The act of seeing: poem, image and the work of William Carlos Williams

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Abstract

Williams' poetry is greatly influenced by the visual arts. The foundations of his technique were laid in the 1910s when he came in contact with the European revolution in art. He wanted to create a poetry local to America and drew inspiration from painters such as Juan Gris and Cezanne whose techniques he tried to apply to words.

His interest in painting led him to attend to the nature of vision in his writing; by scrutinising the quality of his sensory perception - particularly his vision - he hoped to discover the unique, indigenous features of his environment. At the same time, he wanted to open his poetry to the reader so that the discovery could be shared. He thought of a poem as a newly-created object that the reader would perceive like any other object. In order to incite the reader's live perceptions, he made poems that are informed by their visual effect upon the page: the pattern of a poem's layout or lineation which the reader sees actively contributes to what the poem may come to mean.

In Paterson Williams experimented with a variety of visual effects, but the reader's engagement with the look of the page is hampered by Williams' need to impress the reader with his argument: the argument distracts from the reader's perception of the text. In his last poems, however, Williams' technique allows the reader to approach the poet's thought through the perception of the text. Sight is important to these poems since it both reveals the local environment to the poet, and simultaneously seems to embody it as no form of conceptual thinking can. By perception, the poet - and so the reader - is able to discover the world, for he senses that, each moment, it can be seen afresh.

Contents

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Abbreviations

Throughout the text I have referred to Williams' works by means of abbreviations. Other abbreviated references are cited in the footnotes to the chapters in which the works in question first appear. Full bibliographic details of Williams' works mentioned in the text are given in the "List of Sources Consulted" at the end.

A	The Autobiography
CEP	The Collected Earlier Poems
CLP	The Collected Later Poems
EK	The Embodiment of Knowledge
TFD	The Farmer's Daughters
I	Imaginations
IAG	In the American Grain
IWWP	I Wanted to Write a Poem
P	Paterson
PB	Pictures from Brueghel
RI	A Recognizable Image
SE	Selected Essays
SL	Selected Letters
VP	A Voyage to Pagany

"Speech is the sound of thought;
writing is the image of thought."
— Liu Hsich (c465 - c522).

"Instead of postulating that the brain constructs information from the input of a sensory nerve, we can suppose that the centers of the nervous system, including the brain, resonate to information."
— J.J.Gibson.

Introduction

In his Author's Introduction to the Collected Later Poems Williams wrote: 'It isn't what [a poet] says that counts as a work of art, it's what he makes' (CLP 5). This thesis is an attempt to elaborate upon the distinction between 'saying' and 'making'. I have tried to show how the 'making' of a poem replaced for Williams the romantic idea of the poet as the 'sayer' of profound truths. As a result I have generally tried to avoid analysing what may be a poem's 'meaning' and instead have focussed on the ways in which a written work - the 'made' object on the page - can both imply and provoke perceptions.

Williams thought of the poet's role as that of a 'maker' of poems which would draw as much from the occasion of reading as from the poet's past experience. For Williams the poet does not 'say' what he perceives so much as 'make' a verbal object which the reader in turn perceives: thus the reader does not learn from what the poet reports but discovers as he or she reads a world that the poet cherishes. As much as a sensitive perceptive author a poem requires a sensitive perceptive reader.

Throughout his life Williams closely associated with painters and himself 'might easily have become a painter' (IWWP 15). Consequently his technique in 'making' poems often resembles that of contemporary painters in 'making' paintings. The painterly aspects of his work, and the way he attends to and evokes visual perceptions, are my concern. 'Eyes', he wrote in a letter to Louis Zukofsky, 'have always stood first in the poet's equipment' (SL 101).

In particular I have tried to look at the process of a poem itself, how it reflects the poet's way of seeing and more especially

how the poem on the page is perceived as it is read - how it appears to 'make' itself as the reader reads. In common with a number of writers and painters in the first decades of this century, Williams sought to alter the relationship between writer, reader and text. The text should not mediate between writer and reader by transferring the thought of the one to the other; writer and reader, he felt, should share an equality. In the 1910s he began to construct texts in which the reader's perception is parallel to, rather than a reflection of, the immediacy with which the poet perceives his own world. As Williams wrote at the opening of Spring and All, 'We are one. Whenever I say, "I" I mean also, "you"' (SA 89). The text becomes a third term between poet and reader, an autonomous creation which is intended to stir curiosity in a reader quite as much as experience has done in the poet who 'makes' it. If the poem impresses the reader it is due to the excitement of the reading experience itself rather than from the authority of what the poet 'says' about events outside the poem's occasion.

There is, however, an obvious dilemma in trying to look at what occurs as a poem is read: if the poet is concerned to let the reader discover a significance to his words in the process of reading then exegesis is more than ever redundant. Whilst it is possible to trace the influences on Williams' poetry of various painters and their ways of seeing, it is not possible by analytical means to approach the excited experience - the feeling of seeing things through words - which undoubtedly drove Williams to write: 'First we have to see, be taught to see', he insisted.[1] That excited experience is an event central to a poem and can only be sensed from within the reading process itself. I have not therefore tried to interpret texts so much as attempted to offer a framework within which to understand

what may happen as a poem is read: rather than looking at what Williams 'says' I have tried to examine how what he 'makes' may involve and arouse a reader.

My method is more investigative than synthetic. I have wanted to suggest the ways in which the act of seeing informs individual poems and their layout or lineation, rather than attempt to fit Williams' work to a large pattern. In general the poems discussed are presented chronologically. In the first two chapters I have tried to outline Williams' literary ambitions and indicate why, in the context of an America he felt lacked a distinctive voice of its own, the perception - particularly the visual perception - of the immediate environment came to be so important. Under the influence of painters such as Cezanne and Juan Gris he abandoned his early, highly derivative style and began to seek verbal equivalents for the effects they achieved in paint. He learnt from them a crucial notion and one central to this thesis: that, for an artist, the moment of perception embodies the knowable world in a way that thought, or any form of conceptual system, cannot. The artist comes closest to the truth of his experience when he articulates how he sees the world. Abstractions, philosophical tenets - such things as a poet might 'say' - are at a further remove from the world than the sensuous details of a poet's perceptions. Following Cezanne, Williams tried to embody such sensuous details in the poems he 'made'. I have tried to illustrate this development in his art with an extended comparison between the two men's work.

The third, fourth and fifth chapters of the thesis concern how Williams attempted to include the reader in his poems by making them in various ways appeal to the reader's visual sense. There are two principal approaches. Firstly I have discussed the 'image' and how Williams reacted against its customary use as 'simile' and 'likeness'.

This, he felt, was too limiting and deferred the reality of the poem: the poem should not make comparisons to describe reality, it should participate in reality. He preferred to think of the image as an energizing force within a poem; it is organic to a poem and allows the reader to see - as much literally as metaphorically - a poem's meaning. I have tried to argue that Williams' poems may create in the imagination conditions parallel to those which give the images perceived by the physical eye their compelling interest. The second approach concerns how Williams aimed to incite a reader's vision by lineating his poems in such a way that, like a painting, the look of the page would contribute to a reader's understanding. To demonstrate how much the visual effect of the page may influence a reader I have drawn heavily upon a number of visual psychologists, notably J.J.Gibson, Rudolf Arnheim, R.L.Gregory and E.H.Gombrich, and applied their conclusions about the nature of visual perception to the shapes of Williams' poems on the page.

In the final two chapters I have attempted to follow the development of Williams' ideas into his last years, and related them to the ideas of some of his contemporaries, particularly Zukofsky. Williams appears to have taken the notion of the poem as a visual object literally, even more so than Zukofsky who first suggested the idea in his 'Sincerity and Objectification' essay.[2] In Paterson Williams made a sustained effort to invent an object-like, visually absorbing text which will hold the reader's eye. The poem's success, however, seems to me limited. Williams' intention to make a poem that would 'happen on the page'[3] is marred by an intrusive need to 'say' what he means rather than allow the poem's meaning to be 'made' as the reader perceives its evolution. By contrast, the poems of Williams' old age, whilst less emphatically based upon painterly techniques, offer a more effective embodiment of perception. These

late poems do not seek to reflect how objects are visually perceived, as do the earlier poems influenced by Cezanne, but rather use the mechanisms of visual perception - the unfolding patterns of vision - as a model for a poetic method. The patterns of speech by which the poems are composed imitate the visual array across the retina in the act of perception, a constant metamorphosis of images. Using Merleau-Ponty's thought on the primacy of perception I have tried to show how Williams' invention of a flowing pattern - the much-discussed triadic foot - gave him the means to embody his speech in designs that, like the patterns of perception, are continually being 'made'.

In general my aim has been to present a number of ways of approaching Williams' work without trespassing upon its autonomy, a quality that Williams valued so highly. The written word, he felt, is a reality in itself and is known as such, not through explanations but by virtue of being experienced so forcibly that it is apprehended in the same way as any of the other things we call 'reality': a word 'accurately tuned to the fact which giv[es] it reality, by its own reality' is freed and 'dynamiz[ed] at the same time' (SA 150). The reader can feel that a word has been 'dynamized' only by experiencing it in context and sensing its authority. This thesis is intended to clarify some of the preconceptions from which Williams worked in order that this authority - the autonomy and 'dynamic' reality of Williams' words - can be more readily recognised.

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Notes to Introduction:

1. 'Sermon with a Camera', New Republic, XCVI (Oct. 1938), pp.252 - 253, quoted in L.Wagner, The Prose of William Carlos Williams, Weslyan UP. 1970, p.160.
2. First printed in Poetry, Vol. XXXVII, No. V (Feb. 1931).
3. Speaking Straight Ahead: Interviews with William Carlos Williams, ed. L.Wagner, New Directions 1976, p.65.

I

The Origins of a Way of Seeing

> Americans have never recognised themselves. How can they ? It is impossible until someone invent the ORIGINAL terms. As long as we are content to be called by somebody else's terms, we are incapable of being anything but our own dupes (IAG 228).

Throughout his life Williams never lost his thirst for originality. In his eyes the heroes of America were those who would not be content until they had dug down to their roots. They refused to borrow from a European heritage or settle for a diluted vision of their country but insisted on finding their own terms for the land in which they found themselves. Yet Americans in general were blind, Williams felt; they were unable to recognise themselves because they were reluctant to see America with American eyes or take a 'local pride', as Williams imagined himself doing in Paterson, and reply to the authority of Greek and Latin in a language wrenched from the American earth 'with the bare hands' (P 2). Williams' intention when he came to write In the American Grain was to build a new version of American history from the lives of the men and women who were exceptions to this trend. Poe, for example, was a 'SEER' (a see-er) who would not be duped and who divined the American need to go back to the beginning and 'sweep out the unoriginal'. Unlike Hawthorne who did 'what everyone else in France, England, Germany was doing' and was therefore 'no more than copying their method' (IAG 230), Williams felt that Poe aimed to use words that 'were not hung by usage with associations, the pleasing wraiths of former masteries' (IAG 223). Instead he imagined Poe's purpose to be the pursuit of a virgin language in which the words would strike the reader as if never before encountered. 'FIRST! - madly, valiantly battling for the right to BE first - to hold up his ORIGINALITY' (IAG 225). He, and not Hawthorne, possessed the necessary 'firmness of

INSIGHT into the conditions upon which our literature must rest' (IAG 230) since he was willing to invent fresh terms for his experience. The Latin word, invenire, from which the verb 'to invent' is derived, means 'to come upon' or 'to discover'. By inventing his own original terms for experience Poe proved himself to be a discoverer of America just as much as Columbus or any of Williams' heroes, for by his methods he saw it anew.

Williams' compulsive need to be creating such original terms arose from his relentless pursuit of an unmediated contact with the local environment. In the first issue of the magazine Contact which he edited with Robert McAlmon during the early 1920s, he announced that their aim was 'to establish our own position by thorough knowledge of our own locality' (RI 68). He wanted to make the local immediate so that Americans could recognise themselves. To achieve this in his own work Williams turned away from 'former masteries' of style, seeing them as a threat to the necessary immediacy. Believing instead in an erudition of touch or 'tactus eruditus' (CEP 63), he tried to make himself intelligible by adhering strictly to the impressions supplied by his senses. As his eyes saw or his ears heard, so he hoped to write, desiring fidelity to experience rather then a consciously literary competence to authorise his words. This emphasis on the senses led him to define the local as 'the aggregate of all the seeing, touching, smelling of any form of life' (RI 222): the only way he felt he could articulate it justly was in a language as forcibly original as the sensations that made the environment appear real. As a result the language had to make an equally sensory appeal. Words like the senses were exploratory; if a poet used them in an original way to explore his locality some new aspect of the world could be discovered. 'It must not be forgot that we smell, hear and see with words and words alone, and that with

a new language we smell, hear and see afresh.'[1] Williams further came to feel that just as a poet had to follow his senses in writing a poem so a poem should be apprehended sensuously by the reader, since it existed, like the things the poet wrote about, as an object in its own right. 'All art is sensual and poetry particularly so', he wrote of his relation to Objectivism; 'it is directly, that is, of the senses, and since the senses do not exist without an object for their employment, all art is necessarily objective. It doesn't declaim or explain; it presents.'[2] The corollary of this, he insisted, was that 'lofty thoughts certainly ought to be finished now as material for a poem'. If the poem was to be understood as 'of the senses' it could not be considered a vehicle for philosophy or dogma. It had to be responded to as any object would be, understood firstly through the impression it made upon the reader's senses.

Although Williams made the sensory appeal of his poems as broadly-based as possible his natural disposition led him to explore vision in particular. He often admitted that he 'might easily have become a painter' (IWWP 15) and that under different circumstances he would 'rather have been a painter than to bother with these goddamn words' (IWWP 41). He might have turned either way and even after having fully committed himself to writing in preference to painting, his poems frequently derived from contemplating pictures or witnessing some visual event. Criticising Louis Zukofsky for being 'mostly ear' he wrote to him in 1928 saying 'eyes have always stood first in the poet's equipment' (SL 101). His admiration for certain artists never left him: Cezanne he described as 'a god' (A 322); Juan Gris was a life-long inspiration and technical example; and grotesque painters such as Bosch, Breughel and Toulouse L'autrec (to whom Paterson V is dedicated) always kept their attraction to the raw side of Williams'

imagination that delighted in the colourful 'anarchy of poverty' (CEP 415) or the 'flutter and flaunt' of 'sheer rags' (CEP 270). Painters were also amongst his friends. In his last poem, some years after Demuth's death, he recalled with affection the painter with whom he had shared a particular intimacy:

> You know how we treasured
> the few paintings
> we still cling to
> especially the one
> by the dead
> Charlie Demuth. (PB 168)

One reason for Williams' ability to bridge the gap between poetry and painting so readily, was that he could feel with the eyes as sensitively as a painter might. He understood seeing as more than a physical exercise of the eye; it was a mode of comprehension that involved his entire 'sensual being'. That which exists before the 'appraising eye of the artist', he wrote,

> and in heightened intensity . . . is the impression created by the shape and color of an object before him in his sensual being - his whole body (not his eyes) his body, his mind, his memory, his place: himself - that is what he sees (RI 172).

He chose to write rather than paint largely because it suited his life-style as a doctor better. It was far easier for him to note down words on odd scraps of paper than to have to be carrying around all the equipment he needed to paint. Yet the impetus to create remained to a high degree visual. Vision embodied his experience: it gave him such a compelling engagement with the environment that he could feel through it the sense of local contact which alone could establish America in his mind on America's terms.

Williams was slow to mature as a writer, however; it was only in middle age, when he had gained confidence in his purpose, that he started to concentrate upon developing a sensory aesthetic. There is only scant evidence in the work he attempted before 1913 (when he was already thirty) that he felt much need to think in such terms.

For the most part the poems of that period are unavailable and those that are accessible seem to bear out Townley's suggestion that Williams had little to express 'beyond awkward sublimity and awkward facetiousness'.[3] Thirlwell is similarly unimpressed, describing the poems as 'deplorable pastiches',[4] and Williams himself made no effort to disguise his embarrassment when he came to look back on them:

> look at this awful line, I'm ashamed of it: "most needs must flare" - I meant it very definitely but it was no language I spoke or even thought. But it was my idea of what a poem should be (IWWP 25).

There are occasional hints of the later Williams - a strident voice, an exactly observed detail - but in general he seems content 'to be called by somebody else's terms', borrowed out of Palgrave, or copied from Keats and Whitman. He is self-consciously not a 'see-er' but, as he accurately registers in one of these poems, willingly blind to the immediate locality for the sake of conformity to his 'idea of what a poem should be'.

> Eyes that can see,
> Oh, what a rarity!
> For many a year gone by
> I've looked and nothing seen
> But ever been
> Blind to a patent wide reality.[5]

Williams was no doubt happy that all but a handful of copies of his 1909 book, Poems, were 'inadvertantly burned' whilst in 'safe-keeping' (IWWP 22). Yet the way in which he describes his preoccupations at the time indicates that even then he felt a tension between the immediacy of his experience and the tendency for the forms and diction he adopted to distance him from the local. Some poems have a 'real' force since he felt he had been 'touched by real things', whilst others are 'awful' because they use a language he neither 'spoke' nor 'thought'. The disproportion between the sensory immediacy of his experience and the stilted quality of the language in which he wrote

of it, eventually spurred him to reject the methods of his literary idols and try instead to look at the world through his own eyes. He forced himself to cut loose from such influences, risking the blank spaces of personal ignorance in order to discover an original vigour of his own, just as Columbus had willingly committed himself to a 'state as uncertain and perilous as you like' (IAG 39) in voyaging from Europe to discover America. To do this did not mean that Williams chose to abandon himself to 'the senseless / unarrangement of wild things' (CEP 330); it meant rather that he needed to invent new and personal forms which would take account of new experiences, forms which would acknowledge tradition in the degree to which they deviated from it by adding their own originality. 'It may be said that I wish to destroy the past. It is precisely a service to tradition, honouring it and serving it that is envisioned and intended by my attack, and not disfigurement - confirming and enlarging its application' (SE 284). Immediacy was to be achieved by stretching the familiar into unfamiliar contexts. The impressions made by things on the senses could always startle Williams by their freshness however apparently familiar they might be. Something as common as a piece of glass could delight him by sparking the gap between the uninteresting thought of it as 'just a piece of glass' and its actual effect on the senses, its reflected colours, its arrangement on the ground. Already-known forms needed to be 'broken down' and then 'redistributed' (SE 188) if a new form was to have vitality. Williams saw in Joyce a writer who had the skill to do this: whilst not 'chang[ing] his words beyond recognition' he cleansed them of 'stultifying associations' and so freed them 'to be understood again, in an original, a fresh, delightful sense' (SE 90). The artist's purgatory was always to vary 'between knowing

and feeling' (SE 56), departing from the familiar framework of ordered knowledge for the fresh and delightful impressions made by living things on the senses.

The potential for this way of thinking is apparent, though unexploited, even in Williams' earliest poems. His fondness for both Keats and Whitman made him adopt two distinct methods:

> I . . . was putting down my immortal thoughts daily. Little poems, pretty bad poems . . . . More Whitmanesque than Keats . . . . My quick spontaneous poems, as opposed to my studied Keatsian sonnets, were written down in thick, stiff-covered copybooks (IWWP 17).

He was evidently writing two kinds of poem; he either consciously applied himself to achieve a contrived elegance or else he wrote instant improvisations on the spur of the moment. Though Whitman subsequently came to seem formless to him, Williams was nonetheless attracted to him in his youthful work as a counterbalance to his liking for the strict form of rhymed couplets and sonnets. On the one hand this suggests a desire for the formality of a familiar order, and on the other it represents a willingness to break through formal preconceptions in order to transcribe the fleeting engagements of the moment. As will be seen, this dichotomy, fundamental to Williams' work, is analagous to processes involved in visual comprehension.

By the time he was writing Kora in Hell (1920) the volatile equilibrium between these two forces had become the nucleus of a single work. Each day for a year Williams improvised a piece of writing, 'off the cuff' notations (IWWP 39) which, when he came to publish them, seemed to require formal interpretations to make them intelligible.

> Even if I had nothing in mind at all I put something down, and as may be expected, some of the entries were pure nonsense and were rejected when the time for publication came. They were a reflection of the day's happenings more or less, and what I had had to do with them. Some were unintelligible to a stranger

> and I knew that I would have to interpret them. I was groping round to find a way to include the interpretations . . . I took the method . . . of drawing a line to separate my material. First came the Improvisations, those more or less incomprehensible statements, then the dividing line and, in italics, my interpretations of the Improvisations (IWWP 39).

The page is visually split ('Divorce is / the sign of knowledge in our time' P 18), its two halves forced apart by a line which squeezes like a layer of cement between them. The improvisation offers a roughly dislocated version of events that the interpretation re-orders in a more familiar syntactical framework. By their 'antagonistic co-operation' (P 177) the two elements establish a context for meaning ('Read. Bring the mind back (attendant upon / the page) to the day's heat ' P 126).

> Five miscarriages since January is a considerable record Emily dear--but hearken to me: The Pleiades--that small cluster of lights in the sky there--. You'd better go in the house before you catch cold. Go on now!
>
> ---
>
> Carelessness of heart is a virtue akin to the small lights of the stars. But it is sad to see virtues in those who have not the gift of the imagination to value them (I 77).

This is a short example but typical of Williams' method throughout. The specific references of the improvised section are presented with scarcely any acknowledgement of the context they are specific to: the interpretation compensates for this by accommodating the details to a more abstract view which suggests ways of judging them. Particulars ('The Pleiades') are turned to generalities ('of the stars'); precise fictions ('five miscarriages since January') become moral examples ('carelessness of heart'). It is not the part of the improvisation to spoon-feed the reader with evaluations and ideally Williams wants to let 'the imaginative qualities of the actual things being perceived accompany their gross vision in a slow dance, interpreting as they go' (I 67). But in practice Williams realises that this 'will not always be the case'; some kind of framework remains necessary before

such 'actual things' will be understood. In order not to blur them the interpretation is deliberately not superimposed on the improvised section, but presented alongside. Consequently the effect of the writing derives from the relationship between the two elements, the one tending towards formal design with a contingent sense of prior knowledge, and the other following the spontaneous imagination as it works upon what Williams, in his chapter on Poe, described as the 'UNFORMED LUMP' (IAG 230). This relationship, he felt, resulted from the artist's need to present an original vision 'with great intensity of perception' (SE 5) whilst at the same time acknowledging that the 'reader has to be met and won without compromise' (SE 183). The difficulty in writing was the 'virtual impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses' since their 'nearly divergent natures' would be blurred by a writer who fell 'under the spell of' any one 'certain mode' (SE 11) which might over-familiarise the material and so undermine its immediacy.

Yet even in 1913 when Williams' first substantial collection, The Tempers, was published, he still appears to have been largely willing to ignore 'the direct scrutiny of the senses' for a preconceived view of how poetry ought to be written. The date is important for at this time, immediately prior to the first world war, European art was showing a radical change in consciousness. A variety of movements had either recently arisen or were shortly to emerge: Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, Expressionism, Vorticism. The American public, though partially shielded from the revolutionary energies, had been made suddenly and uncomfortable aware of them by the Armory Show exhibition in 1913, and yet little of this ferment is reflected in Williams' book. It cannot be argued that he was unaware of its

existence. He had read Breszka's 'Vortex' and had been in close contact with Pound (who arranged for the book to be published) whose 'Imagism' manifesto appeared in 1912. Moreover, the Armory Show, which had been in New York for six months before The Tempers came into print, had excited Williams and proved the single most decisive influence upon his development in the following years. He had even had close contact with a number of painters who contributed to the show, but his determination to discover for himself, combined with the feeling that he 'had not yet established any kind of independent spirit' (IWWP 28), made him reticent to adopt a radical stance. Disatisfaction with the 'old order' could only be countered by a personal initiative to discover a voice in the terms presented by his own experience:

> this was a period of finding a poetry of my own. I wanted order, which I appreciated. The orderliness of verse appealed to me - as it must to any man - but even more I wanted a new order. I was positively repelled by the old order which, to me, amounted to restriction (IWWP 29).

The vestiges of an 'old order' are barely hidden in The Tempers. The Keatsian influence is still strong in the relished adjectives and feminine cadences of 'First Praise', whilst the more Whitmanesque side of his imagination colours the colloquial ebullience of 'Le Medcin Malgre Lui' and the self-consciously compendious tone of 'Man in a Room'. Yeats is another obvious source:

> On the day when youth is no more upon me
> I will write of the leaves and the moon in a tree top!
> I will sing then the song, long in the making -
> When the stress of youth is put away from me. (CEP 32)

Yet if Williams had scarcely begun 'his lifelong attempt to transpose the visual space and the tensions of painting to the realm of poetry',[6] he had nonetheless recognised the importance of structural inventiveness at a time when the Cubists were making a similar insistence. This

applies to both the individual line-by-line composition of the poems, and to the overall visual effect of their stanzaic patterns. The painter Albert Gleizes described the Cubist technique as 'moving around an object to seize from it successive appearances, which fused into a single image, reconstitute it in time':[7] a diversity of angles of approach to an object were to be represented simultaneously within a composition defined by the limits of the canvas rather than by the applied laws of perspective. Williams adopts a similar method in 'To Mark Anthony in Heaven', arranging then re-arranging a single set of words to reflect the same objects from differing angles.

> This quiet morning light
> reflected, how many times
> from grass and trees and clouds
> enters my north room
> touching the walls with
> grass and clouds and trees.
> Anthony,
> trees and grass and clouds.
> Why did you follow
> that beloved body
> with your ships at Actium?
> I hope it was because
> you knew her inch by inch
> from slanting feet upward
> to the roots of her hair
> and down again and that
> you saw her
> above the battle's fury--
> clouds and trees and grass--
>
> For then you are
> listening in heaven. (CEP 33)

The poem's fascination derives from the alchemy that takes place between the re-orderings of 'trees', 'grass' and 'clouds': its curious design transcends the immediate argument of the words and gives it an intrinsic authority. The reflections of the 'quiet morning light' are imitated, not by description but by the poet's invention of a structure that reflects the words at differing angles.

A similar kind of inventiveness is exercised in the organisation of the collection as a whole. Williams appears quite deliberately to

avoid using any single stanzaic shape for more than one poem, mixing short-lined poems with long-lined, rhymed with unrhymed, and the briefly lyrical with the more expansively narrative. As a result the collection reads as a constant search for new ways in which to create visual interest, each page seeming to offer a fresh angle of approach. The structure of the whole, like the structure of 'To Mark Anthony in Heaven', has the feeling of being governed by the need to create a consciously varied surface. If Williams does not seem to pursue this with the same deliberation as in many of his later books, he nonetheless appears instinctively to want to invent new shapes for his thoughts. In 'The Great American Novel' (1923) he extended this same instinct and went so far as to apply it to the letters of the words, experimenting by breaking them into new components in order to create a set of fresh verbal shapes.

> Words. Words cannot progress. There cannot be a novel. Break the words. Words are indivisible crystals. One cannot break them--Awu tsst grang splith gra pragh og bm--Yes, one can break them. One can make words (I 159 - 160).

The visual surface of a piece of writing is sometimes thought of as merely a convenient notation intended to guide the ear, without significance for the poem's meaning.[8] Williams never shared this opinion; to him the eye's intuition of a poem was as relevant as the ear's. He wrote to James Laughlin complaining about the creation of what he felt were needless divisions:

> damn the bastards for saying you can't mix auditory and visual standards in poetry. Who the hell ever invented these two categories but themselves? Those are the questions that set up all academic controversies. The trouble with them is that they aren't real questions at all; they are merely evidence of a lack of definition in the terms (SL 177).

Not all critics were against him however. Zukofsky, who felt that 'most western poets of consequence seem constantly to communicate the letters of their alphabet as graphic representations of thought',[9] paid tribute

to Williams in 1930 by quoting a line from The Tempers, 'blue at the prow of my desire', and remarking:

> an early line - and for that reason uppermost in my mind, there is a difference of only twenty years between our ages - its character owns all the phases of your later work, the catastrophic and gentle in its characters, in their signing hieroglyphics.[10]

Despite the elusiveness of this remark it is clear from Zukofsky's pun on the word 'character' that he could read a poem with the eye as readily as he could listen to one with the ear. He presumably does not mean that the words form a literal picture-language, although 'signing' hints at this; the implication seems to be that Williams' visual susceptibility to the world, his sensory delight in its appearances, encourage him to use words with an equal susceptibility.

From the evidence of his later comments, even at the time that he was writing The Tempers Williams could feel the importance of the visual appearance of a poem. As yet, however, it remained a matter of giving the verse a patterned surface that would fascinate the reader's eye: he had not begun to attempt to articulate perceptual processes as part of the content of his poems.

> I had my own definite things to say and I was learning how to put them on paper so they looked serious to me (IWWP 18).
>
> The rhythmic unit was not measured by capitals at the beginning of a line or periods within the lines. I was trying for something. The rhythmic unit usually came to me in a lyrical outburst. I wanted it to look that way on the page (IWWP 27).

In this period Williams was thinking of a poem as aiming to distil a 'distinct imaginative picture' (SL 24) to which the actual look of the page formed a decorative counterpart. What was absent was an understanding of eyesight as a synthetic function that binds the see-er to the seen. As he increasingly came to comprehend that vision not only allowed him to see his subject matter but also formed a part of it, so the look of the page became more integral to the meaning of his poems. As long as he felt the poem described a world

his eyes simply looked at, the poem remained a shadow to things, a secondary reality. But as he began to realise that his eyes participated in that world, the poem began to seem equally a part of it, real as the objects it might refer to. By 1927 vision was so firmly established at the heart of his understanding that he could write ecstatically of what he saw rather than accuse himself of being blind to a 'patent wide reality'.

> The sea, a fusion of metals, the xanthrochromic sea — Now, never dropping back to feeling, he was all eyes. The world existed in his eyes, recognized itself ecstatically there. This then was real: all he saw.[11]

Williams had been first encouraged to respond this way by his visit to the Armory Show. In the Autobiography he writes of it as a 'visualisation' of America's backwardness in the arts (A 134). The delight he took in it served to free his poetry from the need to conform to an appropriately 'poetic' language, for it allowed him to recognise vision as not just a means towards feeling but as a mode of feeling in itself. Since the European painters could dispense with formal preconceptions such as perspective Williams had no need to feel inhibited about attacking literary preconceptions in the same way. Upsetting a preconception had the virtue of provoking an immediate reaction which would bring the reader or viewer nearer to the source of 'ORIGINALITY' that he felt could authenticate his American experience. Disorder always had the effect upon Williams' imagination of intensifying the freshness of a thing: the random untidiness of a patient's room could please him for this reason. 'I have seldom seen such disorder and brokenness - such a mass of unrelated parts of things lying about. That's it! I concluded to myself. An unrecognizable order! Actually - the new!'[12] He took the same pleasure in reading Marianne Moore's poems which 'shocked' and 'bewildered' by ruining a whole preconceived set of values (SE 121). Her ability

was defined in his mind by the accuracy with which she could 'throw out of fashion the classical conventional poetry' and 'distress' the reader. This 'distress', rather than a fault, 'is exactly what [the reader] should see, a break through all preconception of poetic form and mood and pace'. There was a necessary 'appearance of disorder in all immediacy' for only by disrupting a reader's anticipations could the poet transcend the effects of stale thought and reach a novel vision of things. Formal explanations were a distraction since things existed without explanation: their immediacy was registered directly by the senses without reference to a conceptual order. 'The night offers no explanation for its sound of winds or its lights. Yet it is accepted simply as if it were a common occurrence' (I 298). The Armory Show gave Williams the freedom to register the 'common occurrence' that the eyes or ears witnessed without obliging him to tie it to familiar frameworks and explanations. He could begin to comprehend art as a process of discovery - 'the language of exploration' as Pound once said of Jacob Epstein[13] - that aimed to open up the terms of understanding in the responses it provoked rather than in its capacity to accomodate itself to already existing forms. The European painters could suggest how it was the experience of seeing things that mattered, not 'explanations' of an order inherent in them that the eyes passively transmitted.

The tensions and contradictions in Williams' work until this time are more easily understood in the light of the divergent opinions about art that the Armory Show served to focus. 'The New Spirit' of the show's motto had an iconoclastic vigour that stirred immense hostility amongst the art academicians whose habits of vision were founded on the older spirit of 'tradition and sanity'. Their 'standards of judgement were technical proficiency and conformity

to some acceptable tradition'.[14] Predictably the very disorder and lack of explanation of some of the exhibits in the show which so pleased Williams were the qualities that most offended more conservative opinion. The director of the Metropolitan Museum was aware as early as 1908 of the stirring of radical energies and went so far as to remark: 'there is a state of unrest in the world, in art as in all things. It is the same in literature as in music, in painting and sculpture. And I dislike unrest.'[15] Unrest was disturbing to the traditional view that a painter aimed to extract the 'beautiful' from its context amidst the 'ugly'. To do this the painter needed to be alert to an idea of beauty hidden in nature.

> "Nature is not all beautiful by any means", Birge Harrison told his pupils at the Art Students League . . , "but why should we choose to perpetuate her ugly side? I believe it to be one of the artist's chief functions, as it should be his chief delight, to watch for the rare mood when she wafts aside the veil of the commonplace and shows her inner soul in some bewildering vision of poetic beauty".[16]

Harrison thinks of the painter's eye as being on the look-out for a 'poetic beauty' which exists before the painting; the painter's role is passive. The art is to watch for the mood in which nature herself decides to reveal her hidden wonders.

Such opinions made it inevitable that the kind of vision suggested by the Modernists at the Armory Show would earn labels such as 'cheap notoriety', 'incomprehensibility combined with the symptoms of paresis' or 'dangerous anarchic thought'.[17] Duchamp's picture, 'Nude Descending a Staircase', which became a focus for critical abuse, seemed a prime example of 'incomprehensibility'. It is composed from a number of instants of vision, small glimpses which add up to a motif of blurred movement - a 'bewildering vision' though not as Harrison meant it. It ceases to matter whether the components of the picture are thought to be 'beautiful' or 'ugly' since the artist's intentions cannot be defined by such aesthetic

categories. The artist's eye is restless, looking into the mechanics of movement rather than watching out for a vision of beauty; the eye is examining how a movement occurs, trying to assess the nature of vision while it happens. Harrison could claim that the artist had a 'chief function' since he was content that the eye merely reported a beauty inherent in nature; the artist's role was to register that beauty accurately. Duchamp's painting challenges this assumption: his eye sets out to discover rather than report what exists. He can serve no 'chief function' since his function is perpetually being discovered by his enquiring eyes. As the photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, once remarked: 'we have to learn to see. We all have to learn how to use our eyes'.[18]

Stieglitz was the one man most responsible for introducing the new European painters to an American audience. Through both his photography and his administration of the New York art gallery '291' in the early years of the century, he had nurtured the attack on conservative standards that the Armory Show triggered. Williams tended to minimize the part Stieglitz played in the development of his poetry yet there is no doubt, as Bram Dijkstra has shown, that he deeply absorbed many of Stieglitz' ideas about art and an artist's vision. In Stieglitz' view preconceptions of 'poetic beauty' such as Harrison's, interferred with the immediate perception of what surrounded the artist. Whether 'commonplace' or 'rare', the things the artist perceived had a force too pressing to be contained by intellectual knowledge. Stieglitz wanted to be free 'to recognize the living moment when it occurs, and to let it flower, without preconceived ideas about what it should be'. The idea of beauty appeared to him to be a mediating principle which obstructed the flowering of the moment. Stieglitz could only feel himself 'to be

truly affirming life' when he was 'no longer thinking. Not to know, but to let exist what is, that alone, perhaps, is truly to know.'[19] As late as 1939 Williams adopted similar terms to describe Charles Sheeler's work: he had a 'bewildering directness' which grew from his ability to distinguish 'the valuable from the impost' and exploit the 'measurable disproportion between what a man sees and knows' (SE 232). An object painted by Sheeler had a value not because the artist knew it to be 'beautiful', but because he saw it as it existed and refused to be deflected into abstractions about it.

The distinction between what a man sees and what he knows was at the heart of the aesthetic debate aroused by the Armory Show. Harrison could imply that an artist's knowledge of beauty directed his way of seeing, whereas Stieglitz, curious about his perceptions, could suggest that an artist's knowledge of the world was a consequence of his way of seeing. There was no longer any need for an artist to think of beauty as an ideal according to which the visible world was to be recomposed and its 'commonplace' appearance transcended for, as Stieglitz showed, the artist could and should use the commonplace in his work. The particularities of the local environment, displayed rawly and unadorned, possessed an intrinsic value that an idealised beauty would only dull. But even amongst photographers the idea that an artist should intervene and impose a value on objects by altering the photographic plates in some way had a strong grip. In his widely-read book Naturalistic Photography published at the turn of the century, P.H.Emerson appealed for 'truth to the subject' whilst at the same time he developed a theory of differential focussing intended to subordinate the elements of a picture in accordance with what the photographer felt to be 'principal' and what 'secondary'. The reality 'that lay before the

camera's lens was not a poetic enough subject' he wrote.

> If the camera was to produce art, it must be freed from the tyranny of the visible world. The photographer could become an expressive artist only by reshaping the sharp, optically corrected image, or by consciously rearranging in front of the lens the accepted symbols and devices of the world of feeling. [20]

In contrast, for Stieglitz, the 'world of feeling' depended upon the direct vision of the shapes and forms of things, not the arrangement of 'accepted symbols and devices'. He said of his photograph 'The Steerage' that

> the scene fascinated me: A round straw hat; the funnel leaning left, the stairway leaning right; the white drawbridge, its railings made of chain; white suspenders crossed on the back of a man below; circular iron machinery; a mast cut into the sky, completing a triangle. I stood spellbound for a while. I saw shapes related to one another - a picture of shapes, and underlying it, a new vision that held me. [21]

There is a catalogue of details here, none of which is qualified by an adjective seeking to explain Stieglitz' fascination with the scene; his description is limited to the relationship of one shape to another. The 'new vision' he speaks of can only be attributed to the direct impression made by the geometric pattern of things as it is felt acting upon his eyes. He takes things as Williams later said the poet should take words, 'as he finds them, interrelated about him' (CLP 5). By looking at the commonplace instead of pursuing a veiled 'poetic beauty' Stieglitz could discover qualities that were capable of sustaining his art. Beauty was not a transcendent power only revealed in some rare mood, but that which came most readily to hand. 'Beauty is the universal seen. In one's way of seeing lies one's way of action.' [22]

Much of the criticism of photography as an art form centred upon the fact that its methods apparently did not allow scope for the photographer's feelings. The romantic habits of vision with which the American public were familiar suggested that mechanical accuracies were necessarily a betrayal of feeling. Yet as Stieglitz' comments

show, this same mechanical accuracy was for him critical if he was to be true to his emotions. By attending to the objects of perception Stieglitz could identify feeling as no longer a matter of the subjective reflections that a scene might stir but as an aspect of the intricate arrangement of surrounding surfaces. He is unambiguous about his absorption in the scene he photographed in 'The Steerage': it held him 'spellbound' and supplied the 'feeling' of the location, yet the terms for that feeling are entirely mathematical - the angle of a stairway, the roundness of a hat, the side of a triangle formed by a mast.

This was a vital discovery for Williams. The colour of his visual experience did not have to be conveyed by emotive adjectives but could be defined in the process of seeing how things were arranged and constructing a commensurate poetic object. Reflecting on this in the Autobiography he wrote: 'it is in the taking of that step over from feeling to the imaginative object, on the cloth, on the page, that defined the term, the modern term - a work of art' (A 381). Feeling has ceased to be defined apart from the imaginative object and become a facet of it, part and parcel of the object the poet makes, just as the emotions that stem from vision are patterned by the objects perceived rather than by a beauty they may symbolise. The rapidity with which Williams developed a method in the period following the Armory Show that was based on a new way of seeing, is evident in an essay he wrote in 1915 utilising the terms of Brzeska's 'Vortex' and fitting them to his own preoccupations as a writer. Like Stieglitz, Williams wanted to articulate his emotions through seeing the geometric patterns created by things about him. 'I meet in agreement the force that will express its emotional content by an arrangement of appearances, for by appearances I know my emotion' (RI 151). The dynamic force of visual planes carries a charge

sufficient to the artist's emotion, with the result that the emotion seeks to be expressed through the details of the immediate environment rather than as personal feeling. 'I will express my emotions in the appearances: surfaces, sounds, smells, touch of the place in which I happen to be.' This conviction led Williams eventually to such poems as 'The Locust Tree in Flower' where appearances are pared down to a dry residue of words.

Among
of
green

stiff
old
bright

broken
branch
come

white
sweet
May

again (CEP 93)

A more expanded version of the poem which Williams later decided to include alongside it in the Collected Earlier Poems (1951) stresses how this version, which comes first, presents each word as a compact surface to be placed adjacent to another, not for the sake of meaning but for its effect as a plane of suggestion as it meets other planes. In the longer version of the poem more narrative details are included so that its mechanical economy is subordinated to a more obvious 'imaginative picture'.

Among
the leaves
bright

green
of wrist-thick
tree

and old
stiff broken
branch

ferncool
swaying
loosely strung--

come May
again
white blossom

clusters
hide
to spill

their sweets
almost
unnoticed

down
and quickly
fall (CEP 94)

The syntax here hints at a prosaic meaning which the reader is invited to reconstruct. In the more compact version both syntax and narrative have been almost entirely dispensed with, leaving the reader with just the prickly rhythm of word following word. The implication of the poet's emotion - his delight in the colours, the fertility of Spring, its secrecy - this remains, but it seems now to derive from the object made on the page, from the pattern of the words, their pent energies imitating the tight bursting of buds. The reader is struck most forcibly by the arrangement of the words instead of, as in the more extended version, by the implications of their narrative content. Stripped to the bare minimum the poem holds the poet's emotion in its precariously contrived structure and avoids any deliberately emotive language: it enacts rather than describes the poet's feelings.

During the period following the Armory Show a sense of disatisfaction with received methods begins to emerge from Williams' letters. He wrote to Harriet Monroe saying, 'to me, what is woefully lacking in our verse and in our criticism is not hammered-out stuff but stuff to be hammered-out' (SL 25). A few days later he wrote again expressing the need to 'understand that which may not yet be

put into words', wishing to be 'completely incomplete if that means anything' (SL 25). His eye being responsive to the intrinsically fascinating details of an object or event, was prompting him to find ways of expressing himself that would adhere faithfully to its uniqueness and release him from the burden of 'poetic beauty'. In so far as it had a value, 'beauty' was what was always coming into being and not an idealised quality. 'Each moment is a near-at-hand divine event in which the whole of creation is incarnated',[23] the artist and critic de Casseres claimed. The artist's eye witnesses a fresh incarnation of experience in each successive instant. As Williams was learning, to be true to experience the artist - no matter whether a painter, photographer or poet - had to reflect such a 'fresh incarnation' in what he made.

This understanding of vision implied a new relationship between the artist and the world. It was inadequate to observe the world as if it were outside the artist: the eye was in the world and measured the artist's involvement in it. A work of art could consequently be thought of as displaying the interaction between the objects of perception and the perceiving artist. Paul Rosenfeld criticised Marsden Hartley for failing in this: he was unable, Rosenfeld felt, to make 'the object visible to him as being an integral portion of the chain of which he is himself a link'. Rosenfeld required that the painting should be, like the artist, 'a material in which the informing spirit of the universe stirs'.[24] The same 'informing spirit', a unifying force at large in the world, became fundamental to Williams' work. The 'I' of romantic subjectivity, he believed, was isolated from the world by a 'vaporous fringe' of feeling which he sought to circumscribe by an 'approximate co-extension' with the world, bringing it and the conscious 'I' into one mesh (I 105): they were, in his

later pun, 'all of a piece' (PB 180), separate elements contributing to the one whole. In Paterson Williams could demonstrate this 'co-extension' by observing the movement of the Passaic river and using it to express corresponding movements of the mind. The rhythm of the verse applies ambiguously to both the poet's mind and to the water, with the result that they are made to share equally a single 'informing spirit':

> Jostled as are the waters approaching
> the brink, his thoughts
> interlace, repel and cut under,
> rise rock-thwarted and turn aside
> but forever strain forward - or strike
> an eddy and whirl, marked by a
> leaf or curdy spume, seeming
> to forget . (P 7)

The word 'as' leads the reader to think that a comparison is being made between the motions of the mind and the water, but as the lines unfold it becomes increasingly difficult to decide which is which until the reader, like the poet, 'seeming to forget', accepts that the mind and the water are aspects of a single movement. The 'as' then appears to be confirmatory rather than comparative: the waters are jostled as they are jostled. Without making the water stand for his state of mind, Williams' technique manages to present both water and state of mind as aspects of the one fabric.

Largely due to Stieglitz' influence, these notions of vision and the artist's relationship with the world had been discussed extensively amongst a coterie of artists for some time before the Armory Show made them a matter of public debate. Many of them had been worked out in the pages of Stieglitz' magazine 'Camera Work'. In 1910, S.H. (almost certainly Sadakichi Hartmann who contributed regularly to the magazine) wrote that 'beauty is chiefly concerned with the muscular sweep of the eye in cognizing adjacent points'.[25] Beauty in this definition has more to do with the physiology of

perception than with the properties of nature. The article in which his comment appeared was devoted to the 'new laws of composition' and attempted to distinguish between photography and painting. He argued that 'the painter composes by an effort of imagination. The photographer interprets by spontaneity of judgement. He practices composition by the eye.' The understanding of an object ('judgement') is here linked directly to sensation ('composition by the eye') within the single spontaneous instant. The authenticity of a composition, he continued, was likely to be damaged by a 'knowledge of pre-existent methods', for 'each object (like the free verse of Whitman) should make its own composition. Its forms and structure, lines and planes should determine its position in the particular space allotted to the picture.' S.H.'s distinction, however, will barely hold, for practicing composition by the eye entails the very effort of imagination he attributes to the painter. As Merleau-Ponty demonstrated of Cezanne's paintings, the artist desires 'to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organisation'.[26] The value of S.H.'s insight is that he shows that both the photographer and the painter can create without having to impose upon the objects of perception. Composition is not a matter of adopting pictorial rules to create beauty, but of discovering an intrinsic order belonging to nature which is recreated in the artist through the gift of sight. Williams' assumption of this attitude towards composition determines the change in his style between the publication of The Tempers and his second book Al Que Quiere four years later in 1917. With the example of Cezanne's art which Williams studied carefully, it is possible to see the degree to which a change in style meant a change in Williams' understanding of vision.

Notes to Chapter 1:

1. Quotation from Williams by Mary Ellen Solt in 'William Carlos Williams: Idiom and Structure', Massachusetts Review, vol. 3 no. 2 (Winter 1962), p.318.

2. 'A Note on the Art of Poetry', Blues, I, 4 (May 1929) reprinted in The Oxford Anthology of American Literature, eds. William Rose Benet and Norman Holmes Pearson, New York 1938, p.1313.

3. Rod Townley, The Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams, Cornell UP. 1975, p.23.

4. John C. Thirlwall, 'The Lost Poems of Williams Carlos Williams', New Directions 16, 1957, p.15.

5. Townley, p.44.

6. Bram Dijkstra, The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech, Princeton 1969, p.51.

7. Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, 'Cubism', in Modern Artists on Art, ed. R. L. Herbert, Englewood Cliffs 1964, p.15.

8. In The Theory of Literature, Cape 1949, Wellek and Warren argue that 'the lines in black ink are a method merely of recording a poem which must be conceived as existing elsewhere', p.142. Denise Levertov, who has suggested that 'the visual shape of a poem is not its form but a result of the notation of its form', would perhaps have agreed; see her The Poet in the World, New Directions 1960, p.59.

9. Louis Zukofsky, Prepositions, California UP. 1974, p.17.

10. Zukofsky, p.46.

11. Williams, A Voyage to Pagany, New Directions 1970, p.88.

12. Williams, The Farmer's Daughters, New Directions 1961, p.327.

13. Ezra Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska; A Memoir, New Directions 1970, p.88.

14. Milton W. Brown, The Story of the Armory Show, Greenwich, Connecticut 1963, p.4.

15. Sir Purdon Clarke, see Dijkstra p.69.

16. John I. H. Baur, Revolution and Tradition in Modern American Art, Harvard UP. 1954, p.12.

17. Brown, p.50.

18. Dijkstra, p.12.

19. Dijkstra, p.102.

20. Camera Work: A Critical Anthology, ed. Green, Aperture, New York 1973, p.18.

21. Dickran Tashjian, William Carlos Williams and the American Scene 1920 - 1940, California UP. 1978, p.100.

22. Dijkstra, p.96.

23. Dijkstra, p.17.

24. Dijkstra, p.119.

25. All quotations from S.H. in this paragraph are taken from his article, 'On the Possibility of New Laws of Composition', Camera Work, pp.199 - 202.

26. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Sense and Nonsense, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus, Northwestern UP. 1964, quoted by John Berger in his Selected Essays and Articles, Penguin 1972, p.195.

...

II

'Let us realize our sensations' - Cezanne

In his essay 'The Sight of a Man' John Berger asks the question: 'what made Cezanne's painting different?' The answer, he suggests, lies in Cezanne's 'view of the visible'.

> He questioned and finally rejected the belief, which was axiomatic to the whole Renaissance tradition, that things are seen for what they are, that their visibility belongs to them. According to this tradition, to make a likeness was to reconstitute a truth . . . . Cezanne . . . destroyed for ever the foundation of that tradition by insisting, more and more radically as his work developed, that visibility is as much an extension of ourselves as it is a quality-in-itself of things. Through Cezanne we recognize that a visible world begins and ends with the life of each man, that millions of these visible worlds correspond in so many respects that from the correspondences we can construct the visible world, but that this world of appearances is inseparable from each one of us: and each one of us constitutes its centre.[1]

There is no doubt of Williams' admiration for Cezanne or that he could share Cezanne's visual sensitivity to

> a certain variation
> hard to perceive in a shade of blue.[2]

As his references to him in Spring and All show,[3] he must have studied his technique and certainly shared many of his convictions. Both artists recognised that 'the visible world' exists, and both felt the 'world of appearances' to be 'inseparable from each one of us'. The artist composes, Williams wrote, from 'the impression created by the shape and color of an object before him' (RI 72) and not from intellectual assumptions about the world: the artist is always a part of the world that extends from and includes his seeing eye. The French philosopher, Merleau-Ponty, writing in a village adjacent to Mont Saint-Victoire (the mountain Cezanne repeatedly painted) developed this understanding of visibility, adopting terms equally relevant to

Williams, and in particular to his sense of the local as the only universal, the one place in which a man could hope to find himself, diffused amongst things and yet simultaneously uniquely an individual:

> we must take literally what vision teaches us: namely, that through it we come in contact with the sun and the stars, that we are everywhere all at once, and that even the power to imagine ourselves elsewhere . . . borrows from vision and employs means we owe to it. Vision alone makes us learn that beings are different, 'exterior', foreign to one another, yet absolutely <u>together</u>, are 'simultaneity'.[4]

The parallel between the visual instincts of the two artists is made more clear by applying Cezanne's reflections on his own work as a painter to Williams' technique as a poet. Although Cezanne wrote very few of his thoughts down, Emile Bernard has preserved a number of them by transcribing a conversation he once held with the painter and his notes provide a helpful commentary on Williams' practice in the mid-1910s. In order to illustrate this, here first are a number of selections from Bernard's transcription and then, making use of his notes, some comments by way of comparison on Williams' 'January Morning', a poem first published in <u>Al Que Quiere</u> (1917).

i: Let us read nature; let us realize our sensations in an aesthetic that is at once personal and traditional. The strongest will be he who sees most deeply and realizes fully . . . .
Painting from nature is not copying the objective, it is realizing one's sensations.

ii: There are two things in the painter, the eye and the mind; each of them should aid the other. It is necessary to work at their mutual development, in the eye by looking at nature, in the mind by the logic of organized sensations which provides the means of expression.

iii: There is no such thing as line or modelling; there are only contrasts. These are not contrasts of light and dark, but the contrasts given by the sensation of colour. Modelling is the outcome of the exact relationship of tones. When they are harmoniously juxtaposed and complete, the picture develops modelling of its own accord . . . .
The contrasts and connections of tones - there you have the secret of drawing and modelling.

iv: It is necessary to be workmanlike in art. To get to know one's way of realization early. To paint in accordance with the qualities of painting itself. To use materials crude and pure.

v: The painter must devote himself entirely to the study of nature and to try to produce pictures which can become a lesson. Causeries on art are almost useless. Work which realizes its progress in its proper medium is a sufficient compensation for the incomprehension of imbeciles. The man of letters expresses himself in abstractions while the painter concretises his sensations, his perceptions by means of drawing and colour.[5]

Williams' way of looking at things in 'January Morning' implies that he shared many of these convictions. The poem comprises fifteen brief sections, each of which is constructed from a fragment of vision that enacts the poem's opening lines:

> I have discovered that most of
> the beauties of travel are due to
> the strange hours we keep to see them.

This summarises Williams' concerns in the poem: the desire to be free of the familiar ('strange hours'), the wish to keep moving ('travel') with open eyes ('to see them'), and the restless urge to find things revealed in new and original ways ('I have discovered'). As it develops, a point of comparison can be found in the poem for each of Cezanne's remarks.

Firstly, the poem is an attempt to 'realise [Williams'] sensations', not only by describing them but also, and more importantly, by enacting them through the poem's images and rhythms. The two outer sections, I and XV, provide a framework which makes the context of 'sensation' explicit:

> the domes of the Church of
> the Paulist Fathers in Weehawken
> against a smoky dawn - the heart stirred -
> are beautiful as Saint Peters
> approached after years of anticipation . . . .
>
> you know how
> the young girls run giggling
> on Park Avenue after dark
> when they ought to be home in bed?
> Well,
> that's the way it is with me somehow.

Williams intends writing directly about his feelings ('the heart stirred'); he aims to realise his sensations and to embody active experience in the poem in much the same way that the 'young girls' who 'run giggling on Park Avenue' relish being out after dark, experiencing the city illicitly rather than hiding in the security of a familiar bed. Enclosed between these sections, the inner sections of the poem isolate pieces of experience which imitate the 'muscular sweep of the eye' as it probes nature:

IV

- and the sun, dipping into the avenues
streaking the tops of
the irregular red houselets,
and
the gay shadows dropping and dropping.

The typographically fragmented word 'and' in these lines, is not a connective that operates simply as a mechanical coupler (which the first 'and' tends to do); rather it articulates the eye's sudden shift in focus from the 'houselets' to the shadows they cast. Separated from 'houselets' so that it is surrounded by space, the second 'and' tends to make the shift in focus occur physically, as much for the eye reading the page as for the eye that is looking at nature: the lines imitate the effect of the object on the senses. Berger remarks of Cezanne that 'he never wanted to let the logic of the painting take precedence over the continuity of perception'.[6] The same tussle between 'logic' and the 'continuity of perception' is suggested by Williams' positioning of the word 'and' on the page where its logical force is less significant than its mimicry of optical experience. As he put it in his poem 'Virtue', the word indicates

nothing -
but the fixing of an eye
concretely upon emptiness! (CEP 152)

Berger's comment continues: 'after each brushstroke he [Cezanne]

had to re-establish his innocence as perceiver. And since such a task is never entirely possible, he was always dogged by a greater or lesser sense of his own failure.'[7] Williams' 'and' also searches for time in which to re-establish the innocence of the eye, as if it were trying to see the shadows for the first time and not as a consequence of the houselets, attempting to disconnect them from their source and see them for themselves. Like Cezanne, Williams too had a sense of inevitable failure: Paterson he described as a poem of 'defective means' (P 3). But he accepted this since he recognised that he could only live partially and never as fully as he would like. 'Heaven seems frankly impossible. I am damned as I succeed. I have no particular hope save to repair, to rescue, to complete' (SL 147).

The tussle between logic and the continuity of perception is also implied by the second of Cezanne's remarks, about the necessity to work at the mutual development of eye and mind. The 'logic of organized sensations' seemed to him to suggest that the eye and mind informed each other. This was true too for Stieglitz who could experience a visual pleasure in the mathematical relationships of tonal planes within a photograph: the organization of the scene in 'The Steerage', for instance, was the result of selecting from the visual field those things which appeared to his eye to possess an inherent logic. The scene pleased his mind as it pleased his eye. Since a photograph is distinct from poetry in that it can represent only an instant in time, the logic of its organization is also largely instantaneous in a way that a poem, evolving in time, can only partially share. What tends to happen in a poem like 'January Morning' is that each word and line becomes like the instant of opening the camera shutter, a process of repeated acts of spontaneous

organization that re-organize the whole of what has preceded. The mind is aware of the construction of the poem, its internal arrangements, as the eye is aware of the arrangement of things in the environment; so the discipline of the poem's form results from following the patterns of perception.

Again there is a parallel in Cezanne's method of painting: each brushstroke affected the organization of the whole, each fresh mark on the canvas readjusted what was already there and laid conditions on what could follow. He went so far as to feel that a false mark would vitiate the whole painting and compel him to begin again. When asked about two areas of blank canvas in one of his paintings, he replied:

> perhaps I will be able tomorrow to find the exact tone to cover up those spots. Don't you see, Monsieur Vollard, that if I put something there by guesswork, I might have to paint the whole canvas over starting from that point?[8]

Though the organization could be spontaneous in that each fresh application of paint would change it, there remained a logic which prevented it from becoming guesswork: the mind and the eye had to work together in order to perceive the particular tonal qualities the canvas required. Similarly in Williams' poem, whilst the eye snatches up seemingly random details, the mind sifts them, searching for a shape in which they achieve an appropriate readjustment of the evolving poem. Each of the sections from II to VIII picks up a different visual detail:

> I saw the tall probationers
> in their tan uniforms . . . .
>
> --and from basement entries
> neatly coiffed, middle aged gentlemen . . . .
>
> --and the sun, dipping into the avenues . . . .
>
> --and the worn
> blue car rails (like the sky!)
> gleaming among the cobbles! etc.

The disconnected visual impressions seem to strain for a logical association through being introduced by the repeated word '—and'. This has a similar effect upon the ear to that of a repeated brushstroke upon the eye; but in order that the reader should not tire of such a pattern and begin to accept it as too neat a means of unifying the poem (which would draw the poem away from 'organized sensation' towards formal predictability), sections IX to XIII break the pattern and adopt a more narrative tone with only section XIV briefly echoing the earlier method:

> —and the flapping flags are at
> half mast for the dead admiral.

The logic of the poem's organization lies in the tension between the developing formal order and the anarchic delight of the eye as it skips from detail to detail pressing the poet to discover new ways of representing his vision.

Cezanne once remarked 'the landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness'.[9] He responded to a reciprocity between himself and the landscape which made it impossible for him to identify himself as an entirely independent being; what he was - his thoughts, his feelings - stemmed from the intimacy he experienced with the things he saw. His knowledge of himself was his knowledge of the world in which he found himself. The technique of Williams' poem suggests he is aware of himself in a similar way: the landscape seems to act through his eye to create his identity. The 'I' of the opening two sections disappears through the following five, as if the immediacy of the poet's vision transcends his self-consciousness and submerges him under a welter of visual impressions. A persona begins to re-appear in the semi-dramatised 'me' and 'he' of the next three sections, but not until section XI does the poet speak again with a full sense of authority, suggesting

that by being drowned in an immanent vision the poet discovers his identity. When the poetic 'I' does recur it is to affirm the inadequacy of personal knowledge before the immediacy of seen things:

> Who knows the Palisades as I do
> knows the river breaks east from them
> above the city - but they continue south
> - under the sky - to bear a crest of
> little peering houses that brighten
> with dawn behind the moody
> water-loving giants of Manhattan.

Logical knowledge has given way to the perception of dawn's brightening and the mind's knowing taken outwards by the eye's reading of nature, with the result that to understand and to see become coincident. A similar outward movement, from the poet's person towards the things he perceives, is implied by the anticipation set up in the very first lines:

> the beauties of travel are due to
> the strange hours we keep to see them:

The colon after the word 'them' encourages the reader to expect that the poem will subjectively illustrate 'the beauties of travel', but by the close of the poem it becomes clear that what concerns Williams is a problem of communication. How can he get beyond the understanding of 'I' and into the life of other things and people ?

> All this -
> was for you, old woman.
> I wanted to write a poem
> that you could understand.

Such understanding is possible only so long as the 'continuity of perception' is preserved, keeping the mind and eye in touch with nature; to read nature and to experience her through reading the poem, are different aspects of a single activity.

A further parallel between Williams and Cezanne can be found in their attitude towards outline: the way Williams' eye reads the

world leads him to adopt a descriptive technique that dispenses with outline in the same way that Cezanne is led to paint 'contrasts' rather than 'line or modelling'. If what Berger says is true about visibility in the Renaissance tradition being regarded as 'a quality-in-itself of things', an external truth which the eyes report and record but do not affect or create, then Cezanne, by questioning the visible, would inevitably have come to distrust the idea of outline, for outline defines an object without reference to the objects it stands in relation to. Outline offers a conventional method of isolating one object from another which is misleading about visual experience if it is taken to imply that an object is contained within itself; an object's limits are in fact visually defined by the encroachment of other surfaces in front of and behind it. Since the world is composed of visual surfaces, the contrast between them came to seem more important to Cezanne than modelling by outline and perspective. He rejected 'light and dark' as irrelevant to painting (presumably because he wanted to avoid the representation of space and concentrate first upon the actual quality of tone on the surface of the canvas), and thought instead of the 'sensation of colour'. For Cezanne shadow, for instance, was not an outlined image thrown by an object but another tone of colour. And in the same way the repeated present particple in Williams' line 'the gay shadows dropping and dropping' draws attention to the shadows as effects in themselves, suggesting that he also thought of shadow as a real, not a negative, characteristic of vision.

The importance of colour to Williams is obvious in 'January Morning': smoky, tan, red, green, blue, white, brown, silver, pink, emerald, yellow, white snow, purple, gold, all appear in the poem, some of them more than once. A number of verbs also make explicit

reference to the sensation of colour: streaking, dirt-colored, fire bursting, gleaming, sparkling, brighten. And the clashing syllables of section X add to this a sense of the physical pleasure Williams could experience in the dancing of light over a scene brilliant with frosted colours:

> The young doctor is dancing with happiness
> in the sparkling wind, alone
> at the prow of the ferry! He notices
> the curdy barnacles and broken ice crusts
> left at the slip's base by the low tide
> and thinks of summer and green
> shell-crusted ledges among
> the emerald eel-grass!

The shape of the poem is determined by the contrast between these flashes of colour and between the thoughts they prompt him to. There is no commentary that seeks to offer an explanation of the juxtapositions that Williams makes. If there were it would have the effect of an 'outline' distracting from the visual experience of contrast which forms the stimulus for and the substance of the poem. There is no 'subject' to the poem since it models itself upon what happens in perception, including thought and reflection as realisations of the instant. In Cezanne's words, the 'model' is unimportant beside the intention to 'modulate'. The contrast between colours and tones makes one thing distinct from another by insisting on the relationship between them, just as the exact tone of a shade of grey can be altered according to whether it is juxtaposed with a shade darker or lighter than itself.

Although the separateness of each section of the poem is emphasised by Williams' use of roman numerals and hyphens, its continuity or 'modulation' is not hindered. Whilst the isolated blocks of verse contrast on the page, the poet's attention to what occurs around him remains fluid for the distinctness with which each thing is discriminated only serves to stress how it is linked to the

things that surround it. Consequently Williams can use the separateness of the blocks of verse to create continuity:

V

—and a young horse with a green bed-quilt
on his withers shaking his head:
bared teeth and nozzle high in the air!

VI

—and a semi-circle of dirt-colored men
about a fire bursting from an old
ash can,

VII

—and the worn
blue car rails (like the sky!)
gleaming among the cobbles!

Though a unit in itself describing an image selected from the total of possible focusses the eye might make, section VI can appropriately end with a comma for it is only perceived as a unit by virtue of the contrast between it and adjacent sections. The comma completes one unit of perception at the same time as it begins another, taking the reader on into the next section of the poem.

By such means Williams establishes that the poem's form is developed from the basis of 'organized sensation'. Later in the poem he can afford to speak directly of the satisfaction to be drawn from this method of juxtaposing visual impressions. He avoids doing this initially perhaps for fear of writing in too abstract a manner:

Long yellow rushes bending
above the white snow patches;
purple and gold ribbon
of the distant wood:
what an angle
you make with each other as
you lie there in contemplation.

('Contemplation' is a nicely ambiguous word that bridges the boundary between sight and thought: to 'contemplate' a painting, do you fix your eye upon it or focus your mind?) Williams is describing a pleasure that is implied throughout the poem: he

observes the angle that occurs between things to see how the relationship between them (and the way the relationship alters) measures their significance. A direct statement about what makes each visual feature important is impossible as that would reduce the poem to an elucidation of a principle rather than a modulation between things. The poet's experience has to be represented as a continual escape from definitive statements; it needs to be revealed elusively as a perpetually renewed encroachment upon the unprecedented. Williams was fascinated by the task of trying to make concrete the less than solid nature of imagination; he wanted to objectify something that was bound to be elusive since his experience taught him to be aware of more than he already knew. As he wrote to Harriet Monroe about the title of his poem 'Peace on Earth':

> isn't the art of writing titles as all art is, a matter of concrete indirections made as they are in order to leave the way clear for a distinct imaginative picture? To directly denote the content of a piece is, to my mind, to put an obstacle of words in the way of the picture. Isn't it better in imaginative work to imply war in heaven, for instance, by saying 'Peace on Earth' than it would be to say it flat out, 'War in Heaven'? (SL 24)

A direct denotation would be an obstacle between the imaginative colours, just as in a painting by Cezanne an outline around an object would obstruct the modulation of his tones. Williams' title invites the reader to discover meanings in the poem by deliberately contrasting with its apparent content. This discourages the reader from envisaging the poem as if it were restricted to the limits of the poet's imagination: instead it is left open for the reader to discover a relationship between the things it describes.

Williams also shared with Cezanne the conviction that 'it is necessary to be workmanlike in art', both with regard to reading and to writing:

I wanted to write a poem
that you would understand.
For what good is it to me
if you can't understand it?
But you got to try hard--

He took literally the notion of the poet as a 'workman'. The man who knew his materials and knew how to work them was an artist, no matter whether he was an Incan mason or a metal worker who

still chewing
picks up a copper strip
and runs his eye along it (CEP 368).

Poetry, as any job of work, involved making the most efficient use possible of the materials which came to hand. 'A poem is a small (or large) machine made out of words', Williams wrote in 1944: it has a mechanically 'perfect economy' (CLP 4). He thought of a poem as made in the original sense of the word in which a poet is a poem's maker. The poet's task, as Cezanne said of the painter, was 'to use materials crude and pure'. There could be no selectivity about what ought and what ought not to be used: anything was good material for poetry so long as it was treated according to its nature and not converted into a symbol or idealised. The old notion of a beauty that the artist extracted from nature like a precious ore had lost its validity. So Williams could reply to a critic in an imaginary conversation:

> what do you think beauty is, since you speak so glibly of the beautiful? You think it's a partial thing, something here against something 'ugly' there. Impossible. It's the whole thing at once. Or nothing.[10]

He repeated the idea in a letter to Marianne Moore:

> In too much refinement there lurks a sterility that wishes to pass too often for purity when it is anything but that. Coarseness for its own sake is inexcusable, but a Rabelasian sanity requires that the rare and the fine be exhibited as coming like everything from the dirt. There is no incompatability between them (SL 155-6).

The poem could show itself to be valuable the more it became, in Zukofsky's words, 'an inclusive object'.[11] It did not discriminate the

usable from the unusable since its material was the 'local' in all its aspects. So in 'January Morning' Williams includes both sophisticated people, the

> neatly coiffed, middle aged gentlemen
> with orderly moustaches

and the unsophisticated

> semicircle of dirt-colored men

without attempting to judge one group against the other. If a poet was a workman he needed to have a material sense of his medium. No less than Cezanne, Williams wanted to 'paint [or write] in accordance with the qualities of painting [or writing] itself', and he therefore insisted on the 'tactile qualities [of] the words themselves' (A 380): 'it's the words, the words we need to get back to, words washed clean' (SE 163). Writing needed to be 'placed . . . on a plane where it may deal unhampered with its own affairs' (SE 116).

In Al Que Quiere Williams was learning to do this; he uses words in both 'crude' and 'pure' ways, not with moral intent but because he is fascinated by the variety of qualitative effects that words can embody. Thus he can syncopate the rancour of an old woman's conversation:

> There's brains and blood
> in there--
> my name's Robitza!
> Corsets
> can go to the devil--
> and drawers along with them--
> What do I care! (CEP 150)

Or he can arrange words with an entirely different effect so that they rock gently amongst themselves with the motion of moored ships:

> The sea water! It is quiet and smooth here!
> How slowly they move, little by little trying
> the hawsers that drop and groan with their agony.
> Yes, it is certainly of the high seas they are talking.
> (CEP 128)

In neither case does it seem that Williams is seeking a primarily

'poetic' expression (he disliked the idea of some things being thought of as 'poetic' and others not, and argued with Stevens when he accused Williams of being 'anti-poetic').[12] He is interested first and foremost in what happens when he brings words together in different patterns and rhythms: the words come first. His knowledge of his materials and his willingness to use their qualities in various ways gives the poems their urgency, not any concept of what a poem should be or what forms it should adopt.

Williams' 'tactile' sense of words stemmed from his wish to draw nature and art into unity. He imagined with words as if they had a definite existence like paint on a canvas in order that the reader should conceive of the poem as an actual thing, part and parcel of the nature it imitated. This was one way in which he could make contact with the local, for if the poem could be apprehended as a real object it was necessarily involved in the reader's immediate environment: it participated in the world it reflected. The poet contacted the local by virtue of never having relinquished his engagement with it. Cezanne also wanted to draw nature and art into a unity. In conversation with Bernard he remarked:

> "the artist must conform to this perfect work of art. Everything comes to us from nature; we exist through it; nothing else is worth remembering." "Are you speaking of our nature?" asked Bernard. "It is to do with both," said Cezanne. "But aren't nature and art different?" "I want to make them the same," replied Cezanne.[13]

It was a concern common to those involved in Modernist work: the divorce of nature and art had to be surmounted. One contributor to a special issue of Camera Work devoted to '291' even went so far as to identify the gallery itself as a work of art because it was 'a living thing in relation to life'.[14]

The assumption that a work of art exists on the same terms as

any other living thing has since become almost axiomatic in some areas of American writing. Robert Duncan, for instance, has said of his work that:

> I evolve the form of the poem by an insistent attention to what happens in inattentions . . . for I strive in the poem not to make some imitation of a model experience but to go deeper and deeper into the experience of the process of the poem itself.[15]

The poem becomes real not because it seeks to copy nature or duplicate experience, but because it is itself an embodiment of actual experience which is realised as the reader reads. Like Cezanne's paintings, it is 'work which realises its progress'. The perceptions it enfolds do not exist apart from the reading process but evolve from the reader's developing awareness of the poem itself. As a result the poem discovers its directions in the process of being written.

In 'January Morning' Williams' words are constantly taking the risk of advancing into areas of uncertainty because he too is concerned with 'the process of the poem itself'. The 'real' that the poem 'realises' is the effect of the senses coming upon a world in which new and unpredicated things are always likely to come into view. The poem aims to create the 'beauties of travel' in its own development by realising through the words (the 'proper medium') the thrill of being taken out through the senses to discover the world in its shifting, **unstable** relationships. As Merleau-Ponty commented upon Cezanne, 'he did not want to separate the stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear; he wanted to depict matter as it takes on form'.[16] Williams places words on the page with the same aim: the stability of the 'water-loving giants of Manhattan' is realised within the 'flux of the seeing eye' (I 105). Though stable in themselves they are perceived as part of a shifting world that is always in the process of being

realised. This is one point where Williams might have disagreed with Cezanne for even though 'a man of letters' he did not think of himself as dealing in abstractions: he felt that a poet could and must 'concretise his sensations' with just as much determination as a painter.

For all this, however great the influence of the visual arts on the poems contained in Al Que Quiere, there remains an essential distinction between paint and words: the conceptless world of colour has a different effect upon the imagination from the significant world of words. Williams was well aware of this and did not attempt to imitate methods that were inappropriate to poetry. Although he studied the technique of various painters he learnt his own through understanding what words could and could not do. He realised that words can never have the same instantaneous presence as brushmarks of paint, for although the inkmarks on the page are real as paint as real, words always have a certain amount of conventional force. Furthermore, a poem evolves much more strictly through time than does a painting, though neither is entirely instantaneous since even a painter appreciates that the viewer's eye will take time to travel across a painting's surface. It is surely misleading then to suggest, as Dijkstra has done, that Williams wanted to imitate painting by removing the poem from time. Djikstra writes that a painting

> represents a moment of perception. It consists of a field of experience made instantaneously perceptible. It is a moment in time, suspended and lifted outside the sequence of time, rescued as it were for eternity.[17]

But, as Berger has argued, this seems to be more true of photography than of painting:

> a photograph, whilst recording what has been seen, always and by its nature refers to what is not seen. It isolates, preserves and presents a moment taken from a continuum. The power of a painting depends upon its internal references.[18]

The viewer of a painting needs time to assimilate these 'internal references'. For Cezanne, each brushstroke represented 'a moment of perception' and the completed picture a progress of the perceptions. As a result his paintings need to be gradually absorbed, their 'internal references' experienced, before they can communicate anything.

Dijkstra develops his argument by asserting that Williams felt the poem must be removed 'from the destructive power of time' for, as Williams wrote, 'all things enter into the singleness of the moment and the moment partakes of the diversity of all things'.[19] Yet experience is a continuous succession of such moments and their realisation can only be achieved from within time. Williams' essay, quoted by Dijkstra, makes this clear. It opens with the incessant ringing of the doctor's front-doorbell during a flu epidemic, 'RING, RING, RING, RING! There's no end to the ringing' (SE 91), and then proceeds to ring the changes on the theme of how to build a sequence from the interruptions and distractions of a doctor's routine. A broken succession of events gives the essay its structure: precisely because their brokenness is part of a succession and not isolated in time, Williams can make a unity from experience. 'And so starting, stopping, alighting, climbing, sitting - a singleness lights'. This is a 'singleness' that occurs within 'the destructive power of time' not, as Dijkstra has it, outside of time; and Williams intended that it should be so. Dijkstra can only support his view by distorting Williams' words and quoting him out of context. Describing the similarities of painting and poetry Dijkstra writes:

> The action represented by the original event has been caught, and because of that continues for ever - but outside of the destructive power of time, for "time is a storm in which we are all lost".[20]

This makes it appear that Williams regrets being lost in time and wants to escape from it. What Williams in fact wrote in his essay has an opposite effect:

> Time is a storm in which we are all lost. Only within the convolutions of the storm itself shall we find our directions (SE Preface).

Instead of attempting to write a poetry that would 'rescue' things 'for eternity', Williams wanted to create a poetry that would exist in the same way that any living thing exists. If we are lost in time it is only within time that we will find ourselves. The poem fails if it tries to remove itself from the conditions under which other things live. It uses the pace of the perceptions in order to keep in contact with those conditions, for truth to the perceptions implies adhering to the raw matter of experience as it impinges on consciousness.

Time is consequently as important in reading Williams' poems as it is in measuring events. The visual space of the page across which the eye must move, provides a means of controlling the pace at which a poem develops through time. Williams exploits this in a number of poems. For instance in 'Rain', the words imitate the rhythm of waterdrops falling from the eaves and their rhythm is then synchronised with the poet's thoughts:

> So my life is spent
> to keep out love
> with which
> she rains upon
> the world
> of spring
> drips
> so spreads
> the words
> far apart to let in
> her love. (CEP 75)

Williams always took care to make his poems 'look' right in this way (IWWP 27). In 'March', Williams makes a transcription of a Fra Angelico painting and uses the page to get the effect of pace that he wants:

> My second spring - painted
> a virgin - in a blue aureole
> sitting on a three-legged stool,
> arms crossed -
> she is intently serious,
> and still
>
> watching an angel
> with colored wings
> half kneeling before her -
> and smiling - the angel's eyes
> holding the eyes of Mary
> as a snake holds a bird's. (CEP 45)

The detachment of the words 'and still' creates time in which the reader can listen to the stillness occurring: a space is opened in which it becomes possible to see with the 'intently serious' eyes of the virgin. The reader's eyes are made to gaze into the page before it becomes clear what, in the poem, is being looked at, with the result that the angel is not simply depicted as being there but, through the temporal process of the poem, is discovered as if with the virgin's eyes.

The moment is a crucial one in the poem and relies for its effect on an accurate assessment of Williams' use of the page. If the gap is narrowed between the words 'and still' and 'watching an angel' the poem's meaning is altered. When Dijkstra comes to discuss the poem he does this, giving rise to what amounts to a misquotation even though he repeats the right words:

> she is intently serious,
> and still
> watching an angel
> with colored wings . . . etc.

The poem comprises five sections and if all of these are considered as part of a single movement through time, an accumulating body of

fluctuating rhythms, it becomes easier to see why Williams deliberately extends the pause after 'and still' and why Djikstra's quotation is therefore misleading. The poem embodies a theme, familiar in Williams' work, of the interaction between active and passive components in living things.[21] March is a month poised between the tentative opening of Spring,

> a matter of a few days
> only,--a flower or two picked
> from mud . . . and sky shining
> teasingly,

and the grip of winter,

> then closing in black
> and sudden, with fierce jaws.

Williams once spoke of language as being 'in its January' (I 280), looking, like Janus, in two directions at once. In this poem this antagonism is used to articulate the opposed tendencies of Spring's creative fertility and the destructive greed of the winds that 'in insatiable eagerness'

> whirl up the snow
> seeking under it-- . . .
> seeking flowers--flowers.

The lines describing Fra Angelico's painting and quoted by Djikstra, follow a section in which the poet has spun words relentlessly and angrily across the page:

> the storms from my calendar
> --winds that blow back the sand!
> winds that enfilade dirt!
> winds that by strange craft
> have whipt up a black army.

The urgency indicated by such writing requires the pause in the visual space following 'and still' in order to maintain the delicate balance upon which the poem draws, the balance between closed and open things, between violence and gentility, between destructive action and creative stillness. Dijkstra appears to

underestimate the importance of the visual space because he is unaware of, or undervalues, the extent to which Williams' technique is aimed at the 'realisation of sensation'. The reader has to feel the effect of the pause, experience the momentary calm it brings, in order to understand how the figure of the virgin relates to the stormy winds that Williams watches.

In his attempt to extend the analogy between the visual arts and Williams' poetry, Dijkstra writes of a 'non-sequential visual unit' or frozen image, apparently implying that any part of a poem can be studied in isolation, like an area of canvas, without damaging its significance:

> The poetic unit . . . . is outside the sequence of time in literature (narrative continuity), because, just as in a painting, the details can be examined in any order desired. In fact, the unit can be read sentence by sentence almost as effectively from the last line up to the first, without any real obstruction to its meaning.[22]

Whilst a poem might be read this way, and Williams even recommended it as a method of becoming familiar with a poem and examining its technique,[23] whatever meaning would be established would depend upon the new interrelations between the words, interrelations that would upset the exact significances the poet had put there. The poetic unit can only be realised with the eye and mind 'attendant upon the page' (P 126), alert to the lay out of the syllables and their evolving significance. Only by 'verbal sequences' (P 189) could Williams hope to enlarge the scope of his poetry. This meant that his words were bound, like his perceptions, to the sequence of time: 'the phase is supreme', he claimed (CLP 27). Poetry was more akin to music than painting in this respect for it developed through time: its measure was linked to a 'musical pace' by which it proceeded (SL 235). Again, this will be seen to have a correlate in visual perception: the idea of the 'non-sequential visual unit' perhaps

results from thinking of vision as arising from a sequence of isolated pictures projected instant by instant on the retina and not from what psychology seems now to suggest is more important, the fluid pattern of stimulation that varies with time (see chapter IV).

'All I try to do is understand something in its own natural colours and shapes', Williams wrote (SL 104). His interest in painting taught him to use his eyes in a way that made such understanding possible. He asked in 'The Wanderer' (a re-working of an early Keatsian epic), 'How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?' (CEP 3). One possible answer became, 'by rejecting the cliche of art as a reflecting surface altogether'. Rather than the world mirrored, Williams began to write of a world as it entered consciousness 'in its own natural colours'. In so doing he distanced himself from a way of seeing that, Berger argues, had been fundamental to European painting since the Renaissance:

> Alberti cites Narcissus when he sees himself reflected in the water as the first painter. The mirror renders the appearances of nature and simultaneously delivers them into the hands of man . . . . Man could observe nature around him on every side and be enhanced both by what he observed and by his own ability to observe. He had no need to consider that he was essentially part of that nature. Man was the eye for which reality had been made visual: the ideal eye, the eye of the viewing-point of Renaissance perspective. The human greatness of this eye lay in its ability to reflect and contain, like a mirror, what was.[24]

Once artists began to consider man as 'essentially part of that nature' he observed, then it became impossible to articulate his relation to the world as if he were its centre looking out on it arranged about him. Man was envisaged instead as continuous with the world he looked at. His sight fluidly engaged him to whatever he saw about him. He could no longer reflect upon the world but was obliged to recognise that his perceptions were part of his continuous experience of it: the way he saw fundamentally coloured the way he understood the world. Williams rejected the dictum

extracted from Shakespeare that the artist's aim should be 'to hold the mirror up to nature'. This was 'as vicious a piece of bad advice as the budding artist ever gazed upon. It is tricky, thoughtless, wrong' (A 291). The mirror was a false analogy for art since it implied that the artist's image was a reflection of a subject rather than a subject itself. The analogy of the mirror could only be useful if thought of, like a man, as a mechanism in which images were always forming, a place where moving rays of light intersected. The artist's painting or the poet's poem, did not contain images but was in its entirety a living image; it reflected how visibility occurred within the artist, how the truth of the world he saw resulted from his seeing of it.

When the novitiate poet of 'The Wanderer' observes the Passaic river, his eye is drawn to the 'backward and forward' movement of the water as it 'tortures itself within' (CEP 11). He is reticent, but finally, led on by the muse who accompanies him through the poem, he gives himself up to the river's flux and abandons his subjective soul to be 'borne off whitely under the waters'. He is no longer observing the river but is immersed in it, washed through by its incessant flow: he becomes part of the world's simultaneous giving and receiving, experiencing the interaction of opposed and compensating forces, instead of viewing them from without. Like the surface of a mirror he stands between the object and the image of it which his vision continually embodies. His eyes do not simply record the objects looked at but provide a means of knowing and discovering what objects are always becoming. The poet's experience is consequently a perpetually 'new wandering' (CEP 12) in which each moment holds the promise of a New World to be contacted.

Notes to Chapter II:

1. Berger, Selected Essays, pp.191 - 192.
2. Uncollected poem on Cezanne published in the Nation, vol. 92 (13 May 1961), p.416 and reprinted in William Carlos Williams : Penguin Critical Anthologies, ed. Tomlinson, Penguin 1972, p.283.
3. See Imaginations pps.111, 117 and 134.
4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Primacy of Perception, ed. J. M. Edie, Northwestern UP. 1964, p.187.
5. Cezanne in Perspective, ed. J. Wechsler, Englewood Cliffs 1975, pp.42 - 43.
6. Berger, p.194.
7. Berger, p.194.
8. Wechsler, p.64.
9. Berger, p.194.
10. Introduction to Sidney Salt's Christopher Columbus, quoted by James Guimond in his The Art of William Carlos Williams : A Discovery and Possession of America, Illinois UP. 1968, p. 130.
11. Zukofsky, Prepositions, p.15.
12. The disagreement arose from the preface Stevens contributed to Williams' Collected Poems 1921 - 1931 in which he wrote of Williams 'the anti-poetic is his spirit's cure. He needs it as a naked man needs shelter'. But their opinions had always been divergent; see, for instance, what Williams had to say in his Preface to Kora in Hell (SE 12 - 13).
13. Berger, pp.194 - 195.
14. Camera Work, ed. Green, p.292.
15. Robert Duncan, The Truth and Life of Myth, Sumac 1968, p.70.
16. Berger, p.195.
17. Dijkstra, Hieroglyphics of a New Speech, pp.52 - 53.
18. Berger, pp.180 - 181.
19. Dijkstra, p.53.
20. Dijkstra, p.54.
21. Compare 'To All Gentleness' (CLP 24) or 'Lear' (CLP 237).
22. Dijkstra, p.63.
23. Dijkstra, p.63.
24. Berger, p.146.

...

III

The image and the 'energizing force of imagination'

Once Williams had come to feel that seeing the world entailed an involvement in it for which the analogy between art and a mirror was inadequate, it naturally followed that an 'image' which gave an illusory reflection of the world would seem to him to betray that involvement. He wanted his poems to be images that would actively embody his experience rather than reveal it at second-hand. In Spring and All (1923) he remarked upon the 'use of the word "like" or that "evocation" of the "image" which served us for a time': the method that had interested the Imagist poets ten years earlier had been misused and had become, for Williams, a barren formula. 'Its abuse is apparent. The insignificant "image" may be "evoked" never so ably and still mean nothing' (I 101). The images art employed should not be thought of as reflections or 'evocations' of the world. To have assumed this would have implied that art comprised a secondary reality which tried to follow point for point a different original object. Williams desired instead an art which would participate in reality itself and which, being free of the obligations of representation, would exist uniquely as a creation in itself. Shakespeare provided the prime example of an artist who could achieve this. Though he might create a dramatic character who could offer what Williams felt to be the 'pernicious advice' that art was indeed 'about holding the mirror up to nature' (I 121), his poetic practice was different:

> his buoyancy of imagination raised him NOT TO COPY . . . but to equal, to surpass [his fellows] as a creator of knowledge, as a vigorous, living force above their heads (I 122).

Williams had observed such a 'living force' in the work of a number of painters who, by transplanting the elements of observed

reality directly to their canvasses, had gone beyond the Impressionists' attempt to register the transient effects of light. Instead of using paint to represent things, things were made to represent themselves. In Europe Picasso and Braque had ripped up bits of newspaper and stuck them to their pictures; Gris had glued pieces of wine labels and theatre tickets to his canvasses. In America they were followed by painters such as Arthur Dove whose painting, 'Gone Fishing', was composed from pieces of real denim and included a real rod and line. By wrenching actual objects from their everyday context and forcing them into the artifice of their pictures, these painters had created a new reality. More important than that it should reflect an original object, a picture needed to <u>be</u> an original object, filled with its own 'living force'. The invitation was being made to think of the canvas as an extension or addition to the world the viewer already knew rather than its reflection. In order to be real in itself the painted image had to be something other than the imitative likeness given by a mirror. Viewers could be made to see this if they were encouraged to use their senses (principally the eyes, though a knowledge of the textures of things meant that the sense of touch was involved too) to observe a picture, just as they would when faced with any object of attention. Williams wanted words to be real in the same vivid way: poetry was 'the perfection of new forms as additions to nature' (I 140), the poem 'a live thing' with buds upon it (CEP 57). The 'principal move in imaginative writing today' he argued, was 'that away from the word as symbol toward the word as reality' (SE 107). Inevitably, a poetic image that was used for 'evocative' effect seemed alien to Williams since it returned writing to a symbolic mode.

The word 'image' as applied to poetry has a number of ambiguities. In what sense can a poetic image be thought of as a visual entity? What is Pound describing when he writes that the language can be energized through the 'casting of images upon the visual imagination'?[1] Part of the ambiguity stems from the use of the word 'image' to describe a graphic representation, so that the poetic image tends to be envisaged as something that is necessarily static as a painting is. There is an important distinction to be made here. Poetry and painting are similar in that both mediums have iconographic elements: like the design of a painting, the lay-out of a poem makes a significant design on the surface of the page. In this sense a poetic image <u>is</u> pictorial. But, more importantly, a poetic image is also something that is constituted in time, an effect of the imagination which occurs as the poem evolves. This is not an aspect of the poem as an object, but an aspect of the perception of it as an object. P. N. Furbank has attributed what he calls the 'doubt' about the literary use of the word 'image' to the difficulty of seeing how it is possible to square it 'as a synonym for metaphor' with the 'natural' sense as meaning 'a likeness, a picture, or a simulacrum'.[2] This could never have formed a 'natural' sense of the word to Williams since he equates 'likeness' with a remoteness from nature. Yet he clearly did think of the poem as in some sense 'a picture' for he once described a poem as 'a canvas of broken parts'.[3] Indeed, many of the poems he wrote in the decade following the Armory Show demonstrate the feeling that Pound ascribed to 'that sort of poetry which seems as if sculpture or painting were just forcing itself into words'.[4] 'The Great Figure' (CEP 230), for instance, had this quality so compellingly that Demuth was led to reverse the process

and force the words back into paint. Furbank's difficulty derives from his insistence that a picture must necessarily be an equivalent for 'a likeness' or 'a simulacrum'. With this emphasis he confuses the iconographic sense of the word 'image' with the vivid effects of the imagination in registering images as a poem is perceived.

These ambiguities are enhanced by the use of the word 'image' in optical theory. It is often assumed that the retina of the eye, like a pin-hole camera, receives a constant stream of inverted pictures of the world, each one of which may be described as a 'visual image'. This is deceptive, however, as the visual psychologist J. J. Gibson has attempted to show. He rejects the notion of a retinal 'picture' on the grounds that 'structure as such, frozen structure, is a myth, or at least a limiting case'. He argues instead that, since 'invariants of structure do not exist except in relation to variants', psychologists should be attending to the flowing pattern of stimulation.[5] The iconographic sense of the word 'image' is thus irrelevant to visual perception in his opinion; the eye perceives by registering the variations in structure that continually occur in the visual world rather than by making an aggregate of still pictures and comparing them. Visual perception in this view derives from a continuous awareness of relative change in the structure of surfaces of the world rather than from a comparison of instantaneous glimpses. If this is taken as an analogy for the way in which the poetic image works through the imagination, the anomalies Furbank describes disappear. 'Metaphor', with its implicit sense of change in form (meta - change; phor [pherein] - form), becomes appropriate to the visual suggestions of the word 'image'. As Herbert Schneidau has commented upon Pound's concept of the image: 'it was not "pictures in verse" that Pound wanted,

but something with the hard-edged quality, the sharp definition, that the visual sense furnishes.'[6]

This stress upon the perceptual image rather than the pictorial image can equally well be applied to Williams. Essentially the same distinction forms the crux of Zukofsky's remark that in Williams' poem 'Della Primavera' 'the advance in the use of the image has been from a word structure paralleling French painting (Cezanne) to the same structure in movement'.[7] Zukofsky's statement implies that the 'advance' in Williams' technique is from a static understanding of the image - the 'picture' of which Furbank writes - to a fluid one. It is as if the altering structures of vision have suggested to Williams a poetic method. The poem can imitate the processes of perception by refusing to make use of words to describe a world with a fixed structure.

Lights
speckle
El Greco
lakes
in renaissance
twilight
with triphammers

which pulverize
nitrogen
of old pastures
to dodge
motorcars
with arms and legs--

The aggregate
is untamed
encapsulating
irritants
but
of agonized spires
knits
peace (CEP 262-263)

Each line sets up a number of possibilities within which the poem might develop: 'Lights' encourages the reader to anticipate a verb. This duly arrives in the next line: 'speckle'. Yet the further anticipation that a noun will follow the verb (what do the lights

speckle? a window? the sky?) is upset by the apparently irrelevant mention of 'El Greco'. Williams has deliberately exploited the reader's expectation of a structure to frustrate it and thereby to suggest an alternative structure. If now the reader attempts to come to terms with the dislocation that has occurred by assuming that the name El Greco is the beginning of a parenthetical statement such as 'El Greco painted like this', this new anticipation is further disrupted by the next line, 'lakes', which seems to have no connection with the painter. Instead it seems to be the noun that had been expected after 'speckle'. Again the anticipated structure has been moved in a different direction; 'El Greco' starts to look like an erratic line that has splintered the poem's surface. Yet the words 'in rennaisance' disturb this idea too by hinting back to the painter without, however, offering any explanation as to why he is mentioned. It is left to the reader to piece together the pertinence of El Greco from the angularity of the words and from the elongated figure hinted at in the poem's last lines:

> where bridge stanchions
> rest
> certainly
> piercing
> left ventricles
> with long
> sunburnt fingers.

The structure of the poem stems from its persistent refusal to satisfy an anticipated pictorial image that is constantly at the point of shaping itself in the reader's mind; the poem is characterised instead by the way it changes in direction. This does not amount to a disintegration through fragmentation but an 'aggregate' of 'untamed' elements which together, like the constantly varied stimuli that fall on the retina, form a perception of the world. The fragments are made to 'knit' in the process of reading the poem.

Williams never involved himself deeply in the Imagist movement and eventually came to feel that it lacked 'formal necessity',[8] although some of his poems do show its influence.[9] There are, nonetheless, ways in which he was clearly sympathetic to Pound whose attempts to sharpen poetic practice effectively created the idea of Imagism. Interestingly, the word 'image' occurs quite commonly in Williams' last book of poems, Pictures from Brueghel, whilst his suspicion of the term in the early twenties led him to avoid it altogether; he preferred to write about the 'Imagination' than the 'image'. His distrust of 'image' in Spring and All had some justification for he was writing eleven years after Pound's Imagism manifesto had been conceived, by which time the concept of the image as it had been originally defined had undergone considerable dilution. Pound (in conjunction with H.D. and Richard Aldington) had described an image as 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time',[10] but by 1917, largely due to the influence of Amy Lowell, Pound could state bluntly that many of those who 'followed' the Imagist 'school' ignored its principles and had turned it into a method 'as verbose as any of the flaccid varieties that preceded it'.[11] Even so the essential features of Pound's definition are consistent with Williams' understanding of the imagination. Both men wanted a language which would be direct in order to animate, or make present (which I take to be one sense of Pound's word 'presents'), an intellectual and emotional complex. Pound wanted to counter the blurred effects of 'evocative' images just as Williams opposed the literary habit of 'copying' in order to dispense with 'evocation'. Both poets wanted to create poems with 'living force'. To Williams it seemed that there was a barrier 'between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with

the world' which needed to be broken down in order to 'intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live' (I 88-89). The imagination - to which he addressed Spring and All - could make such a contact possible since it embodies the same transfusing current as runs through all things. It discovers a 'possibility of movement in our fearful bedazzlement with some concrete and fixed present' (SE 117-118) which, by virtue of keeping time with existence, locates itself within that present.

Pound also implies that the image, like Williams' imagination, in being shaped within 'an instant of time' is a part of the reader's present experience just as it has been a part of the poet's. It does not occupy an eternally suspended present but associates itself with the flow of time. This is made apparent by some of Pound's later comments on the image where the 'possibility of movement' is stressed more strongly. In his Vorticist phase he described an image as:

> a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.[12]

Rather than arrest the flow of time the image occurs within it, focussing energies that constantly rush in and out of the poem. The addition of the phrase 'in an instant of time' to his original definition encouraged a misunderstanding which Pound took pains to correct when he saw the directions that Imagism was taking:

> The defect of earlier Imagist Propaganda was not in misstatement but in incomplete statement. The diluters took the handiest and easiest meaning, and thought only of the STATIONARY image. If you can't think of imagism or phanopoeia as including the moving image, you will have to make a really needless division of fixed image and praxis or action.[13]

Neither he nor Williams was trying to understand the imagination's force in terms of a static pictorial equivalent for something. They were both looking for a poetry that would distil movement in imitation of the imagination's contribution to experience as an

accompanying force that constantly prompts, creates and discovers.

Yet Pound's concept of the image does differ in some ways from Williams' understanding of the imagination. Pound pays greater attention to the image as a tool of argument; the vortex into which ideas are constantly rushing is the embryo of a form which, when he expanded it in the Cantos, allowed him to articulate his opinions and visions of a civilized humanity. Williams, however, 'early recognized the futility of acquisitive understanding' (I 115). Writing intended for some ulterior and dogmatic purpose or designed to enforce an author's convictions, was a betrayal of both man and writing: 'Writing is not a means . . , man is the means, writing is the word' (RI 175). He wished to write in order to refresh words made stale by 'the dead weight of logical burdens' (SE 115), not to argue with words as Pound sometimes could; he preferred to try to persuade the reader by freeing the words from argument and laying them on the page, like a painter's brushmarks, in bursts of colour that sprang from the imagination's 'creative force'. Nonetheless, Williams described the effect of the imagination in much the same terms as Pound described the effect of an image. Whilst Williams could experience a sense of 'enlargement before great or good work', a feeling of 'expansion' (I 107), Pound wrote of how an image could create a 'sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art'.[14] And just as Pound thought of the image as a vortex brought to life in the instant of apprehension, so Williams conceived of the imagination as a composing force that patterned verbal energies in such a way as to involve the reader in the continual creativity of the present: 'When we name it, life exists' (I 115). He desired a 'quickening of the sense' in which the eye, 'measuring itself by the world it inhabits' and 'by aid of the

imagination' (SA 105), would see things in a new light. Pound similarly addressed his readers without concern for their taste but aiming to sharpen their perceptions: as a Russian correspondent remarked in response to one of his poems, 'I see, you wish to give people new eyes, not to make them see some new particular thing'.[15]

This comment implies an important distinction: neither Pound nor Williams was concerned with simply trying to get the reader to see something particular. It was more important that the reader should be taught to see afresh; the writer's images were not so much distillations of an experience the reader might reach through the words, as focusses for the reader's attention that would stir new perceptions. Whilst the reader and the writer shared a 'creative force', it was not simply a matter of a transfer taking place from one to the other. The writer's experience - his awareness of the visibility of things occuring within him - leads him to feel a unity with the world which is perceived in images. Being part of the world, the writer is filled with the same creative force that he observes, and as it acts through his imagination he is led to create new objects, whether poems or prose. These will embody the creative force also by existing, not as commentaries on or copies of the writer's experience, but as original creations. The reader perceives this new poetic object rather than vicariously enjoying the poet's perceptions. Consequently, while the reader's experience is alive in the same way that the writer's is alive, reader and writer do not experience the same thing. They do, however, share a heightened awareness of the world through recognising the creative force in their own perceptions. This makes a new relationship between reader and writer; rather than the poet acting - in Wordsworth's words - as a 'man speaking to men' who persuades by convincing the reader of

the truth that he feels in himself, the poet and reader are now equals in a world that the poet's art shows to be constantly making itself. Williams makes this clear in the opening passage of Spring and All:

> In the imagination, we are from henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classical caress of author and reader. We are one. Whenever I say, 'I' I mean also, 'you'. And so, together, as one, we shall begin (I 89).

The images thrown out by the imagination are provoked in the course of reading and writing (hence Williams' parenthesis, 'so long as you read'); they are not pictures which the poet has frozen into the prose's structure in order to illustrate his meaning, for his meaning always awaits the reader's alert attention before it can be realised.

Thus when Furbank attempts to define an image by asking 'what is it a picture of?'[16] he is asking the wrong question. The image is not so much a picture, as a consequence of the clarity with which the poet perceives and creates a new object for the reader in turn to perceive. It is concurrent with the perceptions rather than an explanation of them. If the poet is now the mirror rather than his art, then the image is what is constantly formed in him as he sees the world; it cannot be a 'comparison' or 'likeness' since it is necessarily always evolving. Williams avoided searching for likenesses because he did not wish 'to set values on the word being used, according to presupposed measures' but aimed to 'write down that which happens at that time' (I 120). All that can be achieved by finding images that act as comparisons is a widening of the gap between art and reality, for the two elements of a comparison, however closely they are made to approximate to one another, can finally stress only their differences. Williams wanted to make a synthesis of his imagination's inventions and the objects of perception, and so sought a version of the image which would 'knit'

diverse elements into a whole during the course of reading: 'the work of the imagination [is] not 'like' anything but transfused with the same forces which transfuse the earth' (I 121). This transfusing force guarantees the reality of the poem by linking it to the creative principle which is immanent in the world. The poem is a new creation which adds to nature, not simply an artifice; it erases the boundary between the artificial and the natural. 'Composition is in no essential an escape from life. In fact if it is so it is negligible to the point of insignificance' (I 101). Writers such as Homer made excellent compositions <u>because</u> of their identity with life; they did not copy nature but used her creative impulse to produce work with such original vigour that it acquired an actual existence, 'as sappy as the leaf of the tree' (I 101). Thus the work of the imagination was to make realities rather than deceptive fictions. 'The only realism in art is of the imagination' and only by the 'invention of new forms' (I 111) could art avoid lapsing into the falsities of illusionism. This led Williams to the central claim of <u>Spring and All</u> that

> we are beginning to discover the truth that in great works of the imagination A CREATIVE FORCE IS SHOWN AT WORK MAKING OBJECTS WHICH ALONE COMPLETE SCIENCE AND ALLOW INTELLIGENCE TO SURVIVE (I 112).

The initiative for such an assertion derived in large measure from Williams' interest in the work of Juan Gris. In his last years Gris developed a method of constructing a picture from what were initially purely abstract patches of paint; these he took as a point of departure and attempted to create a picture by harmonising them with more representative details. The abstract element formed the foundation upon which the picture was gradually built. This must have appealed to Williams as it treated the artist's materials - his pigments - as primary, in the way that he wished to treat words.

Only once the primacy of the pigments had been established did Gris paint further: 'a substance should not become a colour but a colour should become a substance'.[17] This gave Gris a means of ensuring that the picture avoided the trap of mere copying. The pigments represented themselves first and foremost: their allusions to the world by which the viewer and the canvas are surrounded, he made secondary to their actual existence as pigment, as pure paint. He perhaps prompted Williams to a distrust of an art that pursued likenesses, for he did not believe that 'the faithful copy of an object' could ever become 'a picture': in possessing no distinctive structure that would mark it apart from nature as an original creation, it could only remain 'the copy of an object and never a subject'[18] in itself. Consequently, he spoke of deliberately suppressing 'likeness' in his paintings:

> I have preferred to bring the various elements together more directly, simply by showing their connection and dispensing with any intermediary, for the sake of 'creating an image'.
>
> An image is a pure creation of the spirit. It is not born of comparison but through bringing together two more or less remote realities.[19]

The sympathy between Gris and Williams extended to their understanding of how the poem or painting managed to include the larger reality beyond the surface of the page or canvas. Gris once summarised a lecture on painting by saying that

> the essence of painting is the expression of certain relationships between the painter and the outside world. . . , a picture is the intimate association of these relationships with the limited surface that contains them.[20]

If the words 'poetry' and 'image' are substituted for 'painting' and 'picture', the result is a close approximation to what Williams means by imagination. The images that shape themselves through the imagination are not simulacra but the expression of 'certain relationships between the [poet] and the outside world'.

The poem 'The Desolate Field' (CEP 196) illustrates this:

> Vast and grey, the sky
> is a simulacrum
> to all but him whose days
> are vast and grey, and--
> In the tall, dried grasses
> a goat stirs
> with nozzle searching the ground.
> --my head is in the air
> but who am I..?
> And amazed my heart leaps
> at the thought of love
> vast and grey
> yearning silently over me.

The verbal simulacrum reflected in the words 'vast and grey' self-consciously points to the inadequacy of the poet's searching for an identity between self and the world by trying to make the words fuse an inner feeling with an outer phenomenon. The relationship between the poet and the world cannot be determined by saying that the sky <u>looks like</u> what the poet feels. Since they do not copy anything the words can become no more than a likeness or simulacrum of themselves, drawing attention to the poem's 'limited surface'. The anticipation stirred by the third line is frustrated by the repetition in the fourth, which leads the reader back to the first line with the feeling that, after all, words are only the pigment of language and a poem is only a construction from such pigments. But, as Juan Gris says, there <u>is</u> a relationship between the painter (poet) and the outside world. Having drawn the reader into the poem's own limited surfaces, the words then immediately fix upon a feature of the 'outside world' without making any effort to grade the transition: the hyphen serves simply to emphasise the directness with which Williams aligns, like Gris, 'two more or less remote realities'. There is indeed a connection, which the reader can construct - the goat searches the ground just as Williams grubs through the words in pursuit of an identity they refuse to

grant him - but it is unneccessary to do so. Williams avoids such a likeness in order to prevent the reader getting deflected from the direct knowledge supplied by perception into the secondary knowledge supplied by a comparison. By comparing, the reader can only hope to <u>think</u> about experience rather than, as Pound required, 'know[ing] it directly'. The poet has lost the capacity to reflect self-consciously upon his experience, and cannot answer his own question 'who am I..?'. But it does not matter: the question is not relevant for Williams no longer needs to identify himself in isolation from the environment. An awareness of his relation to the environment and of his existence amongst nature's creative force is at the root of his joy: it is not the responsiveness of some inner core identified as 'self'. Thus he can return to the words 'vast and grey', and in a moment of 'enlargement', release that joy by recognising that, as the imagination delivers the words, he is interwoven with the fabric of nature, attuned to her 'yearning'. The words 'vast and grey' form an image in two ways: firstly by asserting their own existence apart from the poet as objects of perception, and secondly, in the pattern Williams weaves from them (what Gris calls the process of 'modification by the artist'),[21] by making explicit a larger relationship to the reality which extends beyond them and within which they occur.

The affinities between Gris and Williams indicate the inappropriateness - as far as Williams' work is concerned - of Furbank's suggestion that the word 'image' 'carries with it irrelevant implications from painting and sculpture'.[22] For both the painter and the poet, an image provides a source of knowledge of the world: as an object it forms a stimulus to the senses, whilst as an imaginative invention it is a concomitant of the perceptions. Just

as Cezanne, in the process of painting, was constantly seeing afresh how his canvas had to develop, so the viewer looking at the final image, is made aware of how perception is a constant reassessment of the visible due to the way the eye is made to travel across the canvas: the image is created as the viewer looks. Similarly for the reader of Williams' poems, the image is created in the course of reading. To use the word 'image', then, to link 'metaphor' with 'picture' need not create the muddle that Furbank describes. Like Cezanne's way of seeing, the poet's envisioning of the world is a process of continual interpretation or, as Williams put it, a 'constant revaluation of its [the poem's] own materials'. Denise Levertov describes the process this way:

> The poet does not see and then begin to search for words to say what he sees: he begins to see and at once begins to say or sing, and only in the action of verbalization does he see further. His language is not more dependent on his vision than his vision is upon his language.[25]

A reader may 'see' a poem's meaning in that its images occur - or are envisaged - in the process of reading. An image creates the effect, familiar to any reader of poetry, of a unique insight; it allows the reader to see the world in a new light. Hence the impossibility of ever satisfactorily paraphrasing a poem, for a different arrangement of the words inevitably destroys the essential image. Creeley, borrowing from Whitehead's idea of the 'event' as the fundamental of cognition, has stressed how a poem is the occasion of something by using the term 'event' to describe it. The muddle Furbank is troubled by derives from applying the idea of the image as a frozen structure to the effect of a poem that presents itself as a 'structure in movement'. Once a picture is thought of in terms of the way it is perceived - thought of as an event - the anomalies between poetry and painting evaporate.

Pound developed his ideas about the image by writing an account of Imagism from the inside which attempted to make explicit the kind of perception that an image could stir. He firstly makes clear that the implications from sculpture and painting are relevant to the image by stating that Imagism had a common source 'with the new pictures and the new sculpture'.[24] The image is 'the poet's pigment'; like an artist's paint it presents the viewer with a conceptless universality which, 'through the indecisive murmur of colours', creates a set of actual presences rather than illusions. Pound emphasises the distinction that Williams reiterates in Spring and All: the artist 'should depend of course on the creative not upon the mimetic or representational part in his work'.[25] An image is made from live energies which are free of preconceived intentions such as might back up or illustrate 'some creed or some system of ethics or economics'. Conformity to 'the conveniences of a preconceived code of ethics' amounted to a lie in Pound's mind just as much as art-as-mirror in Williams' mind formed 'a sham nature, a "lie"' (I 121). 'An image is real because we know it directly'[26]; it cannot be symbolic since symbolism deals in 'a sort of allusion' through associations which displace the primary reality of the image itself. In sympathy with this, Williams recognised the 'vagueness' of the habit of 'association' and insisted instead that 'the word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole - aware - civilized' (I 102).

Pound's reference to the image as 'the poet's pigment' is not purely metaphoric. He understands an arrangement of words as the embodiment of an emotional 'colour' that can be expressed in only those words and in only that arrangement: like Whitehead's definition of an event, the poem is 'a grasping into unity of a pattern of aspects' whose uniqueness gives

> the reason why an event can be found only just where it is and how it is - that is to say, in just one definite set of relationships. For each relationship enters into the essence of the event; so that, apart from that relationship, the event would not be itself.[27]

The poem is itself because in the same way it articulates 'one definite set of relationships' through its verbal colour. These relationships cannot be altered without marring the poem or spoiling its colour: they define the poem's nature. In a difficult discussion of the genesis of his poem In a Station of the Metro, Pound tried to clarify this:

> Three years ago in Paris I got out of a 'metro' train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another . . . and I tried all day to find words for what this had meant to me. . . . And that evening as I went home along the Rue Raynouard, I was still trying and I found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation . . . not in speech, but in little splotches of colour. It was just that - a 'pattern' or hardly a pattern, if by 'pattern' you mean something with a 'repeat' in it. But it was a word, the beginning, for me, of a language in colour.[28]

This 'colour' is not something borrowed from painting in order to illustrate something else about the different medium of language; it is a term which Pound intends should describe a fundamental quality of the words themselves. They do not attempt to describe the beauty of the faces he saw; indeed, the faces are not mentioned in the poem. Pound wants a verbal colour which is appropriate to their beauty but which belongs only to the words and to his immediate perception of them. He appears to be thinking of the words as if, by virtue of the pattern in which they occur to him, they were part of a living reality just as colour is part of the normally-sighted person's world. They cross the boundary between described experience and experience itself and become living presences.

Pound is writing with an unusual hesitancy here as if aware that he is ascribing to words an immediate relation to things that lies outside their assumed province. He writes 'I do not mean that I found

words' and yet goes on to qualify this, claiming 'it was a word . . . a language in colour'. This is the difficult point at which words, which always hold a degree of conventional significance, transcend convention and articulate some new perception; their objective existence as words is composed into a 'pattern' by the creative force of the poet's imagination so that they become the embodiment of an unprecedented experience:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.[29]

Despite its apparently simple shape, the poem was achieved with difficulty over a long period, being gradually pared down from an original poem of more than thirty lines. Yet Pound remained confident that the sense of the words as 'splotches of colour' (a phrase suggested to him by a canvas of Kandinsky's) had allowed him to discover the expression or 'equation' he had been searching for. He was convinced of this to the extent that when he first published the poem he made it imitate 'splotches of colour' by arranging it on the page in the form of verbal daubs:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
> Petals on a wet, black bough.[30]

For Pound, the words seem to convey an intellectual and emotional immediacy sufficient to stretch the language to an entirely new relation with things. The words lose what Williams called 'the dead weight of logical burdens' (SE 115) and become perceptible realities which the reader hears and sees, and which, as Pound accidentally discovered in the Rue Raynouard, correspond to his experience; they satisfy him because they extend his understanding. 'Any mind that is worth calling a mind must have needs beyond the existing categories of language',[31] Pound claimed. The imagination, by inventing a new verbal configuration, calls forth an image which extends the 'existing

categories of language' and creates an original expression. Pound felt that an image was - as Williams felt the imagination to be - 'an actual force comparable to electricity or steam' (SA 120). Consequently the techniques of both poets had much in common. For example, the frantic energies struggling to escape 'while the imagination strains' in a poem such as Williams' 'To Elsie' (CEP 270), compose images that both satisfy Williams' desire to release a 'creative force' and also exemplify Pound's dictum that 'the image is itself the speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language'.[32]

> . . . 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 (CEP 272)

When the language has seemingly slipped out of control, beyond the bounds of 'familiar formulations', it gathers momentum of itself to make 'isolate flecks' of speech which stand in an original relation to the poet's experience and so make it vivid.

Pound's experience in the metro is impossible to articulate within already 'formulated language'; the unique beauty of the faces he sees demands that he brings a new form into existence to accomodate it. Since he believed that 'every emotion and every phase of emotion has some toneless phrase, some rhythm-phrase to express it'[33], the formal expression of any emotion was bound to be as unique as the emotion itself. His comments make it clear that to discover the expression he wanted meant a simultaneous discovery of the form in

which he wanted it. He was granted 'a word, the beginning . . . of a language' at the same time as he received a 'pattern'. (By 'pattern' I take Pound to mean something distinct from the regularity of a Greek key motif with its internal logic, and more like something proportioned to correspond - not necessarily to be congruent with - a second object.) The presentation of the image inevitably involves the discovery of a body of words which, released by the creative force of the imagination from previous formulations, becomes a creation in itself. As with Williams' technique in 'The Agonized Spires', the form of the poem is dictated from within the experience which generates it.

Williams was well aware that this attitude to composition invited an art of idiosyncratic novelty that ran the risk of sacrificing its ability to communicate. He wanted to write poems that the reader could understand but knew that the reader would have to 'try hard' and that in some cases - as, for instance, the improvised sections of Kora - the work would prove 'unintelligible to a stranger' (IWWP 39). Whilst originality was essential, the imagination's creations were constantly under the constraint of the 'formal necessity' to find an objective shape that would make them intelligible to more than the poet. He could recommend licensing the subconscious but insisted that if the writing was to have a value the words needed to be treated with care:

> 'Forget all rules, forget all restrictions, as to taste, as to what ought to be said, write for the pleasure of it.' But after this 'anarchic phase' comes a further phase of discovering the valuable and discarding the redundant: '[the poet] has written with his deepest mind, now the object is there and he is attacking it with his most recent mind, the fore-brain, the seat of memory and ratiocination, the so-called intelligence'.[54]

The form in which Williams expressed himself had to evolve from his experience as a unique creation and yet he was bound to acknowledge the reader's expectations based on already 'formulated language'.

He could only do this and remain true to the originality of his experience by making a positive virtue out of the process of dismantling the language as it was received: he created by inventing fresh means of undermining the language. 'A break through all preconception of poetic form' could be achieved when the poet realised that 'destruction and creation are simultaneous' (SE 121). The 'antagonistic cooperation' between things meant that to perceive how an object isolated itself from other objects meant also to perceive how it shared in 'The universality of things' (CEP 256). In the same way, the more Williams' poems isolated themselves from 'formulated language' the more they made contact with the alienated 'local'.

He could base his technique upon the simultaneity of destruction and creation because he found it to be true to his senses. In 'The Rose', a poem derived from Juan Gris' 1914 collage 'Roses', Williams writes about the line which he sees defining each 'petal's edge'. To draw a line is to do two things: on the one hand it is to create a boundary that keeps things apart (for example, the equator as it divides the two hemispheres of the earth), on the other it is to establish a link between things (for example, a telephone line which is also described as 'a connection'). Thus, whilst Williams can look at the rose and see how

> each petal ends in
> an edge

it is as a result of seeing that definite line that the possibility of its extension occurs:

> But if it ends
> the start is begun

He can then see the line stretching out to embrace the rest of the universe:

From the petal's edge a line starts
that being of steel
infinitely fine, infinitely
rigid penetrates
the Milky Way
without contact - lifting
from it - neither hanging
nor pushing -

The fragility of the flower
unbruised
penetrates space. (CEP 250)

Similarly, the more Williams' images defined themselves apart from him as aspects of a new objective reality on the page with its own definite edges, the more he freed his readers to realise their own live perceptions.

As a poet Williams wanted the 'skill' and 'ability' to register the 'unity of understanding which the imagination gives' and to direct it into the creation of new realities (I 120). Yet the 'moving force' which frees consciousness has a 'largeness' that transcends the limitations of the form within which the writer articulates it. As a result there is a constant tension between a poet's formulations and his sense of their inadequacy in the face of experience. Whilst Pound believed that a man could be thought of either as 'the toy of circumstance' or else as 'directing a certain fluid force against circumstance'[35], Williams sought to fulfil both these roles. Gris' synthetic cubism stemmed from a similar root: on the one hand he wanted to register his perception of objects 'without abolishing or changing them', leaving them free to exist on their own terms, and on the other he wanted to 'group them in a new way'[36] in order to create an original object of his own. Williams' images also share this feature: the rose is no longer an image <u>of</u> something - 'love' or 'beauty' - but an image in itself which the reader perceives directly because it has been made an object - apart, detached. Yet the very separateness of the poet's creation is evidence of the

'transfusing force' that has allowed the poet to make an addition to nature: by perceiving this separateness, the reader is able to discover afresh how things are simultaneously linked.

Here Williams differed from Pound: he felt that an image could only be created by a writer who adhered strictly to the imagination's movements, taking the 'hint to composition' from nature. He had no sense of the 'lordship over fact'[37] which Pound argued art granted: for Williams facts were 'the emotional basis of our lives'[38]. He was motivated by a desire to meet what emerged from reality as he perceived it rather than by a desire to dominate it. His imaginative inventions contributed to reality rather than diverting its flow into the abstract discipline of 'Art'. Williams was bound to reject the mirror-art analogy, because for him there was only the REAL: the images that art manifested were themselves part of the same real world.

> The only realism is of the imagination. It is only thus that the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes a creation (I 111).

The words of a poem are simultaneously an invention of the imagination and an aspect of reality. There is always a sense in which they form graphic fragments on the surface of the page, just as 'pure paint' with which Gris began his paintings continually shows through their more representational parts.

> And so it comes
> to motor cars -
> which is the son
>
> leaving off the g
> of sunlight and grass - (CEP 252)

It seems here that Williams has discovered as he writes that 'song' without a 'g' leads back into the familiar literary pun between 'son' and 'sun'. If he had not been thinking of the graphic shapes of the letters as a feature of the poem he was writing, the lines could not have occurred to him: by standing out as a reality in itself, the letter 'g' licenses Williams' imagination. The poem

mediates between its reality on the page and its vitality as an invention. Whilst Williams certainly shared Pound's Imagist understanding of a 'living language' in which the image made something directly present, he was inclined to stress, more than Pound was, the visible reality of the words which made the poem an object for the reader's senses to explore. His experiments with this characterised the work he produced during the 1920s.

Notes to Chapter III:

1. Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, Faber 1954, p.25.
2. P. N. Furbank, Reflections on the Word 'Image', Secker & Warburg 1970, p.1.
3. Unpublished ms. quoted by Dijkstra, Hieroglyphics of a New Speech, p.76.
4. Pound, Essays, p.380.
5. J. J. Gibson, The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception, Houghton & Mifflin 1979, p.87.
6. H. Schneidau, Ezra Pound: The Image and the Real, Louisiana UP. 1969, p.22.
7. Zukofsky, Prepositions, p.143
8. Unpublished ms. 'The Basis of Form in Art' in the Buffalo Collection. Williams repeated the idea 'The Poem as a Field of Action' where he wrote 'Imagism was not structural' (SE 283).
9. Ruth Grogan identifies a number of these in her article 'Williams and Painting' collected in Tomlinson, Penguin Critical Anthology, p.268.
10. Pound, Essays, p.4.
11. Pound, Essays, p.3.
12. Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska, p.92.
13. Pound, ABC of Reading, Faber 1951, p.52.
14. Pound, Essays, p.4.
15. Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska, p.85.
16. Furbank, p.1.
17. D-H. Kahnweiler, Juan Gris: His Life and Work, Thames & Hudson 1969, p.200.
18. Kahnweiler, p.184.
19. Kahnweiler, p.183.
20. Kahnweiler, p.201.
21. Kahnweiler, p.144.
22. Furbank, p.4.
23. Denise Levertov, The Poet in the World, New Directions 1960, p.73.
24. Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska, p.85.
25. Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska, p.86.
26. Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska, p.86.
27. A. N. Whitehead, Science and the Modern World, Cambridge UP. 1945, p.150.
28. Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska, pp.86 - 87.
29. Pound, Selected Poems, Faber 1973, p.113.

30. Poetry, vol.2 (April 1913), p.12.

31. Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska, p.88.

32. Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska, p.88.

33. Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska, p.84.

34. 'How to Write', an essay reprinted in Linda Wagner's The Poems of William Carlos Williams, Wesleyan UP. 1963, pp.145 - 147.

35. Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska, p.89.

36. Kahnweiler, p.195.

37. Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska, p.92.

38. 'Notes from a Talk on Poetry', Poetry, vol.14 (July 1919), p.215.

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IV

The poem and perception

In an essay he contributed to Der Blaue Reiter Almanac (1912), the painter Kandinsky attempted to illustrate his theory of the relationship between 'realism' and 'abstraction' with the following example:

> When a reader looks at some letter in these lines with unskilled eyes, he will see it not as a familiar symbol for part of a word but first as a thing. Besides the practical man-made abstract form, which is a fixed symbol for a specific sound, he will also see a physical form that quite autonomously causes a certain inner and outer impression.[1]

The letters of the words are seen as having a double existence; they are simultaneously both symbols for particular sounds and autonomous 'physical forms' that are capable of eliciting a response from the reader without reference to anything else. Kandinsky goes on to suggest that this impression may be '"happy", "sad", "striving", "sinking" . . .'; indeed, the reader's sense of the expressive force of each of the 'variously specifically curved lines' which comprise the letters can give rise to any number of different feelings. As has been seen, this simultaneous operation causes an ambiguity in Williams' poetry about what can be implied by the word 'image'. The 'autonomous physical' forms supply the reader with images - in an iconographic sense - just as much as does the association of particular referents in the mind's eye. In this latter sense an image is more the manifestation of a kind of evolving interior vision. Whilst distinct, these two ways of thinking about an image are integrally related. In the first sense an image is composed from the graphic shapes of letters and their arrangement on the page as a visual object. In the second sense the image is a demonstration of an imaginative process which links objects and ideas through the capacity of words to allude to things beyond their own autonomous physical forms: in this sense, 'image' refers not to the letters

themselves but to what they bring to mind. An image is, therefore, simultaneously something that the poet has made and something in the making; it embraces both the actual evidence before the reader and what the reader may imagine.

Although he is considering Juan Gris' painting rather than the written word, the art critic Kahnweiler makes the same distinction:

> This is the origin of a work in paint, which, like all works of art, is a new object which has never existed before and which will always be unique. This entity has a two-fold existence. It exists autonomously in itself, by itself and for itself, as an object: but outside itself it has a further existence - it signifies something.

This tends to make painting another kind of calligraphy:

> Its lines and forms are there to compose certain signs, and by virtue of this the painting is a representation of thought by means of graphic signs - writing.[2]

Painting and writing are alike in that they both have a simultaneous value as representations and autonomous creations. Kahnweiler does, however, make a distinction between different kinds of writing: 'ideographic writing', he suggests, 'goes with concrete languages, for their basis is the image' (he is thinking here of hieroglyphic scripts in which words are rudimentary pictures); 'phonetic writing' goes with 'abstract languages, for their basis is the idea'.[3] Williams would no doubt have disagreed about this: however much his words might be capable of conveying abstract conceptions, he never intended that they should sacrifice the concrete force observed by Kandinsky. His words always retain a degree of graphic immediacy. In one of Williams' favourite anecdotes an assistant at a gallery was responding to a lady who seemed about to purchase a picture but wanted to know, 'what is all this down here in this left-hand corner ?'

> That, said Hartpence, leaning closer to inspect the place, that Madame, he said, straightening and looking at her, that is paint (RI 231).

Williams might equally well have responded to enquiries about the meaning of his poems by saying 'those, Madame, are words'.

Kahnweiler justifies his argument by suggesting that 'the signs of phonetic writing are conventional, arbitrarily chosen and with no autonomous power'.[4] Yet phonetic writing can draw upon an autonomous power which the eyes will detect without having to think about it. This is clear, for instance, in the use of words in traffic control; a driver does not have to decode what HALT means written across a road in order to act upon its command. Autonomous effects of this kind are always available to the poet. For example, a capital letter can have an autonomy that noticeably alters a poem's meaning without changing its words, as at the end of Niedecker's poem 'My Life by Water':

pointed toward
my shore

thru birdstart
wingdrip
weed-drift

of the soft
and serious
Water[5]

The intently personal and contemplative context in which the words move is given a perceptible shift by the capital letter of the final word, drawing attention from the specific lakeside of which Niedecker writes to the universal element 'Water'. If the capital is replaced with a lower case 'w' then the 'water' is apparently only a particular area of the lake where Niedecker can watch weeds drifting; the slight pause that the eyes understand from the capital letter allows the poem's focus to travel wider in a way that would be hard to vocalise.

At the time Williams wrote Spring and All the links between painting and poetry were particularly close: as Kahnweiler noted, 'there was a definite tendency for artists to express themselves in

forms which made use of the technique of more than one art'.[6] Apollinaire had recently been writing his book of Calligrammes, whilst Duchamp's magazine The Blind Man (1917) had initiated an interest in visual poetry that was sustained by artists such as Bob Brown and Harry Crosby. They tended to take literally the idea that words were the material of their art and treated language as if it were a plastic substance. Brown went so far as to invent a reading machine (for which Williams amongst others contributed a 'ready-made' text) which he described as a 'moving type spectacle . . . run[ning] on forever before the eye without having to be chopped up into columns, pars, etc.':[7] the reader was expected to follow the constant stream of words as if they were objects on an assembly line. The words were actual things for the reader to view. Recognising this tendency in Williams' work, Zukofsky felt that his poems needed to be read in a new way, a way that would take into account the eye's involvement in the reading process.

> He has, since 1923, printed his poems differently - used print as a guide to the voice and the eye. His line sense is not only a music heard, but seen, printed as bars, printed (or cut as it were) for the reading.[8]

Williams in turn recognised how Pound used 'print as a guide . . . to the eye' in the Cantos. His words were distinguished by their 'cleanliness', he wrote:

> In short, they live, the sentence lives, the movement lives, the object flares up (out of the dark). That is what I mean by reality, it lives again (as always) in our day.

The subdued visual metaphor, 'flares up (out of the dark)', gradually takes on a literal force as Williams writes, until, in mid-paragraph, he abandons his argument, strikes a hyphen across the page and claims that the words, with a 'new light upon them', need to be looked at in order that the reader should see their content:

> the well-based quality of the language itself - even yes, apart from the 'meaning' - and this alone. It is unbelievably good.
> ---with the eye (that is, the mind) directed flexibly inward. Look into the poem (as poems that deserve to be read should be read) and you will see the sun rise and hear the winds blow, smell the air, the pure air, that is beyond the air - and know the men who are talking.[9]

This is no longer a metaphoric expression. Williams is insisting on the need for the reader to come to terms with the Cantos by linking the eye's apprehension to the mind's as Cezanne did. 'The poet should have an eye with a brain in it' Marsden Hartley once suggested;[10] the reader of poetry in Williams' view needed equally to have an eye with a brain in it in order to perceive the reality of a poem which 'flares up (out of the dark)', emerging from the inert page.

The interaction between poetry and painting (which was by no means one way: painters in the early twenties enjoyed using words in their canvasses as much as poet's enjoyed making 'painted sentences')[11] encouraged Williams to think with words as though they were graphic objects. His pursuit of 'ORIGINALITY' took him to the roots of language, where he found, as Emerson had maintained before him, that 'nature offers all her creatures to [the poet] as a picture-language'. The etymologist would find, according to Emerson, 'the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture'.[12] Noticeably at this time Williams was fascinated by the sight of words displayed in contexts which destroyed their phonetic purpose, leaving them to be absorbed into the general visual landscape. An industrial insignia could interest him because of the purely visual character of its letters:

> When from among
> the steel rocks leaps
> JPM (CEP 251)

Frequently he would transcribe words or letters into his poems that he had seen and make no attempt to accommodate them to a syntactical logic. He draws a SODA sign in 'The Attic Which is Desire' (CEP 353),

ringing it with asterisks to suggest the flashing lines surrounding it. He makes a similarly literal transcription of a restaurant menu in 'Brilliant Sad Sun' (CEP 324), and a shopping list in 'Two Pendants For the Ears' (CLP 222). Equally the sight of numbers could excite him: 'The Great Figure' is a familiar, though not unique, example. In 'The Descent of Winter', the No.2 tacked to the door of the cabin in which he returned from Europe in 1929 occupies his attention in the same way as the nails which hold it in place. The figure does not prompt him to think of an abstraction about the numbering system of the ship's berths but meets his eye as an objectively existing thing:

Berth No.2
was empty above me
the steward

took it apart
and removed
it

only the number
remains
· 2 ·

on an oval disc
of celluloid
tacked

to the white-enamelled
woodwork
with

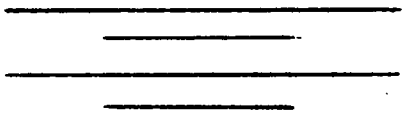
two bright nails (CEP 297)

The locality so readily presents Williams with words and signs that their existence as visual facts is accepted without question. And words remain today, perhaps more obviously so than in the 1920s, part of the general visual landscape: for instance, in this flap from a cereal packet the alphabet is used without any verbal intention:

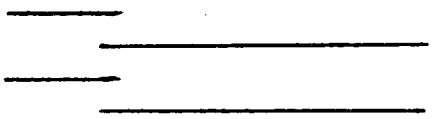
ABCDEFGHIJKLM
NOPQRSTUVWXYZ
ABCDEFGHIJKLM
NOPQRSTUVWXYZ

North Cheshire Studios

When Williams focusses his imagination on this aspect of language his writing inclines to the pictorial. An obvious example of this is 'Della Primavera Transportata Al Morale' (CEP 55), first published in the Imagist Anthology of 1930. At one point Williams sketches on the page a poison emblem (a skull and crossbones), followed by a pair of opposed arrows. Both of these he presumably noticed while at work in hospital and simply transcribed them. Neither could be read to an audience as words could be; the reader needs to see them. There are several other instances in the poem where words and phrases that Williams has seen in the environment have been transferred directly to the paper. At different moments he uses an ice-cream board, a property advertisement, traffic signals (twice), a political slogan, and a warehouse sign. These are not decorative effects but indications of an underlying tendency in the poem which encourages the reader to look at it as a visual object. The tendency can be seen clearly in the arrangement of the poem on the page and in particular in two regular methods of lay-out that Williams adopts. Firstly,



where a central and left-hand margin counterpoint one another with lines that are generally short and long; and secondly



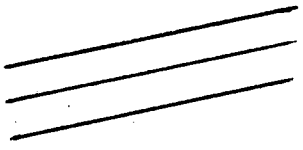
Here the short line is used to repeat the same word or words (either 'Moral' or 'I believe') in alternation with an erratic, longer line. These are patterns which affect the page as a whole, but Williams can also exploit much smaller patterns:

You would "kill me with kindness"
I love you too, but I love you
too--

Thus, in that light and in that
light only can I say--

Winter : Spring
abandoned to you. The world lost--
in you

The rhythm established between the repeated words 'too', 'light' and 'you' organises the lines so that they act diagonally across the page:



Any pattern of stresses that might be heard exists as a result of the reader having first seen the pattern on the page. The visual pattern invents the aural rhythm.

Once the reader's eyes are attuned to the page, then it becomes possible to see how even the hyphens, used liberally throughout the poem, have a positive visual force:

--the wind is howling
the river, shining mud--

By repeatedly introducing or fracturing phrases with a hyphen in this way Williams provides an emblematic equivalent of the compensating backward and forward forces - the 'cross-current' between things - which he feels characterises the world he perceives. The open-ended quality of a hyphenated line suggests the charge which moves between the elements of the poem as it does between the elements of the world Williams observes. If the poem is to be thought of as 'a live thing' as the opening lines suggest, then it can be expected to behave as any living thing would. It is bound to be dependent upon and responsive to the environment that supports it. The poet Robert Duncan, quoting Schrodinger, argues that 'a piece of matter' may be thought of as living when 'it goes on "doing something", moving,

exchanging material with its environment'.[13] The hyphens in Williams' poem indicate how this exchange goes on between the elements of the poem: they make the reader see a kind of continual current running forward and backward between the horizontal lines linking the different parts of the poem. Thus, when the reader comes upon the arrows towards the poem's end (which are effectively hyphens to which tips have been added), they act to confirm the interplay witnessed all along by the reader's eye:

WOMAN'S WARD
←————————
PRIVATE
————————→

Williams' intention is to make his readers attend to the poem at one level as they would to any visual object, urging them to read the text and its visual texture simultaneously. 'Texture', as Pound insisted in his essay of 1928, is a quality which 'Dr. Williams indubitably has in the best, and increasingly frequent, passages of his writing'.[14] The texture of a text is a layered effect of both audible and visible elements which exist objectively as focusses of attention for the ears and eyes; to borrow Zukofsky's terms, 'writing' - which parenthetically he defines as '(audibility in 2-D print)' - 'is an object or affects the mind as such'.[15] It is easy to neglect the part played by the visual details of a text but they always contribute more or less to what a reader understands from it. In an article on 'Spatial Form in Literature' W.J.T.Mitchell writes:

> The spatiality of English texts as physical objects is normally backgrounded, but that does not negate the significance of this aspect of their existence. What might we learn, for instance, about the history of Chaucer's reception if we paid more attention to the development of typography in Chaucerian texts printed from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century ? How do the physical details of publication (style of type, size of paper, location of glosses, presence or absence of illustrations, even texture of paper) reflect the cultural status of the text, and how do they affect the reader's experience?[16]

The temptation is to think of the details of typography or the pattern of a page as variable, decorative effects on the surface of an abstract meaning which they cannot affect. According to the psychologist Rudolf Arnheim this is the misleading consequence of a habit of thought which divorces concept from percept. We cannot think with the things we see because

> thought moves among abstractions. Our eyes have been reduced to instruments with which to identify and to measure; hence we suffer a paucity of ideas that can be expressed in images and an incapacity to discover meaning in what we see.[17]

Yet in ways generally taken for granted, the eye's survey of the appearance of words on a page, seeing how the letters stand in relation to one another, is inseparable from what the mind takes as their meaning.

> spatial organisation is the vital
> factor in anoptical message
>
> sp atialor gani sationist hevital
> fa ctorin an optical message
>
> spatial organisation is thevital
> fa ctorin an optical message.[18]

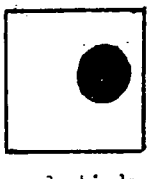
It is noticeable here how the distance between words affects the reading process. In the first example 'spatial organisation' has more force than in the third because the larger gap between the words in the last example gives the illusion that 'spatial' is an isolated noun rather than an adjective. Fracturing the words in this way is not simply a means of disguising an otherwise familiar message; in their new alignments the letters start to assume a life of their own as if a new meaning has been created. Williams once commented that the trailer for a film could prove far more visually exciting than the film itself because the images, 'unburdened by the banal story', had 'freed' the 'real' from the plot's 'boring implications' (RI 218). A similar effect occurs here in the second example where the dislocation of the letters from their anticipated

grouping 'unburdens' them of their 'implications' and releases the ghosts of unexpected words and meanings. The oddity of the shapes on the page compels the eye to attend to the letters rather than look for words; once the letters resolve into 'known' groupings of letters again, as in the final 'an optical message', the eye seems to neglect their shapes once more and see instead a set of words.

The positive visual effect of spatial organisation is always available to the eye. In the following extract from a poem by cummings about a car/lady the thought is clear, yet requires that the reader see the poem in order to follow it:

next
minute i was back in neutral tried and
again slo-wly, bare,ly nudg. ing(my
lev-er Right-
oh and her gears being in
Al shape passed
from low through
second-in-to-high [19]

To read cummings' poem is to do more than cement back together the syllables he has fractured. Like certain ambiguous visual figures which simultaneously present conflicting images, the poem alternates between a syncopated narrative and a patterned typescript. The pattern of a typescript, like any pattern, can be charged with meaning for an eye accustomed to observing it. As Arnheim argues, we read reality <u>in</u> patterns rather than <u>through</u> them. To show what he means by this distinction, he gives the example of an off-centre disc:



Did we behave as a yardstick by first looking at the space between the disk and the left edge and then carrying our image of that distance across to the other side to compare the two distances ?

Probably not he decides. It is more likely that we

> noticed the asymmetrical position of the disk as a property of the visual pattern. We did not see the disk and the square separately. The spatial relation within the whole is part of what we see.[20]

It is easy to see how the eyes respond to the imbalance of the circle and square without needing an abstract yardstick to confirm it. The pattern is itself articulate to the senses. 'Visual experience is dynamic', Arnheim concludes, for what a person perceives is 'not only an arrangement of objects, of colors and shapes, of movements and sizes', but 'first of all, an interplay of directed tensions':

> the nature of visual experience cannot be described in terms of inches of size and distance, degrees of angle, or wave lengths of hue. These static measurements define only the 'stimulus'. . . . But the life of a percept - its expression and meaning - derives entirely from the activity of the perceptual forces. Any line drawn on a sheet of paper, the simplest form modeled from a piece of clay, is like a rock thrown into a pond. It upsets repose, it mobilizes space. Seeing is the perception of action.[21]

By compelling his readers to see 'Della Primavera' as a poem patterned on the page, Williams involves them in the perception of an action that is stirred by the reading process itself; the repose of the page is upset by the 'directed tensions' of his arrangement of the words (the arrows at the end of the poem could be thought of as graphic illustrations of 'directed tensions'). But while the poem actively engages the reader by prompting perceptions, it is also an articulation of Williams' own perceptions. This is a paradox, for it suggests that the poem is simultaneously something the reader knows only at the occasion of reading and a reference to the poet's perceptions which are independent of that occasion. A similar paradox can be found in relation to pictures. In a note on a photograph of a brickwall that appears to lean away from the viewer because of the position close to the ground and adjacent to the wall from which the picture has been taken, the psychologist R.L.Gregory remarks:

> The bricks are seen as slanting, yet the page on which the picture lies is not - and does not appear to be - slanting. This double reality is part of the paradox of pictures.[22]

By attending to the surface of the page the viewer can see that the photograph is flat; but by attending to the thing photographed the viewer perceives a surface which, not literally existing, appears to slant. There are therefore two surfaces: the actual surface of the book in which the photograph is printed, and the surface of the wall to which the photograph refers. These exist simultaneously although they appear to contradict one another. Thinking of the nature of pictures J.J.Gibson comes to a similar conclusion:

> A picture always requires two kinds of apprehension that go on at the same time, one direct and the other indirect. There is direct perceiving of the picture surface along with an indirect awareness of a virtual surface - a perceiving, knowing, or imaging as the case my be.[23]

When confronted by a poem, the reader responds both to the immediate surface on which it is printed and to the 'virtual surface' of the things it refers to, things which the poet, like the photographer of the wall, has an independent perception of. This gives a clue as to why Kahnweiler's absolute division between phonetic and ideographic writing is misleading, for although phonetic writing employs laregly conventional signs it simultaneously retains a degree of autonomy as a graphic effect. A printed poem is always to a greater or lesser degree a visual pattern as well as an allusion to the world at large. When Williams stresses the graphic side of writing he becomes, in Gibson's terms, as much painter as poet:

> I insist that what the draftsman, beginner or expert, actually does is not to replicate, to print, or to copy in any sense of the term but to mark the surface in such a way as to display invariants and record an awareness. Drawing is never copying. It is impossible to copy a piece of the environment. Only another drawing can be copied. We have been misled for too long by the fallacy that a picture is <u>similar</u> to what it

> depicts, a likeness, or an imitation of it. A picture supplies some of the information for what it depicts, but that does not imply that it is in projective correspondence with what it depicts (EA 279).

Like the draftsman, Williams attempts 'to mark the surface [of the page] in such a way as to . . . record an awareness'. Thus when he writes:

> a green truck
> dragging a concrete mixer
> passes
> in the street--
> the clatter and true sound
> of verse--

he is not using words as signs to bring some absent green truck to life, but is employing them to 'mark the surface' of the page in order to display his evolving awareness of what the truck is and does. In Cezanne's phrase, he is trying to 'realise [his] sensations'. He takes the pulse of his perceptions in the way that he argued in Spring and All was incumbent on him. The writer should not replicate things but should 'practice skill in recording the force' that moves through the 'enlarged sympathies' so that a poem can become the living evidence of that force revealed by the lines on the page.

Even so, the poet's articulation of his own perceptions will always be seen in terms of the reader's understanding of the text as an object. Williams insisted that it is not 'what a [poet] says that counts as a work of art, it's what he makes, with such intensity of perception that it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity'. The 'expression of [a poet's] perceptions and ardors' is revealed 'in the speech that he uses' (CLP 5): the words do not project the reader in the direction of something that the poet seeks to express but are, as they are placed together, the expression. The 'intensity of perception' that goes into the making of 'Della Primavera' brings the reader in from the 'vaporous fringes of the moment' to the midst of the 'live thing' which is the poem.

'Understanding' is a 'white heat' of recognition stemming from 'the shapes of things', not from 'learning' which only creates a 'gap':

> The forms
> of the emotions are crystalline,
> geometric-faceted. So we recognise
> only in the white heat of
> understanding, when a flame
> runs through the gap made
> by learning, the shapes of things--

Williams is resisting here the notion of understanding as the grasping of a completed thought: he presents it instead as the successive revelation of the different 'shapes of things' as they alter before his eyes. Fenollosa's well-known essay on the Chinese written characters which, through Pound, has influenced a wide range of recent poets, offers a parallel way of conceiving of thought. The ideograph, Fenellosa felt, embodied understanding in continuities rather than in the logical systems of thought favoured by Western philosophy:

> The truth is that acts are successive, even continuous; one causes or passes into another. . . . All processes in nature are inter-related; and thus there could be no complete sentence.[24]

Just as continuity guarantees that there can be no end to nature's processes, so too it ensures that there can be no beginning, no initial premise from which all other things stem. Since a person perceives nature's processes from within them, perception must itself be as continuous as nature. Recognising himself to be amidst things that are continually evolving (many of his poems begin with, or include, the word 'among'), Williams refuses to let the opening of 'Della Primavera' stand as a beginning:

> the beginning-- or
> what you will

Similarly, for Williams there can be no possible ending:

it is

useless to have it thought
that we are full--

This parallel between Williams' and Fenollosa's thought can be extended: the ability to see 'noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things'[25] attributed by Fenellosa to the eye, is implied also by Williams' ambiguous figure of the wind in trees. The motion of branches seems both inherent, a motion emerging from within the branches (noun) and imposed on the air, and extrinsic, a motion forced upon the branches by the action (verb) of the wind. Thus the word 'lashing' describes both wind and branches:

the ovoid sun, the pointed trees
lashing branches
The wind is fierce, lashing
the long-limbed trees whose
branches
wildly toss--

Williams perceives things as caught in the midst of an activity that is larger than them and propels them; they exist, as Fenollosa says the ideograph represents them, as 'the meeting points, of actions, cross-sections cut through actions'.[26] A man exists as a thing exists: his perceptions occur at the point where different actions intersect, moving him and extending beyond him. He is aware of himself as carried along

in the cross-current
between what the hands reach
and the mind desires
and the eyes see

Both Williams' 'cross-current' and Fenollosa's 'cross-section' indicate the inter-relatedness of things; as their relationship changes, so one thing illuminates another in a fresh way and gives rise to the renewal of a person's perceptions.[27] In order to keep pace with this process Williams is quite ready to leave sentences

incomplete, curtailing them with a hyphen or drawing dots. This rushes the reader from one observation to the next and sacrifices logical continuity for the sake of abruptly altering the poem's direction; one thing is forced into the path of another. As the poem changes its angle of approach, so it registers how the poet is aware of his environment as a constantly rediscovered 'new country':

> --she
> opened the door! nearly
> six feet tall, and I...
> wanted to found a new country--

A single passage of the poem crystallises these various ways of considering it:

> --the complexion of the impossible
> (you'll say)
> never realized--
> At a desk in a hotel in front of a
> machine a year
> later-- for a day or two--
> (Quite so--)
> Whereas the reality trembles
> frankly
> in that though it was like this
> in part
> it was deformed
> even when at its utmost to
> touch-- as it did
> and fill and give and take

The composition of the world to which Williams responds remains 'never realized' since its 'reality trembles' on the brink of what it is becoming. It is partly 'deformed' because what the poet sees is limited by his standpoint. But it is a world that, as it forms, affords particular arrangements of details that in themselves are exactly defined '(Quite so--)'. These lead into a larger arrangement that cannot be encompassed by Williams' perception ('the complexion of the impossible') except by an admission that through the senses ('at its utmost to /touch') he is part of the world's reverberating

body ('and give and take'). The details seen from one location are unique and peculiar to his vision in that place; he can truly say 'it was like this' but it is only a partial truth. He cannot rest there: in order to keep step with his perceptions he is continually forced to seek redefinitions of reality as the patterns in which it is revealed change. It was like this, but is no more. Only by exploring and discovering reality for himself, moment by moment, can Williams stay in contact with his world, never slipping into the 'old mode' of commentary and description but 'clinging to the advance'.

Since Williams presents his perceptions as involvements in the things he perceives, it is natural that he should feel unable to halt their flowing. Nor can he think of himself as somehow taking possession of them through his vision, for his relationship to them means that they are never adequately thought of as 'outside' him. There is an irony in the estate agent's sign, 'BUY THIS PROPERTY', since the land for sale is the land which the individual is permanently in contact with; it cannot be possessed for it has never been lost. The self has no need to be defined apart from the environment, since, as the perceptions reveal, a person is included in the same movements that stir the things seen. The irrelevance of the question 'But who am I ?' to the poet of 'The Desolate Field' also concerns the poet of 'Della Primavera'; 'But who are You ?' he asks and again he responds, not with an answer, but by linking the objectivity of the 'ovoid sun, the pointed trees' to the subjectivity of the 'geometric-faceted emotions'. Identity is not given by the recognition of self as subject in a world of objects: the subjective and the objective are merely what Gibson calls 'poles of attention' between which runs the 'white heat' of the fired understanding. Such details as Williams presents in the poem have no subjective principle to make them cohere, for

the fact of his involvement in them obviates the need for one. He does not say what links them, for to do so he would have to detach himself from them and conceive them in abstract terms. He aims to create a poem in which the reader enters 'a new world and [has] there freedom of movement and newness' (I 134). Rather than adhering to patterns laid down by grammar, he tries to make patterns that evolve as the poem unfolds, so that each instant in its progress is a provisional point in the movement towards what the poem is always becoming.

As a number of psychologists have suggested this is analagous to what happens in visual perception. E.H.Gombrich, for instance, has written that 'the truth we seek with our senses is not the static and eternal truth that interested Plato, but the correct assessment of the developing situation'.[28] The senses disrupt a person's primary assumptions about things, making meaning, as Gibson argues, something that is discovered in the process of attending rather than something that pre-exists:

> If what we perceived were the entities of physics and mathematics, meanings would have to be imposed on them. But if what we perceive are the entities of environmental science, their meanings can be discovered (EA 33).

Gibson uses the example of a box falling from a table to illustrate what he intends by 'meanings can be discovered'. What is seen is not something that the viewer recognises as a box falling through a stationary visual field but rather a fluid pattern of moving and static shapes to which the shape of the box contributes:

> The displacement of a body in space is mapped not as a displacement of a figure in an empty visual field, but as a figural transformation.[29]

The distinction is between visual perception conceived of as the isolation of individual parts of the visual field (parts which are assumed to have an existence independent of the visual field itself),

and visual perception conceived of as the recognition of a total pattern to which the parts contribute. The transformation of the total pattern is seen, not the figure of something already labelled 'box' falling through a static visual field. In 'Della Primavera' the isolated details do not matter so much as their accumulation into a transforming pattern. Williams is articulating his perceptions in a poem which itself follows the processes of perception: he is concerned with the 'developing situation' rather than abstract truths.

In Gibson's terms Williams does something very similar to the graphic artist. He writes as if literally drawing:

> The essence of the graphic act is to change progressively the capacity of a surface to structure light by layout or pigment, the progress of the change being coincident with the hand (SCPS 230).

Williams uses the surface of the page to build a poem whose layout progressively changes as it develops. Although rhythm is generally thought of as an aural effect, the graphic act is also - and according to an etymology suggested by Mitchell, more truly - a rhythmic effect; drawing the poem on the page, Williams makes the poem's rhythm.

> We generally suppose that this term [rhythm] applies literally to temporal phenomena such as speech and music and is a mere metaphor when used in discussions of sculpture, painting, or architecture. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this primarily temporal notion of rhythm was sustained by the derivation of ρυθμος (rhythmos) from ρεω (rheo), with the associated images of 'flow' and 'repetition'. Modern studies of the term in the earliest Greek texts have suggested, however, that it is derived from the root ερυ (ery), which suggests the action of 'drawing' (cf. the German 'ziehen') and which plays on the same double meaning as do 'draw' and 'drawing' in English. 'Rhythmos' was based, then, in the physical act of drawing, inscribing, and engraving and was used to mean something like 'form', 'shape', or 'pattern'.[30]

The rhythm of Williams' poem is not defined by his ability to regulate thought to 'the sweetness of metre', but by his realisation of the power of sight to register the 'directed tensions' which hold

natural processes together. His job as a poet is to record the reality of that power - 'the detail, not mirage, of seeing' as Zukofsky called it[31] - by drawing graphic patterns whose rhythms the reader can know directly.

These patterns afford a means of knowing which stems immediately from the activity of the senses. Williams' awareness of such direct perceptual knowledge led him to stress the sensory side of art, for it carried with it the sense of 'contact' with the local for which he searched. He tried to articulate the kind of knowledge that concerns Gibson:

> Knowledge of the environment . . . develops as perception develops, extends as the observers travel, gets finer as they learn to scrutinize, gets larger as they apprehend more events. . . . Knowledge of this sort does not 'come from' anywhere; it is got by looking, along with listening, feeling, smelling and tasting.(EA 253).

Since Gibson's theories are consistently relevant to Williams' poetic technique, it may be helpful at this juncture to outline briefly the basic assumptions of his psychology. He first challenges the idea that the senses are passive registers of external stimuli (an idea implicit in the word 'receptors' commonly used of them), and suggests instead that the senses are active, exploring the environment: 'the eyes, ears, nose, mouth and skin are in fact mobile, exploratory, orienting' (SCPS 33). He finds the classical 'stimulus-response formula . . . no longer adequate; for there is a loop from response to stimulus to response again, and the result may be a continuous flow of activity rather than a distinct chain of reflexes' (SCPS 31). If the senses are thought of as passive then they may be said to 'reflect' impressions of events outside them and send these as codified messages to the brain which is somehow inside and subject to them. But 'inner' and 'outer' are unsatisfactory terms; since the senses can obtain 'information about objects in the world

without the intervention of an intellectual process' (SCPS 2), there is no need to think of one thing as being 'out there' and the perception of it as being 'in here'. The pattern in which objects appear before the eyes - or the 'layout' of 'surfaces' in the environment - is 'temporarily occupied . . . as the eyes roam over the world' (SCPS 4). This pattern gives the structure of the visual world without the mediating principle of space as a kind of arena or immanent stage on which things happen. To Gibson, Newton's 'absolute space' seems inappropriate for space does not exist as a substance that things 'fill':

> Objects do not <u>fill</u> space, for there was no such thing as empty space to begin with. The persisting surfaces of the environment are what provide the framework for reality. . . . Surfaces and their layout are perceived, but space is not (EA 100).

It is important to recognise that as far as sensory perception is concerned, the 'framework of reality' does not depend upon pre-existing assumptions. Williams reflects this in 'Della Primavera' by writing of vision as a process in which what was formerly unknown is revealed:

> in it we see now
> what then we did not know—

Gibson stresses that 'knowledge of the world cannot be explained by supposing that knowledge of the world already exists. All forms of cognitive processing imply cognition so as to account for cognition.' There is no need to think of space as a set of 'already exist[ing]' definite dimensions; perception concerns the shifting pattern of 'surfaces and their layout' rather than the location of things in absolute space. Gibson is led from this to a reconsideration of how movements in the world are perceived. If the senses are thought of as passive receptors, the perception of movement can be conceived as the recognition of a motion inherent in things which the eyes

or ears merely 'copy'. This would be a world understood in terms of the atomic theory which claims that 'what persists in the world are atoms and what changes in the world are the positions of atoms'. The atomic theory, however, does not square with Gibson's view of perception:

> So different, in fact, are environmental motions from those studied by Isaac Newton that it is best to think of them as changes of structure rather than changes of position of elementary bodies, changes of form rather than point locations, or changes in the layout rather than motions in the usual meaning of the term (EA 15).

The vital factor in determining how a thing moves is seeing how it affects 'a change in the overall surface layout'. (This recalls Cezanne's desire to follow his perceptions so accurately that each brushstroke became an alteration in the 'overall surface layout' of his picture.) An individual object is not singled out from its context in perception, but seen as part of a larger pattern. Fenollosa could claim that 'a true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature'[32] because he realised that one thing could only be understood in terms of its relationship to another; a stationary object is only stationary relative to objects that are moving.

When he wrote The Doors of Perception Aldous Huxley experimented with the drug mescalin in order to scrutinise its effect on the way he perceived things and his results closely resemble Gibson's. Moreover, there is a clear similarity between the kind of vision he experienced and Williams' in 'Della Primavera'. For instance, Williams' seeing of colour here, as in 'January Morning', suggests he responds to it as if it were a quality intrinsic to objects rather than superficial:

A live thing
the buds are upon it
the green shoot come between
the red flowerets
curled back

Under whose green veil
strain trunk and limbs of
the supporting trees--

Yellow! the arched stick
pinning the fragile foil

The colour 'yellow' is not an adjective but a noun; it seems almost substantial in Williams' eyes. He sees colour as if it was a quality that emerges from within objects; it appears to belong to what a thing is, an expression of its essence rather than, like paint, a surface layer. In comparison, Huxley has this to say about colour:

> Mescalin raises all colours to a higher power and makes the percipient aware of innumerable fine shades of difference, to which, at ordinary times, he is completely blind. It would seem that, for Mind at Large, the so-called secondary characters of things are primary. Unlike Locke, it evidently feels that colours are more important, better worth attending to than masses, positions and dimensions.[33]

In Williams' poem, 'measures and locations' are sacrificed in order to stress a sense of being; his 'yellow' is not located anywhere but simply <u>is</u>. Both he and Huxley are involved in the perception of 'fine shades of difference' discovered, as Huxley tries to explain, through experiencing 'relationships within a pattern'.

> The really important facts were that spatial relationships had ceased to matter very much and that my mind was perceiving the world in terms of other than spatial categories. In the mescalin experience . . . place and distance cease to be of much interest. The mind does its perceiving in terms of intensity of existence, profundity of significance, relationships within a pattern. I saw the books, but was not at all concerned with their positions in space. What I noticed, what impressed itself upon my mind was the fact that all of them glowed with living light and that in some the glory was more manifest than in others. In this context, position and the three dimensions were beside the point. . . . Space was still there; but it had lost its predominance. The mind was primarily concerned, not with measures and locations, but with being and meaning.[34]

This is of particular interest because the experience prompts Huxley to think, as Williams often did, of Juan Gris: 'table, chair and desk came together in a composition that was like something by Braque or Juan Gris, a still life recognizably related to the objective world,

but rendered without depth, without any attempt at photographic realism.' Under the influence of mescalin the mind seems not to seek objective standards - 'measures and locations' - by which to comprehend things, but attends instead to the fact of its awareness of them.

Like Huxley, Williams is writing about intensities of experience ('the white heat of the fired understanding'); he is less bothered about defining them as 'here' or 'there', than about making things present. He includes himself with them in the living moment. It is impossible to think of the components of the poem as objects to which Williams is subject: he is together with them in what Huxley describes as 'the paradox of the absoluteness of relationships, the infinity and universality of particulars'.[35] Here again Gibson pursues a similar idea: since the visual field always includes parts of the observer's body, Gibson argues that it is unnecessary to think of the individual as divorced from the environment. The use of a tool such as a pair of scissors as an extension to the body suggests that 'the boundary between the animal and the environment is not fixed at the surface of the skin but can shift'. Consequently he can assert that:

> the supposedly separate realms of the subjective and the objective are actually only poles of attention. The dualism of observer and environment is unnecessary. The information for the perception of 'here' is of the same kind as the information for the perception of 'there', and a continuous layout of surfaces extends from one to the other (EA 116).

And in the same way that the environment and the observer are related by a continuous layout of surfaces, so perceptions and conceptions can be thought of as part of a continuity: 'To perceive the environment and to conceive it are different in degree but not in kind. One is continuous with the other' (EA 258).

The link between percept and concept is important for an

understanding of why Williams felt such a need to create a new object when he wrote a poem; in order to conceive a new idea a thought had to be linked to a thing perceived. His lifelong attack upon 'meaning' and abstraction, was an attack not against ideas but against the kind of conceptualising that neglects the root in things perceived. 'Say it: no ideas but in things' is Williams' way of insisting that concepts keep hold of their perceptual source. It is not a nominalism refusing ideas, but an expression of an intense need to make concepts consistent with what is sensed. 'Meaning' is only achieved when the writer links 'the individual sense to a total meaning which is the aggregate of all the seeing, touching, smelling of any focus of life' (RI 222). Writing is never an unthinking revolt against ideas: the poet has to 'watch carefully and erase' since 'a chance word, upon paper, may destroy the world' (P 129). Feeling that knowledge of the local could only be attained through attention to the way it is sensed, Williams was forced to an art that would require the reader's knowledge to be similarly embodied. The two words 'Say it' preceding his familiar slogan emphasise that a poem is a live thing which focusses ideas as the reader perceives its unfolding, as it is said aloud or in the head: the poem's conceptions have vitality insofar as the reader perceives the poem itself as if it were an object.

'Della Primavera' provides unusual evidence of the extent to which Williams took his notion of the poem as an object. In the twenty-one years between the poem's first publication and its appearance in The Collected Earlier Poems a number of anomalous versions were printed. The first, in the Imagist Anthology of 1930 under the title 'Della Primavera Transportata al Morale', is shorter than any other version and prints the line 'THIS IS MY PLATFORM' as if the title of another poem. When the poem was published in The Collected Poems (1934) it appeared as the first poem in a section

of the book that carried the general heading 'PRIMAVERA'. Six other poems followed it, arranged as entirely separate compositions. When Williams published the poem in The Complete Collected Poems (1938), he dropped the sectional title altogether and made 'Della Primavera' the first unit of 10 numbered poems that included all the 'Primavera' poems of 1934 with three additions. Williams had rethought the poem yet again by the time of The Collected Earlier Poems (1951): in this version there is a sectional title, 'DELLA PRIMAVERA TRANSPORTATA AL MORALE', followed by nine other poems from the 1938 edition, this time without numbers. These different versions are so consistently erratic as to suggest that Williams found something satisfying in the process of alteration, as if he wanted the objective appearance of the text to have the same tendency to change as the objects in his visual field. Inconsistencies of spelling underline this. If the spelling 'Primaverra' in the original Imagist Anthology version is a failure of proof reading, it might also be true of the spelling 'Trasportata' in the sectional heading of 1951. But Williams did not correct this in later editions with the result that the text has two successive pages showing different spellings, one with 'Transportata' and the other with 'Trasportata'. It is unlikely that this could have been repeatedly missed, so presumably Williams intended it. The metamorphosis of the poem over the years suggests that Williams wanted the poem to be as varied as the objects of his perception. If ideas evolve from the individual's sensory contact with things then his poem can enfold thought only in the same way. It has to be a thing that the reader is able to see, hear and respond to as an object.

Notes to Chapter IV:

1. Der Blaue Reiter Almanac, eds. Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, Thames & Hudson 1974, p.165.
2. Kahnweiler, Juan Gris, p.64.
3. Kahnweiler, p.68.
4. Kahnweiler, p.70.
5. Lorine Niedecker, My Life By Water, Fulcrum 1970.
6. Kahnweiler, p.75.
7. Revolution of the Word, ed. J. Rothenberg, Seabury, NY. 1974, p.9.
8. Zukofsky, Prepositions, p.150.
9. From a review, Imagi, iv (Spring 1944), pp.10 - 11, reprinted in Pound: The Critical Heritage, ed. E. Homberger, Routledge 1972, p.372.
10. Tashjian, Williams and the American Scene, p.53.
11. Tashjian, p.70.
12. R. W. Emerson, Selected Prose and Poetry, ed. R. L. Cook, New York 1950, p.327.
13. R. Duncan, 'Towards an Open Universe', in Poetics of the New American Poetry, eds. Allen and Tallman, Grove 1973, p.214.
14. Pound, Essays, p.395.
15. Zukofsky, p.13.
16. W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory', Critical Inquiry, vol. 6, no. 3 (Spring 1980), p.550.
17. Rudolf Arnheim, Art and Visual Perception, California UP. 1974, p.1.
18. G. Kepes, Language of Vision, Chicago 1944, p.46.
19. e. e. cummings, Selected Poems, Faber 1958, p.15.
20. Arnheim, p.10.
21. Arnheim, p.16.
22. R. L. Gregory, The Intelligent Eye, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, undated, p.32.
23. J. J. Gibson, The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception, Boston 1979, p.283, hereafter referred to in text as "EA".
24. Ernest Fenollosa, The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry, ed. Pound, City Lights 1968, p.11.
25. Fenollosa, p.10.
26. Fenollosa, p.10.
27. Visual perception relies on change in relationship. Even when an object in the environment is perceived to be stationary, the eye that sees it is moving. In order to keep stimulating new areas on the retina, the eye keeps up a rapid flickering motion.

This movement is known as the 'saccadic movement' of the eye. 'It turns out that the saccadic movements of the eyes are essential to vision. It is possible to fix the image on the retina so that wherever the eye moves, the images move with it and so remain fixed on the retina. When the image is optically stabilised vision fades after a few seconds, and so it seems that part of the function of eye movements is to sweep the image over the receptors so that they do not adapt and so cease to signal to the brain the presence of the image in the eye.' R. L. Gregory, Eye and Brain, Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1979, p.58.

28. R. L. Gregory and E. H. Gombrich, Illusion in Nature and Art, Duckworth 1973, p.218.

29. J. J. Gibson, The Senses Considered as a Perceptual System, Boston 1966, p.203, hereafter referred to in text as "SCPS".

30. Mitchell, Critical Inquiry, p.548.

31. Zukofsky, p.12.

32. Fenollosa, p.10.

33. Aldous Huxley, The Doors of Perception, Chatto 1960, p.14.

34. Huxley, p.20.

35. Aldous Huxley, Adonis and the Alphabet, Chatto 1956, p.193.

...

V

The poem as an object

> The work of art gives the concerns of man a tactile reality, it does not dissipate them. It makes the unknown a form which eyes, ears, nose, mouth and fingers can experience; even nothingness at the hands of an artist becomes a thing (RI 212).

Whether thinking in terms of the visual arts or of poetry, Williams was uncompromising about the 'tactile reality' of an artist's creations. A poem may arise in the poet's physiology,

> the middle brain, the nerves, the glands, the very muscles and bones of the body itself speaking.
> But once the writing is on the paper it becomes an object.[1]

The idea that a poem can be an object has created a lot of misunderstanding: if a poem has an 'objective' existence, how can it possibly articulate any of the personal 'concerns of man' ? Is it not inevitably impersonal and stripped of emotive force ? Such questions arise, however, only if the understanding of an object is thought to be a process of assimilating something wholly outside the reader which the perceptions do no more than register mechanically. If the perception of an object is understood to colour what the object is seen to be, then its 'objectivity' remains linked to the 'subjective' responses of the reader: the two terms 'subjective' and 'objective' are consequently misleading. It is not what a poem means that matters but how - and if - it becomes meaningful.

Robert Duncan demonstrates this with the example of Williams' 'The Red Wheelbarrow': the poem is meaningful, he argues, through its notation as an object. He is impatient with a critic picked at random who appears to expect the poem's meaningfulness to stem from its more or less artful encapsulation of a message:

> There is some difference in movement between the poem she seems to have read that went as follows: "So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens" and the actual poem. But it is part of her

> conviction that the appearance on the page of a line is a matter of convention, must indicate either following or disobeying what men have agreed on. Any other meaning, that the line might be a notation of how it is to be read, is intolerable.
>
> So she must overlook or deny the lines as meaningful notation, where syllabic measures of variable number alternate with lines of two syllables to form a dance immediate to the eye as a rhythmic pattern.[2]

For Duncan, the rhythmic pattern, immediate to the eye, allows the reader to 'explore the meaning and form of the poem'. A poem's meaning is not to be prised open but 'explored', just as, in Gibson's view, the 'meanings' of entities in environmental science can be discovered rather than imposed.[3] Unwilling to <u>see</u> what the poem is, the critic provides an analysis of the poem the goal of which is 'to stand against it; to remain independent of red wheelbarrow, vowels and consonants, count of syllables and interchange of stresses, juncture, phrase'. Duncan has here linked both the poem's component parts and its subject matter, implying thereby that each is realised as the reader enters the poem; 'vowels and consonants' are objects just as much as the red wheelbarrow is an object. Without sacrificing any of the emotiveness usually associated with the word 'subjective', he is engaged by the poem through his recognition of it as an object, a careful design 'trimmed to a perfect economy'.

For Williams, the accuracy with which a poem is made an object displays the degree of his integrity to his feelings: from the poet's 'perceptions and ardors' is derived a 'machine made of words' that 'lives with an intrinsic movement of its own' (CLP 5). The least adorned expressions carry a weight of emotive force; 'facts are the emotional basis of our lives', he once wrote.[4] The imagination is only released to articulate emotion when it is confident of the objectified reality of its materials:

A Chinese Toy

Six whittled chickens
on a wooden bat

that peck within a
circle pulled

by strings fast to
a hanging weight

when shuttled by the
playful hand (CEP 370)

There can be no doubt the objects observed here are actual things: they are not allegories or allusions but exactly what they say they are, parts of a chinese toy. Nor is there any doubt about the peculiarly material feel that the words have: the compactness of the poem, the absence of argument or insistence, and the almost clockwork movement, compel the reader to attend undistracted to the 'tactile reality' of the words themselves. The poem describes a mechanism and is a mechanism. Yet the movement of the poem is not meant to simulate that of the objects described: the movement is that of the imagination as it grasps its material and weaves a pattern from words to indicate how the shuttling of the playful hand is perceived. The words are not a key to open the door on an experience which lies beyond them, but the experience itself. The reader's attention is focussed on the behaviour of nouns within the poem rather than first and foremost on the behaviour of the things named by the nouns. The first two lines each come to rest on nouns, the next three variously upset the reader's anticipation of nouns, whilst the last three prepare for the equilibrium restored in the final word. Thus the poem describes an arc from balance, through imbalance, and back to balance again. The movement 'rivals' the effect of the hanging weight pulling the chickens back and forth. It is not an illusion of another object's movement but a movement which seems to be intrinsic to the poem itself.

Linda Wagner has called this poem a 'still-life description'; she has even denied that it is a poem. Williams, she suggests:

> avoided subjective comparisons and narrated events objectively. . . . Yet, although impersonality may increase the physical reality of the person or object presented, it also may repress or limit the poet's responses and expression. Consequently the results of the poetic process are often still-life descriptions rather than poems. Lines like 'Six whittled chickens / on a wooden bat / that peck within a / circle' may create accurate depictions, but they hardly constitute great poetry.[5]

There are several false assumptions here. (The poem is in a sense misquoted since the way Wagner lineates it within a prose paragraph destroys its visual compactness and efficiency in order to draw attention to its apparent deficiency in expressiveness.) Since the subjective / objective distinction is the critic's and not the poet's, it is unjust that she should use the distinction to argue that the responses suggested by the poem are limited. The poet's responses are 'limited' only if it is assumed that responsiveness is defined by an emotionalism that is 'subjective' and independent of the objects of attention. Nor is the poem a 'still-life' depiction; Williams is attempting to make something happen rather than making a picture. His poem is an 'animate-life' mechanism whose construction the reader is being asked to notice. The way Williams has constructed the poem holds all the implications of the poem's meaning. In some notes he made on Pound's work, he shows how strictly he intended the poem to be valued according to the details of its structure rather than its photographic or philosophic accuracies:

> All the thought and the implications of thought are there in in the words (in the minute character and relationships of the words . . .)- it is <u>that</u> I wish to say again and again-- it is there in the technique and it is that that is the making or breaking of the work. It is that that one sees, feels. It is that that <u>is</u> the work of art-- to be observed. . . .
>
> The measure is an inevitability, an unavoidable accessory after the fact. If one move, if one run, if one seize up a material-- it cannot avoid a movement which clings to it-- as the movement of a horse becomes a part of the rider also. . . .

> It is in the minutiae-- in the minute organization of the words and their relationships in a composition that the seriousness and value of a work of writing exist -- not in the sentiments, ideas, schemes portrayed (SE 107-109).

Despite the fractured style the drift of Williams' argument is clear: the quality of a poem relates to its efficiency of organisation not to its sentiments. The poet seizes a material and moulds words according to the character of his source, but shaping them into a new construction; the burden of the poem is discovered in the tiny details of its composition. It is revealed by its mechanics.

There is no repression of the poet's responses in this process as Wagner claims; it would seem rather that the poet's responses derive wholly from the object depicted and that the object is therefore sufficient to express those responses without comment. The poem becomes the evidence of the poet's coincidence with reality. There is a difficulty about this process which is symptomatic of Williams' technique generally. Octavio Paz has described it this way:

> To Williams artists - it is significant that he depends upon and draws inspiration from the example of Juan Gris - separate the things of the imagination from the things of reality: cubist reality is not the table, the cup, the pipe, and the newspaper of reality; it is another reality, no less real. This other reality does not deny the reality of real things: it is another thing and simultaneously the same thing.[6]

An artist differentiates exactly between the things he makes and the things he observes. He intends what he makes to be an addition to reality and yet at the same time it continues to give evidence of his experience of reality. In Williams' view, the poet attempts to create 'an immediate objective world of actual experience' (SE 33-34) through a poem which, acting like a prism, is an object in its own right with the power to focus thoughts, things, states of being beyond it. As an object (Zukofsky helpfully defined the 'poetic object' as 'an order of words that exists as another created thing in the world'[7]) the poem is to be apprehended by the senses as any object would be, is to be looked at and listened to. 'The written

object comes under the laws of all created things',[8] Williams wrote. Yet as an imaginative creation the poem has the additional property which other objects do not share, of being able to draw attention to its own surfaces even while it goes beyond them: as Paz says, 'it is another thing and simultaneously the same thing'. It is satisfactory neither to think of the poem as something that exists 'objectively' nor as something created from 'subjective' resources: rather, it is a thing created out of the fluid interchange between objects and the poet's imagination. The poet shapes the poem into a unique object which, in its own design, crystallises experience. To be an object the poem does not have to be placed beyond individual experience amidst the otherness of things, where it may be divorced from personal concerns; instead, through its object-ness, it should make explicit the singleness of the individual imagination and perceived things.

Difficulties arise only when the philosophic concept of 'objectivity' is confused with the fact of perceiving an object. Williams' idea of the poem as 'a live thing' is instructive: it is possible to say that a bull, for instance, exists as an objective entity, and yet, although there is no need to doubt the fact of its existence, the perceiver's knowledge of its existence depends upon a continual re-estimation of its movements and gestures. It would be a mistake to imagine that the bull's undoubted objectivity is a guarantee of its independence of the observer. Similarly, to say that a poem is 'objective' is not to imply that its materials are detached from the reader or necessarily dispassionate: to economise and reduce commentary to a minimum in order to make the poem exist as an object has nothing to do with 'excluding any subjective reaction'. It is merely the most efficient method the poet can find for recording his response:

Young Woman at a Window

She sits with
tears on

her cheek
her cheek on

her hand
the child

in her lap
his nose

pressed
to the glass (CEP 369)

In spite of the lack of directly emotive terms here (though 'tears' and 'pressed' may seem indirectly emotive) the poem is filled with emotional urgency. This is not because Williams describes his emotions but because he composes them into a rhythmic unit with its own insistence. The importance to the poet of what is perceived is revealed as the poem progresses; in Williams' words it emerges 'from within the minute relationships of the words'. In the first four couplets the reiterated rhythmical pattern creates an increasing pressure that comes to a climax in the elongated syllable of the word 'pressed' in the final couplet. The reader is chiefly aware of how the effect derives from the mechanics of the poem's movement, rather than from an emotion that the poet feels the need to express. The attention is focussed on the poem - the object on the page and the reading of it - rather than on what the poetic imagination that made the poem is saying. This technique does not, however, deny the poet's involvement in the things observed in the poem, but reveals it in his wish to make a new object from what he sees; he does not state his involvement but enacts it in the poetic object he creates. 'The thing itself' carries the emotional charge. The poet's self, implied by the poem, is not its authority but the perceiving source which generates it. Without having to submit to the poet as a guiding light, the reader is made aware of the keenness of his concern by being made to

perceive a fresh object. Things observed by Williams about him, having opened the way for his experience, are presented as verbal objects in the poem in order to open the way for the reader's experience. Thus the words have a two-fold existence: they occur in the poet's imagination as an appropriate means of appraising and registering his contact with reality, whilst, to the reader, they are perceptible objects, marks on the page or spoken sounds, possessing their own significance. In Arnheim's phrase, they 'upset the repose' of the reader's imagination and stir live perceptions which embrace aspects of what may be the poet's experience but which are subsumed in the present experience of the reader.

The poem, then, is both an object of attention and simultaneously an apprehension of reality. As a result it can never be fitted to the either/or of 'objective' and 'subjective' categories. Williams noted on his copy of Whitehead's Science and the Modern World, 'Finished reading it at sea, Sept. 26., 1927 - A milestone surely in my career, should I have the force and imagination to go on with my work'.[9] In his book Whitehead suggested an epistemological counterpart to Williams' poetic procedures. As part of what he understood to be an objective relationship to things, Whitehead proposed:

> that the actual elements perceived by our senses are in themselves the elements of a common world; and that this world is a complex of things, including indeed our acts of cognition, but transcending them.
>
> According to this point of view the things experienced are to be distinguished from our knowledge of them. So far as there is dependence, the things pave the way for the cognition, rather than vice versa. But the point is that the actual things experienced enter a common world which transcends knowledge, though it includes knowledge.[10]

Whilst the objects of perception and our knowledge of them are distinct, to experience them is to enter a world which is 'common' with them. Cognition follows the route things have paved for it: perception is coloured by the objects perceived, even though they are known to be separate from the perceiver. Although a young woman

at a window is in a world apart from Williams, the way he perceives her is inextricably tied to the way he chooses to represent her. The poet attempts to take 'the shape of the moment' and articulate it in a poetic object which, like that which he observes, exists in a world apart, and yet, by virtue of its very separateness, becomes part of a common world of objects. 'The objectivist holds that the things experienced and the cognisant subject enter into the common world on equal terms', Whitehead proposed.[11] Williams seeks to create this 'common world' in a poem; consequently his world is not stripped bare of his experience for the sake of the poem. It is rather one in which, as Zukofsky suggested, 'the mind receives shapes',[12] and out of respect for the objects that determine those shapes, the mind avoids the effects of purely personal fantasy which Whitehead attributed to 'subjectivism'. He explained the term 'subjectivism' as 'the expression of the individual peculiarities of the cognitive act'.[13] The poet transcends this by articulating a condition of being, or knowing, in which objects participate. Williams wanted to avoid commenting on the 'peculiarities' of his perceptions; he aimed, rather, to try to to express the part played by things by embodying his perceptions in a newly-created thing.

It is possibly a coincidence that Zukofsky used the term 'objectivist' in much the same way that Whitehead had, for as Mike Weaver has pointed out there is no evidence to suppose that Zukofsky had read Whitehead at this time.[Weaver : p. 54] On the other hand there is plenty of evidence to show that what Zukofsky and a handful of sympathetic writers might have meant by the term was, like Whitehead's definition, something alternative to 'subjectivism' rather than diametrically opposed to it. Oppen is very succinct about this:

> We were all very much concerned with poetic form, and form not merely as texture, but as the shape that makes a poem possible to grasp. (Would we all have thought that a

> satisfactory way to put it ?) 'Objectivist' meant, not an objective viewpoint, but to objectify the poem, to make the poem an object. Meant form.[14]

Nevertheless, there remains a strong body of opinion that maintains that to write as an 'Objectivist' does indeed mean 'pursuing an objective viewpoint'. James Guimond has defined the term by turning to the dictionary to discover exactly the meaning which Oppen rejects;[15] and Wagner repeatedly implies the same attitude, as has been seen, by insisting that Williams' part in this so-called movement meant his writing about things to the exclusion of any 'subjective reaction'. For critics like Guimond and Wagner, accurate delineation of a thing must occur in isolation from individual experience, as if the manner of expression and the things expressed were not intimately related. The poet's technique is understood to be distinct from the quality of his perceptions. But for Oppen what mattered was the 'necessity for forming a poem properly, for achieving form', not the chimera of the 'objectively existing':

> That's what 'objectivist' really means. There's been tremendous misunderstanding about that. People assume it means the psychologically objective in attitude. It actually means the objectification of the poem, the making an object of the poem.[16]

The motivation to objectify a poem, in Oppen's view, derives from the link between perception and things: he delights in objects so much that he attempts to make another object which the reader can in turn perceive. The poem's form as an object, addressed to the reader's perceptions, makes it 'possible to grasp'. This is a different way of thinking from either Guimond's or Wagner's. For Oppen 'the poet's expression' is not limited to a formal presentation of his own private thoughts and feelings; it goes beyond that into the making of a new reality.

Most of the difficulties in understanding a poem as an object arise therefore from misinterpreting the term 'Objectivism'. Zukofsky

has stressed that as far as he was concerned Objectivism was never even a movement:

> objectivism . . . I never used the word; I used the word 'objectivist' and the only reason for using it was Harriet Monroe's insistence when I edited the 'Objectivist' number of Poetry. . . . I don't like any of those isms. I mean, as soon as you do that, you start becoming a balloon instead of a person. And it swells and a lot of mad people go chasing it (TCW 216).

Again Wagner illustrates what happens when an illusory 'ism' is 'chased'. Having taken the word 'Objectivism' to apply to a movement, she is able to infer elements of a group programme - 'the tenets of Objectivism' - which a number of writers, Williams amongst them, are supposed to have followed. From this she postulates a necessary suppression of the 'subjective' as part of the programme:

> Concentrating on the 'thing' and excluding any subjective reaction, Williams had reached a stalemate of pictorial perfection at the close of his concern with Objectivism.

Objectivism, she suggests, 'allowed as subject only the concrete "thing" (presented literally and in isolation even from the poet)'. This apparently drove Williams into stalemate by 'the late thirties' and decided him upon a modification of his 'definition of both the poem and the role of the poet':

> Still maintaining that the poem was to re-create the local, Williams now saw that it must present a complex view rather than a simple one. It must include many components of life: the poet and his perception, the subject and its surroundings, related objects in the fabric of life. In short, Williams felt that the poet must take the details of his observation and combine them into a meaningful whole. Man observes; the poet interprets the observation and relates it to life.[17]

For Williams the poet never aims to 're-create' the local (Wagner ends her paragraph with Williams' own comment that 'the objective in writing, is to reveal' [my emphasis]). The local he conceives of as 'certain, definite environmental conditions' with which the artist makes contact. He does not 're-create' it: he creates it by making himself part of it through his poem. Quoting Arthur Craven,

Williams suggests the poet is '"influenced by every sentient moment"' (SE 33). Since the early 1910s at least Williams had attempted to present objects, not in 'isolation' from himself or purged of his experience of them, but as living in the poem. Objects give shape to his creations: they provide the material of his poetry as the '"aggregate of all those experiences that have taken form in the imagination"'. Certainly Williams recognised that the poem must include '"many components of life"', as Wagner suggests; the poet's '"material is vast and comprehensive"' (SE 33), he wrote. But this has nothing to do with a disatisfaction with 'Objectivism': he made the comment in 1921, not the 'late thirties', before the elusive 'Objectivism' had been dreamt of.

If there is a link between the various poets embraced by the term 'Objectivism', it is perhaps that each has tried, in his own way, to make clear that respect for objects is not a question of impersonality but of involvement in perceived things. Reznikoff, for instance, has said:

> I think poetry deals essentially with feelings, the feelings of the man who writes it and the feelings of the reader, though it may fail in either direction (TCW 209).

And Rakosi, in response to the suggestion that the images in his poem 'The City 1925' lack any logical connection, replied:

> since this is my first exposure to New York , there are all kinds of objects to be described - objects which have no connection with each other. The connection is through my perception, through my receiving of them in their tremendous multiplicity (TCW 199).

Out of respect for his materials the poet should not confuse the subject with the object. This does not mean that the poet suppresses his feelings in order to isolate objects. The connection between the objects described in the poem occurs not through imposed emotion or logic but 'through [the poet's] perception' of the diverse objects surrounding him: the poem is the evidence of 'what this young man is

experiencing in their presence'. Inventing formal arrangements from the raw data of perception the poet intends to clarify his experience rather than sterilise it, but he has to do so by avoiding extraneous commentary:

> I respect the external world - there is much in it which is beautiful if you look at it hard. I don't want to contaminate that; it has its own being; its own beauty and interest that should not be corrupted or distorted (TCW 199).

Oppen similarly had no interest in 'rushing over the subject-matter in order to make a comment about it':

> The important thing is that if we are talking about the nature of reality, then we are not really talking about our comment about it; we are talking about the apprehension of some thing (TCW 175).

Parallel to this emphasis on the importance of perception was a pleasure in the act of seeing shared by several of the 'Objectivist' poets. To see accurately the elements of the surrounding world, to respect its 'own beauty and interest', implied for them a deep-rooted emotional engagement. They wanted to convey in a poem's sensuous immediacy their sensuous delight in vision. In a letter to Marianne Moore, Williams regretted that as he grew older he had to put up with the inability to see as 'distinctly' as in his youth (SL 122). His fascination with 'distinctly' discriminated things is not the kind of 'pictorial perfection' of which Wagner writes, but a passionate interest in their exact perception. Oppen felt a similar passion and confessed himself sorry for anyone not able to share it. Like Arnheim, Oppen believed it possible to think with the things we see:

> The mind is capable not only of thinking but has an emotional root that forces it to look, to think, to see. The most tremendous and compelling emotion we possess is the one that forces us to look, to know, if we can, to see. The difference between just the neuro-sensitivity of the eye and the act of seeing is one over which we have no control. It is a tremendous emotional response, which fills us with the experience we describe as seeing, not with the experience of some twitching nerves in the eyeball (TCW 186).

The 'Objectivist' poets, then, were not in agreement about a

suppression of 'subjective reaction'; rather, they shared a desire to eliminate superfluous commentary in order to stress how they perceived things. They never wished to exclude their own feelings for an exact presentation of objects seemed to them a mode of feeling in itself. This idea no doubt stemmed from Pound's recognition that the 'natural object is always the adequate symbol'.[18] If a sufficiently economic, objectified form could be achieved the poem would inevitably be emotive:

> I see something and it moves me and I put it down as I see it. In the treatment of it, I abstain from comment. Now, if I've done something that moves me - if I've portrayed the object well - somebody will come along and also be moved (TCW 207).

The term 'Objectivist' was first used by Zukofsky in the essay Sincerity and Objectification included in the 1931 issue of Poetry he was invited to edit. At the head of the essay he wrote:

> An Objective: (Optics) - The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus. That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry) - Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars.[19]

Here, as in Williams' phrase 'the objective in writing is to reveal', the word 'objective' refers to an intention or thing intended. It is used as a noun, not as an adjective, and is unrelated to the opposite of the adjective 'subjective': it implies the author's end in view, or that which he aims at. Zukofsky is concerned with a movement towards things (the Objectivist Press was called 'To') rather than the detachment of things from personal responses. Oppen felt similarly: 'I think a poet comes to feel this is all he does - moves us in the direction we are going' (TCW 187). One misapprehension that arises from the confusion of 'objectivity' with 'an objective' is to think of the words of a poem as if they were static delineations seeking to resist movement and become, in Wagner's phrase, 'still-life' depictions. The effectiveness of Williams' poem 'Young Woman at a Window' depends upon the reader's awareness of the movement towards

the final couplet: 'pressed' loses its force if it is withdrawn from the pattern of rhythms, including the visual, that leads up to it. There is no impersonality about this: the poet's personality is focussed in his attempt to objectify his experience. His personality is felt, as Zukofsky says, as a 'desire' inciting the poet - a passion to drive his excited perceptions outward into a newly created reality.

Mike Weaver has suggested a source for the word 'objective' in the 'objectif' of photography:

> the process by which images are produced on specially prepared surfaces, by means of an objectif through which light passes, provided an underlying analogy for the new poetry. Photography as an art, as well as a mechanical process, played an extremely important part in the revived emphasis on the image.[20]

In this analogy the poem is thought of as an equivalent of a lens focussing a visual array. It therefore stands as both a revealer of things and as a thing in its own right. This analogy both emphasises the double-reality of the poem (real in itself and a focus for surrounding reality), and offers a mechanical parallel for Zukofsky's desire for accuracy ('an interest in clear and vital particulars').[21] A poem, like a lens, needs to have a mathematical precision to eliminate any blurring of 'the quality of things being together'.[22] Like Zukofsky, Williams also made use of a photographic analogy for poetry; in 'The Mirrors' he likens the impression made by things on the mind to the response of a sensitive paper to light:

> Is Germany's bestiality, in detail
> like certain racial traits,
> any more than a reflection of the world's
>
> evil ? Take a negative, take Ezra Pound
> for example, and see
> how the world has impressed itself
>
> there. It is as when with infra-red
> searching a landscape obscured
> to the unaided eye one discloses
>
> the sea. The world is at its worst the
> positive to these foils,
> imaged there as on the eyes of a fly. (CLP 85)

(The poem is also an interesting example of the disparity between Williams' opinions on poetry and his practice. An almost Miltonic phrase 'It is as when' introduces an undisguised simile of a kind condemned in Spring and All.)

There are, however, several definitions of 'An Objective' and it would be unnecessary to limit them to wholly photographic connotations. Zukofsky presumably has also in mind the fact that the eye has a lens, different in operation from that of a camera, but similarly one that focusses 'rays from an object'. His poetry repeatedly exploits the pun between 'I' and 'eye', thus suggesting a consciousness informed by visual experience. For instance, his poem 'I's (PRONOUNCED EYES)':

> Hi, Kuh,
> those
> gold'n bees
> are Is,
> eyes,
> skyscrapers.[23]

(Bottom on Shakespeare, a long work of criticism designed to put an end to all philosophy, is an extensive development of the same theme.) A poem articulates 'the detail of seeing';[24] it occurs as an evidence of the contact between the poet and the objects that visit his senses. There is a distinction, however, between the work of a poet and that of a photographer; Zukofsky conceives of a poem as arising 'in the veins and capillaries', whilst such physiological involvement is hardly possible in the work of a photographer. The poet is concerned with movement, such as the circulation of the blood and the rhythm of the lungs, whilst the photographer is concerned with the arresting of movement at any one moment. This physiological aspect of the poet's work emphasises how the creation of a poetic object does not imply detachment on the poet's part but, on the contrary, an involvement of all that makes up the poet's self.

An 'objective', therefore, should be understood to refer to more than an object in view; it refers also to the intention to realise how that object is perceived, that is, the process of realisation. In Zukofsky's opinion a poem is 'an object in process';[25] it exists as a thing but is constantly developing, growing, throwing fresh light on the common elements of experience. Apprehended by the reader as an object, the poem is never quite the same object, for, as it evolves, it becomes new.

To a Poor Old Woman

munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her

You can see it by
the way she gives herself
to the one half
sucked out in her hand

Comforted
a solace of ripe plums
seeming to fill the air
They taste good to her (CEP 99)

The object 'aimed at' here is a woman chewing plums. The poem's 'objective' is to move the reader towards her as if it were a lens focussing upon her, It would be possible to reduce the poem to a cameo image but to do so would be to ignore the effect of the reshuffled phrase 'They taste good to her'. What Williams has done both attempts to enact the woman's pleasure in the taste of the plums, renewed as she munches each fresh fruit, and also enforces a sense of curiosity about the process of building a poem itself. There is an odd feeling of suspension about lines 3 - 7; the description is delayed apparently in order to sidetrack the reader into an eddy of words that only turn back upon themselves. Initially there is a sense that the poet has cheated the reader; the words say nothing more, they alienate the

reader, they are just words. Precisely this feeling is intended. While Williams wants to convey something of the 'solace' the old woman experiences he does not want to achieve it through encouraging the reader to identify with her. He has to objectify that feeling in the structure of the words he uses. He seems to be saying: "here is a woman enjoying some plums - I enjoy watching her; words are to me what plums are to her; here's a poem then for you to chew on". He gives the reader words to turn round in the mouth as if they were plums; thus he links his pleasure in watching the woman to his desire for an 'objective' text. The reader in turn is invited to witness the process of building the poem. The final line is a kind of fulfilment towards which the poem evolves: it renews the sense of the poet's relish of making poems (delight in the words as words) whilst satisfying the reader's interest in the object 'aimed at' (the woman's delight in her plums).

Zukofsky's term 'objective' has two aspects. First:

> A poem. A poem as object . . . Experienced - (every word can't be overdefined) experienced as an object.[26]

The reader experiences the poem as any object; it has an objective existence which the reader must perceive. And second:

> **A poem.** Also the materials that are outside (?) the veins and capillaries-- The context-- The context necessarily dealing with a world outside of it--

The poem aims the reader towards 'a world outside'; its objective is to take the reader closer to that world, to move the reader in the direction of things. Pursuing an objective means not just that the poet deals with objects but that his knowledge of objects expressed through a poem is never more than an approach towards them; the poet creates knowledge of objects as a poem evolves. The military usage of the word 'objective' hinted at by Zukofsky in his original essay was dropped when he came to revise it for Prepositions, probably because, as Weaver notes, it reinforced the idea that poetry was

like 'the photographic shooting of a still'.[27] Rather than a poetry that would freeze objects Zukofsky wanted one that would distil movement. In his case this meant 'directing [objects] along a line of melody'.[28] For Williams, who was primarily concerned with contacting the local through the articulation of perception, the poet tries for

> an immediate quality which only comes when the intelligence matches an acuteness of the sensual perception to which you add an aimed heat of the emotions (SL 122).

Yet however various the details of their technique, 'an aimed heat of the emotions' was sought by each of the 'Objectivist' poets; objects were a passion that they wished to record accurately using words that were themselves felt like objects.

It is important to understand how literally Williams took the notion of the poem as an object; only then is it possible to appreciate how completely he intended the page, like the surface of a canvas, to be seen as a texture with a direct bearing upon what the reader experiences. He embraced the object-ness of the poem more thoroughly even than Zukofsky, who at times entertained a rather more metaphysical conception; 'there exists', Zukofsky wrote,

> though it may not be harboured as solidity in the crook of an elbow, writing (audibility in 2-D print) which is an object or affects the mind as such.[29]

Whilst writing assuredly exists, Zukofsky felt the need to qualify his notion of its 'solidity' by admitting that it is not necessarily palpable like other, tangible objects. He had his reservations too about whole-heartedly accepting the idea that the visual impression of letters on a page could be felt as 'the Chinese feel their written characters'.[30] But nonetheless, elusive though it was, he was aware of the distinct effects that the sight of letters could provoke:

> most western poets of consequence seem constantly to communicate the letters of their alphabets as graphic representations of thought - no doubt the thought of the word influences the letters but the letters are there and seem to exude thought.

Williams was not as guarded as this about his sense of the material basis of a poem. Zukofsky may have affirmed 'the natural physical simplicity of [poetry's] best examples', but it was Williams who practiced it most literally. He knew it and said as much in a letter to Zukofsky in 1929:

> it may be that I'm too literal in my search for objective clarities of image. It may be that you are completely right in forcing abstract conceptions into the sound pattern. I dunno (SL 102).

Yet Williams was sure that a poetry that bought abstractions at the cost of concrete examples was a poetry for which he had no use.

Whatever their differences over the relative importance of sound and sight in the creation of a poetic object, both Zukofsky and Williams well knew that it is facile to make any absolute distinction between audibility and visibility; poetry, being sensual, makes use of all the senses. Each sense, though an independent function, informs the other. With his emphasis on the literal visibility of a poem, Williams could think of poetry as visually expressive as if it were painting:

> The first effect is in the writing itself. . . . Verse form, the actual shape of the line, must be as it is the first visible thing (SL 299).

Williams does not mean that the visibility of the words can be thought of as separate from their effect as speech. In the Paris interview he applauded the suggestion that 'the appearance of this poem ["The Descent"] on the page suggests you were conscious of it as a thing - something for the eye'. 'Yes, very good', he replied; 'I was conscious of making it even'.[31] But, as the same interview goes on to hint, the interviewer may have misunderstood how Williams felt that the eye also meant the ear:

> I: (picking up a copy of Paterson) - these opening lines - they make an image on the page.
> WCW: Yes, I was imitating the flight of a bird.
> I: Then it's directed--
> WCW: --to the eyes. Read it.

I: 'In old age the mind casts off . . .'
WCW: 'In old age
the mind
casts off
rebelliously
an eagle
from its crag . . .'

The interviewer recognises the pictorial nature of the poem but presumably ignores the direct link that Williams envisages between the visual object and the rhythmic speech: he clearly intends that what is seen and what is said should contribute to a single pattern of apprehension. He wishes, as he remarked in a second interview, to make the poem 'happen on the page'.[32] Oppen, who once commented that Zukofsky had wanted to 'construct a method of thought from the imagist technique of poetry - from the imagist intensity of vision' (TCW 174), might have been speaking of Williams: the 'intensity of vision' which could make a poem 'happen' on the page entailed the kind of attentiveness that would see, hear, think, imagine, in a single act of sharpened awareness.

Paterson is the clearest example of a poem in which Williams applies his visual inventiveness to make it 'happen' in this way. The typographical arrangements (as that of the passage just quoted) form visual patterns of speech which are presented as inherently articulate. Although some contemporary critics understood Williams' intention, most were unwilling to think of the poem as an object and so tended to argue that the visual texture was distracting. Hayden Carruth, for instance, felt it 'interfered' with reading:

> The lines here are not run over . . . They break in the most extraordinary places, with no textual, metrical, or syntactical tension to help us over. If this is done for typographical effect, as sometimes it appears, it is inexcusable, for it interferes with our reading. If it is done to indicate a certain way of reading the poem, then we should be told what it is.[33]

'Typographical effect' is here assumed to be antagonistic to the reading process. Ironically, the effect is intended 'to indicate a

certain way of reading' but to perceive it requires the reader to look at the text rather than be told. Williams' aim is to extend the sensory appeal of his art by combining the visual and the aural rather than purchasing the one at the cost of the other. By contrast, Leslie Fiedler, a critic who took seriously the poem's 'typographical effect', felt that the aural force was inevitably lost:

> His entirely visual concept of poetic form inhibits what incipient melody comes . . ; he pursues absolutely the seen poem: speech that rejects the illusion of being heard; lines broken on the page regardless of cadence to make the eyes' pattern or emulate plastic form. . . . . Proposed in our world where not the brush, intimate with the hand, but a remote machine composes the poem on the page, there is an inevitable air of nostalgia, or even parody about the attempt to unify the seen and heard forms of the poem - and in the end what is involved is a kind of betrayal, a surrender to typography of music and resonance.[34]

Whether or not this is true of the poem's effect, it is not true of Williams' purpose: as the Paris Interview implies, it is not 'absolutely the seen poem' that he pursues. He writes hoping to link the expressive force of the visual object to the effects of cadence, though this of course does not guarantee that he succeeds. To a certain extent Williams does seem to break lines where they might be expected to continue; but since his purpose is to 'disperse' knowledge fixed in minds that are 'like beds made up' (P 4), any technique that interfered with habitual reading would have been attractive. He had no intention to satisfy a reader's expectations. If he could 'make it new' by breaking lines in unanticipated places, then there was good reason to do so.

Williams required a fresh way of thinking about and responding to a poem. Both Carruth and Fiedler seem to assume that Paterson expresses what the poet has directed it to express. Fiedler is aware that what is at 'stake is the "line"', but ends his article with the question, 'what, precisely, has experimental technique added to our knowledge of ways to say our thoughts ?' He imagines a thought to

be separate from how it is expressed, and thus does not allow that a poem's form is an aspect of its meaning. 'Experimental technique' is more than a means of devising new ways of saying something: it is also a way of saying something new. The poetic object which embodies the poet's thoughts is what adds to knowledge: the reader locates originality (or not) in the poem as it argues its own case, rather than in the arguments that might be deciphered from it and imputed to the poet. The reader, like the poet, 'thinks with [the] poem' as it progresses.

For Williams, the 'remote machine' was an asset to the sort of speech he was looking for since it drew attention to the distance between the poet and the object he made. Paradoxically this very distance brought the poet and the poem close together. If, as Rakosi agreed when asked, the objectivist was one who 'let his feelings depend upon the object and was faithful' to it (TCM 201), he would naturally want to make a poem that would allow the reader's feelings to depend on objects in the same way. The success of Williams' Paterson relies upon the poet's success in making the poem an object; if he fails the poem is unable to fulfil its purpose to 'embody the whole knowable world about [him]' (A 391).

Notes to Chapter V:

1. 'How to Write', an essay reprinted in Linda Wagner, The Poems of William Carlos Williams, p.146.
2. Robert Duncan, 'Ideas of the Meaning of Form', in Poetics of the New American Poetry, eds. Allen and Tallman, p.200.
3. See page 98.
4. 'Notes from a Talk on Poetry', Poetry XIV (July 1919), p.215.
5. Wagner, p.51.
6. Octavio Paz, 'Saxifrage: Some Notes on Williams Carlos Williams', London Magazine (June/July 1974), p.37.
7. Zukofsky, Prepositions, p.20.
8. 'How to Write', in Wagner, p.146.
9. M. Weaver, William Carlos Williams and the American Background, Cambridge UP. 1971, p.48.
10. Whitehead, Science and the Modern World, p.110.
11. Whitehead, p.110.
12. Zukofsky, p.12.
13. Whitehead, p.109.
14. A letter from George Oppen to Mary Ellen Solt, 18th Feb. 1961; quoted in Weaver, p.55.
15. Guimond, The Art Of William Carlos Williams, in his chapter on 'Objectivism', pp.93 - 125.
16. George Oppen in conversation with L. S. Dembo in The Contemporary Writer, eds. L. S. Dembo and C. N. Pondrom, Wisconsin UP. 1972, p.173, hereafter referred to in text as "TCW".
17. Quotations in this paragraph are from Wagner, p.17 and pp. 62-63.
18. Pound, Essays, p.5.
19. Zukofsky had made use of essentially the same material in the sixth section of his long poem A, the majority of which had been written a year earlier in 1930; see A, California UP. 1978, p.24.
20. Weaver, p.55.
21. Zukofsky, p.12.
22. Zukofsky, p.13.
23. Zukofsky, ALL the collected short poems 1923 - 1964, Norton 1971, p.217.
24. Zukofsky, Prepositions, p.12.
25. Zukofsky, p.15.
26. Zukofsky, p.15.

27. Weaver, p.66.

28. Zukofsky, p.12.

29. Zukofsky, p.13.

30. Zukofsky, p.17.

31. Writers at Work (3rd Series), ed. G. Plimpton, Penguin 1977, pp.11 - 12.

32. Speaking Straight Ahead, New Directions 1976, p.65.

33. Hayden Carruth, 'Hung Over, Like a Dali Watch', Nation (8 April 1950), reprinted in William Carlos Williams: The Critical Heritage, ed. C. Doyle, Routledge 1980, p.221.

34. Leslie Fiedler, 'Some Uses and Failures of Feeling', Partisan Review (8 August 1948), in Williams: The Critical Heritage, p.193.

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VI

Paterson: a poem in typescript

In his comments on Paterson in the Autobiography, Williams wrote that he wanted to continue where Whitman had left off and break 'the dominance of the iambic pentameter in English prosody' (A 392) which had for too long interfered with the development of a truly American idiom. Instead, he wanted to develop a new line. Pursuing the idea that 'a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody' (P Author's Note), he tried to make a poem about a city he knew intimately, hoping that 'in the very lay of the syllables Paterson as Paterson would be discovered'. Whitman had begun the break, Williams believed, and 'it is up to us, in the new dialect, to continue it by a new construction upon the syllables'. The reader was to see the 'new construction' on the page; the 'thought' of the poem was 'to be discovered in the context of that with which he [the poet] is dealing'. If the context for the poet was a diversity of material relating to Paterson, for the reader the context was the poem itself.

In typography Williams had an invaluable asset: his 'new construction' could be built from a printer's typefaces and displays. These served to amplify the effect of the basic tool of composition - the typewriter. As a machine, the typewriter helped to emphasis the objectivity of the text: letters emerged from it independently. If the reader could actively perceive the poem as an object, the poem's 'thought' could be felt to be 'embodied' rather than simply transferred. Without this active perception of the text the reader cannot discover Paterson: the poem's syllables can only be dead shells and not embodiments of knowledge. Once a piece of writing is placed on the

page it becomes, Williams felt, 'definite words on a piece of paper':[1] the poem is 'an object for the liveliest attention that the full mind can give it'. In Paterson the poet aims to bring into coherence a 'mass of detail' by 'inter-relating' it 'on a new ground' (P 20), that is, on the new ground of the page. Thought emerges from the perception of the typewritten object - 'the thing itself' - so that the poem creates an alertness in the reader, 'touching as the mind touches' (P 25). For Williams this alertness stemmed principally from the eyes; the thought of the poem depends upon keeping the reader visually stimulated. In a note to himself he wrote: 'Make it factual (as the life is factual - almost casual - always sensual - usually visual: related to thought)'.[2]

Throughout Paterson Williams is at pains to invent new forms of visual articulacy. The texture of the page is kept as varied as possible by a versatile use of printing techniques. He employs both Roman and Italic typefaces, 6- and 8-point print, light and heavy inks, and a range of different types of capitalisation. These features are in addition to the obvious techniques of visual invention, such as the fragmentation of horizontal alignments (P 137), or the mimicry of the falls in a visual imitation (P 83). A rapid flick through the pages reveals how this is a poem to be viewed - as, for instance, Whitman's 'Song of Myself' is not. In the period between Williams and Whitman the typewriter had a profound effect on American writing. A poem needed no longer to be drafted by hand; it could be written out directly from a machine. The poet could watch the letters appearing in orderly succession on the paper and see a poem being built.

In a way perhaps hard for the English imagination to grasp - an imagination accustomed to a language with layer on layer of buried etymology - the American imagination seems less prone to listen to the mysterious over- and undertones of words and more able to take a

disinterested relish in the process of building with words for its own sake. Certainly Mark Twain, the first author to make consistent use of the typewriter, delighted in its ability to construct texts. He wrote to his brother:

> I believe it will print faster than I can write. One may lean back in his chair and work it. It piles an awful stack of words on the page. It dont muss things or scatter inkblots.[3]

Moreover, the construction on the page could sometimes be invented by the typewriter if the typing was inaccurate: 'this curiosity breeding little joker', he named the machine. It gave scripts an autonomy by eliminating the idiosyncracies of handwriting. This quality was also noted by Emmet Densmore, who owned an interest in the typewriter during its development in the late 1860s: 'there is something impersonal which does not inhere in any manuscript', he claimed.[4]

As the typewriter was developed, thought began to seem more intimate with the print in which it appeared, as if the arrangement and 'set' of the page affected the way a thought might be both received and composed. The idea of print as a public form of an originally private transcription was altered: the typewriter made it possible to think instead of the writing process as a direct organisation of generally available materials. If every author's thoughts could be transcribed by a similar method the letters of the alphabet were bound to seem more impersonal than formerly. The mechanical precisions of typescript made the letters and punctuation of a piece of writing take on the look of phenomena in their own right; not only did the typewriter offer a writer a clean surface on which things were not 'mussed', but it also kept continually present at the writer's fingertips all the necessary signs. It objectified the individual components of writing in front of the author. The effect on poetry was to change the idea of the page as

a convenient place to transcribe a previous inspiration, to the idea that the page was itself - as an object - the locus where a poem took place. Whilst handwriting could articulate feelings and ideas belonging to an experience that had occurred elsewhere, the typewriter displayed alphabetic particles which when printed out on paper seemed to contribute to an experience that happens here and now.

It is not difficult to see how the typewriter contributed to Williams' sense of a poem as 'definite words on a piece of paper'. It gave script an accuracy, a sense of 'separate existence' (P 224), that handwriting could not suggest. In Paterson Williams was consolidating the work of e. e. cummings and Marianne Moore, both poets who, drawing on the freedom granted by the typewriter, made poems that need to be seen as objects on the page. cummings' poems often seem to test the language to see how far it can be split before it sacrifices sense and becomes purely a set of characters. Asked to comment on a particularly intractable poem by cummings, Williams confessed he got 'no meaning at all' (P 224). But to 'understand' a poem, as Williams points out, is not just to gather its 'sense': 'Sometimes modern poets ignore sense completely' he argues. At one extreme in cummings' poems is narrative continuity, at the other is the written object - a word, a letter, or a punctuation mark. It is as if, sitting at the typewriter, cummings faces on the keyboard the shattered building bricks of language; as he types he invents 'a new construction' which is assembled on the page before him.

The fragmentation of language which the typewriter made possible opened for cummings a new mode of feeling. Bits and pieces of words could be experienced intensely not as broken parts of whole words but as fragments complete in themselves. In cummings' work, letters often seem to be visually articulate, quite apart from their sense as words; his practice recalls Arnheim's example of the circle and the

square,[5] in which the feeling of imbalance is articulated through the pattern rather than through a conscious comparison. Like cummings, Marianne Moore felt 'a great amount of joy in the thing';[6] objects delighted her simply by being objects, and amongst objects she counted words. Thinking of her, Williams wrote:

> a word is a word most when it is separated out by science, treated with acid to remove the smudges, washed, dried and placed right side up on a clean surface (SE 128).

In common with those whom Hugh Kenner has called the 'American Modernists', Marianne Moore could value the word 'both in itself and in its power to denote'.[7] A word 'placed right side up on a clean surface' by the typewriter could contribute to a poem's architecture, and so its sense, without reference to its 'meaning'; thus she could revise a poem without changing a word, altering only its syllabic layout:

> the first three times 'The Fish' appeared in print its stanzaic system grouped the syllables not 1,3,9,6,8, but, 1,3,8,1,6,8, and in six lines not five.[8]

Because the architecture of Marianne Moore's poems has such visual exactitude it is a shame that the compositor of the 1951 edition of her Collected Works should have had such difficulty in preserving her stanzaic patterns. Not all of her longer lines will fit the page and the extra syllables have been displaced on to the line below. As a result the visual symmetery - the 'lay of the syllables' - which makes her poems appear to be independently existing objects is lost. This is vital to her meaning, as Williams was well aware: she intends, he felt, the reader's eye to explore between the words arranged on the page - between the minute syllabic details - quite as much as to penetrate to the 'object of the drawing':

> It grows impossible for the eye to rest long upon the object of the drawing. Here is an escape from the old dilemma. The unessential is put rapidly aside as the eye searches between for illumination. Miss Moore undertakes in her work to

> separate the poetry from the subject entirely - like all the moderns (SE 123).

Her poems are designed to fascinate the eye as any novel objects or textures might. The typewriter enabled her to use words as if they were actual entities, and so allowed her to create an equality between words and things; for words are no longer compelled to defer to reality by representing it. Instead, they become a part of what they represent, a part of the same reality that preoccupies the poet.

When Williams writes in Paterson 'Say it: no ideas but in things', he intends a similar equality between words and things. I take it he means that it is not sufficient simply to name things: you must also shape the words you use to name things into another thing, into a 'new construction'. The precise alignments that the typewriter allows permitted Williams to make the poem so that 'the lay of the syllables' would be articulate as a pattern. The reader sees the poem; it 'happens' before the reader's eyes, just as the sensations a picture provokes 'happen'. Like a brush or knife to a painter, the typewriter was Williams' tool in the making of his art. Many examples of this can be adduced. For instance, the theme announced at the opening of the poem,

> To make a start
> out of particulars
> and make them general, rolling
> up the sum, by defective means-- (P 3)

is frequently illustrated visually by the lineation, as in the last pages of Book I where large stanzaic blocks of words counterpoint isolated verbal fragments. The reader sees a set of marks constantly attaching to and breaking away from a 'general sum', with single words in the empty white of the page offset by a lattice of black marks where the words cluster together: the eye sees the 'bafflingly/ complex' sensation (P 39) the poet is seeking to articulate.

Williams has used words to animate the page visually, occasionally

letting one word become isolated to arrest the eye, only to lead it back again amongst the more densely packed syllables. The words are seen as might be the jostling waters of the Passaic river. Aware that 'Thought clambers up' from a context in which it is 'hedged in by the pouring torrent' (P 39), Williams makes an equivalent pattern on the page: a torrent of words overwhelms the isolated phrases. Williams compels the eye to register the activity that he describes by removing 'representation' from what Charles Olson called 'the dead-spot of description'[9] and articulating things seen and thought in an object that itself must be seen.

Effects such as this of course rely on the reader being able to see the whole page as the words are absorbed individually; the typewritten pattern enacts the poem's 'meaning'. Sometimes the pattern runs counter to what a listener without the text might imagine to be the lineation. This is usually because the visual effect of the text says something that cannot be achieved aurally:

America the golden!
with trick and money
damned
like Altgeld sick
and molden
we love thee bitter
land

Like Altgeld on the
corner
seeing the mourners
pass
we bow our heads
before thee
and take our hats
in hand (P 68)

These lines might easily have been arranged, as the ear tends to hear them, into two strict four line stanzas. But Williams intends a bitter commentary upon the 'blessed dignity and strength' with which Klaus, the preacher in Book II, credits his own words. By avoiding a four line stanza Williams makes a contrast with the lines immediately preceding which report Klaus' words. These, at the top of the page

where the Altgeld lyric occurs, are lineated in four line sequences so that both patterns of lineation can be seen at once. By the contrast Williams manages to evoke the lyricism of a writer such as Herrick whilst indicating ironically how it is absent from Klaus' words; he employs a lyric shape to stress a lack of lyric grace. The effect is made clearer in his use of the same device in the opening lyric to Book III. He again intends an ironic jibe, although here it is aimed at a society which regards 'beauty' as a commodity to be bought:

I love the locust tree
the sweet white locust
How much ?
How much ?
How much does it cost
to love the locust tree
in bloom ?

A fortune bigger than
Avery could muster
So much
So much . . . (P 95)

The typewritten pattern of the lines recalls to the eye a lyric tradition buried under the weight of mercenary and bookish minds. These minds, seeking 'beauty' in an aesthetic ideal rather than in the 'thing itself', Williams tries to destroy in the ensuing passage about the burning of Paterson library. Wanting to release the poem from a context in which, like 'dead men's dreams', it is 'confined by these walls', he attempts to place it instead where he feels it belongs:

The province of the poem is the world.
When the sun rises, it rises in the poem
and when it sets darkness comes down
and the poem is dark . (P 99)

The irony of the locust tree lyric arises from the reader's ability to see the pattern of a former lyric 'beauty' which has grown stale because the province of the poem has been usurped. Beauty has become, like wealth, a thing to be acquired. But the only 'beauty' is that which inheres in things: it cannot belong to a moneyed class or cultured elite (Klaus represents a religous elite) since it exists

commonly in things as they are. The visual pattern also stresses that the poem is such a common thing; it is an object with its own inherent 'beauty'. Williams arranges his words in order to satirise the pretensions of those who attempt to understand beauty as an ideal rather than as a quality invested in the most immediate and 'local' objects. At the same time he uses the exact alignments that the typewriter permits to make the poem a visually unique object which the reader perceives as a 'thing itself'. Thus the poem enacts its own argument.

The effect of the poem can rest in quite complex ways on the manner in which Williams exploits the typewriter's ability to align words. For instance, the lineation of the famous passage 'The descent beckons' has a visual articulacy with a very precise function. In its context this passage embodies a process of initiation that contrasts with all that has immediately preceded. Throughout the previous section the language has been described as 'blocked': as it is spoken by Klaus or cited by monetarists the language has no freedom of movement; it does not flow as the torrent at the falls. The poet has reached a nadir of despondency by the opening of Book II, part III. Having heard Klaus' sermon Williams is left with 'despair'. He has realised that the economic and religous institutions of Paterson have each in their own way sold out to fixed truths; they have detached themselves from the changing aspects of the local in pursuit of ulterior values. That despair is reflected firstly in the bitter, clipped lines:

> Look for the nul
> defeats it all
>
> the N of all
> equations . . .
>
> Look
> for that nul
>
> that's past all
> seeing

the death of all
that's past

all being

and secondly in the mocking rhyme of:

> But Spring shall come and flowers will bloom
> and man must chatter of his doom . . (P 77)

This appears to parody Williams' common theme of the imagination's escape from destruction through its relentless flourishing. In the short-lined couplets man's doom is tolled out in the repetition of of the word 'nul' and the aurally associated word 'all'. There is an inevitability about the words that loads them down, 'blocks' them, and makes them seem to resist movement.

Then Williams introduces a new visual pattern:

> The descent beckons
> as the ascent beckoned
> Memory is a kind
> of accomplishment
> a sort of renewal
> even
> an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new
> places
> inhabited by hordes
> heretofore unrealised

Here, the tentative rhythmic searching supplies an image of initiation that stands against the weight of the previously accumulated despair. Instead of the remorseless rhythms of 'the death of all' the writing has a delicate unpredictability. The solid left-hand margin has given way to an advancing margin so that the visual pattern suggests 'a sort of renewal', each line beginning again from a 'new place' on the page. The words themselves become 'new places', no longer loci of despair but regions of possibility in which the poet searches to discover his bearings. They enact a response to the question that has haunted Williams:

> Why should I move from this place
> where I was born ? knowing
> how futile would be the search

for you in the multiplicity
of your debacle. (P 75)

That response is not an answer but a gesture. The reader is given no reason for 'moving from this place' but is presented instead with a pattern of words that simply does it: to be disinterestedly beginning again, with no end in view save the action itself, is the means of escape offered by the poem from the atrophy of despair. 'New places' are always to be found wherever there is a willingness to accept fresh initiatives. On the page the step by step arrangement of the lines confirms to the reader's eyes what the words seem to propose.

If the poem is not actively looked at in this way as a visually expressive typescript it becomes possible to misread it. For instance, in Book II the poet disturbs some crickets from the grass as he walks:

When! from before his feet, half tripping,
picking a way, there starts .
a flight of empurpled wings!
—invisibly created . . . (P 47)

The lineation here is critical to Williams' intention. On the previous page a piece of narrative has been severed at a point of indecision -

The crowd hesitated, bewildered between the bravery of
the Dean and .

- an indecision that echoes Sam Patch's fatal hesitancy at the brink of the Falls. So long as Patch refused to hold back from the present moment his spectacular dive remained true, but once he hesitated and withdrew to consider the risks involved, he failed. This is an archetype of the contact with the locality that Williams wanted: a willing commitment to the raw edge of experience, to the immediate patterns of perception. Since any moment of perception occurs at a point on the line of change between what has been and what will be, a willing submission to uncertainty is inevitable if the contact with the locality is to be preserved. No outcome can ever be entirely contrived: it depends on the openness of the individual in meeting

each new occasion. To hesitate is to doubt and so to be divorced from nature's creative force. The poet has the task of committing himself to paper - risking his words - so that they participate in the becomingness of the world: they need to make the world new rather than describe its newness. Thus, when Williams comes to writing of the grasshoppers, his spacing prevents the poem from appearing merely to report an event. Had he run on directly from the word 'starts' the reader could have assumed that Williams is writing narratively; he would seem to be describing an event from the past. But the fragmentation of the lines brings the event into the present; the lines articulate the perceptual process of seeing the event occur. The reader halts at the word 'starts' with questions in mind: what starts ? does Williams mean by 'starts', "there begins", or "is startled" ? In the space that follows the eyes lead the mind to that verge where the senses are most alert to new impressions and so most likely to perceive things in a new light. Arriving at the words 'invisibly created', the reader is not only given a description of experience but is also made to enter the experience itself, for the words occur, like the grasshoppers, as if emerging from an unknown source. The indentation gives a visual pattern that the reader feels articulates what the poet describes.

If the effect of the visual pattern is neglected in favour of a more prosaic interpretation of the text the possibility of misunderstanding arises. As the crickets are disturbed at his feet Dr. Paterson is visited by the memory of a carved grasshopper he had once seen at Chapultepec in Mexico:

> They fly away, churring! until
> their strength spent they plunge
> to the coarse cover again and disappear
> —but leave, livening the mind, a flashing
> of wings and a churring song

AND a grasshopper of red basalt, boot-long,
tumbles from the core of his mind,
a rubble-bank disintegrating beneath a
tropic downpour (P 47)

On this passage, Benjamin Sanky comments: 'As he walks along some grasshoppers start up, "a flight of empurpled wings"; and this sudden flight jars from his memory the image of a carved grasshopper, discovered at Chapultepec, "grasshopper hill", in Mexico City.'[10] He goes on to argue that 'Paterson's mind is compared to the carved grasshopper'; by the comparison Williams demonstrates 'the power of art to give durable shape to the artist's love for his world'. Williams does not, however, intend a comparison: his capitalised 'AND' is inclusive not comparative. Indeed, a comparison was quite deliberately excised from the manuscript, as Sanky himself indicates by quoting an earlier typescript in which 'Williams had compared the head of the carved grasshopper to that of a bull'.[11] He wants to avoid likenesses altogether. Sanky is right to speak of the 'image' in this passage, but because he does not attend to the capitalisation, he does not see that the image is the 'livening of the mind' that the carving provokes both in Dr. Paterson and in the reader as the poem is read. In Olson's words, the image is concerned with that which is 'happening as of the poem itself'.[12] Williams stresses the word 'AND' to ensure that the reader will take the memory of the carving as an 'accomplishment' in, rather than a comparison to, the event he has just witnessed; it is 'a sort of renewal' that takes place in the poem itself (P 77). It may be true, as Sanky suggests, that the carving is a record of 'something permanent yet always in flight',[13] but he goes on to imply that this is an idea to which Williams' art gives 'durable shape'. Yet experience is transient in every phase and the poem aims to embody that transience rather than compete with it. As the poet walks

Before his feet, at each step, the flight
is renewed

just as the reader renews it in the space following the word 'starts': the mind is 'aflame only in flight'. The 'flight' is the whirring of the wings at the poet's feet and also the flight of memory as it 'tumbles from his mind'; both are included in the one moment as the poet is kindled to 'sudden ardor'. The power of the passage lies not so much in its 'durable shape' as in the way it patterns nature's fluctuating energies so that the reader actively perceives them as the page is read.

Paterson, then, draws on and extends the work of poets such as cummings and Marianne Moore who had used the typewriter to make poems that were visually significant objects. In Paterson, the visual emphasis of the typewritten pattern always plays an active part in what the reader understands as the poem's 'meaning'; at times the visual layout of the syllables confirms and clarifies what the reader hears, whilst at other times the aural aspect seems relatively unimportant and the visual articulacy of the patterned page the principal reason for the layout. It does not seem to matter too much at such points whether the reader hears the poem, or at least whether the aural rhythm is strictly observed.

Yet, if Carruth's claim that Williams' technique is 'a surrender to typography of music' overstates the case,[14] it remains difficult to determine the extent to which Williams did indeed mean 'the lay of the syllables' to refer to the rhythm a reader might hear. It is evident from the Paris Interview and from his mention in Paterson of a 'jagged rhythm' evocative of jazz (P 225), that Williams has the sound of speech in mind when he writes. A manuscript note in the Buffalo collection shows one sense of the syllabic force Williams was seeking:

Detail

Doc, I bin lookin' for you
I owe you two bucks
How you doin ?
Fine!
When I get it
I'll bring it up to you

> This is the sort of thing, in it's essential poetic nature, it's [sic] rhythmic make-up (analyzed) [of which] the poetry I want to write is made. The reason I haven't gone on with Paterson is that I am not able to - as yet, if ever I shall be. It must be made up of such speech (analyzed).[15]

He stresses speech just as he does when reiterating 'Say it: no ideas but in things', but his terminology is ambiguous; when he writes of the poetry's 'rhythmic make-up', or of its 'composition', he does not make it clear whether he means the shape on the page or its effect on the ear. In Paterson, the poem 'argues its own case' and the poet avoids comment: the 'analysis' he writes of must then derive from the formal organisation of the speech itself. The reader has to grasp the shape of the verse directly as an intimation of its sense:

> nothing loses its identity because of the composition, but the parts in their assembly remain quite as 'natural' as before they were gathered (SE 129).

Williams did indeed take a lot of care over the 'assembly' of the words in Paterson: some of his revisions are simply rearrangements of the pattern on the page in the manner of Marianne Moore's revision of 'The Fish'. The passage beginning 'A man like a city' (P 7), appeared as a preface to The Broken Span under the title 'For the Poem Patterson' [sic] with the same words but in a different layout on the page. Even a single phrase such as the evangelist's cry 'brighten the corner where you are' is arranged at different points in the poem in different ways (P 128 & P 173).

These revisions suggest the 'analysis' is largely in the visual arrangement of the lines. But Williams obviously intended to create

a text that would be a guide to both eyes and ears and deliberately avoided resolving the ambiguity of his terms; when he urges the reader to be 'attendant upon the page' (P 126) he means both look and listen. Even so, there is evidence to suggest that Williams intended the typewritten object on the page to have more aural significance than is easy to hear. In the late 30s and early 40s he corresponded with a systems engineer, David Lyle. At one stage in the genesis of Paterson Williams planned to include large quantities of material drawn from these letters and, though the idea was considerably modified, Lyle continued to figure in the poem under the guise of Faitoute (do-all). Lyle believed that a word was the meeting-point for the diversity of things that might, at any moment, enter consciousness. Douglass Fiero describes his thought this way:

> For Lyle, some suggestive word becomes a current that connects the latest story in a newspaper to physiological fact to artistic experiment. He always clarifies relationships and races to open more relationships, but he is not lost if he remembers his purpose, in Weaver's words, 'to bridge the gap between the alienated, whether between management and labour, or artist and audience.'[16]

The spoken word is understood as a kind of vortex that focusses and makes coherent otherwise unrelated things. Lyle's ideas gave Williams the incentive to think of the progression of the poem's syllables as a 'current' which would make cohere the varied mass of documentary details on Paterson he had collected. As the syllables lay on the page they were to activate 'a common language which would illustrate the common basis of all organisation and so open the way to a sense of common purpose in the world'.[17] Saying the words the reader would be joined to that 'common purpose'.

In Paterson it is hard to feel that the 'lay of the syllables' can always be made to bear such a weight of aural attention; Williams' painterly imagination often makes the typewritten object on the page more exciting for the eye than for the ear. Lyle's ideas seem more

appropriate to a poet such as Olson who reflects rather more on his own technique than Williams' when he remarks that Williams 'used the machine [the typewriter] as a scoring to his composing'.[18] The comparison between the two is nonetheless interesting for it helps to reveal Williams' bias towards a visually determined layout of text. Whilst both poets were deeply concerned that words should be treated as objects, should stir live perceptions, and should work in poems so that

> all start up
> to the eye and soul
> as though it had never
> happened before[19],

Olson was more concerned to objectify the act of speech. The system of poetics propounded in Olson's 'Projective Verse' essay, an essay that impressed Williams to the extent that he devoted a chapter of his Autobiography to quoting it, is perhaps more in line with Lyle's ideas for it stems unambiguously from Olson's interest in the word spoken. Like Williams, Olson was scrupulous about the 'lay of the syllables' and felt that the typewriter acted as 'the personal and instantaneous recorder of the poet's work':

> it is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends.[20]

But there is no doubt that Olson is thinking here of the typewritten page not primarily as a graphic object but as a guide to speech. The 'suspensions of syllables' indicate pauses in the sound in Olson's poems, whereas in Paterson the space between words and phrases is often used simply to discriminate visually between different types of documentary material or different voices. According to Olson the syllable was 'the minimum and source of speech': for him, accurately paced syllables could have an effect like Lyle's 'current' which

'clarifies relationships and races to open more relationships'.

If Williams intends the 'lay of the syllables' to embody that 'current' in the sound of the speech he uses, the text is insufficiently clear. The implied aural rhythms do not always feel urgent; the 'new construction on the syllables' seems to be largely decided by the invention of new ways to make the page look different. As he said of his early poems, 'I wanted it to look that way on the page' (IWWP 27). The lineation of the dialogue passages in Book IV, for instance, between Corydon and Phyllis, and Phyllis and Paterson, suggests that Williams was trying to sustain the poem's 'originality' with novel layouts on the page which have only scanty aural significance: Lyle's 'current' seems to be abandoned for a decorative effect. Yet it is clear that Williams intended more than a verbal collage for he distinguished between the mere 'arrangement' of words and the process of 'composition' in which he hoped to find renewal; he wrote to Horace Gregory on January 1st 1945:

> I MUST BEGIN COMPOSING again. I thought all I had to do was to arrange the material but that's ridiculous. . . . The old approach is outdated, and I shall have to work like a fiend to make myself new again (SL 234).

As well as a visual effect Williams appears to want an Olsonian verbal energy. Words, Olson felt, are like objects to a physicist: they contain a certain amount of potential energy which awaits an occasion to be released. The reader frees that energy as a poem is read, responding immediately to the words as objects, rather than to the words as signifying something that originally stirred the poet. The problem for the poet is how he

> gets in, at all points energy at least the equivalent of the energy which propelled him in the first place, yet an energy which is peculiar to verse alone and which will be, obviously, also different from the energy which the reader, because he is a third term, will take away.[21]

The reader tends to see the discharge of energy in Paterson. This

happens, for example, in the passage concerning the Curies, whose discovery of luminosity in an apparently insignificant 'stain' provided Williams with a figure for the energy, or 'current', he sought:

> Pauvre étudiant .
> en l'an trentième de mon âge
> Item . with coarsened hands
> by the hour, the day, the week
> to get, after months of labor .
> a stain at the bottom of the retort
> without weight, a failure, a
> nothing. And then, returning in the
> night, to find it .
>
> LUMINOUS! (P 178)

The impact of the passage is not achieved by any insistent aural rhythm, but by the way the single word 'LUMINOUS' is made to stand out and continue on the periphery of vision even while other parts of the page are being read. The discharge of energy in Olson's work is much more distinctly aural: he exploits the typewriter's precisions not for graphic effect but to measure the exact pace at which the ear has caught the movement of words as he wants them voiced.

At its best Paterson is the richer for Williams' refusal to resolve the ambiguity of such a phrase as 'rhythmic make-up'; in a passage such as 'The descent beckons' the eyes see a pattern of lines that enhances the pattern of sounds that the ears hear. Both the visual effect of the page and the sound of the words encourage the reader to respond to the poem as a newly-created object whose 'originality' measures Williams' alertness to the local environment of Paterson. Yet there is an antagonism at the heart of the poem which limits its effectiveness; whilst Williams works to 'renew [him]self' and 'think with his poem', he is simultaneously forced to contend with a sense of the impoverishment of the language he hears around him:

> The language, the language
> fails them
> They do not know the words

or have not
the courage to use them . (P 12)

His 'new construction upon the syllables' is often expressed as a hostile reaction to the existing constructions which he feels to be inadequate:

The writing
should be a relief,
relief from the conditions
which as we advance become - a fire,
a destroying fire. For the writing
is also an attack and means must be
found to scotch it - at the root
if possible. (P 113)

Williams wishes to voice his 'intimate convictions' and by extension those of his townspeople, for they are, so it is implied, mute in the received language, but he knows too that only in the language as it is received, as it exists in 'the conditions', is the voice that he desires to be found. In so far as he feels bound to narrate his purpose he is by so much divorced from the advancing torrent of language which alone can make his poem an embodiment of knowledge. Whilst the water pouring at the edge of the Passaic Falls can suggest to Williams the kind of syllabic 'current' which he hopes will embody a new and living language, it can also serve a very different end: at times the river provides a source of escape from words.

Quit it. Quit this place. Go where all
mouths are rinsed: to the river for
an answer
for relief from 'meaning' (P 111)

He feels driven away from the 'local' - 'this place' - which, by means of an immediately perceptible language, he aims to contact; whilst he wants his words to be articulate in the act of speech itself, he has to employ a language in which such articulacy seems impossible.

Williams' inability to trust his own articulacy gives rise to the more unsatisfactory features of Paterson. It is as if he fears the

inevitable failure of his attempt to 'make the poem happen'. Inventing a 'new construction' from the typewritten syllables may, in the end, bring him no nearer to the alienated 'local', but leave him, instead, merely 'married with empty words' (P 83). The reader hears the voice of a poet who is wary about his compositions. e. e. cummings' use of the typewriter may have hinted at a method for Williams, but Williams' dislocation of letters is less clearly derived from the quality that Marianne Moore called 'impassioned feeling that hazards its life for the sake of emphasis'.[22] Williams at times seems more cynical than 'impassioned' about language:

> Go home. Write. Compose.
> Ha!
> Be reconciled, poet, with your world, it is the only truth!
> Ha!
> --the language is worn out. (P 84)

Lacking reconciliation with the world, Williams is unable to trust that his words will become embodiments of knowledge. He is distanced from his words and so fails to articulate the 'current' which will give his syllables force and energy.

As a result his words sometimes represent and allegorise experience rather than enact it. For example, in his original scheme, the poem was to comprise four books, the climax of which would be the immersion of the poet in the sea into which the river flows. The poet then returns from the water, towels himself down, and walks off inland pursued by a Chesapeake bitch. This last detail reminds the reader of Walt Whitman's dog and so refers back to Whitman's own initiative in breaking the iambic pentameter. Here the reader has been given an allegory of Williams' purpose: this is not a dog that has been perceived in the way that he might have perceived the dogs that roam in the park. It is a symbolic dog: it invites the reader

to think of the text as a parable for Williams' opinion. "We ought to follow Whitman; get up off our backsides, explore the language, discover for ourselves." The sense derives not from the 'lay of the syllables' or any 'current' that is generated in the reading, but from an image acting as a symbol. Inevitably, the passage reads as an allegory of purpose rather than as the 'thing itself': the autonomy of the language is compromised.

Williams fails in Paterson at those points where he is sidetracked from the continuous present; he misses the 'way in', of which Olson wrote in his 'Human Universe' essay:

> there must be a way which bears in instead of away, which meets head on what goes on each split second, a way which does not - in order to define - prevent, deter, distract, and so cease the act of, discovering.[25]

The development of Paterson is often marred by Williams' need to 'define' his purpose in a way that distracts from 'what goes on'. In his last poems, however, he was better able to marry his purpose to his desire for an immediately perceptible language, for his 'definitions' seem to arise from within the concerns of the poems, from within the 'current' which moves through them. The typewritten page engages both ear and eye without leaving the reader uncertain about their respective roles. Williams no longer seems compelled to fight against a sense of alienation from his world and consequently his last poems seem to invite the reader to continue more readily the 'act of discovering'.

Notes to Chapter VI:

1. 'How to Write', in Wagner, The Poems of WCW, p.146.
2. A note in the Buffalo collection, reprinted in F. Douglass Fiero, 'Williams Creates the First Book of Paterson', Journal of Modern Literature, vol. 3 (1974), p.975.
3. R. N. Current, The Typewriter and the Men who Made it, Illinois UP 1954, p.36.
4. Current, p.51.
5. See page 90.
6. Marianne Moore: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. C. Tomlinson, Englewood Cliffs 1969, p.37.
7. Hugh Kenner, A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers, Alfred A. Knopf 1975, Intro. p.xvii.
8. Kenner, p.100.
9. Charles Olson, Selected Writings, ed. R. Creeley, New Directions 1966, p.28.
10. Benjamin Sanky, A Companion to Williams Carlos Williams' Paterson, California UP 1978, p.77.
11. Sanky, p.77.
12. Olson, p.28.
13. Sanky, p.77.
14. See page 130.
15. Fiero, Journal of Mod. Lit., p.974.
16. Fiero, p.977.
17. Weaver, WCW and the American Background, p.123.
18. Olson, p.22.
19. Charles Olson, The Maximus Poems, Jargon/Corinth 1960, 'Maximus, to Gloucester Letter 27'.
20. Olson, Selected Writings, p.22.
21. Olson, p.16.
22. Marianne Moore, Predilections, Faber 1956, p.141.
23. Olson, p.56.

...

VII

Pictures from Brueghel: the 'ear and the eye . . . in the same bed'.

The poems collected in Williams' last book, Pictures from Brueghel, suggest that the temper of his mind has changed since Paterson. The notion of writing as an 'attack' (P 113) has given way to the quieter tones of an old man thinking aloud. Whilst there is no less a sense of language as a 'failing means', the violence and alienation has gone from the poet's tone. It is not that he feels he has found the 'common language' he sought in Paterson: the poet, like the inhabitants of the mental hospital, still walks

> bewildered,
> seeking
> between the leaves
> for a vantage
> from which to view
> the advancing season . (PB 99)

Nor has Williams any more ability to dispel his bewilderment, or any less need to renew his language; but whereas in Paterson that renewal of language is sought by forcing it through the furnace of the imagination just as a glass bottle, 'mauled' by fire, is transformed to a fresh beauty (P 117), in the later poems the inadequacy of speech is accepted as an inevitable limitation that the poet attempts to absorb into his work rather than trying to compensate for it. Although he may have no clearer view about what the language can be made to express - 'What shall I say, because talk I must?' (PB 89) - he knows, unsatisfactory as it is, that it is all he has and that he had best use it. He is no longer driven, as in Paterson, to make destruction a necessary precondition of creation. By keeping on talking, by not restricting the emergent flow of speech with intruded ideas, Williams can find a trust in his language in spite of his uncertainties:

There is something
something urgent
I have to say to you . . .
And so
with fear in my heart
I drag it out
and keep on talking
for I dare not stop. (PB 154)

His 'fear' is not so much, as it was in Paterson, that the language may prove stale (P 11), but that he himself may fail if he is unwilling to rely on it.

Violence has not now the attraction it had for the poet of Paterson: snow may fall on a garden like 'a rain of bombs' but it brings a 'benefice' which 'dignifies it as / no violence can'.(PB 56). The typographic effect of the page reflects this calmer tone. In Paterson the typography provides Williams with one means for writing's 'attack': at times he invents lineations that deliberately disorientate and challenge the reader. Such lineations, directed at the eyes, are bound to seem disturbing to a reader accustomed to the rhythms of iambic pentameter. In 'Pictures from Brueghel'[1] attention is still paid to typography but its effect is no longer aggressive; whilst the shapes on the page are varied between poems, within each poem they tend to be regular. The variety of linear arrangements that Williams employs rivals that of The Tempers written forty years previously. The most regularly used is that of a group of three lines, the middle one of which is shorter than the others ═══ ═══. But Williams exploits inversions of this ═══ ═══ in 'The Rewaking', and a different three-line shape ═══ ═══ in 'To a Woodpecker' and 'Iris'. Other poems combine two of these shapes ('Jersey Lyric') or all three ('He Has Beaten About The Bush Long Enough').

These three-line shapes are the commonest, but few poems in this section of the book seem to lack visual interest. In 'The Loving Dexterity', for instance, Williams lays the words out so that they form

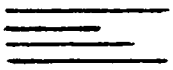
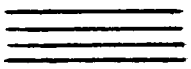
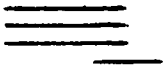
a stem which is a verbal parallel to the stem referred to in the poem: the 'dexterity' of the title then becomes both that of the woman observed and that of the poet as he imitates her action in the delicate placing of his words:

The flower
    fallen
she saw it

    where
it lay
    a pink petal

intact
    deftly
placed it

    on
its stem
    again. (PB 17)

Apart from the poems in three line groups there are also a number of poems written in groups of four lines; these too tend to be organised so as to be visually balanced. 'The Polar Bear' is composed of lines in the pattern  , 'The Chrysanthemum' of lines patterned  , and both 'The Stone Crock' and 'Sappho be Comforted' in an arrangement with a regularly detached last line  . In the section as a whole, each poem tends to be organised in its own evenly regulated pattern so that the reader's eye sees a balanced page rather than, as is sometimes the case in Paterson, a page on which the words are excitedly dispersed. With Arnheim's notion of the eye's capacity to feel the effect of patterns in mind, it can be said that the eye senses the effect of this balance: it becomes an aspect of the poems' tone as they are read.

The technique of these poems seems to be to use the ordered pattern as a limiting framework for the words. The 'push' of the line which Olson conceived as arising from the poet's breath, is sustained here by adapting the lines to make them fit a visual shape:

To Flossie

who showed me
a bunch of garden roses
she was keeping
on ice

against an appointment
with friends
for supper
day after tomorrow

aren't they beautiful
you can't
smell them
because they're so cold

but aren't they
in wax
paper for the
moment beautiful (PB 45)

The visual shape here appears predetermined and seems to act as a formal constraint upon the poet. The narrative content has been reduced in order to accommodate it to the pattern on the page. Whilst the aural rhythm is effective (especially in leading to the final line, 'moment beautiful', which delightfully reflects back upon the poem itself, upon its own step by step, moment by moment, beauty) it does not, as happens in Olson's work for instance, necessitate the visual effect. In terms of the poem's aural pace, the gap between 'on ice' and 'against an appointment' is strictly inessential, but to have dispensed with it would have destroyed the visual balance which pleases the eye as the poem is read. The double margin does have a visual significance in that it stresses the delicate tiptoe attention to the 'moment beautiful' that forms part of the poem's content; a single solid margin would have suggested to the eye a more rigid attention. But the important point is that the typography here disciplines the poem by limiting how much the poet can say in any one line. Williams is making a poem whose visual effect organises what is said.

The visual force of the typography, then, in the 'Pictures from

Brueghel' section of the book, though less aggressive, is no more muted than in Paterson and continues to form a part of what the poems communicate. The nature of vision, however, in these poems holds a more central place in Williams' concerns. Much of the energy in Paterson is devoted to enacting the theme that 'a man in himself is a city' (P Author's Note); but here, in 'Pictures from Brueghel', as the title indicates, Williams is once again drawing upon his lifelong interest in painting. His poems are, in a sense, pictures; just as are those collected in his early volume Sour Grapes (a volume originally entitled 'Picture Poems'), of which he said, 'to me, at that time, a poem was an image, the picture was the important thing' (IWWP 46). It would be misleading, however, to argue that in his later poetry Williams pursues 'the picture' as literally as he did. Brueghel's pictures interest him in the way they provide an example and a stimulus to poetry. The passion with which Brueghel makes an art from his vision of the everyday, from the crudely physical pleasures and pains of a 'local' Dutch peasantry, prompts Williams to stress the integral link for an artist between what is seen and the representation of what is seen. An artist's excited vision compels an art that itself appeals to the eye. Williams' argument in Spring and All was that art is an 'addition to nature'; it returns to nature a new object which 'adds' to the common source of objects. Consequently a painter's art and the things he paints are part of the one fabric, the single dimension of visible things. In 'Pictures from Brueghel' vision is ascribed the same role: Williams can speak in the same breath of what Brueghel sees and of the object he paints. Through vision, art and the 'local' are linked.

Thus Williams treats art and the subjects of art as part of the single world of nature. Of the ten poems devoted to Brueghel that compose the opening sequence of the book, nine make explicit reference

both to the subject of the painting - peasants, dancers, reapers, Icarus etc. - and also either to the artist himself (by name or by implying his presence through the mention of, for instance, 'The living quality of / the man's mind'), or to his artifact, the painting. 'The Hunters in the Snow', for example, begins with a direct reference to the object, the painting,

> The over-all picture is winter

then details some of the things Brueghel has painted before ending with a further reference to the painting and the fact of its autonomous existence:

> a winter-struck bush for his
> foreground to
> complete the picture

The single sentence of Williams' poem envisages no qualitative distinction between the painted and the paint; nor even between the painted and the painter:

> Brueghel the painter
> concerned with it all . . . (PB 5)

Vision weaves the painter's life, his painting, and the other objects of existence, into a single fabric.

The method of the poems is deceptively simple: they appear to be casual restatements of an original picture, but a discrete art in their organisation makes them verbal artifacts in their own right:

> Disciplined by the artist
> to go round
> & round
>
> in holiday gear
> a riotously gay rabble of
> peasants and their
>
> ample-bottomed doxies
> fills
> the market square
>
> featured by the women in
> their starched
> white headgear

they prance or go openly
toward the wood's
edges

round and around in
rough shoes and
farm breeches

mouths agape
Oya!
kicking up their heels (PB 10)

The dance of words that composes a poem is a recurrent theme in Pictures from Brueghel. In this poem, reflecting upon the dance that Brueghel has painted Williams moves his words around so that they perform a verbal dance of their own. In Spring and All Williams repeatedly distinguished between a 'copy' and an 'imitation': here, he has not copied what Brueghel has done but made an imitation of his painting by transforming it into the medium of words. The half-rhymed endings - 'gear', 'their', 'square', 'headgear'; and 'edges', 'breeches', 'heels' - make an aural pattern that evolves as the steps in a dance. The overall design of the poem emerges from the words' reaction and readjustment to one another. Unlike the cadence of a ballad meter for instance, in which the lines seem to rest in the consonance of a rhyme, Williams has arranged the poem so that the consonances propel the poem forward, just as one step in a dance requires a reciprocal movement from a partner for the dance to continue. The arrangement of the lines into clipped phrases that interfere with a too easy detail-by-detail reading of the poem, provides a record of how, by looking at Brueghel's picture, Williams' eye has been made to dance as it scrutinises the picture's surface, taking in each component part not simply as an isolated fragment but as a portion that constantly seeks to link itself to a larger design. More than the impression of particular details such as the 'ample-bottomed doxies' or 'rough shoes', the reader is given a state of apprehension in which Williams' eye is searching to discover

the inter-relation of these particulars. The poem as a result seems to be concerned with the 'what happens' of visual perception rather than just the 'what'.

As can be seen this articulation of vision is achieved principally by aural rather than typographic effects. Whilst the economy that the typography introduces is important to Williams' technique and to the reader's sense of his control, the lines do not attempt the 'literal pursuit of the image' (SL 102) such as is suggested by the graphic effects in 'Della Primavera' for example. Williams is content to let the typography dictate the poem's general shape on the page, in order to to allow an aural effect to emerge from its visual discipline. Throughout Pictures from Brueghel Williams shows a clear preference for examining the way he sees things by talking with words rather than by painting with them. Whilst 'eyes' remain a critical part of the 'poet's equipment', Williams seems less inclined to articulate it by emblematic means that are impossible to voice. The typography, especially that of the second and third sections of the book, promotes rather than disrupts the flow of the poet's voice. Without eyes to perceive the world afresh it remains true that there is 'no cure / for the sick', and the 'crooked', 'ungainly', 'unnatural' and 'deformed' features of experience lead only to ruin (PB 89). But Williams now has a means of 'escape' from ruin for he senses that through his sight he can include himself in the world, 'deformed' as it is; his eyes place him in advance of ruin and rid of its consequences. He must, though, speak of what his eyes reveal in order to renew himself and so escape the deathliness of the unoriginal:

> But also
> I have eyes
> that are made to see and if
> they see ruin for myself
> and all that I hold
> dear, they see
> also
> through the eyes

and through the lips
and tongue the power
to free myself
and speak of it (PB 90 - 91)

Through 'the little / central hole / of the eye itself' enters the light which illuminates the imagination and gives the incidental details of 'the trivial instant' their power to 'startle us anew' (PB 152). But such details can only 'startle' if the poet first frees himself to 'speak of [them]'.

This emphasis on the necessity to speak as well as see encouraged Williams to pay increasing attention to the sound of his poems. In Pictures from Brueghel the 'melody line' plays a greater part than in Paterson in determining the character of 'the composition' (PB 18). At the same time the visual effect of the page is more consistently allied to the aural, so that, Williams hopes, the

ear and the eye lie
down together in the same bed. (PB 15)

The collage structure of 'Della Primavera' and passages in Paterson which derived from the visual arts, has given way to the 'variable foot' with its musical principles: the purpose of a poem, like that of an orchestra, is

to organize those sounds
and hold them
to an assembled order . (PB 80)

The shift in Williams' aesthetic is apparent in the analogies he employed when speaking of the 'measure' in which he sought to write from the early 50s onwards. In a letter to Richard Eberhardt in 1954 he persistently employs musical terminology to explain himself: 'the tune which the lines . . . make in our ears'; 'by its music shall the best of modern verse be known' (SL 325).

In 'The Orchestra' Williams suggests what he means by the 'music . . . of modern verse':

And so the banked violins
in three tiers
enliven the scene,
pizzicato. For a short
memory or to
make the listener listen
the theme is repeated
stressing a variant:
it is a principle of music
to repeat the theme. Repeat
and repeat again,
as the pace mounts. (PB 81)

This 'principle of music' is intrinsic to the 'variable foot'. If 'the theme' is understood as certain clusters of sound or individual words, the poems can be seen to adopt the 'principle' frequently.

Only give me time,
time to recall them
before I shall speak out.
Give me time,
time.
When I was a boy
I kept a book
to which, from time
to time,
I added pressed flowers
until, after a time,
I had a good collection. (PB 154 - 155)

In this passage Williams places the repetitions of the word 'time' in such a way that each line in which it occurs gives it an altered emphasis. The lines seem to be propelled by a need to vary the weight that falls upon it: the repetitions 'stress a variant'. In other passages, assonances are absorbed into the poem to give a similar effect; the ear catches recurrent sounds within lines whose varying lengths alter the emphasis they receive:

I should have known
though I did not,
that the lily-of-the-valley
is a flower makes many ill
who whiff it.
We had our children,
rivals in the general onslaught. (PB 160)

If the lineation is carefully followed the tune emerges unobtrusively through the harmony of the vowel sounds: 'lily', 'valley', 'ill', 'children'; and 'rivals', 'general'.

If Williams increasingly tried to make a poem's 'assembled order' by trying to organise its sound rather than by typographic invention, as has been suggested it reflects no slackening of his interest in vision and the nature of perception. Instead it implies a new understanding of how a poem can be made to articulate vision. Williams seeks to 'see . . . through the lips' (PB 91) by talking of what his eyes perceive. To illustrate how this happens I should like to return to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of Cezanne and indicate a number of parallels in Williams' work.

Cezanne, Merleau-Ponty argues, sought all his life to find a means of painting that was not dependent upon perspective. He did not want to think of space as a 'network of relations between objects such as would be seen by a witness to my vision or by a geometer looking over it and reconstructing it from the outside'.[2] Space, having no material dimensions apart from the painter's perception, must include the painter and extend from him. It therefore changes both as the objects of perception move and as the painter's eye shifts its attention. Vision, Merleau-Ponty suggests, is not a matter of the eye looking out upon an arrangement of surfaces in an 'outside' with definite dimensions, but 'a means given . . . for being present at the fission of Being from the inside': in a phrase reminiscent of Williams' lines in 'Della Primavera', 'in the cross-current / between what . . . the eyes see' (CEP 60), Merleau-Ponty writes that vision 'encounters, as at a cross-roads, all the aspects of Being'. Cezanne could not paint as if he were attempting to confirm what anyone else might see were they to occupy the same position; his perception of any scene made it unique to him alone. He was pursuing instead, 'in the flesh of contingency, a structure of the event and a virtue peculiar to the scenario' which composed itself in him. He was devoted to painting how his eyes discovered form in the

process of looking. Rather than assuming form to be an inherent property of things, he understood it to be shaped in the process of perceiving them. His art, in Merleau-Ponty's view, is only representative in so far as it represents the action of his eye:

> The painting itself would offer to my eyes almost the same thing offered them by real movements: a series of appropriately mixed, instantaneous glimpses along with, if a living thing is involved, attitudes unstably suspended between a before and an after — in short, the outsides of a change in place which the spectator would read from the imprint it leaves.[3]

This is a kind of vision similar to that which Williams implies in his poem about Brueghel's dance. The lines present 'a series of appropriately mixed, instantaneous glimpses' in a state of 'unstable suspension'. They offer the reader a rhythmic progression, composed from precarious instants of balance, which refuses to allow the objects described to become static, and insists on including them in a larger movement that comprises the 'outsides of a change of place'. (By this last phrase Merleau-Ponty presumably means the succession of attitudes adopted by a thing, or set of things, as they alter in relation to one another and to an observer.) It would be impossible to think of the character of Williams' lines apart from the whole to which they contribute (at least, not without significantly altering them), since that whole is achieved through the overlap, or inter-relation, of parts, rather than through their accumulation. Line in Cezanne's paintings, Merleau-Ponty argues, does not contain objects but, like Williams' poetic line, suggests relationships: Cezanne rejects the 'prosaic conception of the line as a positive attribute and property of the object itself', since he realises that 'there are no lines visible in themselves',

> that neither the contour of the apple nor the border between field and meadow is in <u>this</u> place or that, that they are always on the near or the far side of the point we look at. They are always between or behind whatever we fix our eyes upon; they are indicated, implicated, and even very imperiously demanded by things, but they themselves are not the things.[4]

This does not negate the value of the line in painting but changes its significance so that it no longer seeks to copy the visible but becomes instead 'the blueprint of a genesis of things'. In other words, a painted line does not duplicate the relationships between things that a viewer sees, but creates those relationships.

Williams employs the poetic 'line' to a similar end: in isolation his lines are very banal, but they are never intended to be thought of separately. The concept of the poetic 'line' as a definitive quantity is irrelevant to Williams' poetry just as is the idea of 'outline' to Cezanne's paintings. The line of a poem takes its quality from the way other lines inter-relate with it, how each emerges from its context. For instance, each line in Williams' poem about Brueghel's dance reflects Williams' attention to the 'moment beautiful', but no line is complete in itself; each necessitates the line that follows. One line provides the 'genesis' for the next, just as in Merleau-Ponty's view of Cezanne, the contours of a painted object reveal how, in each successive moment of vision, a new sense of the relationships between things is born. The poems written in the 'variable foot' emphasise this sense of vision as a 'genesis of things' through their typography: the lines are both seen and heard to be renewing initiatives, always advancing across the page. As independent units they convey little sense, but are seen to create sense as they develop within a context. Unlike the lines of a drawing in which one mark may represent a nose and another a mouth, the lines of the poem seem to be individual movements that require to be recognised collectively - 'a flowing movement of planes which overlap, which advance and retreat', as George Schmidt said of Cezanne's watercolours.[5]

Merleau-Ponty recognises, as does Gibson, that visual perception is much more than a physiological event; it lays down the terms for

our knowledge of the world, it embodies our understanding. He tries to demonstrate this by examining Cezanne's claim that an artist 'thinks with his painting', that his colours inhabit 'the place where our brain and the universe meet'.[6] There is, in Merleau-Ponty's opinion, a region of embodied thought which is peculiar to an artist's vision. The thought of painting is distinct from 'scientific thought' for it draws on a 'fabric of brute meanings'; whilst 'scientific thinking' conceives of the object-in-general, painting returns to 'the soil of the sensible'. The thought of science remains detached from objects: it views them through a model that it conceives for them. On the other hand, a picture's order of meaning, the quality of thought it implies, derives from the artist's ability to 'lend his body to the world' and be bound up with objects by virtue of his vision. His body is not the body that would be described by scientific thought as a 'chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement'. The painter is 'immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible'. As a see-er the painter does not 'appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens himself to the world'. The painter's self is caught up in things, defined by 'the inherence of the one who sees in that which he sees'. The limits of a painter's thought are given by the limits of his vision, for thought is shaped and embodied by vision.

Williams had always sought to embody his knowledge of the world: abstractions could only sever the vital contact he wanted to articulate between himself and the 'local', most immediate objects of perception. Concepts could never alone provide an adequate measure for the directness with which the perceived world spoke:

> Ripped from the concept of our lives
> and from all concept
> somehow, and plainly,

the sun will come up
each morning
and sink again. (PB 151)

In Paterson Williams is led to assault abstract thought: he holds in contempt the agents of the 'university' who are 'spitted on fixed concepts like / roasting hogs' (P 32). In Pictures from Br. ghel, however, there is a feeling that conceptual knowledge need not be destroyed so much as subsumed within the embodied knowledge of the poem; like Cezanne's 'fabric of brute meanings', the words of a poem are intimations of the superior knowledge that is informed by vision. They make sense in so far as they reflect the poet's 'immers[ion] in the visible by his body'.

From the Nativity
which I have already celebrated
the Babe in its Mother's arms
the Wise Men in their stolen
splendor
and Joseph and the soldiery
attendant
with their incredulous faces
make a scene copied we'll say
from the Italian masters . . . (PB 6)

Merleau-Ponty's terms apply here as well to Williams as to Cezanne. There is no 'object-in-general', only the specific painting. The poem is rooted in the 'soil of the sensible'; Williams' thoughts and his perception of the details of Br. ghel's picture are knitted together. Nothing is outside the poet for the poem assumes his body's 'immers[ion] in the visible'. He is surrounded by a world he both looks at and moves amongst: the poem implies 'the inherence of the one who sees in that which he sees'. The poet sees because he 'approaches [objects] by looking'. His self, like his knowledge, is 'caught up in things', comprehended in the process of looking at Brueghel's painting. It is not a self that has 'appropriated what he sees' and is seeking to translate that act of possession into a poem, for Williams' way of

seeing will not allow his self to exist apart from the things he sees. Like Breughel, he is 'concerned with it all'. The poem shows a vision that does not limit the poet's identity or his knowledge of the world: it serves rather to supply the conditions from within which both his identity and his knowledge are determined.

Merleau-Ponty's argument intimates a further parallel between Williams' use of words and Cezanne's use of colour. Colour in Cezanne's art was not, Merleau-Ponty suggests, the 'simulacra of colours in nature', but rather the painter's contribution to what he calls 'the dimension of colour, that dimension that creates identities, differences, a texture, a materiality . . .'[7] This dimension extends uniformly through things, including the painting itself, so that while a painting can reflect how the artist sees the world, it remains simultaneously a part of that world. If words could be treated in a similar manner, as colours or tones of a voice that recognises itself not so much as a commentator upon things but as a witness at the 'fission of Being', then the texture of the writing that might result would be like that of the poems in Pictures from Brueghel. In the act of speaking, these poem's words are not just references to things but share a single dimension with them. Just as Cezanne's colour registers the continual 'fission of Being' that is informed by vision, so, by speaking the words of a poem, the poet voices his sense of being present at the 'genesis of things'. His words form a single dimension with objects: by virtue of his perception both words and objects are nurtured in 'the soil of the sensible'.

These late poems by Williams, like Cezanne's pictures, invite the reader (or viewer) to be witness to the process of creation, to share the artist's presence at 'the fission of Being'. They reflect how, as the poet perceives the world with all his senses alert, he comes to know the world. Consequently the poems are discovered in the process

of writing. They do not relate something that the poet already knows, but register the poet's voice as he pursues knowledge. Each sentient moment he finds through his perceptions that his knowledge of the world is renewed. The design of the poems is therefore always emergent, their 'assembled order' intelligible only in the evolving relationship of one line to another. The final section of Pictures from Brueghel is appropriately entitled Journey to Love: each poem is itself a journeying, an attempt to keep pace with the ever-renewing embodiment of the world that the poet perceives.

In 'Asphodel' Williams illustrates the poet's moment by moment rediscovery of the world, his feeling that it constantly forms and remakes itself within him, with the example of 'odor'. Like an 'odor' which is invisible yet precise, the poem comes to the poet, as Williams said of the first poem he remembered writing, 'out of the blue' (IWWP 16). The words imitate an 'odor',

made solely of air
or less,
that came to me
out of the air
and insisted
on being written down (PB 169)

In Williams' imagination various remembered flower scents combine to create 'a curious odor,/ a moral odor' (PB 155) which is identified with the revivifying powers of the poem itself. The poem disturbs - as only it can for 'there is no other fit medium' - a pervasive power, of love and of the imagination's fertility, which is a perennial guarantee of the human capacity to survive. Asphodel, however, the flower of hell, having no odour of its own, suggests 'foreboding', for it would seem to deny the contact through the senses which alone in Williams' mind could give the poet's work its value.

Against this potential barrenness stands something ill-defined but which Williams 'see[s] clearly enough':

I have forgot
and yet I see clearly enough
something
central to the sky
which ranges round it.
An odor
springs from it!
A sweetest odor!
Honeysuckle! And now
there comes the buzzing of a bee!
and a whole flood
of sister memories! (PB 154)

The 'something' of this passage is quite consciously elusive. The simplest sense of the syntax suggests that the sky 'ranges round' something that Williams has difficulty in defining until he recognises it as the honeysuckle's scent. But the passage is imprecise: as the reader hears the passage, it is not clear whether both occurrences of the pronoun 'it' refer to a single thing - the sky - or whether neither do. Both occurrences might refer back to 'something', although it is more likely that only the second does and the first does indeed refer to 'the sky'. In the end, however, even the simplest reading is not quite satisfactory. The mention of 'sister memories' seems to suggest that the whole passage is concerned with memory: the 'sweetest odor' now seems to be that of the aroused memory in which the 'Honeysuckle' and the 'bee' are incidental recollections. In this case the 'something' Williams seeks to define is a memory; the way he gradually discovers the source of the 'odor' is offered as a sensory parallel to the workings of his own mind.

The indeterminate quality does not trouble the reader, since as the poem progresses it establishes for itself a context in which intuitional probing is its natural mode: perceived and remembered odours blend in an evolving flow of words that make a synthesis between the poet's reflective consciousness and the objects of reflection. The poet makes no attempt to impose an intellectual order upon the

relationships between things; he uses words instead to appeal to the mind as if they were the 'odor' of things, as if they could, like a scent, emanate from things and permeate the senses. As they appear, 'out of the air', the words of the poem give evidence of that 'genesis of things' which renews and so preserves the 'contact' between the poet and the surrounding world. Williams recognises that he is an old man and near to death, but he can still celebrate the 'odor' of things for it retains the power to penetrate and reveal anew the hidden corners of his life; even to a dying man it can bring renewal:

Asphodel
has no odor
save to the imagination
but it too
celebrates the light.
It is late
but an odor
as from our wedding
has revived for me
and begun again to penetrate
into all crevices
of my world. (PB 182)

Even things without odour can carry scents to the imagination: the words Williams speaks, like the odourless asphodel, have a fragrance by virtue of the revivifying power they make it possible to sense.

This power is the same power that Williams admired in Poe; it 'revives' the stalely familiar and gives it a new, 'ORIGINAL' character. It reveals a virtue in things that allows life to escape 'the cavern of death' (P 212). Williams epitomises this escape in 'Asphodel' by a ritual celebration of the medium of light, through which and in which the eyes see:

. . . if
the light itself
has escaped,
the whole edifice opposed to it
goes down.
Light, the imagination
and love,
in our age,

by natural law,
which we worship,
maintain
all of a piece
their dominance.
So let us love
confident as is the light
in its struggle with darkness . . . .
The light
for all time shall outspeed
the thunder crack. (PB 180 - 181)

Light is opposed to darkness and the encroachments of death: it 'outspeeds' destructive violence. Each moment it illuminates the 'crevices of [the] world' afresh, and remains permanently in advance of the darker forces with which it 'struggles'. The relationship of lightning to thunder is mirrored in the more sinister figure of 'the bomb' which illuminates before it destroys: just as there is a 'huge gap / between the flash / and the thunderstroke' into which the poet finds 'Spring [can] come' (PB 178), so in the 'interval' between the light of the bomb and its heat, 'love [can] blossom' (PB 179). The light which reveals the world and by which the eyes perceive the world's 'originality', is 'all of a piece' with the creative 'imagination': arising in the imagination, a poem, in its moment by moment evolution, like light, discovers the world. Destruction is not the 'beautiful thing' of Paterson but that which is escaped by virtue of the light. A witness to the light, the poet, through his vision, is present at the recurring 'genesis of things' which denies death its power.

Vision has supplied Williams with a way of articulating experience that overcomes the incipient sense of alienation in Paterson by which he is driven to relish destruction. He embraces the violence of natural devastation in Paterson since it can obliterate a landscape in the same way that he wishes to scour the atrophied language - 'a dark flame / a wind, a flood - counter to all staleness' (P 100). A new perception is arrived at in words by the eradication of preconceived meanings. Thus, in order to renew the language, Williams finds himself having to

undermine what he says even as he says it, for the 'new mind' and the 'new line' (P 50) he desires are continually supplied by 'the old' which 'repeat[s] itself with recurring / deadliness'. To escape this 'deadliness' he invents a new line through his typography by attacking the old and familiar. Even his 'pattern' for the poem in hand has to be made subject to the attack lest it should grow rigid and tyrannize over his attempt to invent: he must never discover the 'pattern' he seeks but must 'scotch it - at the root' (P 113). 'My whole effort . . . is to find a pattern, large enough, modern enough, flexible enough to include my desires', he wrote to Riordan: 'And if I should find it I'd wither and die'.[Weaver : p.164] Fracturing the poem even as he makes it, Williams aims to make it new.

In Pictures from Brueghel, although a poem is understood to be no less a continuing exploration of the world that cannot finally be completed, Williams no longer feels compelled to assault his own words in order to renew their impact, for vision has taught him to understand creation as that which precedes destruction. His poems reflect, in their renewing initiatives across the page and in the constant probing of their thought, what his eyes reveal: each moment of experience holds a fresh 'genesis'. The lines of the poems in the 'variable foot' are like each fresh instant of vision; they seem to be always beginning again, repeatedly renewed apprehensions. 'Originality' is achieved in these poems less by shocking the reader into a sense of newness by typographic invention, than by a feeling that, as the poet talks, the words of the poems become, like the light that plays on the eye, intimations of a world that is constantly being reborn.

> But if I have come from the sea
> it is not to be
> wholly
> fascinated by the glint of waves.
> The free interchange
> of light over their surface

which I have compared
to a garden
should not deceive us
or prove
too difficult a figure.
The poem
if it reflects the sea
reflects only
its dance
upon that profound depth
where
it seems to triumph. (PB 164 - 165)

In this passage 'the free interchange / of light' across the surface of the waves is a figure for the movement of the words of the poem; the 'interchange' is both that of the words and that of the light glinting on the waves, the surface both that of the sea and that of the poem. The fluid pattern of light which Williams sees provides him with an example for the way he envisages his poem working. Both to the eye and ear, the poem's pattern is constantly altering, constantly becoming new, just as the pattern of light that 'dances' and plays on the sea and on the retina is also constantly renewed. By watching the sea Williams' sight allows him - in Merleau-Ponty's words - to be present at the 'genesis of things'. Each fresh line of the poem reflects this 'genesis', for each line represents a renewed 'contact' with the 'ORIGINAL'. Like the light that reveals the world to the eye, the 'free interchange' of words in the poem reveals the poet's mind in the process of reflection, in the process of discovering the world.

Superficially it may seem that Williams has betrayed himself in this passage for he has written of a 'figure' of speech and is quite unembarrassed about invoking a comparison. In Spring and All, comparison as a literary technique was anathema; it served to distract from the poet's primary task of creating a new object, that is, avoiding a surrogate reflection of nature. Indeed, the word 'image' which Williams felt had such disastrous 'evocative' connotations in

the 1920s, occurs quite frequently in Pictures from Brueghel; he now seems undisturbed by the possibility that the word may evoke likenesses or comparisons. In part this may be due to his use of the word 'image' in an almost exclusively pictorial context; for instance, in 'The World Contracted to a Recognizable Image' (PB 42) the 'image' of the title is a 'picture' on the wall of a room (the word 'picture' is repeated three times in the poem's eight lines).

But there is a more important reason for Williams' willingness to use the word 'image', for he now has acquired

> the knowledge of
> the tyranny of the image
> and how
> men
> in their designs
> have learned
> to shatter it (PB 137)

The image tyrannized over men's minds when it was allowed to represent nature, as if by a subtle deceit it could duplicate nature so accurately as to become invisible; looking at a picture, the viewer would seem to see nature itself. The 'tyranny' of that deceit is 'shattered' by insisting on the 'design' of the object that the artist makes. Similarly the tyranny of the literary image is shattered by insisting that the poem is, first and foremost, a 'design' that evolves - like the patterns in perception - as the poem is read. The words of a poem are like the sounds of birds; the poet gives them force by allowing a design to 'surmount' them:

> The birds twitter now anew
> but a design
> surmounts their twittering.
> It is a design of a man
> that makes them twitter.
> It is a design. (PB 82)

The design is a new reality without equal in nature: it enacts, as it evolves, the continual 'genesis of things' that the poet feels.

Williams is less inhibited now about using comparisons, even similes, since he realises that the poem's design 'surmounts' what he says: a 'figure' or comparison may reveal the poet's mind as he speaks what he thinks, but the revelation emerges from within the primary reality of the poem's own design. The reader responds to the design in which the poet's words are subsumed - to what the poet has 'made' rather than to what he has 'said'.

In the poems of Pictures from Brueghel Williams' sense of evolving design brings an ease to his mind that is missing in Paterson. The painters he admires have shattered the image in order that 'the trouble / in their minds / shall be quieted'. It seems less important that the poems should excite the reader's eyes directly, as that the process of seeing should inform the way the reader understands and responds to the poems' unfolding. Gibson's terms for visual perception might be applied to Williams' poetic technique: as the poet sees 'changes in the layout' of the local environment (EA 15) he finds things revealed - he finds that their 'meanings can be discovered' (EA 33). The 'combination of order with discovery, with exploration and revelation . . . is of the essence of art', Williams wrote.[8] In the designs of his poems he reflects how, through his sight, he constantly discovers the world: by seeing, he can continually renew his contact with, and exploration of, the 'local'.

There is an impressive courage to Williams' words in 'Asphodel': he is 'approaching death' (PB 162) yet his poem is a celebration of life, and of the human capacity to find renewal. Columbus, the discoverer of the New World, with whose voyages Williams felt 'so deeply concerned' (PB 167), is an appropriate figure for Williams to invoke: for all that his voyages 'ended so disastrously' his example offers hope. The local environment, at any time, is another America

awaiting discovery; simply by looking it can be seen afresh. At each moment in the evolution of a person's life the local can be perceived anew, as long as there is a willingness to look.

How the world opened its eyes! (PB 167)

Notes to Chapter VII:

1. Pictures from Brueghel is composed of three sections containing poems written at different times in the ten years before Williams' death. The last two sections are 'The Desert Music' (1954) and 'Journey to Love' (1955). The first, 'Pictures from Breughel', which gives the book as a whole its title, includes poems of various dates. In order to avoid confusion in my text, where I refer to the poems in this first section the title is given in inverted commas; where I refer to the volume as a whole the title is underlined. The comments in this and the following paragraph, therefore, refer to the first section of the book, not to the volume generally.
2. M. Merleau-Ponty, The Primacy of Perception, ed. J. M. Edie, Northwestern UP., 1964, p.178.
3. Merleau-Ponty, p.184.
4. Merleau-Ponty, p.183.
5. George Schmidt, The Watercolours of Cezanne, New York, 1953, p.21, quoted in Merleau-Ponty, p.181.
6. Merleau-Ponty, p.161.
7. Merleau-Ponty, p.181.
8. 'Preface', Quarterly Review of Literature, II, 4, 1946, p.348, quoted in Guimond, The Art of William Carlos Williams, p.233.

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List of Sources Consulted

Only those works of Williams' referred to in this thesis are listed below. A comprehensive bibliography has been compiled by E. M. Wallace, A Bibliography of William Carlos Williams, Wesleyan UP., Middletown, 1968. A more manageable bibliography with an extensive list of works about Williams, can be found in James Guimond's The Art of William Carlos Williams. The list below is only intended to indicate the main sources for the thesis and a number of other works containing relevant material.

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