think
Of Cézanne?

I asked a young artist.
The abstractions of Hindu painting,
he replied,
is all at the moment which interests me.

He liked my poem
about the parts
of a broken bottle,
lying green in the cinders
of a hospital courtyard.

There was also, to his mind,
the one on gay wallpaper
which he had heard about
but not read.

I was grateful to him
for his interest. (PB, pp. 162-163)

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

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

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

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

And in the same year, to Horace Gregory:

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

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

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

> Let it rot, at my center.
> Whose center?
> I stand and surpass
> youth’s lesserness.

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38 See, for example, Walter Peterson, *An Approach to Paterson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), passim.
40 *A Homemade World*, p. 60.
escape from all human contact. The intrusion of the free-verse passage:

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

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

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

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


42. Cf. Eleanor Berry, "Williams' Development Of A New Prosodic Form—Not The 'Vari-
able Foot', But The Sight-Stanza," William Carlos Williams Review, 7, no. 2 (Fall 1981);
Berry writes: "The sense of regularity, sometimes, indeed, monotonous, that is induced
by Williams' triadic-line verse would seem to be due to the fact that the intervals be-
betweenthe prominent syllables of successive intonational units in spoken English tend
to be perceived as equal." As I have argued above, I question the isochrony of the three
the collage-structure of *Paterson* would not have been possible without the Cubist or Dada model. Indeed, I would posit that when Williams exchanged this particular visual paradigm for the simple numerical grid of the geometr, as he was to do in the steptris of his last decade, he denied himself the possibility of the play that makes poems of his middle years like “Between Walls” and “The Gay Wallpaper” so remarkable. The prosodic trick was to de-center, or, as Williams put it in “The Attic Which Is Desire”:

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

(CEP, p. 353)

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DIANA COLLECOTT SURMAN

**TOWARDS THE CRYSTAL:**
**ART AND SCIENCE IN WILLIAMS’ POETIC**

1. *To make a start...*

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

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

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

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