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Compelling Objects: Form and Emotion in Williams's Lyric Poetry

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WILLIAM Carlos Williams's canonical status represents a convergence of the rise to dominance of "theory" in literary criticism and Williams's own deep desire for cultural authority through his writing. Though many have viewed Williams as an energetic (proto-) postmodern rebel against traditional poetic values, much of Williams's energy in his lyric poetry comes from his attempts to harness what he viewed in rather traditional terms as the feminine power of the body. Noteworthy in Williams's oeuvre are the many objects—material and human—that hold an almost iconic status. As he said, famously: "No ideas but in things." But Williams's objects are internal as well. Because form is the generative shaping activity between self and other, involving the abstract creation of simulacra of experience, form is intimately connected to the emotional power of objects.

There is growing scholarly interest in how poetry can provide a "sensuous knowledge." Attention to Williams's poetic objects reveals the strategies whereby he attempted to capture the erotic power of the body. While many of his early poems achieved a taut emotional clarity through the tension between form and imagistic content, many of his later lyric poems relaxed and lost much of the tension that allowed "significant form" to develop in the space between text and reader. Objects in Williams's poems, far from being "innocent" artifacts in the world, demonstrate the quality of Williams's relations with himself and his others.

Theory: What are Aesthetic Objects?

There is a growing body of scholarship that has developed the idea of "sensuous knowledge." Such work necessarily positions itself on the fissure between self and

other, between appearance and reality that has run through the golden bowl of Western culture. That is large ground, but it is invoked by the challenged status of texts in our culture, both philosophically in terms of the post-Kantian subjectivization of objects (and concomitant materialization of subjects), and historically in terms of the decline of literacy as a value in Western—perhaps I should say "postmodern"—cultures. Now that poststructuralism insists that we see texts as material artifacts, physical marks, we have an opportunity to revisit the issue of how poetry—especially lyric poetry—employs form to create objects that generate power with respect to shared human feeling.

Immanuel Kant's transcendental critique of the possibilities for knowledge addresses aesthetic experience in terms of objects and is a taproot of modern Western thought. In Kant's Third Critique, the *Critique of Judgment,* published in 1790, he considers our response to objects in nature which we consider "aesthetic." As Rodolphe Gasché points out, Kant is concerned with nature rather than art in the Third Critique, so he is not specifically developing an "aesthetics" in the sense of a theory of art. But he does develop an important line of thought regarding "aesthetic reflection," and it is that with which we are concerned here, because aesthetic reflection provides a particular orientation to objects.

Simply put, in Kant's system there is a tacit relationship between humans and nature; we assume that nature will yield to our efforts to understand it. But the unity that we find in nature is subjective—what we ourselves find in it; we can never know what nature is in itself. Kant's transcendental philosophy describes how we have to think about nature in order to have unified experience at all. For Kant there are three faculties: reason, the understanding, and the imagination. Reason has to do with rational ideas, the understanding with empirical concepts, and the imagination with synthesizing. A natural object is a phenomenon in the empirical manifold and would typically be under the authority of the understanding. The imagination, with its synthesizing function, is generally dependent on the understanding.

It is with the concept of "judgment" that Kant broaches the issue of the aesthetic. For Kant there are two types of judgment: determinative and reflective. Determinative judgments have universals under which they subsume particulars; these are acts of the understanding. Reflective judgments, however, begin with a particular, but have no universal under which to subsume it. The mind responds "as if" the object could be subsumed under a universal, "as if" the empirical manifold in nature had unity which the mind could grasp. This is an act of the imagination, and it is with reflective judgment that we enter the realm of the aesthetic. Objects which we respond to as having "purposiveness without purpose" (no spe-

cific utility, no "end" or "goal") are aesthetic for us. This "as if" thinking is a metaphorical, symbolic process.

I can approach Kant's aesthetic theory with a preference for his Analytic of the Sublime, as does Kirk Pillow, or for his Analytic of the Beautiful, as does Gasché. The sublime has been particularly important in postmodern thought; Pillow argues that with the sublime Kant explores the limits of conceptual and representational understanding (1). Pillow holds that Kant offers a tacit theory of metaphor in the Third Critique, that his "aesthetic ideas" are essentially metaphors. The imagination creates new nature through analogical laws. Such analogical laws are fecundative, because aesthetics involves a relationship between subject and object based on feelings of pleasure (or pain, in the case of the sublime, as boundlessness overwhelms the finite subject in search of totality), and offering insight into the "affine relations of the manifold," to which both subject and object mutually belong.

While Pillow looks to Kant's Analytic of the Sublime, Gasché looks to the Analytic of the Beautiful and forcefully argues for the centrality of judgments of taste in Kant's thought. Judgments are aesthetic when they are grounded in the affects, in pleasure. Pleasure directly alters the structure of cognition. In speaking of aesthetic reflection on the beautiful and the sublime, Gasché says: "aesthetic judgment is based on the intuition of the form of the object [the beautiful], and of the totality of what is boundlessly formless [the sublime]" (3). Gasché emphasizes the importance of the concept of "mere" form in Kant's terminology. "Mere form" in Kant unifies an intuitive manifold for which there is no determinate concept (10). Gasché tells us, "The pleasure predicated of representations in judgments of taste is the pleasure of coming to life, as it were" (45). The act of creating unity, of discerning form, animates the mind and gives us a sense of vitality, of life.

I direct attention to both the beautiful and the sublime in Kant's thought, because whether one takes a postmodern position of preference for the sublime, or a "formalist" position of preference for the beautiful, in either case there is a circular relationship with the object. In the beautiful, the object presents itself as having the potential for form; it promises satisfaction. The imagination then attributes unity to it. This is more than an account of form as a process. It lays the foundation for understanding form in an aesthetic object as involving cathexis, the affective bonding with an object, whether internal or external. In the sublime, the object cannot be brought into totality, but the imagination in trying shows respect for reason and comes closest to being an independent faculty. Subjects and objects, given the very nature of our minds and our orientation to the world, have a relationship with one another.

Objects are also internal. In Kant's system, mental images are central. A representation (Vorstellung) is any mental image. A presentation (Darstellung) is an *apprehension.* A presentation raises the empirical manifold to intuition, making it *available* for representation. Presentation is necessary for representation. In the "Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment," in discussing aesthetic ideas, Kant says the imagination *binds* an intuition to a representation (Kant 189). There are two types of presentation: schematic and symbolic; the latter is what we are concerned with here, because symbolic presentation has to do with aesthetic ideas. Symbolic presentation is required for the production of an image of "mere form" for an intuitable manifold with no determinate concept (Gasché 118). Symbolic presentation is indirect, a kind of analogy. Gasché tells us that analogical presentation produces a symbol for reflection to allow us to perceive the similarity between an intuition and a concept (212). It makes a concept *meaningful* without making it *intelligible.*

Images can have a symbolic resonance that informs us internally. Indeed, Giorgio Agamben in *Stanzas* makes the internal image of an object, the phantasm, the focus of his analysis of Western poetry and culture. Agamben calls psychoanalysis a "general theory of the phantasm" (23). Internal objects to which feelings can be attached are central to a cultural process of changing the valences of terms and concepts, such as melancholy, which like fetishism simultaneously affirms and denies the object. From being a source of illness and spiritual apathy, melancholy became re-valorized as the fount of romantic love.

Finally, abstraction lies on at least two levels in Kant's aesthetics: in the "mere form" that establishes the *potential* unified representation of an object or experience, and in the symbolic presentation by which the imagination establishes a *relationship* between a concept and a tangible thing (an empirical intuition), that relationship being metaphorical, symbolic. Form is not an objective attribute but instead a subjective condition of the *representability* of things (Gasché 179). Gasché tells us that "form is brought to life through a process of indetermination" (190). Abstraction allows a work of art to release emotional valences that otherwise would lie latent in the concrete ordinary.

The Kantian root of modernist aesthetics runs deep and informs many of our aesthetic attitudes. Susanne Langer's analysis of abstraction in art in *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* from 1953 posits a notion of "virtual emotion" to describe our reactions to art: we do not *actually* feel terrified or bored or ecstatic in responding to art but feel, to use both Kant's and Wittgenstein's terminology, *as if* we were those things. Langer defines art as "the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling" (40). She adds: "A symbol is any device whereby we are enabled

to make an abstraction" (xi). Form in art, says Langer using very Kantian terms, is abstract in order to facilitate its own appearance so that it may have "new use" as a symbol, may provoke the "feeling as if" that leads to new ideas (51). Emotion is an abstraction from actual feelings—shaped by form into an affective experience with enough distance from reality that the one experiencing it can reflect on its effect on her or him. Such an effect has shaping value.

Charles Altieri's *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* of 1989 discusses the ways in which abstraction activates energies which are sharable with an audience. For Altieri abstraction allows poetry to resist being warped by empirical pressures. Form carries extra-formal, including emotional, content. Abstraction allows poetry to be a vehicle for cultural analysis. Somewhat as for Langer, for Altieri form provides "presentational immanence" (179).

I have discussed form, abstraction, and emotion in the context of a theoretical notion of aesthetic objects. How can this idea of aesthetic objects help us see poetry as "sensuous knowledge"? Susan Stewart's work *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* is an especially comprehensive example. Stewart focuses on the special employment of *deixis* in lyric poetry—the this-ness, the here-ness, the now-ness—of the speaker's presence that roots that experience in the reader's body through rhythm and allows contact with the other. Stewart argues that the "culture work" lyric does is precisely to create a triangulation of speaker, reader, text in order that the reader may recognize an other. Altieri agrees with Stewart: lyric does cultural work in terms of promoting connections with others.

Michael Taussig in *Mimesis and Alterity* explores sensuous knowledge from an anthropological perspective. Following Frazer in *The Golden Bough,* he argues that mimesis involves both imitation, copying, and (bodily) contact. Taussig points to the lack of realism in "primitive" fetishes and ritual objects. For him the copying function of the object draws its "sympathetic magic" from the contact it has with the original, such "contact" being generated by material, bodily connections to the original. In fact the object gains its power from the *abstract* quality of the copying. While Altieri sees abstraction as opposed to mimesis, which approaches too close to the empirical, Taussig holds the opposite view: abstraction is essential to mimesis. It helps to provide the "profane illumination" that Taussig finds so powerful a theme in Walter Benjamin's writings.

Though Taussig does not discuss poetry, his approach to mimesis—which Stewart cites—addresses the power that the copy has back on the original. In terms of poetry, this means that the mind does not simply shape metaphors; rather, metaphors shape the mind. As Agamben asserts, metaphor does not result *from* resemblance but makes resemblance *possible* (148). The concrete, specific

experience of responding to an aesthetic object involves both the body and the mind, in the "contact" of an almost physical gaze that images and visual patterns invite (exhort) and the aural stimulation of sound patterns, and in the abstraction of the mind's finding mimetic recognition in symbolic linkages. The form of aesthetic experiences facilitates these reactions. Aesthetic objects are mimetic of the mind's act of finding form in reality. Form is the shaping activity within the poem that provides the abstraction whereby the emotional content of the work can become visible.

Form then is the potential that a work of art creates for discovery by establishing a relationship between reader (auditor, observer) and text (artifact, performance) based on the sensuous qualities of repetition, imagery, rhythm, and spatial and aural patterns. Form makes aesthetic objects possible through a process of abstraction that allows significant emotional weight to develop around an image, theme, pattern, and in the undetermined space between reader and text, making it possible for emotion to emerge from the rhythms and patterns of the art work. Such emotion tills the ground of possibility for insight, even cognition.

Insofar as poetry effects change in a reader, it does so by provoking wonder. It achieves this by means of its particular emphasis on linguistic form, which involves a process of recognition through the abstraction of form. This change is not "functional"; poetry does not "do" anything. It is purposive only in its formal presentation of affective experience, which makes possible conceptual insights. If there is an ethical element to art, it is that it offers the viewer or reader or auditor an experience into which he or she can enter and leave unharmed, if not "untouched." It achieves this by means of the abstraction of form, which releases the sensuous appeal of the work to "touch" audiences and "move" them but leave them their integrity as it preserves its own.

Scholarship: Views on Williams

Williams's critical heritage began in the 1960s with the first major promotions of him in book-length works by J. Hillis Miller in 1965 and Joseph Riddel in 1974. The first work, Miller's *Poets of Reality,* made claims for Williams's work precisely in terms of objects. Miller declared that Williams had achieved the "disappearance of a distinction between subject and object" in his poetry (291). Just as sweepingly, Miller also claimed that there is "no basis for metaphor" in Williams's world, that Williams could look straight at an object because it offered no threat (306). In *The Inverted Bell* Riddel took a self-consciously Derridean, deconstructionist position towards Williams's work, claiming that he, Riddel, was not writing about poetry but about "poetics"; that is, his work was "theory," not criticism or

scholarship per se. These major studies helped deflect attention from T. S. Eliot to Williams and helped establish Williams's position in the canon, and they did so at least in Riddel's case in explicitly "theoretical" terms. They point to two major views people have had of Williams's work. One can see Williams as 1) *naïf* and open to the world, with aggressive and sexual impulses that he's honest about, or 2) undercutting claims of ownership in language and of narrative primacy in recognizably "postmodern" terms. Early scholars promoted Williams in terms of "theory" but without *a theory of* objects.

Since then there have been revisionary approaches that indicate the importance for Williams of ideas in his work, of his own status as a thinker. Though he famously said "No ideas but in things," which asserts priority for the object world, Williams's things do not live apart from his ambitions for them—on paper. Daniel Morris has extensively examined Williams's ambitions for his status as a literary figure. Unlike Miller, David Perkins identifies a theoretical, even didactic, side to Williams; of Williams's early volumes, Perkins writes that "many of the poems in these volumes were intended as demonstrations or metaphors of poetry, what it should be and how it should be written" (*History: 1890s* 547). Bram Dijkstra notes that Williams was sensitive about others' belief that he was not a thinker or theorist, that this belief might undermine his claim to originality (87).

Numerous scholars have observed the obsessive nature of Williams's theorizing. Both Carl Rapp and Stephen Cushman place Williams into a Romantic tradition running through Emerson and American Transcendentalism. Rapp calls Williams "a relentless theorist" (81). Cushman examines Williams's theorizing about "measure" and calls "measure" for Williams a slogan, a "crusade," and finally a "mythology." Cushman refers to the "obsessive quality of [Williams's] theorizing"; he calls it "a persistence that sometimes borders on the monomaniacal" (111).

James E. B. Breslin, in *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist,* while admiring Williams's work, offers a useful assessment of Williams's work:

> The doctrine of rebellion tended increasingly to narrow Williams. . . . Whereas Williams was able to generate a remarkably extended development as a writer, his critical ideas underwent little growth or modification. . . . [I]n the final ten years of the author's life they narrowed into an obsessive preoccupation with a new "variable" poetic foot. (38)

Again toward the end, as part of his concluding remarks, Breslin comments:

> in his later years Williams more and more found himself irresistible and, his self-divisions resolved, lost much of his capacity for self-

> criticism. . . . The new looseness of manner and tenderness of feeling can sometimes sink into the sort of soggy, uplifting didacticism that had prompted Imagism in the first place. (211)

Terence Diggory has made perhaps the most concerted effort to examine Williams's aesthetic in contemporary theoretical terms, to apply a feminist sensibility, and to look at the issues of violence and aggression in Williams's work with the aim of finding an ethical core. He does it in terms of a painterly ethos, a line of inquiry initiated by, among others, Dijkstra and Altieri, and he employs the writings of Julia Kristeva to argue for a triangulation of desire in Williams's texts, a triangulation between reader, poet, and text, the same triangulation that Susan Stewart affirms. Diggory primarily looks at Williams's late lyrics of the 1950s. He argues that such triangulation involves an ethical acknowledgment of aggressive impulses toward the object but entails a distancing that allows the poet not to internalize those impulses. Diggory reminds us that "every attempt to apply a theory of reading to Williams becomes a reading of theory" (106).

One way we can get past the theory/sincerity divide—Williams presents ecstatic union with the object world; Williams destabilizes notions of literary hierarchy—is to look at Williams's poetic objects, to see how they reveal not just his orientation toward the world but his orientation toward himself. It is not in his theorizing or sloganeering, but in his poetic practice, particularly in his evolving engagements with form, that we will find insight into the quality of his relationship with his objects, both within and without. Examining poetic objects is a means of exploring the role of form in poetry. H. L. Hix tells us: "Great poems speak with greater wisdom than the poets who wrote them possessed. The catalysis for such alchemy comes from form" (50). I will be approaching the question of poetic objects through a formal consideration of the poetry, that is, through an attention to what, to use Altieri's term, "exemplary energies" are released or made manifest by the poem's structure—in lines, images, and rhythms. I will look at two of Williams's lyric poems from the 1920s and "Asphodel that Greeny Flower" from the 1950s, and I will look at lyric elements in Williams's epic effort, *Paterson,* to examine the changing nature of his poetic objects.

Readings: Williams's Poetic Objects

In the early years Williams's poems burst with tension; in the later, Williams is less interested in the tensions, and his sentimental, discursive rhetoric demonstrates that relaxing. Williams's relations with his objects shift as well. In the poetry from

the 1920s, in particular *Sour Grapes* (1921) and *Spring and All* (1923), Williams typically establishes certain iconic objects, often girls or women or things that provide some aura of sexual suggestiveness, such as a glass of water or keys or even the sun. Such icons both capture and "express" desire. "The Lonely Street," from *Sour Grapes,* provides an anchoring point.

Of "The Lonely Street" Daniel Morris writes: "The poet appears through the trace of the maker's hand in the obvious craft of the poem" (149). The poem is short enough to quote in full:

> School is over. It is too hot
> to walk at ease. At ease
> in light frocks they walk the streets
> to while the time away.
> They have grown tall. They hold
> pink flames in their right hands.
> In white from head to foot,
> with sidelong, idle look—
> in yellow, floating stuff,
> black sash and stockings—
> touching their avid mouths
> with pink sugar on a stick—
> like a carnation each holds in her hand—
> they mount the lonely street. (CP1 174)

In this poem young girls are the manifest objects, and yet the speaker himself—objectified as the "lonely street"—becomes an object, devouring them with his gaze, yearning to be devoured by them. Williams thematizes the girls as sexually voracious even as the poem enacts a kind of consumption of them.

Sexuality as feminine devouring is a trope contemporary to Williams. Ezra Pound translated Rémy de Gourmont's *Natural Philosophy of Love,* which was published in 1922. There Gourmont depicts animal sexuality as frequently a matter of the female literally devouring the male after the act of copulation. Furthermore, Gourmont establishes a worldly tone in his account of sexual "science," downplaying traditional values such as human (*feminine*) virginity: "The maidenhead is . . . not peculiar to human virgins, and there is no glory in a privilege which one shares with the marmoset" (71). Williams, too, dismissed virginity as an ideal; but his eager voyeurism is not to be found in Gourmont.

The poem employs Williams's major technique: enjambment. Only three lines

of the fourteen total lines are end-stopped. At fourteen lines the poem invokes a sonnet, a traditional form for love poems. Williams, however, eschews the five-beat line and rhyming quatrains for shorter lines of two to four beats, creating a pulsing quality that matches the speaker's desire for these pubescent girls. The poem establishes a carpe diem theme in its opening statement: "School is over." The girls are out for the day, but also for the school year—and also for life. They are entering an adult world of adult sexuality, including commercial sex.

Williams uses an impersonal, objectivist manner to establish his authority within the poem, an authority which is not obviously attached to an individual speaking voice and is, therefore, "innocent." Though we can see in this poem an impulse to erase a speaking self, an impulse which has endeared Williams to scholars seeking postmodern models, Williams's aim here is not genuinely to erase an individual subjectivity, for one aim of his strategy in this poem is precisely to disengage the personal, authorial self from the fantasy of sexual predation the poem expresses. Voyeuristic and predatory eroticism is presented as natural; the crafted nature of the poem that reminds us that it is not.

Williams's girls are dressed in virginal white, but they cast sly glances. "They hold / pink flames in their right hands," but the flames represent carnal desire, not purity of heart. The girls are "touching their avid mouths / with pink sugar on a stick—[,]" phallic candy. The girls proceed to "mount the lonely street." Such suppressed erotic activity—presented visually under the guise of imagistic objectivism—figures the poet's own creative activity as well. The poet constructs the girls' predatory but exciting and natural (and economically motivated) sexuality as controlled and transparent—and inevitable. The girls "walk the streets," suggesting that they are budding prostitutes.

In *Spring and All,* possibly Williams's best known volume of poetry, apart from *Paterson,* Williams mixes prose and poetry, as he would do again in *Paterson.* In *Spring and All* he employs Whitman's conceit of shared experience with the reader, though he hides his deep concern for his reception and reputation with an air of worldly disinterest and cynicism with his opening lines: "If anything of moment results—so much the better. And so much the more likely will it be that no one will want to see it" (CP1 177). Poem "XXII," better known as "the red wheel barrow," occurs in a knot of small lyrics about midpoint. It demonstrates the emotional power that accrues to an object within a form that conveys purposiveness without positing a concept:

> so much depends
> upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens (CP1 224)

Perhaps Williams's most famous and enigmatic poem, "the red wheel barrow" expressly addresses the affective impact of an object. The poem opens with a declaration, indeed an insistence, on the importance of this object. But this poem is neither a literal description of a wheelbarrow, nor an exercise in language. Through its form the poem becomes an object that shapes our experience and emotional response.

Though free verse, this poem is rhythmical and carefully structured. Scanning reveals insight:

´ ´ ˘ ´
So much | depends

˘ ´
upon

˘ ´ ´ (˘)
a red | wheel

´ ˘
barrow

´ ˘ ´ (˘)
glazed with | rain

´ ˘
water

˘ ´ ˘ ´
beside | the white

´ ˘
chickens

or

´ (˘) ˘ ´
glazed | with rain

´ ˘
water

We have four stanzas, each comprising a distich of two feet followed by one foot, for a total of twelve "feet." The insistence in the speaking voice appears in the opening spondee. Williams then moves into regular iambs for the next three feet,

finishing the first stanza. The iambs suggest that the object is knowable, controllable. But in the second stanza the rhythmic iambs falter. "Wheel," a catalectic foot, suggests a shift into a trochaic, falling rhythm, and "barrow" confirms this. As it is being named, the object bodies forth metrical "irregularity."

The third stanza begins with ambiguity: a trochee followed by a catalectic foot, or a catalectic foot followed by an iamb. The second possibility entails a lengthening of the word "glazed," with a caesura, and then the emphatic shift from iamb to trochee in "glazed | with rain | water," a set of mirrored feet, iamb then reversed iamb or trochee. The other option, "glazed with | rain | water," preserves a regularity as an inversion of the initial three iambs. I prefer the stronger reversals of iambs and trochees; in either case, the poem is experiencing tensions between regularity and irregularity and undergoing internal shifts. The vowels in the third stanza begin with a long *a*—glāzed, rān—and shift to a short *a*—wăter. Similarly the vowels in the fourth stanza begin with a long *i*—besīde, whīte—and shift to a short *i*—chĭckens.

What is this wet, red object upon which "so much" depends and which makes Williams's lines go up and down? It is not in fact the wheelbarrow that is important, but the invisible, unstated, phallic "something" that "depends" upon it, that is, "hangs"—from the Latin *pendere.* This is a poem about the tension between regularity and irregularity, and it invokes irregularity on many levels: metrical, sexual, racial. Mouth/vulva, this "colored" object beckons "white chickens," which like the satyrs on Keats's urn, approach but never touch, except in the palpable rhythms and vowels of the lines, which rise—but then fall again. After the phallic assertion of the emphatic iamb "upon," the poem shifts to falling rhythms, and as the speaker and his Lucy roll forward like the wheel of the barrow (a tumulus or mound over a grave) in the twelve months/feet of the year with its four regular seasons/stanzas in their "diurnal course," the speaker stammers in the long *i*'s of the final stanza: *I . . . I . . . chicken* out.

In the early poems Williams sets objects in tension with one another to allow recognition and insight. Form establishes the abstraction that allows these objects to relate with one another and to the reader without the interference of extrapoetic cognition. These two poems are successful, because the objects are internal objects as well. They reveal the poet's ambivalent relations with his own fears and desires.

Williams's poetry always had a didactic and rhetorical impulse, but in his later poetry this urge frequently dominates. As Williams says in "The Yellow Flower" in *Desert Music,* "What shall I say, because talk I must?" (CP2 257). Williams began publishing *Paterson* in the 1940s. Book I was published in 1946, II in 1948, III in

1949, IV in 1951, and V in 1958. Williams began work on what he viewed as his magnum opus well before he published the two books of lyric poetry in the 1950s that largely employed tripartite lines: *The Desert Music* in 1954 and *Journey to Love* in 1955. So shifts in his poetics must be seen on a continuum.

"Asphodel That Greeny Flower" is a centerpiece of the later lyrics, easily the longest poem using the triadic line. "Asphodel," which purports to be a love poem, is not a love poem at all. Nor is it really even to Flossie, his wife, to whom it is ostensibly addressed. It is instead a tacit apology, not in the sense of an expression of regret for his extramarital affairs, which had provoked a crisis with his wife, but in the sense of a defense of his aesthetic as it had developed at that point in his career.

If "Asphodel" is noteworthy for being a poem that thematizes marriage, it is also noteworthy for enacting—if not exactly thematizing—the construction of its own authority, through the use of a form that asserts regularity and a content that employs sentimental rhetoric and traditional, even archaic, diction. All this is supported by a logic that elides difference even as it tacitly asserts an essential (and hierarchical) barrier between "the poet" and others. Now, for biographical reasons Williams may well have made use of deeply rutted modes of thought, well-traveled images, to lead his wife to a place she knows he wants to take her.

But Williams has larger aims for this rhetoric. The sentimentalism of "Asphodel" is very conscious and part of the poem's persuasive arsenal. By using it, Williams allies himself to a feminine literary tradition in order to position himself closer to his wife. He also silently expands his imagined audience as readers of sentimental literature so that they too become part of the field of flowers he invokes as imagery. This elides the difference between wife and now-feminized audience—she is one of many, both as reader and as flower to be picked; it naturalizes the freedom (or license) he asserts for himself as poet; and it underwrites the logic of sameness that he employs to establish reversals of logic (and responsibility) that raise him in status as "the poet."

Suzanne Clark aims in *Sentimental Modernisms* to write the history of sentimentalism back into modernism. She defines sentimentalism as a "form, a set of tropes, and a rhetorical stance intertwined with the historical conflicts of middle-class culture" (2). Julie Ellison traces the roots of sentimentalism to seventeenth-century men's political efforts to gain parliamentary power and to resist royal power through the homosocial bonding that tears provide. Sentimentalism begins as the public political performance of *masculine* emotionalism.

Williams uses a heightened, ornate, even archaic syntax to heighten the "poetic"—and therefore emotional—appeal of "Asphodel." He uses inverted syn-

tax to establish "Asphodel" as "poetry": "Of asphodel, that greeny flower . . . I come, my sweet, / to sing to you" (CP2 310). The off-rhyme of "flower"/ "to you" reinforces the "poetic" quality of the piece. The inverted, childlike, even awkward diction of the line "Of love, abiding love / it will be telling" attempts to establish its sincerity precisely by signs of poetic clumsiness.

Williams invokes his wife's memory of their past life together to secure her forgiveness. But he does not in fact refer to specific instances of their life, instances which only she would be able to recall. Rather, he invokes generic, even clichéd, instances from the sentimental tradition, from a *public* stock of imagery. Williams invokes memory from the start:

> 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! (CP2 312)

The bee among flowers is generic ("There where the bee sucks, there suck I"), and Williams explicitly thematizes such images, or memories, as feminine ("sister memories"). (There is of course the irony as well of his marrying the sister of the woman he first thought to woo.) He uses ornate, even archaic, diction as well. "The generous earth itself / gave us lief" (CP2 313). "Its guerdon / is a fairy flower" (CP2 314).

Central to Williams's strategy of regaining his wife is his constant construction of metaphors within the poem. He calls her attention to that construction—and to the concomitant act of recognition—and thereby posits her as the active and responsible agent of his distress. Frequently he invokes his own victimization in this process, involving her in the workings of the trope and making her complicit in its virtual predations, even as he the poet constructs it. Throughout, Williams asserts his wife's complicit knowledge of the images he establishes. Her knowledge, without which there can be no love, for love is generated by the metaphors

of the poem, entails death and destruction as well as the odors of the garden. Since morality is conceptual, the emotions that the poem generates—drawing heavily on the sentimental tradition—are precisely in the mind of the wife/reader.

Williams thus asserts an erotics of easy understanding. For readers, the obvious image, even the cliché, carries an emotional power precisely by virtue of its being so shopworn, so softened at the edges. In Williams's later poetry, it is the path *much* taken that is the important one, precisely because the smooth trodden path is so well known and the associations along it are so strong that the connotations rise readily to the surface of the observer's mind.

As with the red wheel barrow, "Asphodel" does not in fact praise the feminine but upholds phallic desire. The bonding that carries the greatest emotional power is not with his wife but with men, as in the scenes with the Ur-father and his fellow artist, longing for the phallic power of a train. The longest section is the speaker's encounter with a strange man, an uncanny father:

> Speak to him,
> I cried. He
> will know the secret.
> He was gone
> and I did nothing about it.
> With him
> went all men
> and all women too
> were in his loins. (CP2 329)

Notice the odd syntactic shift at "and all women too." The women do not go with the father but are "in his loins." The feminine is now the dependent principle.

The sentimental language of metaphor bends women's (his wife's/his reader's) will to Williams's:

> All women are not Helen,
> I know that,
> but have Helen in their hearts.
> My sweet,
> you have it also, therefore
> I love you
> and could not love you otherwise. (CP2 316)

Mrs. Williams is expected to grasp the following logic: because he loves her for her "faults"—for which she is charged beforehand by virtue of being a woman—and can *only* love her on this basis, she therefore must in turn love *him* on that basis, except that his actual faults become figurative whereas her figurative faults become actual. All women blend into the same flower—though he remains separate to "pick" them. The risk of a circular relationship between subject and object is that the two will collapse into each other. In Williams's later poems objects tend to disappear, leaving the "guest" subjectivity no form to shape itself by but the rhetoric of the speaker's voice, which can deceive as well as guide.

Williams uses sentimental rhetoric and imagery to promote a logic of identity in which values shift fluidly among terms. Clark points out that sentimentalism involves a reversal of values; all commitment comes to seem sentimental (3). Williams reverses the ground of causality in "Asphodel." Even as his wife becomes responsible for his trespasses, he becomes the central victim:

> The deaths I suffered
> began in the heads
> about me, my eyes
> were too keen
> not to see through
> the world's niggardliness.
> I accepted it
> as my fate. (CP2 320–1)

Again: "Every drill / driven into the earth / for oil enters my side / also" (CP2 324).

At the end of Book III Williams asserts forgiveness by fiat: "You have forgiven me / making me new again" (CP2 332). This is performative language that enacts what it wishes to achieve. By declaring it, Williams makes it real (in the world of the poem). And he adds:

> Don't think
> that because I say this
> in a poem
> it can be treated lightly
> or that the facts will not uphold it.
> Are facts not flowers
> and flowers facts

or poems flowers
or all works of the imagination,
interchangeable?
Which proves
that love
rules them all, for then
you will be my queen,
my queen of love
forever more. (CP2 333)

Here he makes explicit the claim that the levels of meaning—literal and metaphoric—are equivalent. This allows the assertion of will, and it underwrites cliché: "which *proves* / . . . for *then*/ you will be my queen / . . . of love / forever more" (emphasis mine). The fault is hers, but that is the only way he can love her. There is an unmistakable aggression in this process of thinking, which tries to seize the object by naming it, except that the "flowers" Williams invokes throughout remain rootless abstractions.

Williams wishes to capture the (bodily) power of the feminine. He does so by establishing poetic devices that seem to affirm the literal while tacitly shifting the grounds of significance between literal and figurative. The poem resists objects and the affective engagements they attract and sustain; it relies instead on stock tropes and images and a form, the tripartite line, that promises "regularity" even as the thematic content belies it. This is not to set regularity and irregularity in tension but to elide the tension with a logic of sameness. Williams gestures vaguely toward images and objects with words like "flowers," "a garden," "the sea," "the bomb." Even poetry itself ceases to be a practice of fidelity to a craft or discipline and becomes an unrooted abstraction: "I was lost / failing the poem" (CP2 321). He means "without" "the poem," but the word "failing" is suggestive, for it points to the theme at the heart of much of Williams's later work: anxiety over his cultural status and the acceptability of his production.

The older Yeats spoke of the imperative to "lie down" in the "foul rag and bone shop of the heart" ("The Circus Animals' Desertion"). In *Paterson* Williams amasses many rags and bones: historical texts, letters, overheard snippets of conversation, myths he's made himself, and personal reflections. *Paterson* is unthinkable without the models of Eliot's *Waste Land* and Pound's *Cantos,* both for the use of multiple voices throughout (*The Waste Land*) and for the formless, accretive process of development and incorporation of texts (*The Cantos*). *Paterson*

presents Williams's "complaint" in a sense not just political but aesthetic: a consideration at length of artistic failure, both cultural and personal. While *Paterson* does not achieve a coherent form, it has flashes of lyric intensity.

Williams insists on the externality of potential objects in Book II of *Paterson:*

> Outside
>
> outside myself
>
> there is a world
>
> . . . subject to my incursions (P 43)

This seems to place power in generative subjectivity. But in Book II Williams speaks of "That kind of blockage, exiling one's self from one's self" (45); this achieves a kind of eloquence—except that this is not Williams speaking but "Cress," Marcia Nardi, whose letters Williams incorporated into his book. While Williams's use of these letters has been controversial, what is noteworthy is the attempt throughout to externalize themes of the poem by using "real" letters and documents, from Nardi, from Allen Ginsberg, from Pound. In Book V he even uses Sappho's famous *phainetai moi* in its entirety (215). The true wrong Williams commits in using the "Cress" letters is by refusing to devour them, to internalize their anguish at blockage—creative, sexual, emotional.

Sentimentalism uses the bonding achieved through the scene of tears and emotional connection to reverse the value of tropes and symbols. Williams wishes *Paterson* to present an epic critique of society, much as Pound's *Cantos.* Williams even includes a section on money and in Book II rewrites Pound's "Usury" canto as "Without invention." But one of the key themes of *Paterson,* despite the river and the falls, is the "dryness" of creative sterility, which Williams attempts to deflect as society's problem but which haunts him as his own.

The table of "discovery" in Book III for the Artesian well to be built in Paterson, meant perhaps to comment "dryly" and unfavorably on Pound, fragments of whose letters are included in the page prior, is a good example. The well refers as readily to Williams's aesthetic dryness, his inability to find the wetness he has valued in earlier poems. Perhaps, as the water table indicates, there is none to be found. Williams continues with seven pages of dark mumblings about the dead language, a formlessness that "fouls the mind" (140); he takes a dig at Eliot, ending: "this rhetoric / is real!" (145). But if it's real, so are all the fragments he has employed as part of it, including Pound's and Eliot's. The voice that enters in Book IV, a section on money and usury (Pound's theme), to defend the notion of water, is recognizably Pound's:

[.] just because they ain't no water fit to drink in that spot (or you ain't found none) don't mean there ain't no fresh water to be had NOWHERE [. .] (182)

Pound at his best represents boundless optimism and energy. Williams pretended not to notice.

Divorce is a major theme in *Paterson,* both metaphorical and literal. In *Paterson* Williams throws the wife into the river and drowns her (Mrs. Cummings in Book I). In Book II, Faitoute ("Make"-all, the "tout" feminine), both poet and roué, "sick of his diversions but proud of women" (63), cannot overcome his self-division between fear and desire, between erotic union and misogyny:

> Only the thought of the stream comforts him,
> its terrifying plunge, inviting marriage—and
> a wreath of fur[.] (82)

The falls are divorce—and Williams is both attracted and afraid.

Williams's desire is often not separate from misogyny: Williams mentions the picture from *National Geographic* of the nine wives of an African chief, the youngest first, and "Behind her, packed tight up / in a descending scale of freshness / stiffened the others" (13). But it is the old, first wife, "her old thighs / gripping the log reverently" (21), who supports the chief and all his other women. When Williams gets to the Beautiful Thing in Book III, he is attempting to express not just beauty in its erotic aspect but his own failure to incorporate that internally, as part of himself. He is torn between urges to dominate and identify:

> (Then, my anger rising) TAKE OFF YOUR
> CLOTHES! I didn't ask you
> to take off your skin [.] I said your
> clothes, your clothes. You smell
> like a whore. I ask you to bathe in my
> opinions, the astonishing virtue of your
> lost body (I said) [.]
>
> —that you might
> send me hurtling to the moon
> [. .] let me look at you (I
> said, weeping) (105–6)

He hates the yoke of marriage. He wants divorce. But he can't symbolize the "young wife" internally. So the lyric element remains fragmented, as in Book II:

> Her belly [.] her belly is like a white cloud [.] a
> white cloud at evening [.] before the shuddering night! (86)

The exclamation mark reminds us that this is the same avid voyeurism he brought to Miss Margaret Jarvis in *Spring and All* in poem IX:

> I was your nightgown
> I watched! (CP1 201)

Certainly voyeurism involves objectification, but it lacks the reciprocal connection to an aesthetic object. The voyeurism keeps him separate, even as he deflates himself by including another "Cress" letter, another "wife" whom he ought dutifully to "support"—but who gives no pleasure.

While divorce is a theme that obviously has to do with the sexual politics central to *Paterson, Paterson* is more broadly engaged in a consideration of various alternatives to marriage. Divorce is one alternative; virginity, lesbianism, and adultery are others. Marriage is a disguised trope for the poetic tradition comprising largely men: men whom Williams envies and resents—and wishes to join. In Book III Williams takes a dig at Eliot, and then immediately connects him to women and their wish for marriage:

> Who is it spoke of April? Some
> insane engineer. There is no recurrence.
> The past is dead. Women are
> legalists, they want to rescue
> a framework of laws, a skeleton of
> practices, a calcined reticulum
> of the past which, bees, they will
> fill with honey [.] (P 142)

Women are "legalists," traditionalists. The *tradition* is binding, stifling, "rotted" as Williams immediately goes on to say. He resents it—but he wants to be in it. Williams's ambivalence shows up in Book IV: "I warn you, the sea is *not* our home. / The sea is not our home" (199). This is part of a reverie, "this dream of the

whole poem" (199), though we will remember that in "Asphodel" the sea was connected to *The Iliad* and to the Western poetic tradition.

Williams's envy and resentment of other poets is one of the hidden themes in *Paterson.* A "young man" struggles with the bereaved Reverend Cummings and prevents him from getting wet and heroic. In Book IV, Corydon and Phyllis, pastoral lesbians, Corydon a "poetess" not unlike Williams himself, make hash of Yeats (166). Phyllis and Paterson, most definitely *not* a married couple, have a neurotic conversation just like the married couple in *The Waste Land:* "Talk to me" (168). Williams follows a rebuke to Chaucer that "Thy drasty rymyng is not / worth a toord" (176) with an account of a woman with diarrhea and then Marie Curie's pregnancy, unstably wobbling between that which is "scum" and that which is "LUMINOUS!" (176). Williams expresses considerable anxiety and doubt about which he is. In the highly Poundian section of Book IV on money and usury he dismisses with contempt "the widow" "long past fertility" (181) but then asks less certainly:

> —and did you ever know of a sixty year
> woman with child [.] ?

followed by

> perhaps
> it is not too late? Too late [.] (186)

Williams frequently displaces his doubts and fears about his poetic status onto women, "identifying" with them as other, as inferior, but insisting on preserving his superior status as male, as indicated by the relentless voyeurism throughout his poetic oeuvre.

Having tried to *name* the Beautiful Thing—"black plush, a dark flame" (128)—and thereby dominate the colored girl Williams wishes to defend (and dominate), he offers his aesthetic: "Only one answer: write carelessly so that nothing that is not green will survive" (129). Just as the paint squeezed straight out of Jackson Pollock's tube is "real," so might Williams's words typed straight onto the page be "real." This is a naïve aesthetic that denies metaphor even as it veers toward allegory. The fire Williams sets in Book III is his own wish in words to burn what holds him back—he'd like to think it's "the University"—what prevents him from getting divorced and roaming free to pick all the flowers. But Williams himself is what is left in the ruins:

a nothing, surrounded by
a surface, an inverted
bell resounding, a

white-hot man become
a book, the emptiness of
a cavern resounding (124)

Ironically, Riddel took the title of his book on Williams from this oblique confession of artistic failure.

By *Paterson* and the late lyrics, Williams's objects have moved outside him and increasingly fail to take shape; indeed he burns all into formlessness with the fire in Book III. The poems refuse a form that mimetically presents that act of recognition, of generative shaping, that takes place as the subject confronts a promising object and discovers in it "mere form." As Williams externalizes his objects and displaces them into "texts," he resists confronting them internally, and thereby blocks the reader from experiencing that self-confrontation and growth as well.

This essay is dedicated to Charles Altieri.

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