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## Imagining machines: Time & image in the shorter poems of William Carlos Williams

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# **Imagining Machines**

**Time  
&  
Image**

**In the Shorter Poems  
of  
William Carlos Williams.**

**Stuart Campbell BA Hons**

**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the  
Requirements for the Award of  
Bachelor of Arts (English) Honours.**

**At the Faculty of, Community Services, Education and Social Science  
Edith Cowan University, Mount Lawley.**

**Date of submission: 30 November 1999**

## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## ABSTRACT

A discussion of time and image in the shorter poems of William Carlos Williams. The particular focus is Williams' short poems published between the Great War and World War II. The relationship between the form of the poems, and Williams' theories on poetry, as expressed in *Spring and All*, and *The Wedge* is examined. In turn, Williams' theories are viewed in the context of Imagism, Objectivist poetics, and the modernist machine aesthetic. Williams' application of these theories is seen to create a poetic form that generates images in the reader's imagination in synchrony with the moment.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
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Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date 17 March 2000

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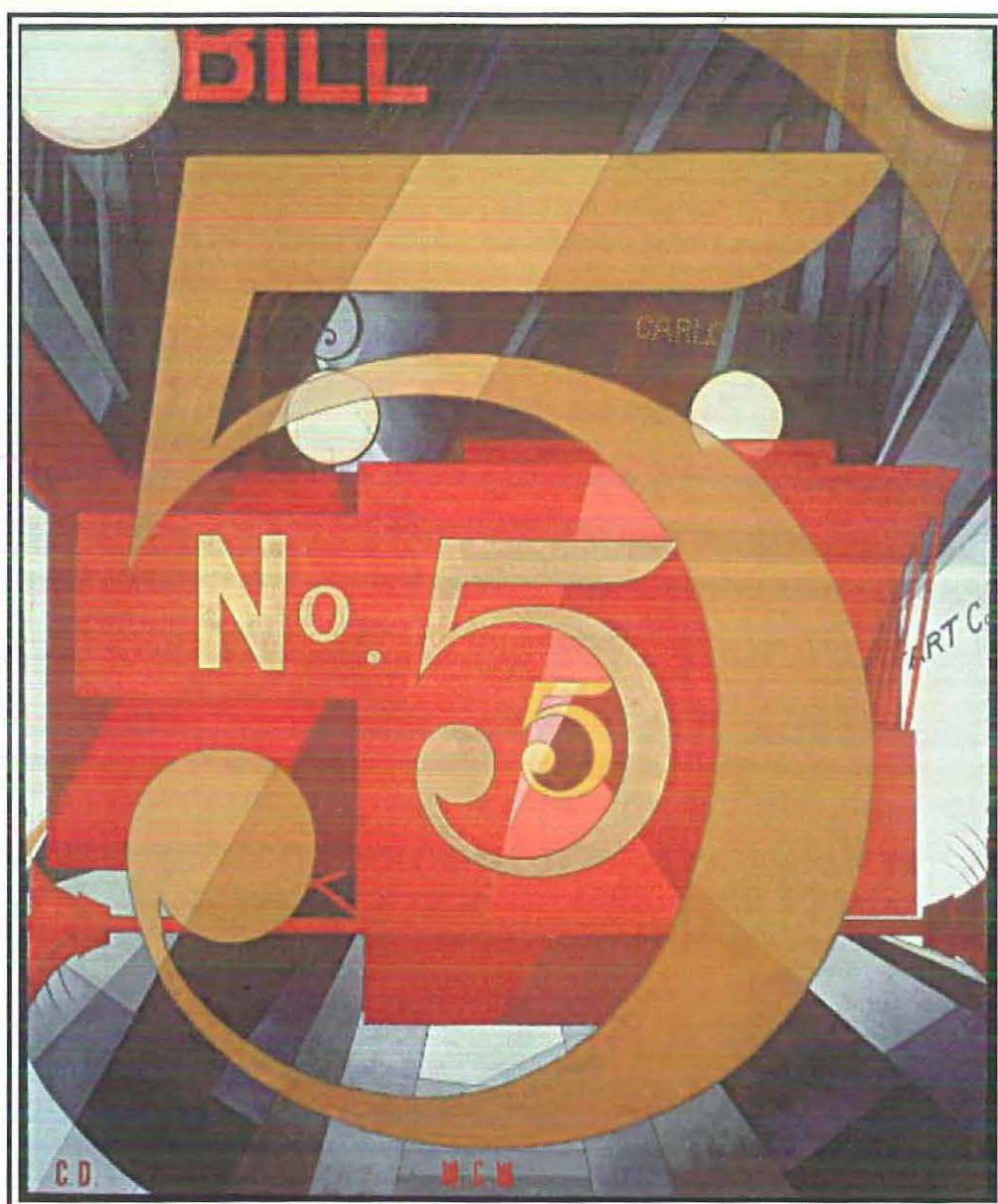
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Charles Demuth, American, 1883-1935  
The Figure 5 in Gold  
90.2 x 76.2 cm (35½ x 30 in.)

## THE GREAT FIGURE

Among the rain  
and lights  
I saw the figure 5  
in gold  
on a red  
firetruck  
moving  
tense  
unheeded  
to gong clangs  
siren howls  
and wheels rumbling  
through the dark city.<sup>1</sup>

## Preface

The poems cited in this essay were all originally published before 1940. My original intention was to look at Williams' work prior to *The Desert Music* (1954); this arbitrary division was devised on the grounds of Williams' adherence to the triadic stanza in that text. Having a design background I find Williams' earlier layouts of far greater interest than the rigidity of the triadic stanza form, described, I believe accurately, by Marjorie Perloff as, "an externally imposed geometric form, a kind of cookie cutter."<sup>2</sup> I have also focused on Williams' shorter poems and as a result, all the poems bar one, "Good Night", are presented in full. Where possible the original layout of the text, for prose as well as poetry has been used, as Williams did use unorthodox layout in both; especially in *Spring and All*.<sup>3</sup>

## Introduction

My original response to the poetry of William Carlos Williams was querulous, followed by wonderment, and then the many questions. The thing that struck me most about his work, was the ease with which the poems could be visualized, and an appreciation for the quality of the text layout. The way Williams' shorter poems sit on the page demonstrates a talent for graphic design, most often absent in poets. This is especially the case today, when some poets sitting at their word processors seem to believe that bigger, capitalised and italicised equals emphasised, when in typography, the central focus of a composition can be plain nine point text.

In focusing on Williams' maintenance of an immediate present timeframe in his shorter poetry, I have also had to examine related modernist theories, with particular emphasis on Williams' own theories as expressed in *Spring and All*, and *The Wedge*. However, initially I look at Imagism, highlighting Ezra Pound's notion of "presenting" rather than "describing", and his requirement that the abstract and concrete be kept separate. This is done using Williams' poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow", as a context, showing how the poem's minimalism matches well with Pound's requirements for presenting. Much of this essay is

concerned with just how much is absent from Williams' poems, and consequently how both image and meaning generation are very much dependant on the reader's participation. From there I use one of Williams' earlier poems, "Love", to demonstrate the dramatic shift in lexis and rhythm in Williams' work from the period before Imagism to post-Imagism.

Having done this I move to Williams' stated emphasis on the moment in *Spring and All*, and an examination of the multiple time frames extant in Williams' poem "To Waken an Old Lady". In this analysis, looking at the importance of word order, I use cinema as an analogy for the process of image generation in the poem—how the structure of the poem facilitates visualization. This poem is also used to demonstrate an instance of Williams foregrounding the poem as object. Then "The Attic Which is Desire:" and Marjorie Perloff's analysis of "Good Night" are used to look at the importance of the appearance of the poem on the page in Williams' work. This objectification of the poem is placed in the context of the general revolt against 'realism' throughout the arts at the start of the twentieth century, with reference to related statements in *Spring and All* and the visual arts. Williams' definition of the imagination, in *Spring and All* and the influence he gives imagination, are central to his conception of how poetry operates and what should define form

in art. Following this, I look at Williams' desire that there be no dominant aesthetic principle in the Arts, implicit in his response to Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

From here, I move on to Williams' recognition of the reader's importance in the process of poetry, noting Walt Whitman as a precursor to Williams' notion of the "fraternal embrace" of author and reader.<sup>4</sup>

Then to an examination of the spatial relationships between objects in the poem, "Poem" (As the Cat), and the generation of an aural image in "The Defective Record". In this analysis I emphasise the absence of visual descriptors to show that Williams' image generation is not dependant on the visual.

Finally, through an analysis of Williams' use of the "machine aesthetic", I locate Williams as an orthodox member of the avant-garde, and examine "The Great Figure", in relation to the machine aesthetic, and Williams' definition of a unit in poetry, finding that in this poem, the unit is the line. From this, I turn to Objectivist poetics as a means of bringing together a number of earlier ideas, which can be summarised as follows: Williams' use of lineation, simple lexis, careful syntax, and recognition of the act of reading, allows the generation of imagery synchronous

with the immediate present. In the shorter poems of William Carlos Williams the time frame of the act of reading is synchronous with the timeframe of the image presented—be that image visual, aural, psychological, concrete or abstract.

Imagism: Presenting without describing.

In the volume 1 of *Poetry*, 1912, M.S. Flint's article "Imagisme" lists the three rules of Imagism:

1. Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.<sup>5</sup>

These simple guidelines allowed their producers ("Pound, F.S. Flint, H.D., T.E. Hulme, and a few others"<sup>6</sup>) to break completely with poetic tradition, at the start of the twentieth century, and create the ground for a new poetic aesthetic. William Carlos Williams' connection to this group in London was his friend Ezra Pound.<sup>7</sup> The two met as students at the University of Pennsylvania. Roger Mitchell stresses the importance of this friendship for Williams: "through Pound's badgering, Williams was able to change his style completely in a short time."<sup>8</sup> Pound's influence, allowed Williams to move away from Keatsian imitations, becoming "an Imagist as it were, by mail."<sup>9</sup>

Directly following Flint's article in *Poetry* is an article by Ezra Pound providing further elaboration on Imagism—"A Few Don'ts by an Imagist".<sup>10</sup> In this article, Pound uses one of William Shakespeare's lines as a positive example, for potential Imagists; he argues that when Shakespeare writes, "Dawn in russet mantle clad' he presents something which the painter does not present. There is in this line of his nothing that one can call description; he presents."<sup>11</sup> The problem with this statement is how does one differentiate between presentation and description? Or, how does a poet *present*, without *describing*?

For me, the difference between presentation and description, that is essential to William Carlos Williams' work, is the timeframe of the language act. "Dawn in russet mantle clad", is a short, sharp, and succinct image. It takes as much time to read the line as it does to visualize the image. Similarly, Williams' line "a red wheel / barrow / / glazed with rain,"<sup>12</sup> has a brevity related to the act of seeing. The reader is provided with the basic elements of the image, in a sequence that allows rapid visualization synchronous with the reading—we see first colour, then form, and then texture. Consequently, the image is presented, not described—that is, the poet refrains from providing extensive detail. Rather than describing a particular



dawn, or wheelbarrow, Williams provides the notion of one, and leaves it to the reader to flesh out the image.

XXII

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens<sup>13</sup>

In “The Red Wheelbarrow”, Williams provides no context for the wheelbarrow, beyond that contained in the line, “beside the white / chickens.” We do not know if the wheelbarrow is standing up, on its side, upside down, on lawn, or on paving. Nor do we know if it is in a backyard, a farmyard, on a building site, or at a market (for all we know the chickens could be in cages). We as readers are provided with access to the elements of a scene, not a whole scene. How many chickens are there? There is no concrete background for the red wheelbarrow; only the reader’s imagination can provide a location for it. The words alone leave the wheelbarrow hanging in space, “beside the white / chickens.”

In terms of Pound's article, simplicity appears to be the key, for Shakespeare like Williams only provides an object, the dawn, and a metaphor, defining its appearance, "in russet mantle clad." Three hundred years before Imagism, Shakespeare conforms to one of Pound's 'don'ts': "Don't be descriptive; remember that the painter can describe a landscape much better than you can"<sup>14</sup>. But, Pound's preference for presentation is best summarised in Imagist rule two: "To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation."<sup>15</sup> Pound requires efficiency of word use, with what defines valid contribution apparently provided through rule 3; "As regarding rhythm; to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not the sequence of a metronome". Many poets may consider the addition of metrical rhythm, alliteration, or rhyme to be very good contributions to the presentation. For the Imagists, this is not the case. Further evidence for this requirement for efficiency, is Flint's listing of devices used by the Imagists' to get "approaching poetasters to attend their instruction,"<sup>16</sup>. The second of these devices was apparently to edit savagely these poetasters' work: "They re-wrote his verses before his eyes, using about ten words to his fifty."<sup>17</sup> Within the framework of the rules of Imagism, Shakespeare's "Dawn in russet mantle clad" complies best with rule 1: "Direct treatment of the 'thing', whether subjective or objective."<sup>18</sup> However, it can be said that

this is the only rule, the other two simply remove the form constraints of pre-modern poetry. Rule 2 negates the inclusion of words to maintain a rhyme structure, and rule 3 does the same to maintenance of a particular rhythm. Pound does note that: "If you are using a symmetrical form, don't put in what you want to say and then fill up the remaining vacuums with slush."<sup>19</sup> So, even if the poet should decide that a symmetrical structure would add to the presentation, Pound would still require all the words to contribute to "what you want to say." The primary demand of the Imagist code is thus for efficiency—an appropriately mechanistic requirement for Moderns.

This direct treatment of a thing is where Williams matches best the Imagist rules: "a red wheel / barrow / glazed with rain,"<sup>20</sup> follows a similar pattern to the quotation from Shakespeare referenced by Pound. Each uses a simple metaphor to provide individual definition to an object. The aim is not to use the smallest number of words—a wet red wheelbarrow—but to avoid using words that do not "contribute to the presentation". The metaphor, "glazed with rain," provides the reader with how the wheelbarrow came to be wet, as well as its being wet. Further, it indicates that there has not been enough time since it rained for the wheelbarrow to dry, though the state of the weather at the exact moment of the poem's action is not stated—it may still be

raining. Williams' use of the metaphor "glazed" greatly enhances the image; it most definitely contributes to the *presentation*, and does so by providing a large amount of information rapidly. Rather than just giving detail to the wheelbarrow, it also gives detail to the day. The metaphor provides detail, and extends the information available to the reader, but it does not allow a totalization of the image. The exact nature of the wheelbarrow's environment remains unstated. Thus, it is left to the reader's imagination to generate a complete image.

Pound's warning, "Don't be descriptive; remember that the painter can describe a landscape much better than you can, and that he has to know a deal more about it.", gets to the heart of image generation in poetry, for the use of words in poetry is inherently abstract.<sup>21</sup> Against this, the visual artist is free to translate directly from four dimensions to three, or two. The dramatist can use four, three, or two, as appropriate to their needs, but their whole work will always operate in four dimensions. Regardless of the art form, the viewer or reader of the text will necessarily observe it in four dimensions, and in their own individual context. A context not only individual in terms of psychology and/or experience, but also in time-space; no event in human perception is isolated from its precursor, and any division of events can only be arbitrary. Poets when

attempting to generate images are using a medium that can only *ever be* abstract. Against this, painters can successfully deceive the viewer by creating an image that has the appearance of three dimensions. Taking this into account, Pound's point is that a landscape artist can provide immediately a complete image, with a depth of detail that is only dependant on their talent. The time required in perceiving the whole of a landscape painting is very different to that of reading the whole of a written text. In painting, the viewer initially has an understanding of the whole composition; only then are individual details separated out. Williams' minimalism in "The Red Wheelbarrow" reproduces this process of perception by providing the labels of concrete objects, rather than defining their form in terms of line or colour. He does not provide the details, they are left to the reader to work out; the objects are usually only given a spatial context.

To this extent, the minimalism of "The Red Wheelbarrow" follows the Imagist creed fairly closely. However, there is one major break: Williams' use of abstraction. The abstract in "The Red Wheelbarrow" is the line "so much depends / upon." Among his 'don'ts', Pound includes (not surprisingly) a negative example: "Don't use such an expression as "dim lands of peace." It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete."<sup>22</sup>

Williams does not directly mix abstract and concrete with the direct syntactical relationship of Pound's example. Williams, however, fails to "Go in fear of abstractions,"<sup>23</sup> for he weaves the abstract into the concrete, and in doing so causes the potential meaning derived from the image to expand greatly beyond the object. The concrete context that is not rendered fully in "The Red Wheelbarrow" is replaced with an abstract, psychological one. "The Red Wheel barrow" recreates a wet red wheelbarrow as a point of tension (though the exact form of that tension is left unexplained) and by doing so it radically effects the meaning of the poem—the small things in life can be so important. A very simple image:

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens.

is made far more complex by the inclusion of a simple abstract phrase: "So much depends / upon." The locality of the red wheelbarrow shifts from the concrete world of chickens, to the abstract world of human desires and relationships. We become party to the act of contemplating the object at the centre of a human point of tension/contention—thus, at a point of desire.

The very minimalism of the poem focuses the reader's attention upon the concrete object, the wheelbarrow, for all other things are irrelevant. This reinforces the abstract statement, which sets up the psychological context for contemplating the object; "so much depends / upon" operates as a predicate for the visual image.

In "A Few Don'ts by an Imagist", Pound defines an image as follows: "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." He qualifies this definition by stating that he is using the term "'complex' rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists,"<sup>24</sup> From this assertion it can be seen that an image need not necessarily be visual; it can be psychological. Hence, Williams' use of the abstract to create a psychological framework, or mode of contemplation, for the visual, allows "The Red Wheelbarrow" to qualify as an Imagist work. Without the abstract, it is merely a view of a wheelbarrow next to some chickens, and a very incomplete one.

Rather than directly applying concrete tropes to abstract conditions—applying a perceived light level, "dim", to an abstract political state, "peace"—Williams instead provides the reader with an abstract psychological reference point for viewing

the image. In this way Williams not only guides the process of viewing, through the sequential organization of the words, but also indicates a psychological position for the view. This is indeed a very important wheelbarrow.

### *Spring And All*

“The Red Wheelbarrow”, originally appeared in *Spring and All* (1923), and like all the poems in *Spring and All* it was untitled; it is instead, as presented above, numbered, XXII.<sup>25</sup> In the prose elements of *Spring and All*, Williams sets forth his own theories and definitions for the production of poetry. Primarily, he defines poetry against prose and voices his opposition to rigid adherence to traditions in art practice. But while Imagism provides a theoretical origin for Williams’ style, he developed his own poetics. However, the relationship between Imagism, and Williams’ images is demonstrably strong. Certainly, the poetry written by Williams before Imagism demonstrates an adherence to the poetic traditions he rails against in *Spring and All*. The following example is from 1909.



## LOVE

Love is twain, it is not single,  
Gold and silver mixed in one,  
Passion 'tis and pain which mingle  
Glist'ring then for aye undone.

Pain it is not; wondering pity  
Dies or e'er the pang is fled:  
Passion 'tis not, foul and gritty,  
Born one instant, instant dead.

Love is twain, it is not single,  
Gold and silver mixed in one,  
Passion 'tis and pain which mingle  
Glist'ring then for aye undone.<sup>26</sup>

Stylistically and lexically, "Love" is far removed from "XXII" ("The Red Wheelbarrow") in *Spring and All*. "Glist'ring," "'tis," "e'er," and "aye" are words alien to the more colloquial vocabulary of *Spring and All*, where common words are the norm. While Williams in *Spring and All* is presenting his own ideas on poetry, the influence of the anti-traditional Imagism is still there. In his look at early twentieth century American poetry, "Modernism Comes to American Poetry: 1908-1920", Roger Mitchell suggests that Imagism provided "the rationale for a poetry unlike any known before in English ..."<sup>27</sup> Although, its primary progenitor Pound, was disaffected with it by 1915,

During its moment, however, Imagism exactly reflected the values Pound wanted for his writing and for writing in general, and the quickness with which it was imitated and institutionalized shows how wide its influence was.<sup>28</sup>

The rules of Imagism are fairly open, but rule 3—"As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome"<sup>29</sup>—invalidates adherence to any rigid poetic structure, such as the sonnet, for example. It is here where Williams' poem, "Love," most obviously contravenes the Imagist rationale. In "Love", Williams uses a structure of rhyming couplets, a b a b c d c d a b a b, with the third stanza being a repetition of the first. This kind of structure is completely at odds with Imagism, and with all Williams' work after he engaged with Imagism. Williams fails to "[u]se no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something", as he must if he is to maintain the rhyme scheme and the rhythmic structure of the poem.<sup>30</sup> "Love" clearly contradicts the following statement from *Spring and All*:

What I put down of value will have this value: an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from "reality"—such as rhyme, meter as meter and not as the essential of the work, one of its words.<sup>31</sup>

"Love", written well before the above remarks, is then not a work of value, for the adherence to a particular scheme of rhyme and rhythm in "Love" qualifies as "meter as meter", and is essential to the work. That is, "Love" is a poem primarily about art, about

adherence to “complicated ritualistic forms”; rhythm dominates the work, and it is these forms, which “separate the work from ‘reality’”, that Williams along with the Imagists rejected. Additionally, the whole poem is abstract; there are no perceptual images, no concrete objects, and therefore no direct connection with the “real” world. Written *before* the Imagist self-promotion of Flint’s and Pound’s articles in *Poetry*, before Imagism had provided a clear break with the past, if not a viable long-term aesthetic, “Love” demonstrates Williams’ early adherence to a very traditional poetic structure; an aesthetic he had completely rejected by the time he came to write *Spring and All*.

*Spring and All* opens with an apparent parody of the criticism leveled against Williams’ poetry for his failure to comply with the very aesthetic he is rejecting: “Rhyme you may perhaps take away but rhythm! why there is none in your work whatever. Is this what you call poetry? It is the very antithesis of poetry. It is antipoetry.”<sup>32</sup> Williams parodies his detractors while placing himself among the moderns: “You moderns! it is the death of poetry that you are accomplishing. No. I cannot understand this work.”<sup>33</sup> Here, at the beginning of *Spring and All*, Williams is defining himself against traditional poetry; to this extent, his poetry is antipoetry.

Thus, in *Spring and All*, Williams is beginning to define for himself an aesthetic, a modernist aesthetic, and underlying that aesthetic is a stated aim:

The reader knows himself as he was twenty years ago and he has also in mind a vision of what he would be, some day. Oh, some day! But the thing he never knows and never dares to know is what he is at the exact moment that he is. And this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested.<sup>34</sup>

That the moment is the only thing Williams is interested in, is somewhat hyperbolic, but the emphasis on the moment, *that continuing instant that all exists in*, is reflected in the *immediacy* of the majority of Williams' work. The first person perspective of the poems is nearly always resident in the now, drifting with time in the immediate present, and never static, for the moment cannot be static. At the heart of Williams' poetics is the understanding that stasis can only be an illusion. Time never stops, only relativistic, subjective, differences in its rate of passage can be perceived. One of the best examples of Williams' understanding of multiple time scales is "To Waken An Old Lady". This awareness of multiple time scales is counterbalanced by the maintenance of immediacy.

### "To Waken An Old Lady"

"To Waken An Old Lady," appeared in *Sour Grapes* (1921) prior to the publication of *Spring and All*. In this poem, a sequence of concrete seasonal images is used as a metaphor for old age. This is done, as it is in "The Red Wheelbarrow", by predicating the poem with an abstract statement. In this instance, it is a combination of the title, and the first line "Old age is". The consequent imagery is thus a metaphor for old age. In addition, the simple lexis of the text means that the image cannot be easily localised in terms of place.

### TO WAKEN AN OLD LADY

Old age is  
a flight of small  
cheeping birds  
skimming  
bare trees  
above a snow glaze.  
Gaining and failing  
they are buffeted  
by a dark wind—  
But what?  
On harsh weedstalks  
the flock has rested,  
the snow  
is covered with broken  
seedhusks  
and the wind tempered  
by a shrill  
piping of plenty.<sup>35</sup>

However, "To Waken an Old Lady" can be localised through the synecdochial elements of its imagery, though only in terms of climate. One can deduce that for there to be "bare trees / above a snow glaze," the location has to be in a temperate climate zone, an environment where the trees lose their leaves in winter. This limits the locality to the Northern Hemisphere, still a very large area. Theoretically, it could be a colonial garden, created to remind the coloniser of home; this would explain the deciduous trees, but not the snow. It is worth noting, that Williams is writing in a colonising language, in a colonised country, himself the son of immigrants.<sup>36</sup> The point is that the context of the poem is not defined geographically, only seasonally, and therefore a location can be inferred—but any *specificity of place* is left to the reader.

The arrival of "a flight of small / cheeping birds," places the seasonal position as spring. Since the trees are still bare, the birds must be returning, having left before all the leaves had fallen. Therefore, these two simple images present the time of season with the minimum of detail. Crucially, though, they require the reader to make the necessary connections. Redolent of Pound's point on Shakespeare's line "dawn in russet mantle clad", Williams in "To Waken An Old Lady" is presenting, not describing, the season. As someone who has never lived in a

climate where the trees lost their leaves—except for the imported ones—never seen snow first hand, and always lived where the majority of the local avian population is non-migratory, the first concrete image of the poem,

a flight of small  
cheeping birds  
skimming  
bare trees  
above a snow glaze.

still firmly places the poem's action at the end of winter.<sup>2</sup> The problem is, that this image is what "Old age is". Williams combines the abstract and the concrete, and this combination gives the poem both the immediacy of the present, through the active image of the birds, and the broader abstract time frames of the seasonal cycle, and the human life span.

Importantly, the lexis of the image is very simple. The birds are "small" & "cheeping", though what species they belong to is left unstated. Quite simply, they are a variety of small birds that cheep. Consequently, they could be any small migratory birds, and could come from anywhere that has snow in winter. This simplicity is important, for like "Dawn in russet mantle clad" it

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<sup>2</sup> This is due to more than trees being imported. Every year, before Christmas, the Coca Cola inspired red & white Santa, reindeer in tow, visits the shopping centres, surrounded by snow images. In other words, what a

leaves the actual details of any visualised image to the reader. This, in turn, allows the maintenance of a timeframe for the image that is synchronous with the reading; for effectively the reader is left to fill in the gaps. The details have to be imagined by the reader. This requires the lexis to be paradoxically precise and, at the same time, widely recognisable—for if the timeframe of the moment is to be maintained, there can be no digression into detail. Thus, the poet speaks of "a flight of small / cheeping birds," rather than a flock of sparrows cheeping as they fly. Williams does not provide species or location; the environment of the piece could be rural, urban or wilderness. The generality of the lexis denies any specificity of place. The image can occur in any Temperate Climatic Zone and because of its directly concrete nature it is available to any individual capable of reading english.

### Word order

To a large extent, it is the ordering of the words in Williams' poems that allows the maintenance of the moment, for the order in which the elements that make up the image are provided greatly determines its coherence, given the minimal nature of

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colonised education system does not provide, expansionist corporate marketing will.



the work. Added to this is Williams' use of lineation to focus groups of words into distinct image units. This sequencing is analogous to cinema, in that the individual image elements when combined as a sequence create a moving image. Each line, is like a frame in a motion picture film, in that, by viewing each individual frame as a continuous sequence, a moving image is created.

Cinematic imagery operates in time, unlike the static visual arts of painting and sculpture. While a visual artist may incorporate narrative, or indicate motion in a painting or sculpture, the work does not have the inherent temporal quality of film or drama. Film always operates within a particular timeframe, even if the picture remains static; by the very process of its projection it has a temporality. Furthermore, it is in the nature of poetry that the words are read sequentially, and therefore have a relationship in time. This effectively makes it impossible to present a static image through words, for the process of defining the image will necessarily be sequential. The writer must start at a particular point in the image, and proceed to the end, but can never present the whole, as a painter would. So the cinematic quality of Williams' imagery is partly the result of his chosen medium, but is reinforced by his desire to breakdown the barrier between the reader and the world. In *Spring and All*, Williams notes that

"There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world."<sup>37</sup> This need for art to exist in the moment requires the images generated to occur chronologically, in time, for the moment is not static. This is why Williams presents rather than describes, for if he were to use extensive detail the synchronicity of the reading act, and the process of visualisation would breakdown.

In to "To Waken an Old Lady", Williams' use of the small birds as a locus of action in this poem enhances its cinematic quality. The "flight" is "skimming / bare trees / above a snow glaze." We first see, then hear, the "cheeping" birds, before a concrete context is provided. We know them to be in the air, because they are a "flight". How they fly is then provided, "skimming," and over what they are skimming, "bare trees / above a snow glaze". Thus, we are provided with a concrete context in addition to the abstract one of old age. The structure of the sentence, and the layout of the text, facilitate visualisation. It is not difficult to imagine this sequence as viewed through a camera lens, following the birds as they fly, for each line operates as an individual unit, or frame.

Similarly, the effect of the dark wind precedes its presence; "Gaining and failing / they are buffeted / by a dark wind-" we see

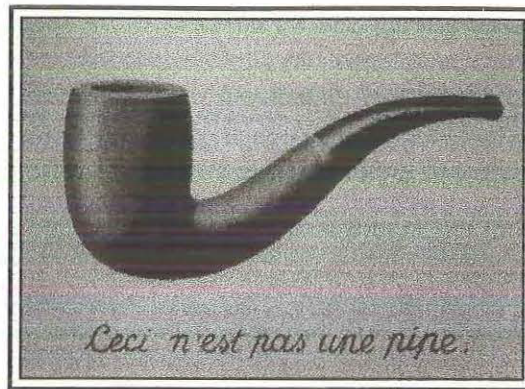
the wind's action on the birds, or their response to it, before knowing the cause. Since there is little other than wind that can buffet flying birds the importance of the wind must be its nature. It is at this point that the cinematic quality breaks down, for the birds are "buffeted / by a dark wind." A "dark" wind is not readily recordable on film, though it could be animated. However, Williams' use of the abstract here, while breaking with the directly visual, does not destroy the image, for a dark wind does not have to be seen to be dark. Rather it is felt to be dark, or its actions regarded as dark; it is foreboding. It is with the question posed in line 8—"But what?"—that a complete break with the visual occurs: a voice interrupts the flow of the image. Motion is brought to a halt, both visually, by this disjunction; linguistically, by the line's prevalence of phonetic stops, b, t, h, & t; and mentally by the shift from following a visual sequence to dealing with a question.

Who asks the question? Is it "But what" dark wind? Alternatively, could it be to the old lady's voice? There is no coherent context provided for the question; once more, the reader is required to place the voice and the question. The disjunction this creates, between reading and visualising, and responding to an abstract problem, foregrounds the poem as

poem; the activity of reading and responding to a poem becomes primary, for the question forces a reassessment of the text.

### Prose v Poetry—Real art objects

This reassessment corresponds with Williams' definition of poetry in *Spring and All*: "poetry: new form dealt with as a reality in itself."<sup>38</sup> This is part of Williams' determined differentiation of prose and poetry. For Williams defines prose as, "statement of facts concerning emotions, intellectual states, data of all sorts—fictional and other—".<sup>39</sup> The primary difference is that for Williams, "the form of poetry is related to the movements of the imagination revealed in words—or whatever it may be".<sup>40</sup> For Williams, the art object "must be real, not "realism" but reality itself".<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the best demonstration of this in the visual arts is Rene Magritte's painting, *La Trahison des images*, 1928/29—English title, *The Treason of Images*. This painting is a very simple 'realistic' image of a smoking pipe, bearing the caption, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe"—"This is not a pipe".<sup>42</sup> Magritte points out that the painting is a painting: the picture of a pipe is just that, a representation in two dimensions of a three-dimensional object. Patently, a painting is not a pipe. Neither is the word "pipe" a pipe. Part of the treason of images then, is that they are not what they purport to be.



Rene Magritte, Belgian, 1898-1967  
 La Trahison des images  
 60 x 81 cm (23 2/3 x 31 7/8 in.)

In *Spring and All*, Williams makes the same point as Magritte, but uses the painter Holbein, a sixteenth century master of perspective, as an example:

The great furor about perspective in Holbein's day had as a consequence much fine drawing, it made coins defy gravity, standing on the table as if in the act of falling. To say this was lifelike must have been satisfying to the master, it gave depth, pungency.<sup>43</sup>

Here, Williams is clearly being ironic for his point is that the image is not life-like, for "Meanwhile . . . in the next street Bauermeister Kummel was letting a gold coin slip from his fingers to the counting table."<sup>44</sup> Painting cannot be life-like, it is static for a start, but it can produce illusions of depth. Holbein's mastery of perspective did not allow him to make three-dimensional images. Williams writes here, what Magritte would

later paint, that so called “realism” is an illusion, a lie. Like the visual artists and dramatists of his generation, Williams revolted against the illusion of realism, preferring art works to be demonstrably art, not illusions. The question “But what?”, in “To Waken An Old Lady”, firmly does this—by directly fracturing the flow of the imagery, it forces the recognition of the poem as poem.

### Cinematic

“To Waken An Old Lady” can be viewed as either two cinematic sequences (lines 2 to 9 and lines 11 to 18) or one sequence that is interrupted. The title and lines 1 & 10 can be seen as operating like a caption or dialogue card in a silent film, though of course this film is not silent. So perhaps a better metaphor might be that of the title and lines 1 & 10 being like superimposed text on a television or film screen, but with line 10 - “But what?” - having the disjunctive power of a silent film caption. For a break in the imagery occurs, similar to the shift from filmed action to text caption.

This use of cinematic imagery creates the time-scape of the poem, for the two image sequences (lines 2-9, 11-18) involving the birds operate in a timeframe that flows with the reading of

the text. The title, line 1, "Old age is," and the question "But what?" are timeless, for unlike the imagery the perceptual frame for these lines is not a sensory one. However, they are part of the time-scheme of the poem. Essentially, the cinematic quality of the imagery gives it a cinematic time-space, in that the image is never static—rather, it occurs in time, in motion. As each new part of the image is provided, it changes the overall image, but at no point does any new part lose integrity with the whole. This is due to the careful ordering of the elements that make up the image. In this sense, the break in imagery—"But what?"—operates like a film edit, for it delineates the shift from birds' in flight, to birds piping. Notably, if the question is removed, there is not necessarily an edit. However, the tense does change from the present (the birds "*are* buffeted") in the first sequence, to the past ("the flock *has* rested") in the second. One can visualize the image both as an edit, effectively a cut from birds in flight to birds at rest, on weedstalks, eating & singing, or as a continuous image with the birds landing on the weedstalks. Potentially, in pausing for the question, one has failed to see the birds' land. In either case, a shift from the present 'are' to the past 'has' occurs, but even so, once on the weedstalks, the birds have action in the present—their "shrill / piping of plenty." The image's progression occurs in time, as it must, is consequently

never static and hence the timeframe of image presentation is the present, in line with the visual process of cinema.

While Williams maintains the immediacy of the moment in "To Waken An Old Lady," the image presented also operates as a synecdoche for two larger time frames. Firstly, the annual seasons, secondly a human life, and a potential third one, life. Williams' ordering of the elements of the image creates a sequence that (through the process of reading) generates a moving picture, in the same way that a series of film stills becomes a motion picture when projected. In Williams' work this occurs in the act of reading/process of writing.

Marjorie Perloff sees the cinematic quality of poems like "To Waken An Old Lady", as the product of the lineation. Perloff uses "Good Night", from *Others*, December 1916, to demonstrate this quality.<sup>45</sup>



## GOOD NIGHT

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

Waiting  
 for the water to freshen—  
 I glance at the spotless floor—:  
 a pair of rubber sandals  
 lie side by side  
 under the wall-table  
 all is in order for the night. . . .<sup>48</sup>

"Here it is lineation rather than the pattern of stresses that guides the reader's eye so that objects stand out, one by one, as in a series of film shots: first the gas light, then the spigot, then the splash of the water, and finally the sink itself."<sup>47</sup> Perloff sees this as stemming from Williams' recognition that a poem is "a small machine made of words"<sup>48</sup>, "a verbal text to be seen at least as much as to be heard".<sup>49</sup> Consequently, the presentation of the poem on the page becomes as important as any other aspect, for the layout is known to affect the reading. As Perloff states it, for Williams "the typographical layout of the page was not a sideline, some sort of secondary support structure, but a central fact of poetic discourse."<sup>50</sup>

The extent to which the visual layout of the text is privileged is demonstrated in the poem, "The Attic Which is Desire:"

# THE ATTIC WHICH IS DESIRE:

the unused tent  
of

bare beams  
beyond which

directly wait  
the night

and day—  
Here

from the street  
by

\* \* \*  
\* S \*  
\* O \*  
\* D \*  
\* A \*  
\* \* \*

ringed with  
running lights

the darkened  
pane

exactly  
down the center

is  
transfixed

51

Here, a "SODA" sign is directly presented as a graphic. The poem could read,

Here  
 from the street  
 by  
 soda  
 ringed with  
 running lights.

In this poem the asterisks are not necessary for the completion of the image, for the following lines, “ringed with / running lights” do so. Nor can the asterisks affect the vocal presentation of the text. By using a simple graphic, one easily created on a typewriter, Williams presents the image pictographically. Through this graphic, the lines “ringed with / running lights” are made almost redundant; they merely add motion to the image.<sup>52</sup> The context of the graphic, “Here / from the street / by”, provides sufficient information for it to be read as street advertising. An added benefit of this layout is that the immediacy of the moment is maintained, for the graphic elements immediately convey the image of a sign (but only to a reader, not a listener). By contrast, ‘soda’ may not be as rapidly related to signage if the asterisks are removed. By doing this, Williams avoids leaving the reader hanging, waiting for further information to complete the image.<sup>53</sup> Once more, the layout not only aids visualisation, but it also maintains immediacy and demonstrates a privileging of the visual appearance of the text over its aural reception.

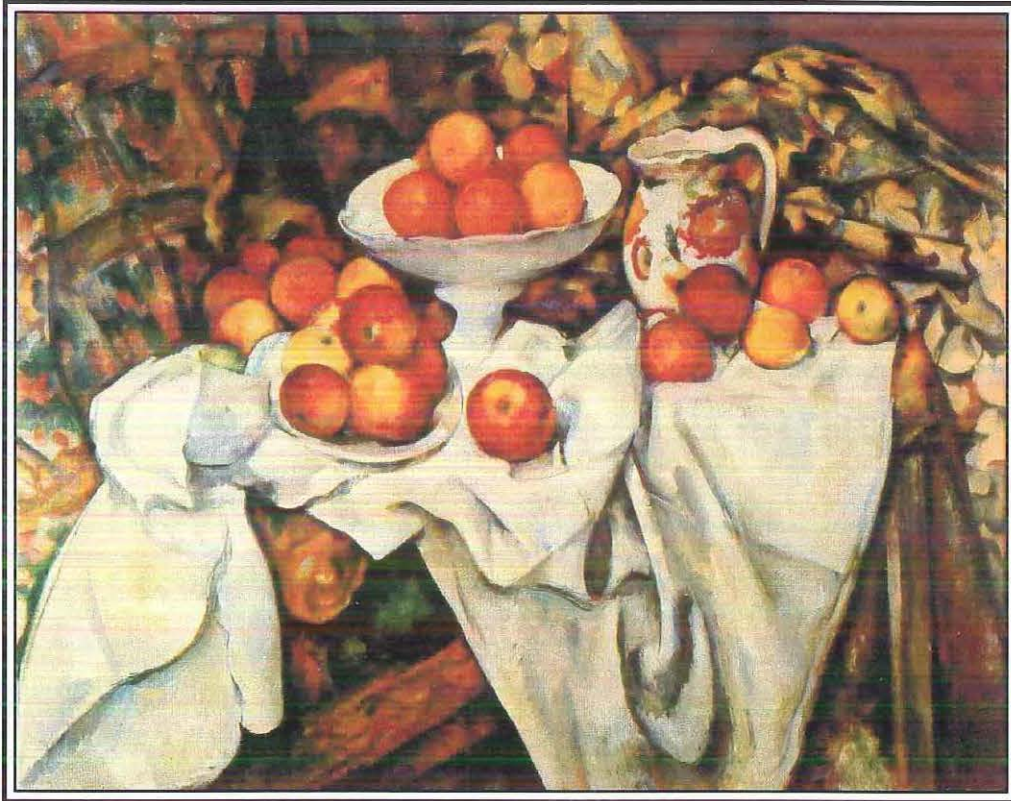
### Cinema Summary

The simplicity of the lexis, the lineation, and the use of concrete perceptual imagery, create a cinematic quality in Williams' shorter poems. This cinematic nature gives the work a synchronicity with real-time, in that the act of reading the text, and the timescape of the text are intimately related, or, as Williams expresses it, "the form of poetry is related to the movements of the imagination revealed in words"<sup>54</sup>. Poetry becomes the revelation of the imagination in words.

### Imagining Visual Arts

For Williams, the motive force that is both captured and expressed in the form of the best poetry, is the Imagination:

To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force—the imagination.<sup>55</sup>



Paul Cézanne, French, 1839-1906

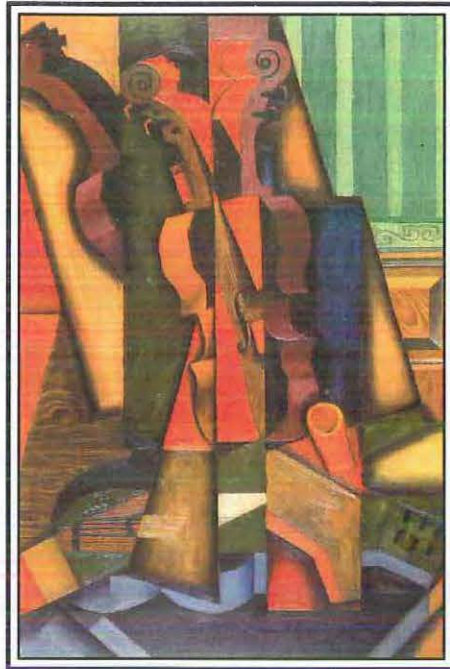
Apples and Oranges

73 x 92 cm (28¾ x 36¼ in.)

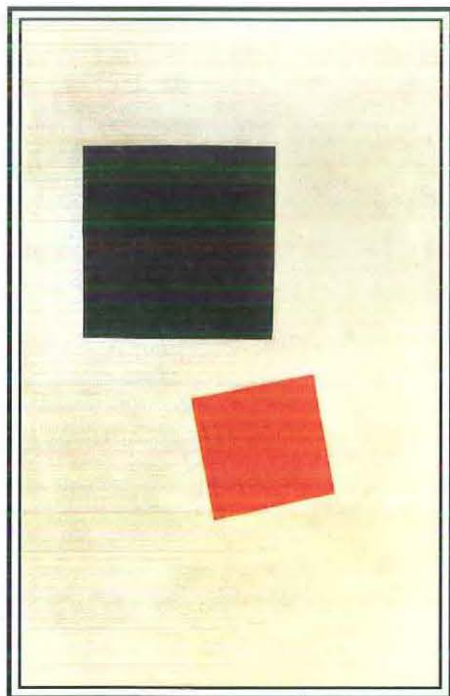
The imagination is central in *Spring and All*. It is through the imagination that Williams sees all perception and expression flowing. It is thus by expressing their experience of the imagination, that artists make 'real' art, art that avoids illusion. Hence, Williams' references to the work of artists like Juan Gris, and Cézanne, for both men create work that is not "realist". Cézanne's painting, *Apples and Oranges*, presents a still life in which multiple perspectives are unified in one composition. In doing this, Cézanne foregrounds the process of art, for while the perspective is varied, each individual point of view is painted with accuracy. The net result is that the finished image has the appearance of one viewed in a slightly distorted mirror. Cézanne's artistry is demonstrated in the image's unity of colour and composition, despite his complete break with the formal perspective of 'realism'. This painting directly opposes Cartesian perspectives of the great renaissance artists, like Holbein. The unity of colour and composition is particularly important, for it demonstrates that an aesthetically successful image need not have 'correct' perspective. Further, by foregrounding the brush strokes used to create the image, he ensures that it is recognisable as a painting, rather than an illusion. In sum, the work makes obvious the method of its production. This concentration on the production of the work, rather the illusion of realism, leads to work like that of Juan Gris,

which concentrates on relationships of colour and form, and reduces the still life object to a curve, colour and line reference. Rather than being the thing to be reproduced, the object becomes the reference source for a work of the imagination. Moving to non-figurative images is then the logical extension to this, as demonstrated in the work of artists like Malevich. For Malevich the visual reference becomes irrelevant, and any need to represent pictorially is replaced by the pure form and colour of total abstraction.

This willingness to make the “mechanics of process” part of the artwork is visible in the work of visual artists. However, in literature, the shift away from the tradition works to remove the obvious mechanics of the art form. As Flint’s and Pound’s “manifesto” in *Poetry* demonstrates, the modernists were intent on removing rhyme and rhythm structures. In this light, Williams’ emphasis on the visual appearance of the poem, particularly the affect of lineation is requisite, for without it his work becomes prose, not poetry. Hence, he must redefine poetry against prose, as he does in *Spring and All*, for the very things being removed from the poetry are the structures that had previously defined it.



Juan Gris, Spanish, 1887-1927  
Violin et Guitare  
100 x 65.5 cm (39 1/3 x 25 3/4 in.)



Kasimir Malevich, Russian, 1878-1935  
Suprematist Composition: Black Square and Red Square  
71.1 x 44.5 cm (28 x 17 1/2 in.)



The logical inversion inherent in the use of the visual arts as an example for this, is that in the visual arts images can be produced as complete illusions, where in poetry images can only ever be abstract in their construction. Image creation in literature is reliant on the reader. Therefore, Williams' desire to "make real" in poetry has a very different effect on the form than it would in the visual arts. Painting and sculpture can be used to reproduce directly the perceptible concrete forms of real things. Thus, to make real the action of the imagination, the artist promotes the artificiality of the works giving the viewer access to how the image came to be produced. In effect, the artist makes apparent the art object's synthetic origins. Consequently, the action of the artist's imagination in relation to the reference object becomes visible. By contrast, in poetry all images, visual, aural, psychological or otherwise are created with a medium that is wholly abstract: words.<sup>56</sup>

The relationship between the artwork and the viewer is fundamental to Williams' conception of how poetry can be "real", as evidenced by his words in *Spring and All*.

As birds' wings beat the solid air without which none  
could fly so words freed by the imagination affirm reality  
by their flight.<sup>57</sup>

In sum then, the imagination allowing the affirmation of reality is the reader's, for nowhere else can words be made real.

### Not *The Waste Land*

The primary reason for Williams' use of the visual arts, as an example of new forms, is one of freedom: "The imagination, freed from the handcuffs of "art," takes the lead!"<sup>58</sup> This desire for freedom from restricted structures is expressed in Williams' negative response to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it and our brave sallies into the unknown were turned to dust.

To me especially it struck me like a sardonic bullet. I felt at once that it had sent me back twenty years, and I'm sure it did. Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself—rooted in the locality which should give it fruit.<sup>59</sup>

Both Edward Hirsch and Lynn Keller focus on this response by Williams. In particular Keller notes that following *The Waste Land's* publication "Eliot surged into prominence and became the dominant figure determining poetic practice and critical principles for the next two decades,"<sup>60</sup>. This new dominance is precisely what Williams is seeking to end, for there is no point in freeing oneself from one artistic dogma and then conforming to

another. But, the problem with this anarchic position, if taken to its extreme, is that it does not allow the artist to develop a style, and voids strict adherence to any theory. By contrast, though, it could be seen in a post-modern sense, in that the style or structure of any given piece can follow any form deigned requisite to the task (this also summarises the aesthetic practice of advertising). Edward Hirsch differentiates Williams, and Marianne Moore, from Continental American Modernism, Eliot and Pound, for as he sees it, "Williams and Moore are poets of immanence, anti-Symbolists. For them meaning inheres primarily in the external world,"<sup>61</sup>. Hirsch goes further: "Moore and Williams are revolutionary poets in the way they destroy preexisting forms in order to create new ones."<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, Williams' complaint can hardly be against developing aesthetic principles, for in *Spring and All*, he is presenting what amounts to a manifesto. Certainly his summary of what a poem should be in the introduction to *The Wedge*, "a small machine made of words" conforms to the dominant modernist aesthetic of the machine.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, if Williams is going to continue to create the new by destroying the old, a new dominant aesthetic principle is not something he can agree with. This is especially so if what Williams wanted, as Hirsch suggests, was a poetry that was "forward-looking and experimental, self-consciously rooted

in American soil."<sup>64</sup> This is something a conservative like Eliot is unlikely to provide writing, as he was, in Europe.

### Addressing The Imagination

Thus, while Eliot sees the human condition as one that does not allow true interconnection, for Williams there is one force that allows experience of reality to be made real in art, the imagination. As he states in *Spring and All*:

To whom am I addressed? To the imagination.<sup>65</sup>

Later, he defines the relationship between reader and writer as occurring via the imagination: "In the imagination, we are from henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one."<sup>66</sup> This relationship between reader and writer has a precursor in Walt Whitman, who according to Ed Folsom, saw himself,

not so much as a poet but rather as the *generator* of poetry: he believed it would be in the *encounter* with his work that poetry would occur, and this would be true for any reader, not just for poets who happened to read him.<sup>67</sup>

This belief of Whitman's matches Williams' notion of "the embrace of reader and author." It also compliments Pound's

Imagist notion of presenting, rather than describing, for in doing so, the poet leaves the reification of the image to the reader. The recognition of the reader's position in the process of poetry means that Williams' work cannot fall into the category of realism. M. H. Abrams notes that the general preference among realist novelists is for "the commonplace and the everyday, represented in minute detail, over rarer aspects of life"<sup>68</sup>. Williams complies with realism in his choice of mundane and everyday subjects and objects, but he does not represent in "minute detail". This is crucial, for rather than attempting to provide the wealth of detail that defines realism in Literature, Williams aims to activate the reader's imagination. To do this he only needs to provide the words necessary to prime the reader's imagination. This has the added benefit of maintaining the desired timeframe of the moment.

### The Defective Cat

The use of painting as an analogue for Williams' work tends to emphasise the visual, but Williams' poems are not entirely dependent on visual description. In "Poem"(As the cat)(one of six poems titled "Poem" listed in *The Complete Works*) rather than concentrating on the visual aspect of the cat, Williams concentrates on its motion. <sup>69</sup> Unlike the wheelbarrow, the cat

has no colour, no texture; no visual indicators of any kind, other than that it is “cat”.

### POEM

As the cat  
climbed over  
the top of

the jamcloset  
first the right  
forefoot

carefully  
then the hind  
stepped down

into the pit of  
the empty  
flowerpot<sup>70</sup>

The first four lines of the poem create the context for the action: “As the cat / climbed over / the top of // the jamcloset”. The next five lines describe the motion of the cat, “first the right / forefoot / / carefully / then the hind / stepped down”. The cadence of the poem emphasises the words “forefoot” and “carefully”, and they are further enhanced through the lineation. Each word is a whole line, with the break between the second and third stanzas increasing the emphasis on “carefully”. By doing this, Williams has managed to convey the tentative care of a cat negotiating an obstacle, though the “flowerpot” is not provided until the last line. For the object negotiated is irrelevant to the primary focus

of the piece, the cat's feet. All the objects in the poem—cat, jam closet, and flowerpot—are provided without description. What is described in detail is the motion of the cat in relation to the jamcloset, and the flowerpot. The appearance of “cat”, “jamcloset” and “flowerpot” is left to the reader, for it is irrelevant to the cat's motion; only the spatial relationships are provided. Peter Nicholls summarises this process in Williams' poetry as follows:

This is not in any sense, then, a poetry of ideas, but an explanation of the syntax which maps the mind's engagement with its objects. Like Stein, Williams asks us to read literally, to remain close to the surface of the words, and in this way our construction of the lines should enact a process not of interpretation but of continuous perception.<sup>71</sup>

“Poem” is like an artist's preliminary sketch; it is wholly about a cat walking over a jamcloset. Unlike “The Red Wheelbarrow” or “To Waken An Old Lady”, there is no wider context for the poem. Except, perhaps to say that this is “poem” in the same way that a cat is “cat”. However, rather than a study of visual form, it is a study of action through time, not unlike that of the birds in “To Waken An Old Lady”.

That Williams' imagery is not limited to the visual is apparent in another of his poems, “The Defective Record”. Here, Williams'

negative response to urban expansion is reinforced by the use of a sound image:

### THE DEFECTIVE RECORD

Cut the bank for fill.  
Dump sand  
pumped out of the river  
into the old swale

killing whatever was  
there before—including  
even the muskrats. Who did it?  
There's the guy.

Him in the blue shirt and  
turquoise skullcap.  
Level it down  
for him to build a house

on to build a  
house on to build a house on  
to build a house  
on to build a house on to . . .<sup>72</sup>

The repetition of the final phrase, “to build a house on”, directly references the aural image of the poem’s title, a scratched record. As mentioned above, Williams rejected devices like repetition early in his career, but here the repetition allows him to create an aural image that redefines the initial sequence, as recurring ad nauseam. This image best demonstrates Nicholls’ description of how Williams’ poetry operates: “the lines should enact a process not of interpretation but of continuous perception”. Typically, rather than using an abstract statement to link habitat destruction and a scratched record, Williams



references the concrete experience of hearing a scratched record. He uses form to manipulate the aural quality of the text, and thus directly combines urban expansion with perceptive experience.

### Machine made of words

That repetition is unusual in Williams' work is not surprising, for what is absent from the poem is, for him, as important as its content.

There's nothing sentimental about a machine, and: A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there's nothing sentimental about a poem I mean that there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant.<sup>73</sup>

This statement from the introduction to *The Wedge* is not far removed from the Imagist rule number 2: "To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation."<sup>74</sup> This similarity demonstrates Williams' adherence to a minimalist aesthetic. The primary difference between the two statements is that Williams' definition of a poem as a machine, and the Imagist requirement for economy, is the aesthetic. In effect, Williams has found a metaphor for efficiency of word use: the machine. Henry M. Sayre notes the similarity between this definition for a

poem, and "the refrain of Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture*—"A house is a machine for living in"".<sup>75</sup> Sayre traces the machine aesthetic in Williams' work, back to,

an article written for the magazine *Others* in 1919: "Poets have written of the big leaves and the little leaves, the leaves that are red, green, yellow and the one thing they have never seen about a leaf is that it is a little engine. It is one of the things that make a plant GO."<sup>76</sup>

Here, Williams directly recasts an organic aesthetic as a mechanism, shifting from the romantic, New Critical organic to the modernist machinal. That Williams should use a machine aesthetic is not at all surprising, for as Sayre goes on to say, "In the 1920s and 1930s a machine aesthetic dominated virtually all modern styles and movements (and those that did not adopt it, reacted against it)."<sup>77</sup> Accordingly its presence can be readily detected throughout the modern avant-garde, in Dada, Futurism, de Stijl, Bauhaus, The Neue Sachlichkeit (or new objectivity), Futurism, Cubism, Purism, and in America in Precisionism, Objectivist poetics, and "straight photography".<sup>78</sup> Sayre is certain that Williams would have recognised this common aesthetic trend, "which in all likelihood defined for him the fundamental direction that the modern avant-garde artist was bound to explore."<sup>79</sup> Williams' definition for a poem in *The Wedge* is using the dominant aesthetic of the period. While his

work may have been experimental, it was not aesthetically heretical.

Williams' definition of poetry in *The Wedge* continues (still firmly in the machine aesthetic):

Prose may carry a load of ill-defined matter like a ship. But poetry is the machine which drives it, pruned to a perfect economy. As in all machines its movement is intrinsic, undulant, a physical more than a literary character. In a poem this movement is distinguished in each case by the character of the speech from which it arises.<sup>80</sup>

Once more, as he did in *Spring and All*, Williams defines poetry against prose. Poetry is defined by its greater economy, and is therefore privileged over prose in Williams' application of the machine metaphor. But the underlying driving force of both is the "character of the speech from which it arises". On this point, Roger Mitchell finds that "Williams came as close as anyone ever had to using the language of everyday speech for poetry,"<sup>81</sup> In particular Mitchell places this as part of Williams' privileging of "the local".<sup>82</sup> In becoming an Imagist, Williams:

. . . stripped his language of generality and gush, abandoned the "metronome" of accentual-syllabic metrics (indeed he went so far as to write prose poems), and schooled himself rigorously in objective writing, writing with as little comment as possible

More important, Williams steeped himself in his given world. Nothing in Imagist aesthetics required the poet to describe what lay out the window, no matter what

it might be, but Williams took the factual and visual implications of that aesthetic to its logical end.<sup>83</sup>

Williams' prose poems are characterised by simple lexis, first person perspective, and immediacy. This immediacy is the product of Williams' project of presenting the imagination's interaction with its objects, and his belief that through making the movement of the imagination, that force which for him mediates all human interaction with the world, the focus of his art, he could best approach the reality of human experience of the world.<sup>84</sup> As a result, time and image are intimately related in Williams' work, for he realised that the process of reading, and the perception of images, occurred through time.

In Williams' essay "Speech Rhythm", written in 1913 (quoted by Mike Weaver) Williams' concern for unity in the process of poetry is made apparent, as well as his recognition that the whole is the sum of its parts:

No action, no creative action is complete but a period from a greater action going in rhythmic course, i.e., an Odyssey, is rightly considered not an isolated unit, but a wave of a series from hollow through crest to hollow. No part in its excellence but partakes of the essential nature of the whole.

This is the conception of the action that I want.

In the other direction, inward: Imagination creates an image, point by point, segment by segment – into a whole, living. But each part as it plays into its neighbor, each segment into its neighbor segment and every other, causing the whole – exists naturally in rhythm, and as

there are waves there are tides and as there are ridges in  
the sand there are bars after bars . . .<sup>85</sup>

Williams' wave theory of poetry enhances the segmented nature of image perception in poetry, while also reinforcing the need for overall unity. Notably Williams is here using a trope from the natural world, though he would later fully embrace the modernist machine aesthetic. Importantly, it is "Imagination that creates an image," and this is done segment by segment, or to use the cinema trope employed earlier in this essay, frame by frame.

For practical purposes and for me the unit is of a  
convenient length, such as may be appreciated at one  
stroke of the attention. It must not be so small as not to  
tax the attention, that is, to hold it; it should be in good  
scale as the architects say . . .<sup>86</sup>

Williams' preference for short, often single word, lines is perhaps best understood in light of the above quote. In "The Great Figure", each line of the poem can be seen as a separate unit.

## THE GREAT FIGURE

Among the rain  
and lights  
I saw the figure 5  
in gold  
on a red  
firetruck  
moving  
tense  
unheeded  
to gong clangs  
siren howls  
and wheels rumbling  
through the dark city.<sup>87</sup>

Only the line “I saw the figure 5”, deals with more than one element; here there is the act of seeing, “I saw” and the object, “the figure 5”. Each line is a unit, a segment, a glance, arbitrarily defined, and individually received, in the wave that is the image—the whole. In ‘Speech Rhythm’ Williams’ concern is with rejecting “This makeshift of counting the syllables”, or traditional meter, as a basis for defining the unit in poetry.<sup>88</sup> Yet, the first nine lines of “The Great Figure”—A/mong/ the/ rain/ and/ lights/ I/ saw/ the/ fig/ure/ 5/ in/ gold// mov/ing/ tense/ un/heed/ed/—conform to traditional metrics. Markos points out that iambic tending lines that have “no more metrical variation than can be found in traditional verse. . . . occur in Williams too frequently to be entirely random”.<sup>89</sup> Markos suggests that this is a holdover from Williams’ earlier work in traditional forms.<sup>90</sup> Williams was apparently unable to free himself entirely of his

early Keatsian imitations, but the formulation of the form that he would eventually express in machine terms: "A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words."<sup>91</sup> is apparent in the essay written in 1913. Williams is requiring that the form of the poem be defined not by an externally enforced metrical measure, but by the careful ordering of perception units, what I have defined, in my analysis of "To Waken An Old Lady" as frames.

### Objectivist Poetics

This ordering of the form of the poem, is central to Objectivist poetics, and it was to this that Williams moved after Imagism. As he writes in his autobiography:

We had had "Imagism" (*Amygism*, as Pound had called it), which ran quickly out. That, though it had been useful in ridding the field of verbiage, had no formal necessity implicit in it. It had already dribbled off into so called "free verse" which, as we saw, was a misnomer.<sup>92</sup>

The "we" used above includes, George Oppen, Louis Zukofsky and Charles Reznikoff, with whom Williams "inaugurated, first, the Objectivist theory of the poem, and then the Objectivist Press."<sup>93</sup> The first book published by The Objectivist Press was Williams' *Collected Poems* in 1934.<sup>94</sup> Williams goes on to define objectivist theory against old forms:

we argued, the poem, like every other form of art, is an object, an object that in itself formally presents its case and its meaning by the very form it assumes. Therefore, being an object, it should be so treated and controlled—not as in the past. For past objects have about them past necessities—like the sonnet—which have conditioned them from which, as a form itself, they cannot be freed.<sup>95</sup>

The Objectivists required poetry to take a new form, as Williams saw it, Objectivism was “an antidote, in a sense, to the bare image haphazardly presented in loose verse.”<sup>96</sup> Objectivism required that the poem have form, but that form should not be conditioned by traditional metrical structure. Williams places all of this within the current avant-garde movement, “It all went with the newer appreciation, the matter of paint upon canvas being of more importance than the literal appearance of the image depicted.”<sup>97</sup> Hence, the use of the visual arts as an example of how art can be real in *Spring and All*, which Markos places as being written at the time “Williams came to his ‘objectivist’ theory in 1923”.

Objectivist poetics formalises the visual emphasis apparent in poems like “The Attic Which is Desire.”. Through this use of the visual arts notion of foregrounding process, Williams found a new form, one not dependant on metrics, but with the structural strength he desired. I have in this essay, used the cinematic as a trope for describing how Williams’ poetry maintains a unity



through time and with time, by the careful structuring of the poems. Williams maintains the immediacy of the moment, by ensuring that nothing unnecessary to the generation of the image in the reader's imagination is allowed to interfere in the process of reading. Consequently, rhyme and rhythm structures are never allowed to dominate, and there are many incomplete sentences; grammar is not allowed to interfere either. Primarily it is the use of lineation, simple lexis, and careful word ordering, all employed with a machinic efficiency that characterise Williams' shorter poems in the period between wars. These four factors allow the generation of images, not only visual and concrete, but also abstract and psychological, in the reader's imagination, and with the immediacy of the moment, so that the reading of the text and the generation of the image occur in synchrony in the immediate present; the poem and the reader are resident in the now.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> (Williams 1986c) page 174.

<sup>2</sup> (Perloff 1985) page 109.

<sup>3</sup> The poems cited in this text, are listed in order of publication below:

Love	1909
Good Night	1917
The Great Figure Five	1921
To Waken an Old Lady	1921
The Red Wheelbarrow (XXII)	1923
The Attic Which is Desire:	1930
Poem (As the cat)	1930
The Defective Record	1938

"Love", which I have used as an example of Williams' work prior to Imagism, was written before World War One. "Good Night", which Marjorie Perloff uses as an example of Williams use of lineation to create a series of film shots, is part of *Al Que Quiere!*, which was published in 1917, during the Great War. The remainders of the poems cited are from between the World Wars. It should be noted that this between war period is only part of Williams' career as a poet. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, comes in two volumes, and all these poems appear in the first; there is a large body of work ignored by this text.

<sup>4</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 178.

<sup>5</sup> (Flint 1912) page 199.

<sup>6</sup> "Imagist theory is based on a few scattered pronouncements arrived at in 1912 by a group in London that included Pound, F.S. Flint, H.D., T.E. Hulme, and a few others." (Mitchell 1991) page 38.

<sup>7</sup> (Williams 1954) page xi.

<sup>8</sup> (Mitchell 1991) page 44.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> (Pound 1912) page 200.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 203. "Horatio: So have I heard and do in part believe it. / But look, the morn in russet mantle clad / Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill." *Hamlet*: 1,1,147-9. (Shakespeare 1994) page 153.

<sup>12</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 224

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. As the poem originally appeared, it is headed, XXII. All the poems in *Spring and All* are titled, or rather numbered, in this way. After this publication all the poems appear to have acquired titles for use in other publications.

<sup>14</sup> (Pound 1912) page 203.

<sup>15</sup> (Flint 1912) page 199.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, page 199.

<sup>17</sup> (Pound 1912) page 200.

<sup>18</sup> (Flint 1912) page 199.

<sup>19</sup> (Pound 1912) page 205.

<sup>20</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 224.

<sup>21</sup> (Pound 1912) page 203.

<sup>22</sup> (Pound 1912) page 201.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 201.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 200.

<sup>25</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 224.

<sup>26</sup> (Litz and MacGowan 1986) page 21.

<sup>27</sup> (Mitchell 1991) page 39.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>29</sup> (Flint 1912) page 199.

<sup>30</sup> (Pound 1912) page 201.

<sup>31</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 189.

<sup>32</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 177.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> (Williams 1986c) page 152.

<sup>36</sup> "Williams Carlos Williams was born on Constitution Day, 1883, in the small country town of Rutherford, New Jersey, to parents of mixed extraction. His father was an Englishman, said to have been born in Birmingham; his mother in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, to a Basque mother and a Jewish father. His middle name was taken from his mother's brother who practiced medicine in Panama City. If his ancestry was in any way Spanish it was more cultural adoption than by blood. He was half English, one-quarter Basque, and one-quarter Jewish." (Weaver 1971) page 1.

<sup>37</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 177.

<sup>38</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 219.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 204.

The Imagist revolt against the traditional forms of poetry, is allied with similar revolts against "realism", both in the fine arts, through the impressionists, etc, and in drama through French symbolism etc.

<sup>42</sup> (Schneede 1978) page 35.

<sup>43</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 199.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> (Perloff 1985) page 103.

<sup>46</sup> (Williams 1986a) page 85.

<sup>47</sup> (Perloff 1985) page 104.

<sup>48</sup> (Williams 1986e) page 54.

<sup>49</sup> (Perloff 1985) page 105.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> (Williams 1986b) page 325.

<sup>52</sup> This graphic is easily produced using a typewriter, but today's word processors use automatically kerning fonts. Using the same keystrokes on a word processor produces the following.

```
* * *
* S *
* O *
* D *
* A *
* * *
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Each individual letter's spacing is different, whereas on a typewriter all letters, "i" to "O", are embossed onto hammers of exactly the same size (This is not necessarily so for later electronic typewriters). This means that a line of 63 characters (including spaces) produced using a typewriter will always have the same length, regardless of its content. This is not the case when fonts are kerned; the length of a 63 character line will be dependant on the characters used, rather than the number of characters. Notably, the fonts used by printers are kerned; that is, the individual cast characters are on blocks with widths appropriate to their individual size. So when Williams' poems, spaced on a typewriter, were printed, there would have been slight changes in the line lengths, and therefore the layout of the poems. This would most likely be negligible in most circumstances, but required in the instance of "The Attic Which is Desire:" that it be reproduced using a dedicated graphics application, because all the word processor fonts, even 'American Typewriter', are kerned.

<sup>53</sup> Williams also uses graphic elements in "Della Prima vera Trasportata al Morale", "1 April", a poison symbol and two arrows. In this instance, they are produced by means other than a typewriter.

<sup>54</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 204.

<sup>55</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 178.

<sup>56</sup> Only in drama, or via "direct speech" is there a direct concrete relationship between words, and what they evoke, in this instance as sound tags, and even here the connection is limited, not unlike the difference between Renaissance perspective and three-dimensional reality.

<sup>57</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 235.

<sup>58</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 185.

<sup>59</sup> (Williams 1951) page 174, cited in (Hirsch 1991) page 66, & (Keller 1987) page 5.

- <sup>60</sup> (Keller 1987) page 5.  
<sup>61</sup> (Hirsch 1991) page 66.  
<sup>62</sup> Ibid, page 67.  
<sup>63</sup> (Williams 1986e) page 54.  
<sup>64</sup> (Hirsch 1991) page 66.  
<sup>65</sup> (Williams 1986d) page 178.  
<sup>66</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>67</sup> The Italics used in this quotation are from the original text. (Folsom 1991) page 13  
<sup>68</sup> (Abrams 1999) page 260.  
<sup>69</sup> Six of Williams' poems are titled "Poem":

Poem (As the cat)  
 Poem (Daniel Boone)  
 Poem (Looking up, of a sudden)  
 Poem (on getting a card)  
 Poem (The plastic surgeon)  
 Poem (The Rose fades)

In addition another poem is titled, "The Poem".

- <sup>70</sup> (Litz and MacGowan 1986) page 352.  
<sup>71</sup> (Nicholls 1995) page 215.  
<sup>72</sup> (Litz and MacGowan 1986) page 455.  
<sup>73</sup> (Williams 1986e) page 54.  
<sup>74</sup> (Flint 1912) page 199.  
<sup>75</sup> (Sayre 1983) page 324.  
<sup>76</sup> Ibid, page 313. William Carlos Williams, "Belly Music", *Others*, 5 (July 1919), page 26.  
<sup>77</sup> (Sayre 1983) page 314.  
<sup>78</sup> Ibid, page 314.  
<sup>79</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>80</sup> Ibid, page 324.  
<sup>81</sup> (Mitchell 1991) page 46.  
<sup>82</sup> Ibid, page 45.  
<sup>83</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>84</sup> There are strong parallels between Williams' conception of the Imagination and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's. See, (Markos 1994), particularly chapter 4, "The Imagination: A Force of Nature".  
<sup>85</sup> (Weaver 1971) page 83. Note: the ellipses used in this quotation are from the original text.  
<sup>86</sup> Ibid, page 82. Note: the ellipses used in this quotation are from the original text.  
<sup>87</sup> (Williams 1986c) page 174.  
<sup>88</sup> (Weaver 1971) page 83.  
<sup>89</sup> (Markos 1994) page 67.  
<sup>90</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>91</sup> (Williams 1986e) page 54.  
<sup>92</sup> (Williams 1951) page 264-5.  
<sup>93</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>94</sup> (Weaver 1971) page 54.  
<sup>95</sup> (Williams 1951) page 26-5.  
<sup>96</sup> Ibid: Williams also notes here, "I believe that it was Gertrude Stein, for her formal insistence on words in their literal, structural quality of being words, who had strongly influenced us."  
<sup>97</sup> Ibid.