A PREFACE TO WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS:
The Prepoetics of Kora in Hell: Improvisations

by

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ABSTRACT

First published in 1920, Kora in Hell: Improvisations is the first of a series of remarkable books which can best be described as experiments and affirmations of the writing act, improvisational texts through which Williams sought to establish a "poetics" of writing. Williams called Kora "an opening of the doors," and certainly the work that came of it, immediately in the 1920's, and throughout the rest of his writing life, would follow this key book, this "secret document." And he also thought of it as a "wonder" because he had no book in mind when he first sat down to write something daily for a year, simply for the sake of writing. Unpremeditated and unplanned as it was, Kora finally became a book and showed Williams that a writer composes as he writes. This is the key discovery which makes Kora a central document in Williams' beginnings as a writer. At the same time, and just as importantly, Kora also initiated Williams into what would be called "modernist" writing -- that is, writing in which the act of writing is affirmed as a mode of consciousness, actual to that extent. For this reason, this study not only examines the "history" of Kora's composition in relation to the origin of Williams' poetics, but also argues that Kora is a primary text in the development of "modernist" writing in America. For Williams, in fact, the two were inseparable.

Williams viewed the beginnings of modernist writing in terms of a shift from language used as a transparent vehicle of thought to a new sense of
language as itself actual. "It is the making of that step," he says in his Autobiography, "to come over into the tactile qualities, the words themselves beyond the mere thought expressed that distinguishes the modern, or distinguished the modern of that time from the period before the turn of the century." Williams aligns this discovery with early 20th century modernist artists like Stuart Davis, Marcel Duchamp and Juan Gris. Alongside this change in attitudes toward language came an equally radical awareness of the otherness of the world, its "objectivity" in relation to the "subjectivity" of the mind's orders. This emphasis upon the particularity of things made possible a new understanding of man as a creature of nature, a live thing in a world of other live things: "a speaking animal."

This dissertation is divided into three sections. Section One focuses on Williams' understanding, especially in the 1920's, of modernist writing and art by considering his "reading" of Dadaism and Surrealism as well as his critical appreciation of Gertrude Stein, James Joyce and Shakespeare. Section Two examines the texture of Kora, specifically the opacity of the writing in it, as the effect of a crisis in meaning. This crisis is tied directly to a crisis in language. The text of Kora is thus discussed as a drama through which a doubletalking fool's voice emerges. The writer undergoing the act of writing finds himself thrown into a crisis of mind which subverts the closure of fixed points of view. A similar effect is evident in the texture of Stuart Davis' drawing, the frontispiece to the first edition of Kora. Out of this rejection of perspective Williams begins to perceive the nature of crisis as a condition of experience. It is from this basis that Section Three explores Kora as the origin of a new poetic for Williams. After dealing with the imaginative world of prehistoric art in relation to the
birth of the imagination in *Kora*, it then argues that the improvisational method -- an act comparable to the act of driving a car -- is the one method which operates within the experience of crisis. Finally, Section Three looks at crisis as a life-principle and examines the new sense of a feminine "self" in *Kora*, one constituted through the crisis of writing. For Williams the appearance of this other self in the act of writing is a re-enactment in the imagination of the *Kora* myth.
TO SLAVIA & WAYLEN

FOR PUTTING UP
WITH ME

& TO ELISSE

FOR BEING BORN
RIGHT AT THE END
This immediacy, the thing, as I went on writing, living as I could, thinking a secret life I wanted to tell openly -- if only I could -- how it lives, secretly about us as much now as ever. It is the history, the anatomy of this, not subject to surgery, plumbing or cures, that I wanted to tell. I don't know why. Why tell that which no one wants to hear? But I saw that when I was successful in portraying something, by accident, of that secret world of perfection, that they did want to listen. Definitely. And my "medicine" was the thing which gained me entrance to these secret gardens of the self. It lay there, another world, in the self. I was permitted by my medical badge to follow the poor, defeated body into those gulsfs and grottos. And the astonishing thing is that at such times and in such places -- foul as they may be with the stinking ischioc-rectal abscesses of our comings and goings -- just there, the thing, in all its greatest beauty, may for a moment be freed to fly for a moment guiltily about the room. In illness, in the permission I as a physician have had to be present at deaths and births, at the tormented battles between daughter and diabolic mother, shattered by a gone brain -- just there -- for a split second -- from one side or the other, it has fluttered before me for a moment, a phrase which I quickly write down on anything at hand, any piece of paper I can grab.

It is an identifiable thing, and its characteristic, its chief character is that it is sure, all of a piece and, as I have said, instant and perfect: it comes, it is there, and it vanishes. But I have seen it, clearly. I have seen it. I know it because there it is. I have been possessed by it just as I was in the fifth grade -- when she leaned over the back of the seat before me and greeted me with some obscene remarks -- which I cannot repeat even if made by a child forty years ago, because no one would or could understand what I am saying that then, there, it had appeared.

(The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams, 288-289)
### ABBREVIATIONS

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<td>A</td>
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<td>AN</td>
<td>A Novelette and Other Prose</td>
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<td>CEP</td>
<td>The Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams</td>
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<td>Kora in Hell: Improvisations</td>
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<td>Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems</td>
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<td>Poems, 1909</td>
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<td>SA</td>
<td>Spring and All</td>
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<td>SE</td>
<td>Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams</td>
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<td>Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams</td>
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For convenience I have used the texts of Kora in Hell: Improvisations, Spring and All, "The Descent of Winter," The Great American Novel, and A Novelette and Other Prose collected in Imaginations, ed. Webster Schott. All page references for these titles refer to Imaginations. For example, K, 39 refers to a quotation from Kora in Hell on page 39 of Imaginations; SA, 92 a quotation from Spring and All on page 92 in Imaginations, and so on.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROLOGUE: MY SELF WAS BEING SLAUGHTERED</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION ONE: THE WORD MAN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION: RING, RING, RING, RING</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: RIENT, RIENT, RIENT</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: THE LANGUAGE ... THE LANGUAGE</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION TWO: PERSPECTIVE AS CLOSURE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE: TO LOOSEN THE ATTENTION</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SIX: THE FRONTISPICE?</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION THREE: A NEW STEP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SEVEN: THE BIRTH OF THE IMAGINATION</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER EIGHT: WRITE GOING. LOOK TO STEER.</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER NINE: A NEW DIRECTION</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION: AN OPENING OF THE DOORS</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

There is an anecdote told me by his mother, who wished me to understand his character, as follows: The young William Carlos, aged let us say about seven, arose in the morning, dressed and put on his shoes. Both shoes buttoned on the left side. He regarded this untoward phenomenon for a few moments and then carefully removed the shoes, placed shoe a that had been on his left foot, on his right foot, and shoe b, that had been on the right foot, on his left foot; both sets of buttons again appeared on the left side of the shoes.

This stumped him. With the shoes so buttoned he went to school, but . . . and here is the significant part of the story, he spent the day in careful consideration of the matter.

(Ezra Pound, from "Dr. Williams' Position," 1928)

Once I came near drowning, I dived from a row-boat during a storm to recover my oars which I had lost, having "caught a crab." I had light clothes on. I am not a very strong swimmer. I recovered one of the oars but the wind carried my boat away faster than I could follow. The waves were high. I swam as hard as I could until out of breath. My clothes began to drag. I tried to remove my shoes. I couldn't. I swallowed some water. I thought I was done for when there crossed my mind these sentences: So this is the end? What a waste of life to die so stupidly.

The thought was singularly emotionless, simply a clear vision of the situation. So much was this so that I was instantly sobered. My action taking at once the quality of the thought, tucking the one oar under my left arm I swam quietly along hoping someone would see the empty boat and come out for me, which a man did. My courage, if you will, turned upon the color of my thought.

(William Carlos Williams, from "Three Professional Studies," 1919)
The lovely anecdote Pound uses to begin his essay "Dr. Williams' Position" (1928), its obvious playfulness aside, indicates how immediately he understood Williams to be the kind of writer who could dwell on an inconsistency and turn it around and around until it finally engaged his whole undivided attention. An intimation of this same capability lies embedded in a line from Kora in Hell: "Or throw two shoes on the floor and see how they'll lie if you think it's all one way" (K, 80). Williams' mind operates in contraries — many ways all at once — that are held in their complexity. And it can do so simply because it thrives on what is indeterminate, unknown, and in the play of change. Crisis is the very air it breathes. The passage from "Three Professional Studies" was written around the same time as Kora, and although it reads as a biographical statement, no other similar statement written then could better reveal the texture of his writing in this unique book. He apparently saved himself in the boating disaster when he released his mind to the condition of the accident. By so adjusting it to the confusion of this crisis, he discovered how to work his way through. His actions turned on the variability of his thought.

In essence this drama presents the terms of what happens in Kora. The book began out of a crisis in Williams' writing life ("my self was being slaughtered" (A, 158), he says in his Autobiography), but given his nature as a writer, it quickly translated itself into a crisis in language. In Kora Williams allowed himself to leap into his own "slaughter" to see if the act of writing itself could retrieve him. And the text finally published in 1920 is the remarkable outcome of this venture. Throughout the massive amount that Williams would subsequently write, it continues to read as a key, the one book that prefigures the underlying pattern of assumptions in
Williams' writing. *Kora* reveals Williams' own beginnings, or to use the term I have chosen for the subtitle of this study, the "pre-poetics" of his writing. In this sense, what follows may be understood as a "preface" to Williams. Other than that, Williams himself offered me a clue as to how an extended study of such an unusual text might be structured. "It is rarely understood," he says in *Spring and All*,

how such plays as Shakespeare's were written -- or in fact how any work of value has been written, the practical bearing of which is that only as the work was produced, in that way alone can it be understood. (SA, 128)

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KORA IN HELL: IMPROVISATIONS

By WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS
PROLOGUE

MY SELF WAS BEING SLAUGHTERED
In 1920 when the Kora in Hell was originally published by The Four Seas Co., of Boston, I was a young man, full of yeast that was soon to flower as the famous outburst of literature and painting marking the early years of the present century. The notorious Armory Show had taken place in 1913, seven years earlier, James Joyce's Ulysses was to appear in 1922. (K, 29)

After a long 37 year interval, Kora in Hell: Improvisations was finally republished in 1957, the occasion of these opening lines from a brief "Prologue" that Williams wrote to replace the original one. In 1920, Williams was 37 years old, perhaps not a "young man," but certainly "full of yeast," who would soon flower in his own "outburst of literature."

A veritable barrage of titles appeared in the years immediately following Kora, as Williams wrote his way into the 20's: the magazine Contact (1920-1923) with Robert McAlmon; Sour Grapes (1921), a collection of poems; the experimental prose of The Great American Novel (1923); the critical prose and the poems of Spring and All (1923); the essays on American history that
comprise *In the American Grain* (1925), a portion of which was written during a trip to Europe in 1924; the improvisational prose and the poems in "The Descent of Winter" (1928); *A Voyage to Pagany* (1928), a first novel that grew out of the European escapade; a translation of Phillipe Soupault's Surrealist novel, *Last Nights of Paris* (1929); and finally, *A Novelette and Other Prose* (1921-1931), more improvisations alongside a collection of essays, not published until 1932, but a book that certainly belongs to the 20's, and in fact acts as a summation of Williams' involvement in modernist writing during the 20's.

By the time Lawrence Ferlinghetti from City Lights Books approached Williams to re-issue *Kora* in his Pocket Poets Series, the one book that had thrown Williams into a new decade of writing had become one of his most hidden, though it had, at the same time -- by then -- become one of the lost "classics" of modern American writing. Long unavailable, but read by a growing number of poets and writers, by the middle 50's *Kora* had entered another generation, another time. Ferlinghetti was acting on this currency, and perhaps this explains why Williams wrote another "Prologue" in which he mentions that *Kora* has "remained more or less of a secret document for my own wonder and amusement known to few others" (*K*, 30). Let another age, he implies, make of the text what it can.

Yet the phrase "secret document" resonates, despite the fact that Williams offers no further explanation or expansion of it. And the same effect holds true for another statement on *Kora*, which he made at about the same time, in *I Wanted to Write a Poem* (1958):

*Kora in Hell: Improvisations* is a unique book, not like any other I have written. It is the one book I have enjoyed referring to more than any of the others. It reveals myself to me and perhaps that is why I have
kept it to myself. (IW, 26)

A "unique book, not like any other I have written." A "secret document." An "amusement." The one book that "reveals myself to me," which is why it was kept "to myself" for so long. **Kora** did remain for Williams both an unusual and a special book, one that he often liked to refer to. In *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, indeed, he goes so far as to provide a fairly lengthy gloss on the unexpected way **Kora** came together as a text, written backwardly as it was --

The Improvisations . . . came first; then the Interpretations which appear below the dividing line. Next I arrived at a title and found the Stuart Davis drawing. (IW, 29)

As though he did not know until the very last -- or last but one -- what it was he was doing. His remarks seem to make **Kora** less obscure; it is significant, however, that Williams does not talk about the severe personal breakdown -- or about a breakdown at all! -- that drove him to write it in the first place. The crisis is so private that it slides only briefly into the 1957 "Prologue," but without further commentary --

scribbling in the dark, leaving behind on my desk, often past midnight, the sheets to be filed away later . . . . (K, 29)

The crisis, Williams tells us in his *Autobiography*, was precipitated by the war, the war in Europe, that was destroying everything he believed in: "Damn it," he writes,

the freshness, the newness of a springtime which I had sensed among the others, a reawakening of letters, all that delight which in making a world to match the supracies of the past could mean was being blotted out by the war. (A, 158)

"All that delight . . . could mean," destroyed. And the image of this destruction gave rise to the figure of the maiden **Kora** (the Greek, Kore),
the virgin deflowered or "raped" by Hades and abducted by him into the Underworld, into Hell. "Kora was the springtime of the year; my year, my self was being slaughtered" (A, 158). In such an impasse, the mind turns for relief, where? Against the loss, against the slaughter: "What was the use of denying it? For relief, to keep myself from planning and thinking at all, I began to write in earnest" (A, 158).

By 1917 (America entered the war in April) Williams could quite possibly have seen the war as a large-scale breakdown, a sign that an older world was collapsing inward upon itself. And the vengeance unleashed in this "slaughter" -- which made a mockery of any belief in reasoned orders -- might in turn have supported his growing sense, embryonic in 1917, full-fledged in the 20's, that European culture was dying. His friend Ezra Pound wrote in Hugh Selwyn Mauberley that so many "of the best" died for "an old bitch gone in the teeth," for "a botched civilization," a civilization bankrupt of significance and now brought to the nightmarish edge of disintegration. The war, for Williams, could thus very well have been an image of "Reason in madness," to quote a line from King Lear.

Having said this much, however, as readers of Kora, we still get the uneasy feeling that we are outside the text. The book, written during the war, was perhaps conditioned by its senseless violence, but nothing on the surface of it would lead us to conclude that the war, and only the war, stands behind it. Instead, we are drawn into the privacy of the writing, the voice inside it undergoing an interiorized crisis, the very foundation of its mind being shaken apart -- at war with itself. Hence the "secrecy" of Kora. In other words, the war in Europe is less the cause of Kora and
more the external equivalent of a like disorder in Williams' mind. And yes, in this sense, the writing does manifest the crisis of a breakdown, a former world of beliefs destroyed by unpredictable forces that break into the mind of the writer and split it apart. And this cleavage does account for the very texture of the writing in which the "slaughter" occurs. Hence the "documentary" nature of Kora.

The "newness of a springtime" in the "reawakening of letters" that Williams says the war "blotted out" still lingers in the opening paragraph of the 1957 "Prologue" to Kora. The Armory Show had happened seven years before. No mention of the war at all.

The International Exhibition of Modern Art at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York opened on February 17, 1913 and brought to light what had been latent up to then. As Williams says in "Recollections" (1952), this infamous show "shocked New Yorkers into a realization, a visualization, that their world had been asleep while the art world had undergone a revolution." Later in the same year Williams would have The Tempers (1913), a slim volume of poetry, published in London through the direct effort of Pound. It was Pound who also wrote, a year before, the first public statement on Williams. "A Selection from The Tempers" appeared in the October, 1912 issue of The Poetry Review (London), the "first magazine publication of the poet" (IW, 11) and Pound's "Introductory Note," the "first published send-off of the then unpublished Williams" (IW, 11).
Williams would later consider The Tempers his first book of poems -- in his Autobiography, for instance, he calls Kora his third book, after The Tempers and Al Que Quiere! (1917) (A, 158) -- but there is a "secret" life: years before, he had privately published Poems (1909) in Rutherford. Perhaps Williams was almost immediately embarrassed by this collection of early poems. He never allowed the book to be reprinted in his lifetime, and hoped never. It is of course quite surprising, at first, to discover that the poet who wrote Paterson, or for that matter Kora, could have begun writing by thinking up such lines as:

Hark! Hark! Mine ears are numb
With dread! Methought a faint hallooing rang!
Where art thou hid? Cry, cry again! I come!
I come! I come! (PO, 9)

Or:

All o'ergrimed
With dust and sweat art thou, which, jointly, mar
Thine else smooth, well-watched bulk, till many a scar
Quick fancy sees there aptly pantomimed. (PO, 12)

Much later, Williams was the first to admit that Poems was "full of inversions of phrase, the rhymes inaccurate, the forms stereotype" (A, 107); "The poems are obviously young, obviously bad" (IW, 10).

In Kora, Williams will blast those poets who use language to "rectify the rhythm" (K, 32) to make it conform to rigid patterns, and who impose an artificial poetic method onto experience to "lift all out of the ruck" (K, 32) of the world: an exact measure of what he himself attempts to do in the "'high falutin'" (IW, 14) language of Poems. In "The Uses of Poetry" (PO, 11), for instance, the poet has a "fond anticipation of a day / O'er-filled with pure diversion presently." And why? "For I must read a lady poesy / The while we glide by many a leafy bay." And on this same day, he and his "lady" will drift away from a world of "woes" and be transported
"On poesy's transforming giant wing, / To worlds afar whose fruits all
anguish mend."\(^6\)

Poems reveals Williams' isolated state of mind at this time, the poems heavily dominated by a disguised privacy, the poet in them wanting his poems to lift him into some transcendent completion that will resolve the tensions of experience. Beneath the transparency of the language, however, we can detect a certain strain, as if Williams were himself aware that his poems are enclosed in the privacy of his intentions, his speech constricted by his own inability to break through the closed forms of perception in which his mind is caged. In the same poem, "The Uses of Poetry," we glimpse briefly the quality of a wholly different kind of mind: "at random play / The glossy black winged May-flies." This sharp image seems itself to appear at random, but it is almost lost in a poem that is being shaped by a predetermined end, "To worlds afar," away from the aimless play of particulars. Or in "The Folly of Preoccupation" (PO, 20), we are told that "imperfection clings all forms about," and aside from the forced inversion of phrase ("about" must rhyme with "stout"), the poet who desires a "wisdom" to "out-face" this condition is, as the poem following, "The Bewilderment of Youth" (PO, 20) makes clear, conscious of the aberrational nature of things, their multiplicity and indeterminacy:

... views forms which myriad seem,
    Distracting here, there, each with changing gleam,
    Like fireflies pointing midnight's curtain smooth.

And all his purpose stands amazed, unknit
By wonder, knowing naught of where nor why,
Compassed about with fresh variety
Where'er his chancing eager looks may flit.

"The Bewilderment of Youth," predictably so, moves to old age when all the "variety" will mingle "into one," to this end, but the actuality of a
"formless rout" nevertheless remains to exert an unacknowledged pressure that strains this closure.

All the while Williams was assembling Poems for publication, he was working as an intern, first in French Hospital, and then in the Nursery and Child's Hospital on the west side of New York, "in a notorious neighborhood called San Juan Hill," or more simply "just plain Hell's Kitchen" (A, 90). In the Nursery and Child's Hospital especially he was initiated into a sense of life-processes quite removed from the kind of poetry he was writing in his off-hours, or even from "poetry" at all! So he was lonely. Pound had gone off to London, and soon after, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) followed, his "lady" in "The Uses of Poetry." They were his only poet-companions at the University of Pennsylvania. Now he was left to make his way in the world of medicine.

Hell's Kitchen: "There were shoutings and near riots and worse practically every week-end" (A, 93). The violence of the area was mirrored in the everyday life of the children's ward of the hospital. The administration was corrupt, Williams' "sleeping quarters . . . on more than one occasion full of bedbugs" (A, 94), so many illegitimate babies born there that a Miss Diamond suggested a banner with the sign "'BABIES FRESH EVERY HOUR, ANY COLOR DESIRED, 100% ILLEGITIMATE!'" (A, 94) be hung around the hospital. And there were battles among the women in the ward, once, five pregnant women "snarling and spitting like cats," two of them apparently "pregnant from the same man" (A, 94). Another time, Williams got the job of transporting a dead child in a suitcase "by public conveyance," and he wondered

what would happen if the rickety container should fly open and the body of the child fall out just at the
wrong moment. I tell you I sweated over that job, plenty. (A, 96)

Still another time, Williams had to improvise a solution to the bedbug epidemic. The ward was fumigated with the fumes of bar-sulphur set on fire with alcohol. "When we opened the place up later in the day," he recalls, "you never saw such heaps of insects on the floors and in the corners of each bed!" (A, 98). Is this image maybe the basis of those "forms which myriad seem" in Poems? In any case, the stories accumulate, one after another in an endless stream. Williams' memory in his Autobiography is unfailing here. As an intern in Hell's Kitchen, he was undergoing a major transformation, the poet in him being thrown into another world that had until now escaped him. It was at this time that Williams decided to become a pediatrician. "I was fascinated by it and knew at once that that was my field" (A, 95). The choice was fundamental and permanent. He entered, then and there, into the realm of childbirth, a woman's world his medicine gave access to:

During my time there I delivered three hundred babies and faced every complication that could be thought of. I learned to know and to admire women, of a sort, in that place. They led a tough life and still kept a sort of gentleness and kindness about them that could, I think, beat anything a man might offer under the same circumstances. (A, 94)

During this time, Williams was going home to work on the poems gathered together in Poems where the immediacy — and complication — of his life as an intern in New York was being transposed into poems that disfigured language, made it conform to his own sense of distance from a contemporary actuality absent in his poetic endeavors. He later confessed that the poems were dominated by "my idea of what a poem should be" (IW, 14). Should be: the reliance upon predetermined intentions is
the very narrowness that makes Poems the prototype of the kind of compositional method that Williams in Kora would attack with a vengeance, so directly would he associate it, by then, with writing that forces experience into conventionalized forms that persist by closing out the present. A sign of the divorce from the actual implicit in Poems surfaces in the opening lines of "A Street Market, N.Y., 1908" (PO, 15):

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

The vizors are beginning to lift from Williams' eyes, and as they do, we can hear, however fragilely, a poet who is just becoming aware of the isolating effect of his privacy and his separation from a present that he has yet to experience in its particularity. Or as we read in "The Loneliness of Life" (PO, 16-17):

But now among low plains or banks which rear:
Their flower hung screens o'erhead I wander -- where?
These fields I know not; know not whence I come;

Nor aught of all which spreads so touching near.
The very bird-songs I have heard them n'er
And this strange folk they know not e'en my name.

Williams explains, in retrospect, that the poems he was writing around 1909 "had to be got out of my system some way" (A, 106), so what better way than to publish them himself. A little further on in the same section of his Autobiography he says that "Ezra was silent, if indeed he ever saw the thing, which I hope he never did" (A, 107). But Williams had sent a copy to Pound in London, and Pound had written an uneasy (yet truthful) reply. The tone of Pound's letter, dated May 21, 1909, suggests that he wanted to be honest without unduly hurting
Williams' feelings. Poems shows that Williams has "poetic instincts," but other than that, the book is no different from "the innumerable poetic volumes poured out" regularly in London. "Your book would not attract even passing attention here." No doubt Williams was disappointed, and yet no doubt he knew that Pound was right. Despite all the best intentions on his part, Poems was finally not the kind of book he wanted to write; no matter, then, that he did take the task of poetry seriously, no slackness there. This may even be the same "intent" (A, 107) he later considered the only value in a book he would otherwise have preferred to forget. "I was terribly earnest" (IW, 14).

In any case, and fortunately so, Williams had no time to dwell on the limits of Poems. The publication brought one phase of his life to an end. In July, 1909, after only a few months, he left New York "on a second-class vessel for Germany" (A, 108) where he planned to study pediatrics. The following year, he would finally get his chance to see Pound: that never-to-be-forgotten week in London in April, 1910 when he experienced Pound's literary milieu first-hand and had a chance to hear Yeats lecture -- "a very fashionable affair, to be presided over by Sir Edmund Gosse, who, it appears, hated the Irishman's guts" (A, 115).

During Yeats' discussion of younger Irish poets who were, in his mind, unjustly neglected in England, Gosse in protest rudely banged a bell and continued to do this each time Yeats tried to carry on his discussion. After the third time, Yeats was "forced to sit down and the lecture came to an end" (A, 115). What continued to dwell in Williams' memory, however, was not simply the callousness of the event itself -- living evidence that English poetry was literally controlled by the heavy hand of
authority — but the fact that no one in the audience, not even Pound, had the nerve to protest Gosse's actions. No one defended Yeats, not even Williams. And so Williams recalls his own inability:

What a chance it had been for me — but I wasn't up to it. I must have shown by my face, however, how near I was to an explosion, for a woman back of me, an extraordinary-looking woman, almost spoke — but didn't, and so I sank back once more into anonymity. (A, 116)

London was not Williams' place, and this at least was clear: "It seemed completely foreign to anything I desired. I was glad to get away" (A, 117).

It is nevertheless a strange turnabout — though not altogether so, Pound being at that time his only link to a literary world — that Williams' first magazine publication would appear two years later in the same "foreign" place he was "glad to get away" from, and with a "Note" by Pound introducing him to a British audience as a younger American poet.

Pound points to Williams' honesty ("He has not sold his soul to editors"), his strength ("He has not complied with their niminy-piminy restrictions"), and his straight-talking manner ("He apparently means what he says"), all of which indicates the emergence of a poet who "may write some very good poetry." Pound then goes on to affirm the absence in The Tempers of one quality which had been written all over Poems: "the magazine touch" which feeds on conventional expectations of what poetry should be. Pound also confesses his "feeling of companionship" with an American poet with whom he can "talk without a lexicon." This free-wheeling tone seems intended to taunt his so-called "critical English audience," but in the brief
lines he quotes --

... crowded
Like peasants to a fair,
Clear skinned, wild from seclusion

-- the accuracy of the image and the directness of the syntax reveal immediately a great change in Williams' poetry. It is as if Williams himself were one of the peasants "wild from seclusion," his own nature coming into its own through a language charged with desire.

Pound's influence is present in The Tempers, the Provençal quality of "First Praise," for instance:

Lady of dusk-wood fastnesses,
Thou art my Lady.
I have known the crisp, splintering leaf-tread with thee on before,
White, slender through green saplings;
I have lain by thee on the brown forest floor
Beside thee, my Lady. (CEP, 17)

But the temper of the whole volume displays a much different Williams.
"There is," we are told in I Wanted to Write a Poem, "a big jump from the first book to the poems in The Tempers (IW, 15). What is striking is the new push toward a re-valuation of desire, the same desire that was confined in Poems. In "Postlude" we find the line, "Blue at the prow of my desire" (CEP, 16). The image returns at the end of the "Prologue" to Kora, but modified, more explicit, more declarative: "The poet should be forever at the ship's prow" (K, 28). For the rest of his life, Williams considered The Tempers his first serious book. Slender as the volume was, it did, in direct contrast to Poems, allow for the birth of a more authentic voice. The following lines from "Postlude," as one example which comes quickly to mind, exemplify this change:

Your hair is my Carthage
And my arms the bow,
And our words arrows
To shoot the stars
Who from that misty sea
Swarm to destroy us. (CEP, 16)

The poet who surfaces in *The Tempest* is restless with narrow confining orders that deny the actuality of desire:

We revel in the sea's green!
Come play:
It is forbidden! (CEP, 20)

The siren voice in these final lines of the poem "From 'The Birth of Venus,' Song" calls out seductively to those who will follow the lead of its "forbidden" movement; its playful tone pulls the reader out to the sea of a laughter straining to break free from inhibitions that confine desire. The counterpart to this female voice speaks through a fool's voice that is ready to break out of its cage in "The Fool's Song":

I tried to put a bird in a cage.
0 fool that I am!
For the bird was Truth.
Sing merrily, Truth: I tried to put
Truth in a cage! (CEP, 19)

This loosening of desire in turn makes possible a noticeable shift away from the former reliance on what poetry should say. In "Con Brio" the speech is sharp and cutting, no sliding off into strained inversions of phrase, no attempt to force words into an artificially balanced syntax. The mind inside the words cuts across the grain of the "perdarnable miserliness" of petty orders that attempt to freeze the world into a neatness contrary to its natural rhythms:

Bah, this sort of slither is below contempt!
In the same vein we should have apple trees exempt
From bearing anything but pink blossoms all the year,
Fixed permanent lest their bellies wax unseemly, and the dear Innocent days of them be wasted quite. (CEP, 31)

Pregnant apples, the insistence of birth, the fact of it in a world that
can never be "Fixed permanent": Williams' experience as an intern comes home to roost. In *The Tempers* the physicality of desire, as well as the physicality of the world, asserts itself. The poet, caught in the midst of estranging himself from those systems (poetic, moral, social or otherwise) that deny desire, thus re-enters the world from its "back side" (K, 80), to use a key phrase from *Kora*. "Hic Jacet," in this sense, stands as a measure of the jump from *Poems* to *The Tempers*:

The coroner's merry little children
  Have such twinkling brown eyes.
Their father is not of gay men
  And their mother jocular in no wise,
Yet the coroner's merry little children
  Laugh so easily.

They laugh because they prosper.
  Fruit for them is upon all branches.
Lo! how they jibe at loss, for
  Kind heaven fills their little paunches!
It's the coroner's merry, merry children
  Who laugh so easily. (CEP, 30)

What stands out in this lovely short poem is the almost perfectly, but not quite, balanced opposition between the form and the subject of the poem. The two stanzas echo one another in rhythm, language, and structure. There are rhymes but they are "irregular . . . yet unitive, carrying from beginning to end" (IW, 15). When they are regular, the rhymes (like "eyes"/"wise" and "men"/"children") are playful, they call attention to themselves as rhymes. There is no pretension behind them, no attempt to disguise their particularity. The near rhymes in stanza two ("prosper"/"for" and "branches"/"paunches") are also just as playful, near rhymes, nothing more, no disfiguration of the language to find the correct rhyme. And the word "paunches" strikes home, the suddenness of its colloquial appearance in an otherwise conventional line of metrical poetry, almost as if the poet were trying to dislocate the reader's expectation with an
exact word that, as such, works to undermine the apparently regulated form of the poem. This tension between predetermined metrical patterns and precise wording is the exact double of the split perception within the poem. Death can, from a perspective outside the conventionalized perceptions which disguise it, be fruitful. Look, says the fool of a poet, just look at the "paunches" of the coroner's "merry children." Once again, the doctor-Williams moves inside the poet-Williams, the one asserting itself within the other.

The form of "Hic Jacet" is thus deceptive. Inside the apparently neat and orderly exterior there is a live mind at work, watching and waiting for its turn, attentive to contradictions, in fact actually thriving in them. Williams says he was, at the time, "conscious of my mother's influence": Elena Hoheb, a stranger to America who, in her detachment from the world of Rutherford, because of this distance, could see its insular forms as a "fantastic world where she was moving as a more or less pathetic figure" (IW, 16). The same detachment, and a similar pathos in Williams, made possible the poems in The Tempers, the severance from the narrow perceptions of Poems allowing him to re-view his own world in its otherness, as a foreigner like his mother would, outside but curiously, for this reason, inside its objectivity. In the "Prologue" to Kora, Williams will envision his estranged mother as the figure of the imagination. In The Tempers he was searching about for "a new order" because he "was positively repelled by the old order which, to me, amounted to restriction" (IW, 18). The writing life was, so it seemed, finally assuming a shape of its own: "I was budding, had no real confidence in my power, but I wanted to make a poetry of my own and it began to come" (IW, 16).
From 1913, and perhaps from the Armory Show on, Williams began to turn more and more to his own immediate world for the resources of his writing. His circle of friendships in New York quickly expanded to include the painters and writers who, like himself, were hunting for new forms to accommodate their sense of the New, both in painting and writing. By then, his London experience still fresh in mind, Poems and The Tempers behind him, Williams was hungry for companionship. Most of his enthusiasm found a focus in the Grantwood group of painters and writers who clustered around Walter Arensberg and Alfred Kreymborg. Kreymborg lived in Grantwood with his wife and edited Others magazine. Pound told Kreymborg to get in touch with Williams. It was to Grantwood that Williams, whenever he could get away from Rutherford, would drive to see Kreymborg and the others. In Troubadour, his autobiography of this period, Kreymborg preserves a snap-shot of Williams pulling into Grantwood in his car:

One man, looking like Don Quixote de la Mancha driving the rusty Rosinante, came in a battered, two-seated Ford. Though the actual place he started from was an ugly town called Rutherford, there was enough of the Spaniard in his blood and the madman in his eye and profile to have warranted the comparison. Whenever he climbed down from the saddle, with an oath or a blessing, he disclosed the bold or bashful features of Ezra Pound's old and Krimmie's new friend, Dr. William Carlos Williams.

And against Kreymborg's impressions of Williams' energy, Williams' own memory of this same period of his life:

There was at that time a great surge of interest in the arts generally before the First World War. New York was seething with it. Painting took the lead. (A, 134)
Grantwood was the focus of all these events. I was hugely excited by what was taking place there. For some unapparent reason, someone, years before, had built several wooden shacks there in the woods, perhaps a summer colony, why, I cannot say -- at least they were there and were rented for next to nothing. Several writers were involved, but the focus of my own enthusiasm was the house occupied by Alfred and Gertrude Kreymborg to which, on every possible occasion, I went madly in my flivver to help with the magazine which had saved my life as a writer. (A, 135)

For the first time, Williams found some semblance of the community of writers he had always yearned for, those who were all involved in the excitement of a possible beginning in their own locale, in local America. "There had been a break somewhere," he writes,

we were streaming through, each thinking his own thoughts, driving his own designs toward his self's objectives. Whether the Armory Show in painting did it or whether that also was no more than a facet -- the poetic line, the way the image was to lie on the page was our immediate concern. For myself all that implied, in the materials, respecting the place I knew best, was finding a local assertion -- to my everlasting relief. I had never in my life before felt that way. I was tremendously stirred. (A, 138)

And so during the period from 1913 to 1916, knee-deep in a new world of writers and painters, excited that a new poetry was lying there on the horizon waiting to be un-covered, Williams began to write poems in earnest, trying to clear his speech of all artificialities of diction, experimenting with a poetic line more natural to actual speech patterns, the images drawn from his immediate surroundings -- all the fruits of which he gathered together in Al Que Quiere! his third book of poems, published by The Four Seas Company of Boston in 1917. "From this time on," Williams says in I Wanted to Write a Poem, "you can see the struggle to get a form without deforming the language. In theme, the poems of Al Que Quiere! reflect things around me" (IW, 23). And yes, the language is direct, the rhythm of speech without the artifice of meter and rhyme, as say in
"Pastoral" which begins:

When I was younger
it was plain to me
I must make something of myself. (CEP, 121)

Line breaks follow the syntax of the fluid movement of perception, as in another poem called "Pastoral:"

The little sparrows
hop ingenuously
about the pavement
quarreling
with sharp voices
over those things
that interest them. (CEP, 124)

And like the sparrow himself, the poet in Al Que Quiere! comes down to what interests him, a more common earth, the one which grounds his local world, that of his "townspeople" whom he now addresses as a poet. The images are all close in, near the skin of his immediate life, the same mind in "Hic Jacet" now coming out into the open air to see what there is to see in his own community: local facts, daisies and chicory, poplar trees, neighborhood figures like "the old man who goes about / gathering dog-lime" (CEP, 124), or the young housewife who comes out from "behind / the wooden walls of her husband's house" (CEP, 136), the "murderer's little daughter" (CEP, 155), the cat "Kathleen" who reveals "a dignity / that is dignity, the dignity / of mud" (CEP, 157), and so on. Many poems deal with the arrival of spring -- "Spring closes me in / with her arms and her hands" (CEP, 120) -- a phase of existence in which the dark earth discloses itself through the nameless particulars making up the poet's local world. In Al Que Quiere! he senses the presence of forces pushing to break into the insularity of his townspeople. They use religion to block out the very tensions he attempts to hold onto, in "Winter Sunset," for instance; above the decorative clouds on a hill stands "one opaque / stone of a cloud," and
above the cloud, "a red streak, then / icy blue sky" (CEP, 127). And the poet comments:

It was a fearful thing
to come into a man's heart
at that time; that stone
over the little blinking stars
they'd set there. (CEP, 127)

Running through Al Que Quiere! is this pressure of a largeness surrounding the particulars of the local. Here the movement of gulls spans an empty space so opaque that it will not admit of transparency. And all this happens in the midst of what is close at hand: in a walk before breakfast with the poet and his son in "Promenade" (CEP, 132-134), in the glimpse of a bird "in the poplars" who becomes a "Metric Figure" (CEP, 123), or in a turn up the back side of a street where the houses of the poor show the absence of the kind of order that shuts the world out --

roof out of line with sides
the yards cluttered
with old chicken wire, ashes,
furniture gone wrong (CEP, 121)

And the poet concludes:

No one will believe this
of vast import to the nation (CEP, 121)

If the poet of Poems was overly conscious of his own divorce from "all which spreads so touching near," in Al Que Quiere! this same poet attempts to close the gap by paying attention to those local particulars no one else seems to notice. These things go unnoticed because they are simply there, like faces that go unrecognized up and down the streets of the town. In "Apology," writing thus comes of a necessity to reveal the near world through its localization in a specific place:

The beauty of
the terrible faces
of our nonentities
stirs me to it: (CEP, 131)
This "beauty" remains hidden precisely because it is so near, so immediate, being the very world we are in because we are alive, common in our particularity. Just this, our "nonentities," which the poet in Al Que Quiere! comes to from outside the self-referential forms of his "townspeople:" his estrangement, in this sense, is a way back into a present resonant with a subversive desire:

Love is so precious
my townspeople
that if I were you I would
have it under lock and key --
like the air or the Atlantic or
like poetry! (CEP, 156)

Or in the lovely poem "Love Song," the second to last of the volume, we encounter the figure of the lover inside the density of an earth-world vibrant with forces and powers that are woven into the physical fabric of things. This earth-pull is so strong that it pulls the poet's heart into its liquid play:

I lie here thinking of you: --

the stain of love
is upon the world!
Yellow, yellow, yellow
it eats into the leaves,
smears with saffron
the horned branches that lean
heavily
against a smooth purple sky! (CEP, 174)

The title Al Que Quiere! translated by Williams reads "To Him Who Wants It" (A, 157), and in this third book of poems, he clearly wants to hit out on his own and create a readership for his poems, not vice-versa. He no longer tries to pander to conventional expectations of what a poem ought to be. Now, in fact, the opposite position attracts him. The "true music" (CEP, 126) of poetry works contrary to habituated forms of perception, the real poet always the one who walks the back streets, on the other side of.
the forms his townspeople live in. The bravado behind this implied assertion is perhaps a little stylized — who was Williams as a poet at this time? — but there was a future to actualize and now seemed the right moment to make a start. This insistence becomes the announcement of "Sub Terra," the opening poem of the collection. Here Williams envisions all of his potential companions underground, like "seven year locusts / with cased wings," lying dormant but waiting to be re-born in a springtime when they shall return to the surface of the earth — a premonition of the figure of Kora in _Kora in Hell_:

That harvest
that shall be your advent —
thrusting up through the grass,
up under the weeds
answering me,
that will be satisfying!
The light shall leap and snap
that day as with a million lashes! (CEP, 117)

 Appropriately enough, _Al Que Quiere!_ has ties with Kreymborg, a close companion during this time. Talking about the title, Williams says that "Alfred Kreymborg noticed that the cacophony was a re-echoing of his name and felt complimented. We were very close friends then and I think his surmise was a proper one" (A, 157). And the volume concludes with the one poem — a rewriting of a long narrative poem Williams was working on around 1909 and which he abandoned then — that reads as a kind of manifesto. The central event of "The Wanderer" is the ritualistic baptism of the poet into the filthy Passaic River through the agency of a magical old woman. She initiates him into the transformational nature of process, and by so doing, marries him to the body of the world. "The Wanderer" was published a few years earlier, in 1914, in _The Egoist_, but its inclusion in _Al Que Quiere!_ points to Williams' belief in the possibility of a future.
There is still more to come.  

If there had to be one climactic moment in Williams' life when all the excitement of his new found friendships came to a head, it would have to be the large party he and Floss -- "six months pregnant" (A, 152) -- threw at their home in Rutherford in the spring of 1916. Everyone in the Others group came, poets and painters, and the party lasted all day Sunday and into Monday; as Williams says, "We fed 'em and wined 'em all day long" (A, 153). The Arensbergs were there, Marcel Duchamp, Kreymborg, Man Ray, Alanson Hartpence, Maxwell Bodenheim, and many more, the whole "gang" that made up Williams' literary milieu in and around New York. "We were in and out all day over the lawn. If anything was said I've forgotten it. Yet it was a good party" (A, 153). Later in 1916, or early in 1917, however, all the energy of new possibilities in the world of "letters," to use Williams' term, seemed to expire almost as suddenly as it appeared. Williams blamed the war that America entered in April, 1917 for blotting the re-awakening out, and in a way, his assessment is accurate. But by late 1916, there is already an indication that he was beginning to doubt the effectiveness of the so-called "Others movement."

In a revealing article called "America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry," which Williams never re-published, we are given an insight into his evaluation of contemporary writing at this time. In the process of glossing the strengths and weaknesses of various recent magazines -- Poetry, The Poetry Journal, Contemporary Verse, The Soil, to name a few -- he admits that Others has not proven to be, as it had intended to be, the
strong front for new forms of writing. "Ah, but Others," he writes, the magazine with which I am connected, is of course excellent. Here we have an attempt to present a blank page to Tom, Dick and Harry with the invitation to write a masterpiece upon it. If Others came out once or twice every three years and consisted of four pages it would be the ideal magazine for poets. It is at least naked. 'But the rain it raineth every day.'

The fool's voice again, quoting Shakespeare's King Lear to criticize the pretentiousness of a magazine that began with the highest intentions but which, like all the rest, finally settled into a stereotypical form. Now any "Tom, Dick and Harry" can publish in it. Was Williams feeling that his own work was just as pretentious? He does not say, but the message is clear to him that the new poetic which so many of them had intuited as early as 1913, or 1914, the year Others began, was simply not arriving.

And now the current magazines seemed to be retreating into narrow cliques, little niches, enclaves of, in short, personalized styles:

Either a magazine is concerned with its own pet little aversions, or it is too poor to exist, or it is hopelessly without a broad comprehension of what modern verse is about.

This last statement leads Williams to suspect that his contemporaries really have not moved beyond the opening provided by Whitman who, over 50 years before them, began the serious exploration of the "democratic groundwork of all forms, basic elements that can be comprehended and used with new force."

"Have we broken down far enough?" Williams asks, or is there still work to be done before new work that does, in deed, mirror the age they all share can be possible? "America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry" appeared in The Poetry Journal in November, 1917, only a month after the first of the improvisations from Kora appeared in The Little Review, and
Williams' misgivings concerning Others is an indication that something had happened in his mind to alter his former faith in the magazine. He was to publish a group of sixteen poems in the December, 1916 issue of Others, but after that, he stopped publishing with the same magazine that had "saved his life as a writer." He would not publish in Others until July, 1919, three years later, when he edited an issue and announced that it had come to its end, that the magazine was, in effect, defunct, his issue its final one. During this period, Williams was to write what eventually turned into Kora in Hell.

Perhaps the demise of Others was inevitable. The initial excitement soon wore thin, and nothing of earth-shattering significance had come of its existence. In fact, the writers associated with the magazine could now continue publishing whatever they wished, no one would really care. The large-scale restructuring of writing that before seemed possible was just as far away as ever. Williams began to pull away, back to Rutherford. Because of his loss of belief in Others? Or his fear that he too would continue to write the same kind of poems in Al Que Quiere! for years on end, maybe in time getting half-hearted recognition as a minor lyric poet of "local"interest in the development of 20th century American poetry?

In "The Ideal Quarrel," a short piece published in the December, 1918 issue of The Little Review, two years after he stopped publishing with Others, Williams talks about the necessity for anger, the force of it a positive thrust forward that spits "through a mush of lumpy stuff -- mouldy words, lie-clots," anger the very negation that gives way to a "new alignment." But the new shift cannot simply be based upon a denial of the past. It depends upon a full-scale destruction of the past which brings the past
into a present that demands to be recognized in its terms. There is, according to Williams, no other way to begin again.

For to break and begin a new alignment is recapitulation but to recement an old and dissolving union is without precedent, a totally new thing. The old union in this case is a part of the new and being directly a part needs no counterpart, the recemented union being ready at birth to go forward.

And anger, in this turnabout, becomes a strong negative force that returns the mind to its ground:

It is the roots of roots we desire! the flower of a flower! the man of a man! the white of a white —
From the beginning again!

"The hard backbite of anger recurring in the ebb flow," Williams says at the end of this short piece, "is sturdiness holding its own." He could very well be talking back to Others. More anger and less complacency, more desire and less back-slapping, more serious writing and less a clique of writers supporting their own biases.

Had this disturbance been all that Williams had to worry about, he may well have weathered the storm. Simultaneous to the breakdown in his writing life, however, was an anger much closer to home. In 1917, Williams was drawn back into the same local world he had affirmed in Al Que Quiere! but this time in ways, to say the least, that did not make for the short, crisp poems characteristic of this volume. His private life was also undergoing its own slaughter. The treatment during the war of Floss's father, Pa Herman, by the townspeople of Rutherford sets the tone of a number of setbacks. Williams recalls the specific incident in his Autobiography:

The war was on and Pa Herman, being by birth an East Prussian from near Breslau, was emotionally deeply involved. This marked a basic phase in our lives. I was all for the man whom I profoundly admired. It was a
tough spot. We were officially neutral before 1917, but individually most of us were pro-French if not pro-British. But Pa Herman was outspokenly pro-German. He was also president of the social club of the town, which met fortnightly, a semi-dress affair, and when the club as a group wanted to write to the President advocating assistance to Britain, he voted no. (A, 154).

When America declared war on Germany later in 1917, Pa Herman was branded a "disloyal citizen" (A, 154), and although, as Williams says, he was loyal to America, the local citizens eventually forced him out of Rutherford. Naturally Williams took Pa Herman's side and got caught up in the broil. He too was accused of being pro-German. "Later," he writes, the same mouths were calling me a Communist, saying that Flossie had gone abroad to divorce me because of my lascivious life. I just kept writing my protests into poems, essays, plays and reviews. (A, 155).

Williams wrote a letter to The Rutherford Republican and Rutherford American newspaper disclaiming all these charges. His own mother turned on him for supporting Pa Herman: "With fury in her eyes she accused me of being pro-German" (A, 155).

All the while this frenzy was churning on the local front, Williams' father was "dying of cancer" (A, 159), in 1918 confined to the house. He died December 25th, 1918. But more, just after the Hermans left Rutherford, Floss's 14 year old brother, Pa Herman's only son, died in a chance mishap --

tripped over a strand of barbed wire hidden in the grass at the top of a steep cut, fell, and was accidentally shot and killed by his own gun which slid after him down the bank. (A, 156)

On top of these disasters in his family life, Williams' work as a doctor intensified enormously when the infamous influenza epidemic hit -- "in the early months of 1918 what doctors remained here were driven off their feet by the work" (A, 159):
We doctors were making up to sixty calls a day. Several of us were knocked out, one of the younger of us died, others caught the thing, and we hadn't a thing that was effective in checking that potent poison that was sweeping the world. I lost two young women in their early twenties, the finest physical specimens you could imagine. Those seemed to be hit hardest. They'd be sick one day and gone the next, just like that, fill up and die. (A, 159-160)

The world, for Williams, had suddenly turned topsy-turvy, uncertain, indeterminate, a tangled web of irresolvable complexities, all of it coming to a point of crisis in the epidemic that killed 18-20 million people all over the world. The disease had no known cause, hence no cure, but simply seemed to come from nowhere, from a darkness out there. And at the same time, in the local world Williams had accepted in Al Que Quiere! -- "You see, it is not necessary for us to leap at each other" (CEP, 126) -- he was undergoing a series of shocks that overturned his life. His father-in-law ostracized, ostracized himself for sticking by him, his father dying of an incurable disease, his brother-in-law killed in a freak accident, and as well, the "literary" world that had consumed so much of his attention itself collapsing into narrow forms of self-defense. In his Autobiography, Williams mentions almost casually, "how much can happen in a few years -- from happiness to disaster" (A, 155), but this is, as far as we can gather, the shape of the crisis that initiated him into the writing of Kora in Hell.

It was Persephone gone into Hades, into hell. Kora was the springtime of the year; my year, my self was being slaughtered. What was the use of denying it? For relief, to keep myself from planning and thinking at all, I began to write in earnest.

I decided that I would write something every day, without missing one day, for a year. I'd write nothing planned but take up a pencil, put the paper before me, and write anything that came into my head. Be it nine in the evening or three in the morning, returning from some delivery on Guinea Hill, I'd write it down.
I did just that, day after day, without missing one day for a year. Not a word was to be changed. I didn't change any, but I did tear up some of the stuff. (A, 158)

It is, then, through writing that Williams eventually got through the crisis, but equally, it is through writing that he managed to figure himself into a modernist world.
SECTION ONE

THE WORD MAN
I make a word. Listen!  UMMMMMMMMMMM -- (GAN, 162)

It is the making of that step, to come over into the tactile qualities, the words themselves beyond the mere thought expressed . . . (A, 380)

Words are the keys that unlock the mind. (SE, 282)

Therefore he writes, attempting to strike straight to the core of his inner self, by words. By words which have been used time without end by other men for the same purpose, words worn smooth, greasy with the thumbing and fingering of others. For him they must be fresh too, fresh as anything he knows -- as fresh as morning light, repeated every day the year around. (EK, 105)

The word is the thing. (GAN, 171)

Am I a word? Words, words, words -- (GAN, 166)
INTRODUCTION

RING, RING, RING, RING

"Am I a word? Words, words, words" (GAN, 166) -- like the insistent ringing of the phone or the doorbell. At the most unexpected of moments: pick up the receiver or open the door, and in they rush, a whole multitude of them. The act of speaking through "the words themselves beyond the mere thought expressed" (A, 380) -- writing came to Williams in this kind of heightened way. Such speaking is primary because it is both necessary and active:

In our family we stammer unless, half mad, we come to speech at last
And I am not a young man. (PB, 77)

So Williams writes in the late and moving poem, "To Daphne and Virginia" from The Desert Music and Other Poems (1954). And given the immediacy of this drive to "come to speech at last," it is not surprising that Shakespeare, a "Grandfather" (EK, 110), should become in his mind the living instance of a human condition -- Shakespeare as the figure of the
writer who is, above all, a type of man: "Man the speaking animal. Man, then at his highest pitch" (EK, 11).

As a writer himself, then, Williams lived a restless life. He gave himself over completely to the intricacies of writing as an act, one in which the writer constantly undergoes the complexity of his medium:

Oh clearly! Clearly?
What more clear than that of all things
nothing is so unclear, between man and
his writing, as to which is the man and
which is the thing and of them both which
is the more to be valued. (P, 140)

It is often that hard, if not impossible, to separate out the life of the man from the life of the writer without losing the connection that makes the separation a perhaps irrelevant distortion. The two, in Williams' writing, are entwined in a knotted relationship:

Five minutes, ten minutes, can always be found. I had my typewriter in my office desk. All I needed to do was to pull up the leaf to which it was fastened and I was ready to go. I worked at top speed. ("Foreword," A, n.p.)

To be, in fact, "Man the speaking animal" is to live the intensest of lives. Williams came to value speech itself for this reason. And as a writer, he never stopped being conscious of the power of words, how they not only demand, but also open the deepest levels of feeling. This affair, this love-affair with words began early for him, and continued unwaveringly through a long and complicated involvement with the rich density of "the language . . . the language!" (P, 21). In 1919, a statement in "Notes from a Talk on Poetry" published in Poetry, a still embryonic but unhesitant assertion of a possible assumption behind the discovery of a new kind of writing, a kind which would permit the widest range to experience:

I must write, I must strive to express myself. I must study my technique, as a Puritan did his Bible, because
I cannot get at my emotions in any other way. There is nothing save the emotions: I must write, I must talk when I can. It is my defiance; my love song: all of it.¹

This essay or series of "notes" is tentative, overly self-conscious and even somewhat frantic, written as it was during a period when Williams felt unusually isolated and unjustly neglected as a poet. Yet the base tone of it persists. In 1921, from a letter to Marianne Moore, in response to her welcome comments on the recently published Kora in Hell (1920):

Surely there is no greater excitement than that of composition. I am dead when I cannot write and when I am at it I burn with a fever till one would think me mad. (SL, 53)²

And finally, one more of many similar examples, this time on the other side of a lifetime, in a print-out accompanying the broadside publication of "Sappho: A Translation by William Carlos Williams" in 1957: "I think all writing is a disease. You can't stop it."³

This sense of writing as a feverish necessity, a disease even, explains Williams' constant desire to maintain the excitement of composition for its own sake. Even when he felt constricted by his own present limitations, he would bring his doubts and reluctances into the effort of the text he was at the moment composing. The push was always forward: "Write going. Look to steer" (AN, 278). And often, as in the "improvisations" that finally became Kora in Hell, his desire to explore and "write" out, and in this way work through the blockages, became the important substance of the text.

There is also this specificity in these lines from Paterson II: "Blocked. / (Make a song out of that: concretely)" (P, 78).

In Williams' terms, writing is alive only when it engages the situation prompting it: The blocked writer should then meet head on whatever is preventing him from authentic speech, in the writing itself. There is a
possible "song" in confronting the blockage ("concretely"), just as there is in confronting any thing. And despite the obvious risks inherent in such an open-ended proposition, Williams continued to trust the process, the movement within words, to help him find a way out of both emotional and intellectual impasses. "The blankness of the writing surface," he says in "How to Write,"

may cause the mind to shy, it may be impossible to release the faculties. Write, write anything: it is all in all probability worthless anyhow, it is never hard to destroy written characters. But it is absolutely essential to the writing of anything worth while that the mind be fluid and release itself to the task.4

Writing was, from the beginning, a hunt --

The thing, the thing, of which I am in chase (A, 288)

-- on the empty space of the page in a silence that the "unruly Master" (PB, 83), the heart, wants to fill with words. The desire is for the animate, for whatever has life and movement, and to carry that into the very words unfolding in the heat of composition. In a revealing passage from the poem "Tapiola," Williams addresses the interior of the composer Sibelius, projecting himself through it. There is that curious resemblance between the figure of the composer wrapped in the "power of music," submerged in a composing of sounds coming together "edge against edge," and Williams himself, whose "improvisations" for Kora in Hell could easily have arisen out of a similar attention to words -- their sights, sounds, and configurations:

You stayed up half the night in your attic room under the eaves, composing secretly, setting it down, period after period, as the wind whistled. Lightning flashed! The roof creaked about your ears threatening to give way! But you had a composition to finish that could not wait. The storm entered your mind where all good things are secured, written down, for love's sake and to defy the devil of emptiness. (PB, 67)
The desire is to write down the storm of words ringing in his mind -- in Williams' work, desire is tied to language. Is language then wild because desire is "unruly?" Or is desire wild because language is "unruly?" It goes either way, the inseparability of the two is itself the actuality behind the questions. This is why Williams took nothing for granted in himself, and why he mistrusted so adamantly any theory of composition he thought betrayed the essentially mysterious, often confusing, but ever-present language of language. He was always swept up in the heat of words as they appeared out of the deep recesses of the heart, declaring themselves, sometimes, but more often than not simply breaking into the mind in haphazardly crazy ways. And Williams was continually struck with wonder that they could so suddenly be there, and thus here in the act of writing:

Ummmmmmmm -- Turned into the wrong street at three A.M. lost in the fog, listening, searching -- Waaaa!' said the baby. I'm new. A boy! A what? Boy. Shit, said the father of two other sons. Listen here. This is no place to talk that way. What a word to use. I'm new, said the sudden word. (GAN, 162)

The words themselves twisted and turned in Williams' mind. First and foremost, he considered himself a "word man," like Pound and Zukofsky, his companions who shared that most difficult and exacting art of writing in the words, "The best of all to my way of thinking" (SE, 282). 5 And always, first and foremost, in the writing, the words were understood as primary -- "for the words come first and the ideas are caught, perhaps among them . . . . It does not go the other way."6 Out of this recognition, Williams could often make what at first glance seem to be straightforward, even commonplace assertions:

Writing is made of words, of nothing else. (SE, 132)
Words are the keys that unlock the mind. (SE, 282).

But not so simplistically, such statements hold weight only to the extent that a writer experiences words as hard-edged particles with an "objectivity" of their own. The basic assumption is that language, the whole range of words in their multiple interactions with each other, exhibits a largeness within which the life of the world comes into the reach of the human. Even what we call the "meaning" of the words issues from the actuality of language. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty reminds us in Signs, language "does not presuppose its table of correspondence; it unveils its secrets itself." Williams' affirmation of the particularity of words rests upon a similar sense of language. He implies as much in a response to a question he must have encountered, both publicly and privately, many times before. This occasion is an interview ("Is Poetry a Dead Duck"?) conducted by Mike Wallace in 1957, which Williams characteristically lifted up into Paterson V:

Q. But shouldn't a word mean something when you see it?

A. In prose, an English word means what it says. In poetry, you're listening to two things . . . you're listening to the sense, the common sense of what it says. But it says more. That is the difficulty. (P, 262)

Is this a polite dismissal? Possibly. Williams' answer does, almost teasingly, leave a great deal unsaid. But the insistency of it remains of a piece: the nature of language, and the fact of it. These are starting points for understanding the basis of Williams' writing. Here we can also see why he was so quick to acknowledge the kind of writers, Joyce and Stein for instance, who deeply engaged, in writing, the appearance of language as an actuality. "I'm new, said the sudden word."
Perpetually amazed that words thus contain the actual in their objectivity, Williams was led by them to hunt down a methodology —

The thing, the thing, of which I am in chase

-- to handle the ringing in his ears, what he heard in those moments "the language" flowed in. This "chase" winds like one continuous thread through all his work. And so when he sat down to write his Autobiography, he structures his life -- and the lives of certain of his contemporaries -- in a way wholly determined by the search for a poetic, one which would answer to the density of language. In this same book, he points emphatically, and not surprisingly, to its origination in the emergence of language as a live thing in the early years of the century. Appropriately enough, he does so in "The College Life." It is here that Williams talks about his stay at Reed College in the late 40's, where he read and conducted discussions on the nature of "modernist" writing, the kind of writing part and parcel of his own life -- and of which he, as it developed, was part and parcel. "It is the making of that step," he writes,

to come over into the tactile qualities, the words themselves beyond the mere thought expressed that distinguishes the modern, or distinguished the modern of that time from the period before the turn of the century. (A, 380)

And then a bit later in the same chapter:

The key, the master-key to the age was that jump from the feeling to the word itself: that which had been got down, the thing to be judged and valued accordingly. Everything else followed that. Without that step having been taken nothing was understandable. (A, 381)

Williams aligns that step over into "the words themselves" with the discoveries of the painters in those same early years. Just as Cézanne,
say, opened up the possibility for an experience of paint, for writers
the shift opened up the very possibility for an experience of language.
Experience had to be re-tied to words and the value of experience re-found,
in the configuration of words through which the actual in all its
indeterminacy, all its fluidity, appears. It may sound simple, commonplace,
to say "Writing is made of words, nothing else." Words are ordinary, and
common. They surround us. But the phrase "nothing else" makes that simpli-
city hard for us to see: "just words." Words are so much the air we breathe
that we rarely experience them objectively, as "themselves beyond the mere
thought expressed." Without them, however, and just then, we find our-
selves lost -- for words, as we seem to have no choice but to say. And
this is one reason why Williams so often mentions the work of Gertrude
Stein when he talks about the beginnings of "modern" writing. "During
the period of her work, influential and fruitful as it grew to be," he
writes in "An Approach to the Poem" (1948), "Miss Stein's emphasis on the
word as an object was one of her most important contributions to contempo-
rary art." Just as the objectivity of a urinal needed a Marcel Duchamp
to bring it forth as "object," so the objectivity of language demanded at
that time the likes of a Gertrude Stein to bring it forth as "object."
Otherwise, language would simply have continued to be taken for granted,
and the "mere thought" be thought of as prior to the words themselves which
make the "thought" possible in the first place. This distinction had to
be made, Williams suggests, or else "nothing was understandable."

As Williams knew well, the shift into words can cause intense resist-
ances, since it makes for an openness that runs contrary to the strong
tendency of the mind to maintain its habitual forms when opposed by change.
The mind can be tricky -- this Williams was to discover for himself in Kora
in Hell -- but most especially when it is left solely to rely on nothing other than its own constructs. It can abstract from multiplicity any number of systems of thought. These in turn can predetermine and reduce to their "orders" an otherwise endlessly dynamic world of things. The way it clings to static states. To consistency. To coherence. To unity. To a kind of order that overlays things with comparisons rather than accounts for "those inimitable particles of dissimilarity to all other things which are the peculiar perfections of the thing in question" (K, 18). And its obstinate, sometimes obsessive determination to inhabit this same order without questioning the limits of it. Williams found this habit of mind vicious because it survives only through its power to negate. "I was early in life," he writes in "The Basis of Faith in Art,"

sick to my very pit with order that cuts off the crab's feelers to make it fit into the box. You remember how Taine left Keats out of his criticism of English literature because to include him would spoil the continuity of his argument? (SE, 188)

The crab's feelers are as actual as Keats is, as any thing is, as for instance, language is. But the assumption of this type of power over things removes the mind from that which it presumes to explain.

The writer who places himself at the disposal of a similar habit of mind sits behind closed doors and thereby loses what should be closest to his attention: the "secret" of language, the words inseparably tied to an animacy always in transit. The enclosure within the confines of which he fixes himself is nothing more than a symptom of a refusal to acknowledge a mode of consciousness -- writing as one such mode -- active to the movement of words. The refusal is really the effect of denying what would permit the destruction of such mental barriers. It is only when language is heard, is allowed to "flow in," so Williams discovered, that the mind can be drawn
outside its own limits, into the multiplicity, the play as well as the inter-play of words. The act of listening, in this specific context, becomes an outwardness that releases the inwardness of words, but equally and simultaneously, releases the writer to the drama of a contrariety within experience that is precisely at odds with the mind's habitual preconceptions: of the dis-order behind and before order, as one instance. Or the irrational, more accurately non-rational, behind and before the rational. Or the indeterminate behind and before the determinate. Or the dis-ease behind or before the ease. Or the change behind and before the form. Or the desire behind and before the mind. Or the language behind and before the man.

Only one answer: write carelessly so that nothing that is not green will survive.

There is a drumming of submerged engines, a beat of propellers. The ears are water. The feet listen. (P, 155)

The continual tension of such subtleties that never ceased to demand Williams' attention is difficult, demanding indeed: it calls for concentration, a concentration paradoxically enough focussed on keeping the mind and the senses wide open to the actual that words contain, rather than to the oversimplification called 'meaning' or 'sense.' Williams' work throughout abounds in writing of this kind, so when he strikes out impatiently against those he takes to be the enemies of language, as he does insistently during the 20's, it is not without some cause. At that time, few readers were prepared, or perhaps able, to see what he was doing in his writing. Frequently, in fact, he was unable to find publishers for his work.
This is especially the case with A Novelette and Other Prose (1932). In a letter to Pound dated March 13, 1930 --

I've been up since 5.30 certifying the death of a man's wife (he cried) and now finishing the correction of the Novelette (SL, 112)

-- Williams says that this text "is very close to my heart -- and no one will handle it here" (SL, 112). Maybe Pound can help him get it published somewhere else.

Floss and the ubiquitous Zuke [Louis Zukofsky] are the only ones in this section of understanding who have fallen for it. And no two people could approach the thing from a more divergent angle. (SL, 112-113)

No one will handle it here. There was no readership, other than a private one, available for the sort of experimental writing holding Williams' interest then. Why? The intelligence of possible readers, he argues in part through the text, is hampered by two of the most predominant forms of thought in his contemporary world: "science" and "philosophy," which together stand behind the narrow belief that the actual is disclosed only by forms of rational discourse. Williams singles them out as special "categories" -- to be treated as such -- in order the more accurately to delineate the limits of all such forms that overlay experience with pre-determination. They may be harmless in themselves, but when they are applied wholesale to regions of activity beyond their boundaries, they permit the mind to slide off into the comfort of a closure that prevents it from dealing ("concretely") with particularities outside. The assumption then grows that language is transparent, nothing more than a vehicle for "ideas" or "things," a mere sign, or a bill-board even, that points to something other than itself, useful perhaps, yet not to be taken as actual. Williams' anger, in the face of what seemed to him an incredibly stupid transposition of terms could become scathing, almost bitter at times:
when language is subservient to the sale of old clothes
and ideas and the formulas for the synthetic manufacture
of rubber (AN, 280-281)

Or else, if a more critical urgency came on, he could assume the
function of "reader" and seek to clarify himself through other writers'
work companion to his own. Through the writing of Gertrude Stein, for
instance, where the experience of language is dramatized in a structuring
of language, her work, for that very reason, confusingly mis-read. So,
in the 20's, when Williams was still reading her freshly, he writes an
essay ("The Work of Gertrude Stein") that is a part of the "other prose"
in A Novelette and Other Prose:

If the attention could envision the whole of writing,
let us say, at one time, moving over it in swift and
accurate pursuit of the modern imperative at the
instant when it is most to the fore, something of what
actually takes place under an optimum of intelligence
could be observed. It is an alertness not to let go
of a possibility of movement in our fearful bedazzlement
with some concrete and fixed present. The goal is to
keep a beleaguered line of understanding which has
movement from breaking down and becoming a hole into
which we sink decoratively to rest.

The goal has nothing to do with the silly function
which logic, natural or otherwise, enforces. Yet it is
a goal. It moves as the sense wearies, remains fresh,
living. One is concerned with it as with anything
pursued and not with the rush of air or the guts of the
horse one is riding -- save to a very minor degree.

Writing, like everything else, is much a question of
refreshed interest. It is directed, not idly, but as
most often happens (though not necessarily so) toward
that point not to be predetermined where movement is
blocked (by the end of logic perhaps). It is about
these parts, if I am not mistaken, that Gertrude Stein
will be found. (AN, 350-351)\(^13\)

We are struck in this passage by Williams' own desire to stick closely
on the heels of another attention that does not sacrifice language to
predetermination. The "goal" he seeks is nothing less than the complexity
of a movement in words such as Gertrude Stein effects. Or at least, in
the way Williams hears her work, the writing processes she explores and
enacts document an experience of language, the 'grammar' of that actuality,
always ahead of the interpretive intelligence, but toward which the
intelligence is drawn out into the energy of a chase: the animacy of the
present in the activity of words. Here the intelligence is alive, Williams
argues, and remains so precisely because it refuses to let go of the
indefinite. "The processes of art, to keep alive," we are told in the
"Preface" to Selected Essays,

must always challenge the unknown and go where the most
uncertainty lies. So that beauty when it is found, as
it rarely is, shall have a touch of the marvelous about
it, the unknown. (SE, xvii)

As a state of indeterminacy in which the attention is tied to what cannot
be predetermined, "uncertainty" maintains the pursuit in words, the
flexibility of it in a context open to change. It is this quality of the
intelligence that prevents it from becoming, to use Williams' words, "a
hole into which we sink decoratively to rest." That is to say, when the
intelligence falls off into the self-referentiality of preconception,
language turns transparent and loses its actuality. "It is about these
parts" that Williams locates Gertrude Stein, but what he discovers also
discloses what he wants in his own writing.

It is movement then. Animacy --

Satyrs dance!
all the deformities take wing
Centaurs
leading to the rout of the vocables
in the writings
of Gertrude
Stein -- but
you cannot be
an artist
by mere ineptitude
The dream
is in pursuit! (P, 258-259)
And writing that is actual keeps the mind alive ("in pursuit") to the movement of consciousness in language:

A drumming in my head and pain under my arm and in my groins.

Speak of the lack of general ideas -- Jesu! in the writing. It is the writing. This is the theme of all I do. It is the writing. Speak of a flight by plane to Europe, of the two hundred inch telescopic reflector that discovers the nebula on the obscure outskirts of the milky way travelling at the incredible speed -- away from the earth -- of 2500 miles a second: it is the actual writing that embodies it, as the king in a chair -- or a flea on a cat.

The general ideas -- are over the writing. No. They are the writing. The writing is not carrying -- their jackass. It is essential to all exposition that the writing be as discreet as the flight, the nebula, the telescope. It is and embodies them all. Actual. (AN, 291)

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A Novelette and Other Prose was finally published in 1932 -- two years after Williams told Pound that "no one will handle it here" -- largely through the support of a growing number of friends.

TO Publishers, made up of a group of objectivist poets -- Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, and others -- got together and decided to publish some books. A Novelette and Other Prose was one of the first to appear. (IW, 48)

Williams had reason to be justified in his satisfaction with this piece he later looked back on as "a tremendous leap ahead of conventional prose" (IW, 49). He reveals himself in it as a "word man" drawn out into the flurry of words, enacting, through the excitement of writing, what turns into an intimate criticism of contemporary assumptions concerning language. There is, running beneath the domestic narrative of the text, the unstated but repeated insistency of a haunting question: How, by what
means, can the mind dis-lodge itself from fixity and so be released to a kind of writing in which language is visible as a live thing? Williams' answer is only apparently indirect. "A Novelette" (subtitled "January") was written under the pressure of a specific occasion, "the recent epidemic," as we learn in a letter to Zukofsky dated January 25, 1929. And yet, what is far more important, this incident is lifted into the occasion of a specific image. Nothing short of a large-scale epidemic can bring about this reversal, this upheaval necessary before the writer as "word man" can experience himself as a vortex for the animacy of words:

Influenza: from 'influence' -- "to flow in"

In the breakage implicit in this attack, whatever is preconceived, no matter how intricate the logical connections and consistencies of relationships that constitute its order, gives way to what Williams in section II calls "The Simplicity of Disorder":

Ring, ring, ring, ring! There's no end to the ringing of the damned -- The bell rings to announce the illness of someone else. It rings today intimately in the warm house. That's your bread and butter.

Is the doctor in? (It used to ring.) What is it? (Out of the bedroom window.) My child has swallowed a mouse. -- Tell him to swallow a cat then. Bam! This is the second paragraph of the second chapter of some writing on the influenza epidemic in the region of New York City, January 11, 1929. In the distance the buildings fail. The blue-white searchlight-flare wheels over to the west every three minutes. Count. One. (AN, 275-276)

The invasion --

Ring, ring, ring, ring!

-- of a system, any system, mental or physical, from the outside by particles alien to it, which subvert by penetrating the shell, the skin of it. Influenza is one such influx of an unknown and so mysterious quantity from somewhere else, flowing in from a distant out -- in this case,
The invasion is sudden; the patients can generally tell the time when they developed the disease; e.g., acute pains in the back and loins came on quite suddenly while they were at work or walking in the street, or in the case of a medical student, while playing cards, rendering him unable to continue the game. A workman wheeling a barrow had to put it down and leave it; and an omnibus driver was unable to pull up his horses. There are pains in the limbs and general sense of aching all over; frontal headache of special severity; pains in the eyeballs, increased by the slightest movement of the eyes; shivering; general feeling of misery and weakness, and great depression of spirits, many patients, both men and women, giving way to weeping; nervous restlessness; inability to sleep, and occasionally delirium.

In the infiltration of this disturbance, the organism, possessed by a force beyond its control, finds itself reduced to the immediacy of its simplest element: its physicality.

An entire community, threatened by an epidemic, such as the one killing around 20 million people during 1918-1919, is forced back to a recognition of what is alone fundamental to its survival. Everyone is open to attack, every one is vulnerable. Through the primacy of need, in other words, an epidemic levels off all values which are not, as Webster's Dictionary defines the actual, "existing at the present moment."

Thus the epidemic had become a criticism -- to begin with. In the seriousness of the moment -- not even the seriousness but the single necessity -- the extraneous dropped of its own weight. One worked rapidly. Meanwhile values stood out in all fineness. (AN, 273)

And by extension, the epidemic of language allows for the rush of words, the multiplicity of them in a flowing in from an outside at once larger than the mind and the condition of its interiority. Language is both that far and near at hand.

That's your bread and butter.

Another voice enters, alluring the mind away from the temptation to define
privacy solely by the limits of social responsibility. The writer as
doctor in a social crisis:

There's no end to the ringing of the damned -- The bell
rings to announce the illness of someone else.

In the social it is always someone else's illness that needs attending.
There was, understandably for Dr. Williams, the continual pressure of being
on call, intensified many times over during an epidemic, and he gave in to
what seemed like an endless drain of energy. In writing, however, if we
take *A Novelette* as representative, Williams is not intent upon a
description of things (i.e. "the recent epidemic"), although other writers
may have done so for the sake of "realism." His writing attends to
participations rather than descriptions of, engagements with language in
the near and far of its actuality. There is the ringing need to be on call
to the crisis of language:

It rings today intimately in the warm house.

This distinction, the other voice intimates, has to be drawn, even clarified,
to keep the mind clear of secondary concerns. Writing can be, if the
attention glides with the surface of words, an elusive and slippery thing.

This is the second paragraph of the second chapter of
some writing on the influenza epidemic in the region of
New York City, January 11, 1929.

-- if only as a reminder that words come before descriptions using them as
a front, just as presentation comes before re-presentation. "It does not
go the other way." When this priority is lost, the writer fools himself
into the enclosure of a personal cause, from which perspective language is
subordinate to a manipulation of words to his own advantage alone. This
can often be a thin line, but it is one that Williams, to isolate the most
common and so the most invisible trap for the writer, makes visible for
himself:
Is the doctor in? (It used to ring.) What is it? (Out of the bedroom window.) My child has swallowed a mouse.
— Tell him to swallow a cat then. Bam!

There is, as this cryptically frantic sequence suggests, that crucial instance of turning away ("Bam"!) from the motivation behind the kind of "cause" inherent in diagnoses. This rejection, as a writer, of the method of logical analysis includes the rejection of writing shaped by preconceived intentions, that is, by a personal "cause" imposed on the words. Neither of these "causes" allows for that inwardness, that moving with words in a listening out of which they emerge, like so many figures appearing and disappearing.

In the distance the buildings fail. The blue-white searchlight-flare wheels over to the west every three minutes.

In the light of search, in the movement of writing, fixities like buildings like "causes" fail: this is another beginning, one that proposes a listening attentive to the rhythmic gaps between "the words themselves."

Count. One.
Dada: or Dada-ism: or the push behind it to dis-lodge the mind from its
fixities and to subvert the pretension of systematized forms of thought.

I tried to put a bird in a cage.
O fool that I am!¹

The actual is too quick and subtle to be contained and laid to rest so
easily. It has its own resources. There is always an irrationality waiting
to break out of the rational. Forms that cut off the crab's feelers to make
it fit into a box are by that negation vulnerable to attack by those very
forces they attempt to overpower. The actual moves according to its own
necessities.

And when I had the bird in the cage.
O fool that I am!
Why, it broke my pretty cage.

Dada:

Knowledge is a thing you know and how
can you know more than you do know.

This is Gertrude Stein quoted by Zukofsky in an essay on Williams: "one of
Williams' interests." There is this monotonous circularity within the closure of systems of thought. They can be quite harmless in themselves when understood as limited constructs with isolated duties to perform. They become pernicious once the "known" of them is oppressively asserted as end, the end. Imprisoned by this dogmatism, the living, the actual has no way but to break out and fly off, or the reverse, to break in like an epidemic to declare itself absent. Dada: either way the absurdity and the implicit cost of self-referentiality is self-evident.

And when the bird was flown from the cage,
0 fool that I am!
Why, I had nor bird nor cage.
Sing merrily, Truth: I tried to put
Truth in a cage!
Heigh-ho! Truth in a cage.

In 1921, a year after The Four Seas Company brought out Kora in Hell at Williams' expense, Marsden Hartley, painter and writer, a close friend of Williams at the time, published Adventures in the Arts, a series of essays on various American subjects and artists in which Hartley attempts to define the subject as well as the possibility of American art forms. The concern is one that Williams shared and supported. Hartley is mentioned in Spring and All (1923). Near the end of this same book Hartley speaks of "The Importance of Being 'Dada!'" in a short essay, almost an appendix, and there he describes a Dadaist as "one who finds no one thing more important than any other one thing." He says further that Dadaism should not be mis-understood as another cause, as nothing more than another closed system of thought. If it were that, and only that, it would be of no importance. Why substitute one tyranny for another?
Instead, Dadaism is essentially a force that acts as a sweeping gesture, or a turn of the hand signalling a refusal to participate any further in the artificiality -- social, political, cultural, intellectual, and artistic -- of those forms of thought that depend for their power on their allegiance to "the Past." And here the past can be anything and everything up to the very moment itself. This negation is not a final end, but when the mind finds itself in such a dead-end, denial -- "Rien, rien, rien!" (GAN, 174) -- remains the one way to extricate itself without compromising its own integrity. With a thunderous No! to all imposed forms of significance -- God over Man, Soul over Matter, Art over Life, Reason over Sense, Thought over Language, all such hierarchies which fix the present in static forms -- and an equally thunderous Yes! to the state of non-significance, the Dadaist with his da da da clears the way for what is left. And what is left in this destruction is nothing other than the living actual, the same actual that cannot be caged by thought, engaged, but never caged. One of the issues, "Art" (capitalized), the Dadaists single out for special attack. Not the art which is an extension of life forces, as say in the prehistoric cave paintings, but the constricting concept of "Art" as a privileged form, as then a category of thought separable from the actual, in a special realm all to itself -- and valued for that reason alone. Williams mentions the "handcuffs of 'art'" in Spring and All (SA, 97), and more than likely he has this in mind. In the false but stubbornly held assumption that "Art" stands above, or over life, artists and writers handcuff themselves with a fixity that denies the authentic function of art: to free the mind from all imposed hierarchies of "thought" and to re-open the immediacy of the present. As a gesture of negative force, Dadaism with its "rien" thus broke the spell of "Art" (capitalized).
In this larger sense, as seen by Williams at least, the Dadaists are symptomatic of a force within the mind that refuses, like the bird in Williams' early poem "The Fool's Song," to be caged by its own obsolete forms. It is the living imagination they embody, an energy in the mind comparable to "electricity" as Williams says in Spring and All (SA, 150) — which returns with a vengeance when constricted by an order that survives by denying the actual. The present constantly demands the destruction of the old, the known world, in favor of the pressing desires of the new, which by definition is always the condition of an unknown world. "The imagination, freed from the handcuffs of 'art,' takes the lead!" (SA, 97).

A few pages before this declaration in Spring and All Williams himself proposes nothing less than a large-scale holocaust, a dadaistic destruction of a world that is past (The past) simply because it no longer accounts for the present. Against this construct, the holocaust, like an epidemic, or like Dadaism, would break in to destroy a past that prevents a present from breaking through. It is the renewal of the mind's force, we should emphasize, that carries Williams: outside of any dead form the mind clings to for comfort lives that "bizarre fowl" (SA, 92) -- "Oh life" (SA, 92) -- ready to take wing in order to re-assert its primacy, its immediacy. In this transformation, the actual once again returns to the spring of its forwardness. Over against the "Art" (capitalized) that stands over life, Williams wants that "art" which extends life processes by taking its lead from the force of the imagination. "Yes, the imagination," he writes,

drunk with prohibitions, has destroyed and recreated everything afresh in the likeness of that which it was. Now indeed men look about in amazement at each other with a full realization of the meaning of 'art.' (SA, 93)
We will return later to a more specific understanding of this "meaning of 'art,'" but for the moment we might remind ourselves that in the destruction of obsolete forms of thought, in the instant of that destruction, when the oppressive buildings of thought crumble, the world is once again brought back to a state of newness — "everything afresh," or to re-state Hartley's statement, now no one thing is any more or less than any other one thing. Since all things as things are particulars, all things, to that extent, are equal, no longer disposable through the overlay of secondary values assigned to them by virtue of their "position" in a hierarchic frame of reference, parts of a whole that is greater and through which, because of which, they are merely a part, a sign say, that does nothing more than point somewhere else, empty in itself. Now each thing is substantial, exists in its own right: signs that before were transparent now become actual in themselves. Words, for instance: but, as well, in "A Novelette" especially, the mind comes into a new feeling for things as themselves the context of the mind's acts ("No ideas but in things"). This is only another way of saying that the mind is itself one of the actualities of the world, both of and in a field of existing (i.e. moving) things. Value is no longer make-shift, no longer dependent upon abstracted forms of reference (such as "Art," or "Science," or "Philosophy"). Instead, this new sense of the particular functions as an extension of what Hartley in the same essay calls "the brilliant excitation of the moment," the same living present Williams wants the hold of. In this "single necessity" which then arises to stay in "the moment" (AN, 273), the epidemic, like Dadaism, turns out to be a destructive force, but one that allows the mind to release itself to move with the complex surfaces of things, as things:

Where the drop of rain had been, there remained a delicate
black stain, the outline of the drop marked clearly on the white paint, in black, within which a shadow, a smoothest tone faded upward between the lines and burst them, thinning out upon the woodwork down which the rain had come. In the tops of the screws the polishing powder could be seen white.

And Williams' "thus?"

Thus the epidemic had become a criticism -- to begin with. In the seriousness of the moment -- not even the seriousness but the single necessity -- the extraneous dropped of its own weight. One worked rapidly. Meanwhile values stood out in all fineness. (AN, 273)

And later on in the same section, "A Paradox:"

January. January. (AN, 275)

A Novelette is subtitled "January:" the epidemic and Dadaism, neither of them as final ends, but as criticisms which will not permit the mind to retreat from the "single necessity" of the present moment. Both of them are gestures ("to begin with") that re-open the experience of the actual, make possible the mind's return to beginnings, to the condition of "January."

"To begin with" -- one way of viewing the dadaist elements in The Great American Novel, Spring and All, and A Novelette and Other Prose, all of which were written during the 20's, without insisting that Williams was a Dadaist in too strict a sense. The European Dadaism born in the dark nightmare of the war grew out of conditions quite distant from American shores. As Maurice Nadeau says in The History of Surrealism, this particular form of Dadaism, the explosive dissent of Tristan Tzara, for instance, made "enthusiastic converts in a conquered Germany at grips with famine,
poverty, and revolutionary riots." In his work, as far as we can tell, Williams neither furthered the specific issues of European Dadaism, nor did he publicly align himself with that movement. And yet, understandably enough, he could easily identify with the linguistic ground of the Dadaist's attack on reason: the word "dada" itself, about which Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes in his *History of Dada* has the following to offer: "It means nothing, aims to mean nothing, and was adopted precisely because of its absence of meaning." If dada means "nothing," then the "absence of meaning" signals a relief from the suffocating obsession with the meaning of words at the expense of their objectivity. The word dada, in this way, re-opens the experience of language, and this sense of playing with words Williams understood only too well. He heard it very much in his own ear.

In the few years prior to 1917, the year America joined the war, Williams did, however, come into contact in New York with a certain form of Dadaism, though Dadaism as such had not yet existed, through the presence and work of Marcel Duchamp. Williams admits in his *Autobiography* the puzzlement of, and his uneasiness with, this enigmatic French artist and double-talker, the maker of "ready-mades" and *The Nude Descending the Staircase*, the one painting that thoroughly scandalized the New York art world at the 1913 Armory Show. As we shall see, his references to Duchamp's work, scattered and few as they are, suggest that this work, the experience of its effect on conventional notions of art form, did point to possibilities in writing for Williams.

The so-called influence of Dadaism, like the influence of so many writers and movements in Williams' life, is one more manifestation, in his mind, of the struggle for the NEW. In this assertion, Williams envisioned
a NEW world, that vita nuova he felt pushing for embodiment in his own experience of language. We might call it "modernism." The question of influence in Williams' work, in other words, is more often than not questionable in itself because it remains so double-edged. On the one hand, we can almost go so far as to argue that anything and everything, positive or negative, in some way "influenced" Williams. He was an intensely public writer, as anyone who has read him seriously knows. The whole of his Selected Essays, which begins with his "Prologue" to Kora in Hell, all the pieces he wrote on art and artists collected in A Recognizable Image, not to mention his Selected Letters and his Autobiography, not even to mention all the essays and reviews that have not as yet been collected, attest to this side of his nature. "Granted my interest in writing," he says simply in his "Preface" to the Selected Essays, "to make the poets particularly more accepted in what they say, I wanted to reinterpret them and relate them to the world" (SE, xvi). The aim, of course, applies to writers and artists as well. On the other hand, when it became a question of his own writing, right from the beginning, if we exclude Poems (1909), he could, and mostly did, stubbornly maintain his own particular sense of what he wanted from writing. It is for this very reason, the obvious foot-stomping aside, that his assertion in the "Prologue" -- "I'll write whatever I damn please, whenever I damn please and as I damn please" (K, 13) -- equally rings true to his nature. Could anyone but Williams have written Kora in Hell? It is not exactly a question of influence.

This is another way of saying that it is possible to talk about the dadaist elements in Williams' work without labelling him a Dadaist. Williams was too restless a writer ever to be caught under the guise of a label. Brought into a piece of writing wholesale, Dadaism (capitalized)
could only lead to another closure, and Williams, of all writers, continually guarded against the predetermination of his writing by any given fixed point of view, which Dadaism taken as an end would be. But as a force, as an initial negation that says No! to reason as end, it could bring relief, even to Williams in Rutherford, New Jersey. And especially to Williams, since the Dadaists brought into public view a similar crisis of mind and language that he had undergone when he wrote Kora in Hell. Dadaism, then, by the time Hartley wrote "The Importance of Being 'Dada'" in 1921, must have been less "news" to Williams than a clarification that confirmed his own desire for new beginnings. He might have supported the basis of Breton's own farewell to Dada --

> It shall not be said that Dadaism served any other purpose than to keep us in that state of perfect availability in which we are and from which we shall now set out with lucidity toward what claims us for its own.\(^1\)

Breton is talking about the origins of Surrealism as an advancement, a rebuilding necessary after the destruction brought on by Dadaism. Whether Breton is right or not,\(^2\) his phrase -- "that state of perfect availability" -- suits Williams very well: Dadaism understood as a means through which the actual breaks through, because of which something else could now happen, the availability of new forms, for instance, or the availability of a new sense of experience interwoven with a new sense of language.

The two times Williams mentions Dadaism in *I Wanted to Write a Poem* are notable for their absence of detail. Talking about his 1924 trip to Paris, for instance, he comments,
I had met Soupault in Paris. He was a very amusing person, really amusing, all wound up in Dadaism. I didn't understand what Dadaism was but I liked Soupault. (IW, 47)

What Williams says here is so sparse that it sounds almost cryptic, although in that characteristic uneasiness he had with "movements" as ends, he does shift attention immediately from Soupault the Dadaist to Soupault the man. And yet it is so unlikely, given Williams' sharp intelligence, that he "didn't understand" Dadaism. Against this remark, another one in relation to "A Novelette:"

The pieces in this book show the influence of Dadaism. I didn't originate Dadaism but I had it in my soul to write it. Spring and All shows that. Paris had influenced me; there is a French feeling in this work. (IW, 48-49)

Williams' statement that he didn't "originate Dadaism" sounds curious because there are no indications in his work that he, or anyone else, ever thought he did. But again, his attention quickly shifts from the label to the man, this time, to himself. "I had it in my soul to write it," he says, thus suggesting that Dadaism was less a movement with which he identified and more the instance of a way -- an initial breakage -- that releases the mind to the play of language.

In this sense, it is possible that Williams viewed Dadaism (to use Ribemont-Dessaigne's phrase) as "a movement of the mind" that prepared the ground for the Surrealist exploration into the nature of language. He hints as much in a letter to Norman Macleod written in 1945 (July 25) where he talks about a desire "to write something on the Surrealists, as French artists" -- and the weight, we notice, falls heavily on the word French. He goes on to explain that he sees Surrealism as a science of misnomers (a purely local and temporal phase) evading correct nomenclature, entirely a product of
contemporary France. The immediate sequel of Dadaism and the First World War with the actual but diverted defeat of France. (SL, 240)

Names tie the world together in language, so much so that most speakers of any given language are rarely aware that language conditions experience. The word-men Williams admires -- and the Surrealists are more instances -- have experienced language as both here and there, a possession on the one hand, but something that lives its own life as well. Begin calling things by their wrong names, as children love to do, and suddenly confusion breaks in. Nothing is any longer settled, the words become wiry and restless. Mis-naming something throws language into relief as something.

"Thus, 'The Nude Descending a Staircase,'" Williams writes to Macleod, is actually the Fall of France -- which could not be stated -- formally in any other way. The Surrealism that followed this early and isolated example, a continued misnaming of external events, an appearance had to be invented to fit the misapplication. Its general character is thus self-evident, both the subject and its treatment. (SL, 240)

And so in "A Novelette" Williams praises the Surrealists -- "Take the surrealists, take Soupault's Les Dernières Nuits de Paris" -- for their effort in bringing language back to "its January" by making "the words into sentences that will have a fantastic reality which is false" (AN, 280), that is, by "misnaming." By so doing, they reveal that other falseness, when language is subservient to the sale of old clothes and ideas and the formulas for the synthetic manufacture of rubber (AN, 280-281)

The Surrealists are thus exemplary for the way in which they undermine the constructive intellect (reason as end) in favor of the actuality of language: the words as particles by and in which human desire seeks to explore, manifest and discover itself. We might add, by writing in the words. Those who make language subservient to "ideas" betray the very
thing ("No ideas but in things") which is most human in man. Hence they subvert that which is closest to desire.

"House for sale." (AN, 281)

Words become so much real estate, and not the estate of the real which they are. According to Williams, French Surrealism clears out this false premise:

Surrealism does not lie. It is the single truth. It is an epidemic. It is. It is just words. (AN, 281)

And yet, and significantly enough, since particularism is the effect of an epidemic that brings things back to their "January," Williams points to the specifically French nature of Surrealism. He and other American writers can learn from it, but to copy it wholesale would be disastrous, because Surrealism is itself a particular -- a new thing:

... it is French. It is their invention: one. That language is in constant revolution, constantly being covered, mended, stolen, slimed. Theirs.

It is in the kind that we should see it. In that diversity of the mind which is excellence, like a tree -- one single tree -- French -- it is surrealism. It is of that kind which is the actual. (AN, 281)

Language is constantly changing to meet new conditions, or stated negatively, words are constantly "being covered" over with meanings that cling to a past world. As a symbol of love, the "rose is obsolete," Williams says in Spring and All, but love can be re-discovered "at the edge of the / petal" (SA, 107-108) of a rose, as words can as well. "It is in the kind," Williams argues, and right here he retrieves a more primary, a more active sense of the word "kind," one of the words "covered over," but uncovered momentarily to get at the particularity of Surrealism. In Webster's Dictionary, we note one definition of "kind:" Rare or Archaic, a. origin, b. nature, c. manner; way. A very dense word indeed has been degraded and thus
emptied of its substantiality. And Williams implies that a world in which "kind" had substance must have paid attention to the actuality of language, not covered over, can we say lost, in such generalities as (Webster's) \textit{sort; variety; class}. It is in kind, then, that such a particular form as Surrealism has come into "appearance" (to quote the term Williams uses in his letter to Macleod): a return to \textit{origins} as a concern for what is primary in human \textit{nature} made possible through the way of language.

Through Williams' eyes, the emergence of Surrealism is no different from that of the Indian in America, indigenous but neglected, "a natural expression of the place, the Indian himself as 'right,' the flower of his world" (\textit{IAG}, 138). In Surrealism, France is embodied in a rooted thing, "like a tree -- one single tree -- French -- it is surrealism" (\textit{AN}, 281).

And this kind of thing, rooted, so Williams (circa 1929) believes, does not exist in America. If, however, the Surrealists can break through the deadness of language forms in France, then American writers must be able to do the same thing in their world.

Or as Williams had spoken of this same necessity in 1923 in \textit{The Great American Novel}: "We must imitate the motivation and shun the result" (\textit{GAN}, 175). It is from this position that he had then argued the need for American writers to break away from European models. (the "foreign" is not of the nature of "kind") in order "to begin to find a shape -- to begin to begin again" (\textit{P}, 167), to quote the way he puts it in \textit{Paterson}, his own "reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands" (\textit{P}, 10). He is talking about European music, but all forms of art share the consequences:

\begin{quote}
Tear it all apart. Start with one note. One word.
Chant it over and over forty different ways.
But it would be stupid --
It would, if it were what I mean -- it would be
\end{quote}
accurate. It would articulate with something. It would signify relief. Release I mean. It would be the beginning. (GAN, 174-175)

Relief and release: the "rien, rien, rien" of Dadaism as an "apotheosis of relief" (GAN, 173) and the Surrealist release into language, both of which restore to the mind the primacy of experience.

What Williams wants in the 20's is a critical reading of modernist writing — the kind of writing actual to the conditions of its time. "Reading will become an art" (AN, 364), so he hopes in a "Statement" at the end of A Novelette. It is thus not surprising that the writer-Williams might at times become the reader-Williams and that he might, in this capacity, turn to the likes of a Shakespeare or a Joyce in his effort to further modernist writing in America. No doubt, as a writer, he is simply looking for news from other writers which can be of use in his own writing, but as a reader — and Williams did take this task seriously — he is seeking critical terms to make a readership for such writing available in America.
Williams' deep attachment to Shakespeare began as far back as in his childhood, when his father, so we learn in his Autobiography, first introduced him to the work of the Elizabethan, "whom I read avidly, practically from beginning to end" (A, 15). Further on in this same book, Shakespeare is mentioned again, this time in terms of Williams' decision to become a writer. "Words offered themselves," he says, "and I jumped at them. To write, like Shakespeare!" (A, 48). Quite an ambition, to be sure, but the excitement of the possibility took root — and Shakespeare remained a constant companion in Williams' mind. In The Embodiment of Knowledge, he even goes so far as to call Shakespeare "My Grandfather" (EK, 110). A feeling of kinship as well. It is here that we are also offered, however incomplete, a more insightful understanding of Shakespeare's significance, for Williams, as a writer who continues to be a source for modernist writers. But not simply because Shakespeare was a "great" dramatist, and as such, necessary reading, say in the cultural eyes of Williams' English father.
More than that, Shakespeare's plays prefigure the effort behind modernism to make language actual. Here Williams could locate a working model for the kind of American writing he thought possible once the tyranny of discursive forms of thought were overcome -- the work of the Dadaists and the Surrealists in France -- and writing could once again become an extension of experience, not merely a container into which writers pour their preconceived ideas.

In the plays themselves (as plays), Williams could see the exemplification of that figure of the writer, the "word man" who lives so much in his words that the biographic impulse is resisted completely. Shakespeare literally disappears into his words; they are not assumed to be transparent vehicles burdened with the "thoughts" of the writer, what he believes, his theory of life, or whatever he thinks prior to the act of writing. Words are deeds through which Shakespeare composed an actual world. As Williams says,

He is not a dealer in abstractions using a play as a subterfuge, words, writing as a means. But the writing is all and only. (EK, 14)

Shakespeare did not use words, as do the "idea-vendors" Williams attacks in "A Novelette,"

to transmit abstract ideas. They were a switchboard for things and people's growth and movements, in reverse. The actions pressed the keys and recorded them on the page. (EK, 15)

Shakespeare was himself an instrument of action in words, "he is all play, all the play" (EK, 15).

Even more importantly perhaps, in Shakespeare's plays, Williams also sees the emergence of new forces, new concerns, a new view of the world that undermines Shakespeare's hold on language, a change that could be
read as an historic shift in attitudes toward language — over from language as a revelation of human acts to the discursive use of language as a tool, an instrument of control over things. This shift marks the beginning of a "cleavage" (SA, 111), to use Williams' word in *Spring and All*, between words and things that has continued into the early part of the 20th century. To Williams, the effect of this change is most evident in the "science" and "philosophy" he criticizes in *A Novelette* and *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, but equally in any form of thought ("literary" or otherwise) that attempts to cage the actual by making it conform to a preconceived frame of reference. Bacon enters the stage at the beginning of this new methodology, one that works to sever the bond between words and things, in fact constitutes itself through that severance. A new kind of "objectivity" is born. Language becomes secondary. Words are taken as signs for things, after things, for it is in those same "things" that men can discover the so-called "laws" of nature which enable them to control forces that once appeared so mysterious and awesome. In this separation, the substances of the world (men included) disappeared into abstract forms of thought: "science" into "materialism" and "philosophy" into "idealism," both of them taken as means to a new end: "knowledge" as a completed state of understanding. In its simplest form, so Williams argues, this concept of "knowledge" was an illusion right from the beginning. "Bacon and his confrères of the period," he writes,

had a great work to do. Science had to be built up. The lure of a solution of life carried them forward giving them the belief that to know everything was the end of knowledge, the same falsity that debauches the mind of a college boy to this day. It had a perfect justice as an incentive to work and has worked so wonderfully. (EK, 68)

If the first quarter of the 20th century is any indication, it becomes
apparent to Williams that the habit of mind giving birth to science has triumphed. But like all other "truths" which eventually reveal their limits, the fiction of science is now

so worn, so violently wrong that its viciousness has become surely the most distorting, obsessive ghost of the world. It is the most violent lie in existence to the extent that it has been the most powerful force inciting men to labor for hundreds of years. Now it must be killed. It must be killed by showing it false. This is why Science -- for that is what "science" has come to mean, the fiction itself, and Philosophy -- for it is the same there -- must be branded as lie. (EK, 68-69)

A lie, because somewhere in this triumph, Shakespeare's sense of man as a "speaking animal" got lost, and the solidity of his use of words as well. As a writer, Shakespeare resisted the lure of abstractions and held to the density of live experience:

... never a philosopher in any of Shakespeare's pieces -- only men and women of action -- bent by what you will -- something more solid which was there before, something he could not escape, opaque, unscientific, in an awakening scientific era, which Bacon was first in awakening. Shakespeare had nothing but people to oppose to that, a solid rock he could not break -- just arrange, rearrange. He could not get by them. There he stuck and spun. (EK, 111-112)

Some of Williams' comments on Shakespeare found their way into "The Descent of Winter" (first published in Pound's Exile, Autumn, 1928), but his reading of this genius of the English language nevertheless remains in a state of "notes and fragments," quick takes. What is important for this study, however, is the manner in which he reads Shakespeare into the modernist movement in writing. Not that "the modern" should, or is "trying or wishing or dreaming to bring back Shakespeare" (EK, 112), not that kind of nostalgic lament for things past. "But his solidity," Williams says, "his opacity is growing familiar" (EK, 112).
In the section of The Embodiment of Knowledge immediately following the first discussion of Shakespeare as a writer -- "Shakespeare's work is all words" (EK, 11) -- Williams affirms the experimental writing of Stein and Joyce, two modernist writers who have made the shift back into a sense of language as actual, the matter of writing. By breaking through the "false reliance on emotion and idea" (EK, 18) and returning to the objectivity of words, they are attempting to overcome the same cleavage between words and things that enters Shakespeare's work. After stating that "Language is the key to the mind's escape from bondage to the past" (EK, 19), Williams outlines his own sense of the "province" (EK, 19) and "function" (EK, 20) of writing in his contemporary world. In writing that engages language, "words and their configurations are real and all ideas and facts with which they deal are secondary" (EK, 19-20). And because of this, such writing is the complement of all other realms of the intelligence which use language as secondary to the reality of their own materials -- such as science, philosophy, history, religion, the legislative field. (EK, 20)

Williams, in other words, does not oppose writing to other fields of intelligence, but separates it out as that "realm of the intelligence" in which language is explored on its own terms. And since experience is inextricably bound to the play of words, the modernist writing Williams has in mind functions to "re-enkindle language, to break it away from its enforcements, its prostitutions under all other categories" (EK, 20). In very crucial ways, what we know of the past is a language construct, a completed state of understanding frozen into the grammar and syntax of a world that no longer exists. By breaking up the language of that construct,
modernist writers thus free "the words themselves" to a present where they can be re-discovered in their newness. So Williams concludes, "By taking language as real and employing it with a full breadth and sweep, letters frees it from encroachments and makes it operative again" (EK, 20). The key word is "operative." It is imperative that now, in the 20th century, writers be drawn into the hunt for a form of writing that reveals the immediacy of their time, the one they live.

This loyalty toward the present, however, can cause intense resistances in those writers and readers who would prefer to rely on past forms because they are more predictable, less threatening, more comforting. A great deal of what concerns Williams deeply strikes to the core of this central drama, the modernist battle for the New as against the dominance of the Old. Taken together, all the essays collected in Selected Essays are exemplary in this sense, and no doubt Williams had some such intention in mind in the early 50's when he gathered them together for re-publication. Selected Essays begins with the "Prologue" to Kora in Hell, his first major defense of modernism, and ends with "On measure -- Statement for Cid Corman," a re-affirmation of the modernist poet's desire to discover "a new measure by which may be ordered our poems as well as our lives" (SE, 340).

"A Point for American Criticism" appears mid-stream, first published in transition in 1929, around the same time as The Embodiment of Knowledge was written and A Novelette and Other Prose compiled. By the end of the 20's, over ten years after writing Kora in Hell, modernism was still, at least in Williams' eyes, not accepted as an actuality. Rebecca West's essay "The Strange Case of James Joyce," the focus of his attention in "A Point for American Criticism," confirmed his growing sense that no
authentic American form of writing had yet become public. "No one will handle it here," he had written to Pound in March, 1930, admitting his own failure to find a publisher for *A Novelette and Other Prose*. He is equally angered because West's criticism of Joyce was published in America, further indication that Americans are still dependent upon foreign authority to tell them how to judge what is, and what is not, relevant in contemporary literature. Williams thus writes "a point" for American criticism and argues the need for readers in America to become more conscious of the fact that modern writing issues from the condition of their experience; and that Americans, for this reason, have the opportunity, if they will act on it, to interpret the work of such a writer as Joyce from their own perspective.

Possibly "A Point for American Criticism" does not deserve to be singled out for special attention -- it is, after all, only a review of a review -- except that it dramatizes so clearly and so well the nature of the constant struggle, in Williams' work, out of which such a thing as "modernism" takes shape. Just as the Dadaists and Surrealists in France -- "We must imitate the motivation and shun the result" -- American writers must discover a form of writing particular to their own needs. And criticism can act as a positive force in this endeavor. Modernist writing demands the effort of modernist readers. So it is that in the case of "Joyce vs West" an American form of criticism could have offered a more accurate evaluation of the larger context of Joyce's work.

What then might this form be for the "American" reader that Williams becomes on the occasion of this brief essay? We notice, first of all, that he does not choose to answer West in the most obvious way, through a
point by point rebuttal of her reading of Joyce. Instead, he constructs his argument negatively, moves behind the content of West's remarks back to the basic assumptions she holds as a "critic." By so de-constructing the terms of her argument, he can lift her readerly misgivings -- Joyce as a "strange case" -- into the context of the historic condition of modernist writing -- again, the battle between the past ("West" defends what is "old") and the present ("Joyce" manifests the birth of the "new").

We are told that Rebecca West, on the one hand, acknowledges Joyce's "genius," only then to expose his so-called defects, one of them his lack of "taste." What gets Williams is the smugness behind the judgment, the apparent security of it, which he translates as the other side of a failure to deal with an object of attention -- i.e. Joyce's writing -- that does not conform to pre-established literary standards. What is outwardly a criticism is thus really a defense. Joyce offends West's sensibilities, and she uses the whole weighted authority of her aesthetic perspective to demonstrate that Joyce's work, as "beautiful" (SE, 81) as his prose may be, is finally unsuccessful because he fails to lift his "'compulsions'" beyond "'the threshold that divides life from art'" (SE, 81). In Williams' deconstruction, such a statement betrays the fundamental bankruptcy of an aesthetic frame of reference that constitutes itself on the hierarchic separation of "art" from life. This is the same "Art" (capitalized) that the Dadaists singled out for attack years before. Joyce, on the other hand, refuses to pander to this separation, and his work is significant for that very fact. Words to him are not used as some kind of ladder to transport the reader out of the world to some transcendent "somewhere else" (SE, 87). Like Shakespeare, he is, first and foremost, a writer: "Will this never be understood?" (SE, 86).
Williams would have enjoyed Marcel Duchamp's answer, in an interview, to the question, "What is taste for you?" "A habit. The repetition of something already accepted." In this sense, "taste" is a fixed response, an aesthetic measuring rod determined by an already given standard, a set of social or cultural norms against which, and only against which, a thing is judged as "beautiful" or not. This is both its limit and its danger. As a "repetition of something already accepted," it becomes one more example of a form that cuts off the crab's feelers to make those feelers fit into a box. The resulting constriction prevents the mind (Rebecca West's, according to Williams) from experiencing something altogether new.

Of course, the issue of "taste" in itself is not the sole point of Williams' attack. Rather, the dogmatic reliance upon it as a critical tool disguises what stands behind it, "British critical orthodoxy (R.W. its spokesman)" (SE, 84), a frame of reference that asserts its power by refusing to accept what does not conform to its fixed standards. This is the real reason why it cannot (or will not) understand Joyce's so-called defects --

Joyce does offend in taste. Joyce is sentimental in his handling of his material. He does deform his drawing and allow defective characterizations to creep in (SE, 84)

-- as inconsequential in the face of the much more pressing (and obvious, to Williams) fact that he is breaking away from aesthetic forms that have become obsolete. "British critical orthodoxy" is one such form. This, then, is the immediate thing: "Joyce has broken through and drags his defects with him, a thing English criticism cannot tolerate" (SE, 85). Williams says that West cannot acknowledge this complexity without sacrificing her predetermined expectations:

She cannot say that on the basis of Joyce's effort, the
defect is a consequence of the genius which, to gain way,
has superseded the restrictions of the orthodox field.
She cannot say that it is the break that has released the
genius -- and that the defects are stigmata of the break.
She cannot link the two as an indissoluble whole -- but
she must put defect to the right, genius to the left,
British criticism in the center, where it is wholly
forced; a thorough imposition. (SE, 84)

Meanwhile, Joyce -- "the leap of a new force" (SE, 85) -- slips through her
fingers:

Forward is the new. It will not be blamed. It will not
force itself into what amounts to paralyzing restrictions.
It cannot be correct. It hasn't time. It has that which
is beyond measurement, which renders measurement a falsi­
fication, since the energy is showing itself as recrudes­
cent, the measurement being the aftermath of each new
outburst. (SE, 85)

"And this," so Williams asserts a little further on, "is the opportunity
of America! to see large, larger than England can" (SE, 86). Severed from
the need to rely on British tradition (which is itself, would the "British
critical orthodoxy" question its own past, a form of localism) American
criticism can accept Joyce as a new force "beyond measurement." They both
share the same constituting break from orthodoxy and the state of newness
that issues from this break.

There is an American criticism that applies to American
literature -- all too unformed to speak of positively.
This American thing it is that would better fit the
Irish of Joyce. (SE, 87)

This "unformed" but "American thing" has not yet blossomed, but this state
of restless possibility is its precise advantage. With no fixed standards
to defend, it does not have to deny what does not conform. Implicit in
Williams' argument is thus a push toward a more authentic critical
appraisal on the part of American readers of modernist writing such as
Joyce's. Its apparent absence of "order" is the sign of a new kind of
readership. Williams is perhaps hinting that behind the idea of literary "taste," which constitutes itself on the division between a "high" and a "low" culture, there is that more common, more democratic sense of "taste" — originally, to test by touching; to test the flavour of by putting a little in one's mouth; to receive the sensation of, as for the first time.

In America, "taste" can then become an act of feeling out something new, something other that is other because as yet unknown. American readers can "test" such writing as Joyce's, not by judging it according to externally imposed standards of measurement, but by making contact with it, "as for the first time."

It is from this perspective that Williams comes to conclude that the reader-West hides behind a critical framework conditioned by British norms. And by refusing to enter the dynamics of "the words themselves" in Joyce's writing, not surprisingly, she transposes the writing over into categories of thought which its very texture undermines. As Williams writes,

She speaks of transcendental tosh, of Freud, of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, of anything that comes into her head, but she has not yet learned -- though she professes to know the difference between art and life -- the sentimental and the non-sentimental -- that writing is made of words. And that in just this essential Joyce is making a technical advance which she is afraid to acknowledge -- that is actually cutting away all England from under her. (SE, 88)

What West refuses to recognize is the "technical advance" part and parcel of Joyce's writing:

Joyce maims words. Why? Because meanings have been dulled, then lost, then perverted by their connotations (which have grown over them) until their effect on the mind is no longer what it was when they were fresh, but grows rotten as poi -- though we may get to like poi. (SE, 89-90)

That is, if we get used to its taste. And how else to get used to poi but
by eating it? This is, of course, a fool's language, but it is the same kind of language Williams thinks Rebecca West judges without hearing. From a position outside this maiming of words, and predictably, to West's ears, Joyce finally does become himself a fool, the Shakespearean fool returning in Irish garb. But right here, once again, Williams moves in swiftly from the position of the fool and turns her perception upside down:

Truly her conception of the Shakespearean fool, to whom she likens Joyce's mental processes, is cloacal if anything could be so, with his japes and antics which so distress her thought, in that transcendental dream in which the spirit is triumphant — somewhere else. Whereas here is the only place where we know the spirit to exist at all, befouled as it is by lies. Joyce she sees as a 'fool' dragging down the great and the good to his own foul level, making the high spirit 'prove' its earthy baseness by lowering itself to laugh at low truth. (SE, 87)

In Williams' own re-interpretation,

. . . the true significance of the fool is to consolidate life, to insist on its lowness, to knit it up, to correct a certain fatuousness in the round-table circle. Life is not to run off into dream but to remain one, from low to high. If you care to go so far, the fool is the premonition of the Russian Revolution, to modern revolutions in thought. (SE, 88)

And he clarifies further:

Lear's fool . . . is far from what R.W. paints his genus to be, but is full of compassion. Joyce, where he stoops low, has in him all the signs of a beginning. It is a new literature, a new world, that he is undertaking. (SE, 88)

For Williams, Joyce, like Shakespeare before him, or like the Dadaists and Surrealists in France, is the "fool" who turns a closed system of thought back on itself in order to destroy it, and so begins again, anew. It is this insistence that strikes the bass note of "A Point for American Criticism," but as well of so many of the essays Williams wrote during his
lifetime. Like the epidemic in the rush of which whatever was secondary fell away, leaving only the actual, the moving present has no patience, or "hasn't time," to worry over some such item as "taste." Joyce lives the condition of his time, as a writer, a "word man." In his work, Williams says, "The words are freed to be understood again in an original, a fresh, delightful sense" (SE, 90). So it all comes back home for Williams. "We must imitate the motivation and shun the result."

And as final clarification of Williams' critical understanding of modernist writing, we are reminded of a passage from "The Basis of Faith in Art" written in 1934. The essay is structured as a conversation-discussion-argument, that is to say, a dialogue, between an architect (we cannot help but think of Williams' brother) and a poet (we cannot help but think of Williams), who talk themselves back to the necessity for artists to recognize the primacy of need behind any given form, architectural or otherwise.

There you are! Just what I said. I mean you build a house for people, don't you? Then the needs of . . . I mean, the minute you let yourself be carried away by purely "architectural" or "literary" reasoning without consulting the thing from which it grew, you've cut the life-giving artery and nothing ensues but rot. What we seem to be getting to is that all the arts have to come back to something. And that that thing is human need. When our manner of action becomes imbecilic we breed dada, Gertrude Stein, surrealism. These things seem unrelated to any sort of sense UNTIL we look for the NEED of human beings. Examining that we find that these apparently irrelevant movements of art represent mind saving, even at moments of genius, soul saving, continents of security for the pestered and bedeviled spirit of man, bedeviled by the deadly, lying repetitiveness of doctrinaire formula
worship which is the standard work of the day. In my young days it was "English." (SE, 178-179)

In just such an indirect but persistent way, Williams moves from the actual as primary, to Dada, Gertrude Stein and Surrealism, and by negation right back to the one thing that grounds his own need -- "the language ... the language." It is this language which undermines "English," a term taken here to be the front of minds dominated and so caged by the same "Doctrinaire formula worship" that Williams calls "our real enemy" (AN, 279) in A Novelette. "English" in his "young days" was thus another empty form cut off from that "which it grew," the product of a methodology based on the denial of need, in that way another predetermination that boxes in an actual language to which desire is tied.

In its larger context, therefore, Williams' sneer is a criticism of mind, more especially that power within it to rely on forms of discourse that would make both experience and language transparent to preconceived systems of thought, the superimposed authority of the so-called "rules" of grammar on the same plane as any other narrow categorization that cuts off the crab's feelers, an actual speech that moves on its own terms, to make it fit into a box. And so in Paterson I we meet those automatons who aimlessly walk the streets, emptied of all passion because "need" has no path through their minds:

Who because they neither know their sources nor the sills of their disappointments walk outside their bodies aimlessly for the most part, locked and forgot in their desires -- unroused. (P, 14)

And what does Williams say a few pages further on?

-- the language is divorced from their minds, the language ... the language! (P, 21)
How then to "begin to begin again?" There is still one necessary
distinction to be made. "That's all very fine about le mot juste,"
Williams says in The Great American Novel, making sure that his sense
of language is not mis-understood as mere poetic technique,

but first the word must be free. -- But is there not
some other way? It must come about gradually. Why go
down into hell when -- . Because words are not men, they
have no adjustments that need to be made. They are words.
They can not be anything but free or bound. Go about it
any way you choose.

The word is the thing. If it is smeared with colors
from right and left what can it amount to?
I'd hate to have to live up there, she said with a
frown. It was the soul that spoke. In her words could
be read the whole of democracy, the entire life of the
planet. It fell by chance on his ear but he was ready,
he was alert. (GAN, 171)

No amount of effort to isolate "le mot juste" can guarantee that a writer
will experience the life of language, although Williams, we should emphasize,
does not undervalue the effort. It is, more exactly, a question of prior­

ities: an exclusive concern (maybe obsession is a better term) for exact
w wording divorced from the context of an experience in language makes the
writing "mere;" more often than not it indicates that the writer is shaping
words, making them conform to intentions brought to, rather than discovered
in the act of writing. As we have seen in the passage discussed from "A
Novelette,"this use of words prevents the writer from hearing what shifts
and turns in the words themselves. The "processes of art," to be alive,
are much larger, are much more indeterminate, because language, to be free,
must be allowed to flow in. And it is this flowing in that a writer must
somehow record as accurately as he can, what he hears in those moments the
words come ringing into his ears. Words cannot be expected to adjust
themselves to preconceptions, except at the cost of losing their objectivity.
They are either "free or bound" (italics added). After all, they are "just
words." Or as Williams says, "The word is the thing" demanding the attention of the writer. If he remains fixed on the point of his own predetermined intentions alone, he stands, to that extent, above words. From this removal, any word he chooses to express a private "meaning" will amount to nothing more than a dominance that imprisons the very thing that can free him from his own self-imposed tyranny. The choice for Williams is clear: either the writer comes down to the "democracy" of words, or he forever remains abstracted from those very elements that carry "the life of the planet."

Methodology is the crucial issue here at stake. The mind must learn how to adjust itself to the life of language -- and not vice-versa. Behind Williams' apparently cryptic advice that writers should "write carelessly so that nothing that is not green will survive" (P, 155) thus lies an intimate sense of the mind's contrariety. It at once seeks to structure into form the multiplicity of the world and forever desires release from its own fixities. This is the basis for the endless battle between the "old" and the "new," between the "past" and the "present" in Williams' writing. True to his own nature, however, he does not advocate a reconciliation, since he was aware that the contrariety itself is precisely what makes the actual what it is. History too mirrors the mind's processes -- and in history, as well, the present has no other choice but to assert its immediacy. Life presses forward, not backward. For "life," Williams says in an early letter to Harriet Monroe (March 5, 1913), "is above all things else at any moment subversive of life as it was the moment before -- always new, irregular" (SL, 23-24). And much later, this time in a letter to John C. Thirlwall (January 13, 1955), he applies this sense of life to the process of human history:
The tendency of the race is to resist change violently. At the same time the new presses to be recognized. Which is the most conservative? That which drives us to keep the old or that which seeks a place for us in some slowly, or at times, as in the present, some rapidly evolving new? Certain it is that we have no voice in the matter; we cannot refuse to go forward when the opportunity offers itself. Not to do so is the end of us. (SL, 330)

In order to go forward, the mind must first come face to face with that side of itself that works against change, against the flowing in of the new, the present. And language carries the front of this necessity. Williams says so to Thirlwall in a letter (November 30, 1954) in which he explains his own beginnings as a writer:

The mind's a queer fish. It wants to live; when the air is denied it, it comes to the surface gasping for air, and when it is denied that, it turns on its side on the sand and soon expires. I did not intend to die but thought very often during my youth that my time was short; I was often depressed, for I was early convinced that I had in the compass of my head a great discovery that if I could only get it out would not only settle my own internal conflicts but be of transcendent use to the men and women around me. That it concerned something as evanescent as language I did not for a moment guess. (SL, 329)

"That it should concern something as evanescent as language:" again Williams reveals what is fundamental for him as a writer, the experience of language that calls for the act of writing in words, an act that allows the mind to explore its contrary nature. It is this tension Williams has in mind in a piece from The Embodiment of Knowledge entitled (simply) "July 7," a kind of note that answers so clearly an unspoken question: Of what use is writing as an act in itself? What he writes takes us directly into the heart of a drama -- the mark, we might add, of the "texture" of Williams' writing -- that runs through a great deal, if not all, of his work. For this reason, we quote at length:
Afraid lest he be caught in a net of words, tripped up, bewildered and so defeated -- thrown aside -- a man hesitates to write down his innermost convictions. Especially is this true after forty when all his life has formed, perhaps into a single strand which allows him to say to himself that life is to him a reasonable thing, of related parts coordinated and workable -- no matter what the end. If this be lost, this certainty which must pass for hope, this comforting inward sense of his own personal integrity lost in a crashing together of words which will not be resolved into lucidity -- the lucidity he feels in his whole being somewhere -- it is the end. He fears.

It cannot be that this certainty which alone carries him forward is false. Rarely does he think of that. Yet might it not be that to be too explicit -- in words -- might blast his comfort, this solidity of his mind? To write it down might prove his feelings just that, feelings alone, in themselves nothing, a fool's paradise of self-deception in which he manages to hide himself somehow in order to live at all. Better to leave it so. Where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise.

But it is just this which drives a man on. For how can he be certain that his conviction, which if it be worth anything at all (must be able to bear examination) is so, unless he test it explicitly by statement? It must be written down, bit by bit, as he may, in fear for his lack of skill at words, watching them, distrusting them -- yet counting on them to help him, to bring what he knows he must believe into a searchlight of scrutiny. And who knows, it may be that he will succeed. If so his life will be strengthened, placed on a higher level of purity, made into the thing he admires more than anything else: the understanding of himself which he imagines many men possess in the world.

Therefore he writes, attempting to strike straight to the core of his inner self, by words. By words which have been used time without end by other men for the same purpose, words worn smooth, greasy with the thumbing and fingering of others. For him they must be fresh too, fresh as anything he knows -- as fresh as morning light, repeated every day the year around.

(EB, 104-105)

Although Williams does not, in his letter to Thirlwall, specify the exact period of his life he calls "my youth," the experience of language, so central to any understanding of the origin of his poetics, erupts in Kora in Hell as a drama: a former state of mind, fixed in what could be
described as a "certainty which must pass for hope," gives way to writing
that dislocates and disrupts a "personal integrity" that before seemed
"reasonable." In this crisis, this "crashing together of words," Williams
finds himself being drawn into, out into a present that breaks through
like an epidemic. He recalls in his Autobiography the effect of this
historic moment: "my self was being slaughtered." It was a break up of
the words. "Language," he wrote in "The Modern Primer," considering the
value of Gertrude Stein's writing,

Language being made up of words, the spaces between words
and their configurations, Gertrude Stein's work means
that these materials are real and must be understood, in
letters, to supercede in themselves all ideas, facts,
movements which they may under other circumstances be
asked to signify. (EK, 17)

Kora in Hell begins on Williams' own initial leap into "the words
themselves" where he discovers, by writing, those spaces -- or gaps --
between words that make for "configurations fresh to our senses" (EK, 17).
And the text does literally enact this shift into the "objective" nature
of language. In the opening line of "Improvisation XVII.3," as one
instance among many in Kora, the spaces between the words on the page
effect an experience of a "real" language:

Once again the moon in a glassy twilight. (K, 63)

Without the spaces -- "Once again the moon in a glassy twilight" -- the
line, a sentence fragment, would most likely be read as a descriptive
statement, nothing more. Although it lacks a predicate, the grammatical
connections between the words are nonetheless conventional. The reader's
mind is drawn more or less effortlessly through the words to some external
"reality" that the line apparently refers to. The twilight is "glassy" and
the "moon" appears in it "once again," as it has done many times before.
With the gaps between the phrases, however, the reader is forced to bear witness to a loosening of grammatical "relations." Disconnected from that predetermined system of ordering words, the words themselves come alive as words -- words tense with an apprehension, born as they are into a present filled with desire. Now a voice comes into play, a speaking voice ("Once again"), one that constitutes itself in an actual world ("the moon") which simply appears ("in a glassy twilight") indeterminately within the gaps between the words. Now as well the voice of the writer follows the lead of the words themselves, wherever they may go in the time of the writing that subsequently occurs. In this one brief example, we have in miniature the kind of experience in language that Kora announces in the opening line of its initial improvisation. "It is the making of that step," we recall Williams saying in his Autobiography,

to come over into the tactile qualities, the words themselves beyond the mere thought expressed that distinguishes the modern, or distinguished the modern of that time from the period before the turn of the century. (A, 380)

Perhaps, then, he did have Kora in mind.
SECTION TWO

PERSPECTIVE AS CLOSURE
What then would you say of the usual interpretation of the word "literature?" — Permanence. A great army with its tail in antiquity. Cliché of the soul: beauty.

But can you have literature without beauty? It all depends on what you mean by beauty.

There is beauty in the bellow of the BLAST, etc. from all previous significance. -- To me beauty is purity. To me it is discovery, a race on the ground.

And for this you are willing to smash --

Yes, everything. -- To go down into hell. -- Well let's look. (GAN, 170-171)
Fools have big wombs. (K, 31)

The first line of *Kora in Hell*: apparently straightforward and assertive, a statement of fact, no equivocation, no hesitation, no attempt even to be complex. In these four words we have the most fundamental form of the sentence, the simple sentence, and if we are not completely mistaken, an instance of simple speech. There is a swiftness of thought in "Fools have big wombs" that seems to present the articulation of a primary illumination. But what does it mean? Unfortunately, we have only this one statement as beginning. No other statements in the text lead up to it, and there is nothing within it to tell us how the writer reached this conclusion. There is, in other words, no past for us to draw on, no prior matter or thought toward which, or because of which, this statement can be read as the end of a thought process. It is simply there on the page, a bald statement. The reader is thus forced back on his own resources.
Maybe the statement would be clearer had the writer left out "big" and simply said, "Fools have wombs," and yes, we can either agree or disagree with this statement. Why not, why cannot "fools" have "wombs?" It is the word "big" that makes the statement so oblique. If "fools" have "big wombs," then that must mean that non-fools have "small" ones; at least the adjective appears to carry the weight of this kind of significant distinction. But why go through all this bother trying to account for the supposed meaning of this statement? Perhaps the writer has simply not made his intended meaning clear enough; "le mot juste" is missing. Perhaps he should have provided his reader with more linguistic clues, more signs. But then it is just as possible that he is himself being foolish and not to be taken seriously. Or if not that, maybe he should re-think (that is, revise) his proposition to make it more accessible to interpretation. Had he done the latter, of course, he would not have written what he has written. We would not have the same text, the text he has given us. And is it not the text of Kora that should concern us, "the words themselves," we recall Williams saying, "beyond the mere thought expressed?" Behind all this interpretive vacillation on our part, in other words, we can never be quite certain, given the disembodied effect of the statement, how we should read it. In some such way, nevertheless, the reader is brought toward an uneasy impasse. His understanding cannot break "the back" (K, 33) of the statement.

In 1920, just after Kora in Hell was published, one reader did react to the apparent meaninglessness of the opening line. Williams' reply
(dated October 27) to Alva Turner's letter begins:

Dear Turner: I am always glad to receive your letters. Your criticisms of my book are just and refreshing. I like especially your revised rendering of the first improvisation. I see your point about fools having no wombs, it is well taken. Yet I am right. (SL, 46)

It is quite likely that Williams was not altogether surprised that readers would puzzle over the opening line of *Kora*, but he would not revise it. His comment is brief, but his answer rings with a finality: "Yet I am right."

And he gives no further explanation.

Instead, Williams talks about the discrepancies of experience and the sense of feeling "out of alignment with your environment" (SL, 46). And he sees this environment as the narrow limits of the social world which maintains a strict order hostile to any forces that may disrupt its smug securities. The writer who finds his own energies sapped by this environment suffers a dislocation which gives way, in turn, to a feeling of the insignificance of any serious work. Williams indirectly hints that Turner ought to understand that what a writer says has nothing to do with what he ought to say, since this _ought_ is nothing more than a cage whereby live speech is stifled. It is difficult to live according to "sheer instinct" in a society that "would be destroyed by your mere presence did it not make an example of you, keep you subdued. These are the fools and their breed is unnumbered" (SL, 46). "Fools have big wombs." There is an anger in these words. But in the midst of it, of what he calls "my own heaviness" (SL, 46), Williams is still "thinking of fathering a magazine. A plain damned, restless fool" (SL, 47), he says of himself. And the letter ends with a reference to the kind of fool who, moving against the grain of "ought," is suppressed by a world which calls him "fool" and makes him think that perhaps he is:
I have a friend who is trying to get out of an insane asylum. His hearing is on Friday. What chance has he? Yet you say fools have no wombs. Mister Preacher, do not forget that you are a poet too. Look down. I am always, unhappily, knee deep in blue mud. (SL, 47)

Williams unleashes a great deal of anxiety in this letter, and his sense of alienation comes through sharply, almost bitterly, stimulated by Turner's reading of the opening line of Kora. Turner, he seems to be saying, should understand that poets often work within and against structures of thought that cannot accommodate their desires. No amount of preaching about the need to be more logical with words will change that fact. What is insane in a closed world can be very sane from a position outside.

There are, then, two types of fools: one inside a sanctioned frame of reference ("their breed is unnumbered") and the other outside, its critic. The fool inside an enclosed frame cannot recognize the limits of that frame, thus his so-called "foolishness" in denying the existence of any force that threatens his limits. This fool is the one we find in any dictionary, "a person with little or no judgment, common sense, wisdom," plainly the man who acts out of his own stupidity. And he can, because of his narrow view of things, turn his stupidity back on the world, especially on that other kind of fool, the one who does not fit into rigid categories. John Coffee say, the "friend" Williams mentions in his letter, who was labelled insane by a court system that could not tolerate a man who would steal in order to be arrested in order thus to reveal the existence of poverty. He tried to turn the system back on itself through this gesture, but that same system subdued him by locking him up in the one institution it has for such "fools": the insane asylum.  

The prototype of this kind of fool can be found in Shakespeare's King
Lear, and it is no wonder that this play momentarily passes through Williams' mind as he writes to Turner:

I have just thrashed my youngest son for spitting in his nurse's lap. What in God's name is one to do? Better run out into the rain as Lear did. I wish I had the inspiration for it. (SL, 46-47)

The round of domestic trivialities -- again the pressure of a closure, of an isolation, of a futility. And Williams hints that he can think of no way to escape this impending sense of senselessness. It is here that the image of Lear comes to mind. We can hardly use Williams' words against him as an accurate measure of what he is really thinking about King Lear. The reference is off-hand and slight, almost insignificant. Perhaps it is no more than simply coincidental that the image of Lear in "the rain" should break into a letter about fools and Kora in Hell. But the image does come to mind, and in itself, this fact is nonetheless suggestive. In the play, Lear does get trapped in a domestic disorderliness and becomes himself an old fool, one who is inside, and thus prey, to a system of toppling values. And juxtaposed against him, there is another fool, his Fool, the one who stands outside the system and whose wild speech, for this reason, mirrors the breakdown of order. And Lear does form a close relationship with his Fool in the storm, his own "foolishness" by then reflected in the disorderly elements, the same elements that spill out of the Fool's mouth, in his words. In a way, then, the two of them do become the two types of fools who, between them, dramatize the collapse of an entire world of meaning in the play.

It is, of course, ridiculous to jump immediately to the conclusion that a so-called "hidden" meaning in the opening line of Kora in Hell can be tracked down to King Lear, simply because the line as statement calls
attention to the density of its own language. Nevertheless, the disintegration of political order in the play is related to the disappearance of language as a substantiality. And in this respect, the topsy-turvy world -- "When priests are more in word than matter" (III.ii.81), the Fool says -- of overturned values illuminates by correspondence the range of the reader's experience of Williams' text.

In the famous opening scene of *King Lear*, Lear divides up the wholeness of his kingdom into three parts, one for each of his three daughters. It is this act which breaks the unity of a former order and unleashes a public language transparently the use of, at the disposal of the will of, those whose speech is nothing more than a front for purely personal ends, and silences those for whom language is not merely a tool. Lear thus establishes the environment within which he is made to play the kind of fool with "little or no judgment," who is willing to sell out his kingdom -- and for what? To hear only what he thinks he ought to hear, prostrating himself to the most predatory use of words, "to flattery" (I.i.150), as Kent says. With the question "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?" (I.i.52) as the basis of his judgment, we already sense that he is judging deafly, like a sentimental fool who will be duped by his own foolishness. His question asks for a speech, not speech. And this is exactly what he gets in Goneril's answer: "Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter" (I.i.56) (italics added). And Regan's speech is a copy cast from the self-same mould:

Sir, I am made
Of the self-same metal that my sister is,
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
I find she names my very deed of love;
Only she comes too short: (I.i.70-74)

Mere words. In an environment where this kind of language is the norm, Lear
ears only what he wants to hear, or thinks he ought, and so his one honest daughter Cordelia -- it is the heart speaking -- has no choice but to speak through the absence of speech, through the gap of silence, what is between words. Lear turns to Cordelia:

. . . what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters?
Speak.

Cordelia: Nothing, my Lord.
Lear: Nothing!
Cordelia: Nothing.
Lear: Nothing will come of nothing: speak again. (I.1.86-92)

Lear, however, is so much the fool that in his hunger for flattery he can only advise her to use words to get ahead in the world: "How, how Cordelia! mend your speech a little, / Lest it may mar your fortunes" (I.1.96-97). And this just immediately after Cordelia had hit the nail directly on the head, saying that she cannot use words in the way her sisters have done: "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth" (I.1.93-94).

The speeches of Goneril and Regan are less professions of love than confessions of their own will to power. But Lear is deaf; his ears cannot attune to the substance of Cordelia's silence. Aside from Cordelia, only Kent hears and speaks, but he is sent into exile -- for his words.

It is from a position outside this world, one that is falling prey to a transparent language, that Lear's Fool comes to act as a word-mirror to Lear's eventual madness. In this sense, he manifests the actuality of the dis-order at the edge of "Reason's" order, the same order that Lear broke when he divided up his kingdom, wrongly assuming that a whole is equal to the sum of its parts. The Fool -- in words -- reflects the effect of Lear's error of judgment. He speaks a negative, or a "backward," language that emerges within the gaps between words, the silences, the speech that is
not spoken in the play but against which the action is measured. On the other hand, Lear, the counterpart of his Fool, severs his blood ties with a live speech and thus finds himself emptied of content, his authority become "nothing." The Fool, because he is outside Lear's system, sees through this reduction and calls Lear an "O without a figure" (I.iv.212): the mere shell of authority with no flesh attached to it. A Zero. But Lear cannot think in negatives -- "Nothing will come of nothing" -- and this inability to hear "nothing" locks him up within his own limits, defines him as that kind of fool who is duped by the fixity of his narrow perceptions. His Fool, on the contrary, stands outside the use of language controlled solely by the intention of the will, and by being estranged in this way, in his own speech continually calls language back on itself as the substance that has disappeared from the "order" of Lear's kingdom.

After another of the Fool's dense statements -- this time how to make 10 and 10 equal more than a score -- Kent listens and says that the Fool is saying "nothing" (I.iv.141). And the Fool answers, "Then 'tis like the breath of an un- / fee'd lawyer; you gave me nothing for't" (I.iv.142-143). This kind of cryptic doubletalk is a sign that the Fool values speech for itself alone -- words for their own sake, not words used -- as lawyers who are paid to use them -- for the sake of other motives. The Fool lives in the words "prior to the thought expressed," not unlike the Duchamp that Octavio Paz describes in *The Castle of Purity*, who is fascinated by the power of language to mirror itself, "the most perfect instrument for producing meanings and at the same time for destroying them."3 The Fool then turns from Kent to Lear: "Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?" (I.iv.144). Lear's answer is predictable since it echoes his response to Cordelia: "Why, no, boy; nothing can be made out of nothing" (I.iv.145).
Again, we hear the deafness of Lear, the voice of reason relying on an aphorism, the use of words frozen into a dogmatism. There is no place for "nothing" in reason's systems, which by nature constructs those orders that survive by denying what they cannot contain — that is, their negatives. But it is, by sharp contrast, in the knotted speech of the Fool where meaning is both produced and destroyed at the same time that we intuit the pressure of a substantial world. This is the content of the "storm" — to use the central image of the play, an image that operates in Williams' work as well — that will not be caged by the grammar and syntax of a language that not only devalues the actual, but also falsifies it by disengaging the mind from the absence of meaning, what we might call the "nothing" of its own limits.

The kind of complex speech that spills out of the Fool's mouth, like, for example, "Winter's not gone yet, if the wildgeese fly that way" (II.iii. 46), sounds familiar enough to readers of Kora: the same swiftness in the words, the play of meanings (the pun on "way"), and the undermining of habitual perceptions that have been frozen into fixed grammatical forms. This much should become clearer when we examine the text of Kora at more length, but here we can single out this one line from King Lear for special emphasis; it exemplifies structurally the effect of reading the opening line of Kora where a similar crisis "in the words themselves" occurs: the very crisis that, in fact, establishes the texture of all the improvisations that follow.

Taken in themselves, the Fool's words, which read very much like a
truism, stubbornly resist a discursive overlay, and instead constitute themselves as words that exist before the imposition of a patterned order predetermined by grammatical conventions -- very much like, in other words, the opening line of Kora. And like the opening line, they create this effect quite simply because their apparent referential frame fails to confirm the expectations implicit in typical propositional statements, in this case one held together by the conditional "if," the language-hinge upon which the two separate elements of the sentence swing. In its apparent form, the propositional sentence posits a causal relation between seasonal change and the migration pattern of wildgeese. Not in itself unusual, in fact, the association is so commonplace that we can, if our attention flags, gloss the thought without becoming conscious of any disruption of meaning. We bring to the sentence a referential connection between the flight of the wildgeese out of a region at the end of summer or into a region at the beginning of spring, or at the end of winter. That is to say, we apply a referential frame -- in this case, an already established association -- because we automatically assume that the words are transparent to a meaning external to their objectivity: they have a past.

The actual opaque surface of the statement, however, displaces our expectations. And it creates this effect once we begin to notice the ambiguous relationship between cause and effect in the two parts of the proposition. It is not even clear what causes what. The statement, we soon discover, is quite deceptive. If, for instance, we rephrase it to read, "Winter's gone if the wildgeese fly this way," then it is clear that a change in the season is responsible for a change in the flight pattern of the geese; or, rather, that the change in the geese's direction of flight signals a seasonal change. Either way, the conventional pattern of
association between the flight of geese into a region at the end of winter is maintained. However, the Fool asks us to think that no change in the season ("Winter's not gone yet") has effected a change in the flight pattern of the geese ("if the wildgeese fly that way"): the geese have changed their flight pattern for no reason. He therefore concludes from the change of their flight that nothing has changed. "Nothing" has changed.

To put it simply, the Fool's statement, as a statement, disrupts a conventional pattern of meaning and thought. What initially sounds like a conditional statement constructed on the premise that a logical tie binds two disparate things -- the end of winter and the flight of wildgeese that way -- now assumes the tension of an illogicality that runs counter to the discursive meaning we expected. How do we logically think this statement? We do not. Instead, we find ourselves drawn into the pull created by this disjuncture of meaning. Associational comparisons that make things subservient to a fixed perception are, in this way, revealed to be arbitrary. Comparisons deny the particularity of the things being compared.

Similes are further examples of such a form of thought, as Williams says in his "Prologue" to Kora:

... the coining of similes is a pastime of very low order, depending as it does upon a nearly vegetable coincidence. Much more keen is that power which discovers in things those inimitable particles of dissimilarity to all other things which are the peculiar perfections of the thing in question.

But this loose linking of one thing with another has effects of a destructive power little to be guessed at: all manner of things are thrown out of key so that it approaches the impossible to arrive at an understanding of anything. All is confusion ... . (K, 18)

Here Williams seems to have in mind a literal sense of confusion as a "mixing together" that loosens the fixity of habitual associations through which a
predetermined form is imposed onto things: that is, confusion subverts, in a destructive manner, the dominance over things so evident in the "coining of similes," or any similar mode of perception that relies upon comparisons. The condition of confusion (the world of Kora is born out of this condition) is thus a release, the mind thereby "thrown out of key," hence brought to the edge of its own limits where it once again experiences a moving world of particulars.

And we notice that it is the pressure of a fundamental confusion of this sort that splits the Fool's conditional statement apart. The phrase "that way," for instance. Initially, we cannot help but read it as a description of a direction of flight. But where? All directions are possible, at least they are within the context of the illogicality the statement manifests. In an even more immediate way, the phrase, especially when dis-engaged from its apparent frame of reference, floats in the air of the statement without being pinned down to a grammatical place. And since it no longer need point to a geographical location, we can read it much more radically -- say, to indicate, not the direction of flight, but the nature of it. The wildgeese now enter a reality made within the play of words. It may even be possible to envision them caught in the act of flying erratically in space with no where to go: because, as we are told, "Winter's not gone yet." A world of fixed perceptions -- the clichéd relation between wildgeese and seasonal change -- through the dislocating drama of the statement, turns "topsy-turvy," and as it does, we glimpse a disharmony underlying the shell of an order emptied of substance. This is the same order which, in its emptiness, like the Shade of "puritanism" that haunts In the American Grain, imprisons the actual to make it less threatening, less what it is: the world of particulars that subsumes reason and "makes logic
a butterfly" (K, 81). And yet, we notice that reason still holds a grip (however tentatively) on the actual in the Fool's statement. The wildgeese cannot obey their instincts, so they fly erratically in space looking for somewhere to go -- an exact mirror of the crumbling world of Lear, aptly described by Edgar, "Reason in madness" (IV.vi.179).

Almost inevitably, at some point, an echo of the Fool who spins a web of doubletalk must break explicitly into the text of Kora --

Ah well, chastity is a lily of the valley that only a fool would mock. There is no whiter nor no sweeter flower -- but once past, the rankest stink comes from the soothest petals. Heigh-ya! A crib from our mediaeval friend Shakespeare. (K, 59)

The same riddler of a fool of a writer in Kora teases thought to its breaking point, in words that twist and turn without coming to rest in anything resembling a discursive completion, in fact mocking the pretension of any such end to thought:

What is it in the stilled face of an old menderman and winter not far off and a darky parts his wool, and wenches wear of a Sunday? It's a sparrow with a crumb in his beak dodging wheels and clouds crossing two ways. (K, 50)

The spirit of Dadaism -- two ways: the language moving in two directions, "two ways," at the same time, calling for meaning and destroying meaning, but in between, a world (the world) in movement that cannot be caught up in reason's cage. This is the same world with a live sparrow in it, "crumb in his beak dodging wheels and clouds," a live creature who must keep adjusting to his environment by constantly shifting perspectives and positions, in order simply to survive. The sparrow pays attention to the
field of particulars that constitute his world. Were he a writer, this partiality may very well reside in words as well.

One of Williams' most intimate readers, Louis Zukofsky says that "at best the writing in the Improvisations attains a Shakespearean verbalism," and he quotes "Improvisation XI.2," the one improvisation in Kora where the words are like heavy blocks of matter, placed one beside the other, the fool's tongue absorbed by the sight and sound of them, "knee deep in blue mud," while meaning flounders around looking for a place to come to rest — something of a similar pattern we noted in "Winter's not gone yet, if the wildgeese fly that way:"

When beldams dig clams their fat hams (it's always beldams) balanced near Tellus's hide, this rhinoceros pelt, these lumped stones -- buffoonery of midges on a bull's thigh -- invoke, -- what you will: birth's glut, awe at God's craft, youth's poverty, evolution of a child's caper, man's poor inconsequence. Eclipse of all things; sun's self turned hen's rump. (K, 51)

Within the substantiality of the language in this passage, and the verbal play, we can hear the energy of a writer who feels the texture of words, the dense physical words that "carry the life of the planet." There is the figure projected of the earth as a surface that grows the multiplicity of concrete things -- beldams with fat hams who are digging clams, etc. -- all of them crowding together on Tellus' skin, like "midges on a bull's thigh." We recall, in this context, Williams' comment on Gertrude Stein's hold on the multiplicity of words: "They are like a crowd at Coney Island, let us say, seen from an airplane" (AN, 349). Or "midges on a bull's thigh."

What does it all mean? Since the drama of earth gives birth to the very possibility of meaning, it can mean almost anything, "what you will." In a world where contradictions thrive, where "All is confusion," even the "sun's self" can turn "hen's rump," the face (as Octavio Paz in Conjunctions and
Disjunctions says)\(^5\) become an ass, or the man become a fool. At the level of earth, down on the ground, all things are subject to the principle of transformation. Equalized, they are common: one to another to another. Against this condition, the static and hierarchic forms of rational discourse are an impertinence, an instance of control over process that is a removal, a "divorce," which Williams much later, in *Paterson*, will call a "sign of knowledge in our time" (P, 28). Like the bird in "The Fool's Song" from *The Tempers*, the actual is slippery -- in transition, in flight -- like the earth which also constantly reverses stable orders: "laughs at the names / by which they think to trap it. Escapes!" (P, 33). And escapes, as well, through the fool's tongue that mis-names, as Williams says the Surrealists do, in order to stir up the mind to make it, once again, active to the opacity of words, the assumption being that language is a surface that demands to be met as a surface, impenetrable to that extent.

It is precisely at this point that Pound's initial response to the texture of Williams' writing in *Kora* holds weight. In a letter to Williams (dated November 10, 1917) -- the first set of improvisations in *Kora* were printed in *The Little Review* (October, 1917) only a month before\(^6\) -- he provides a quick take, parts of which Williams later incorporated into his "Prologue." "I was very glad to see your wholly incoherent unAmerican poems in the L.R.," Pound writes, and then explains his sense of the quality of Williams' language:

(You thank your bloomin gawd you've got enough Spanish blood to muddy up your mind, and prevent the current American ideation from going through it like a blighted collander.)

The thing that saves your work is **opacity**, and don't you forget it. Opacity is NOT an American quality. Fizz, swish, gabble of verbiage; these are echt Amerikanisch.\(^7\)

For Pound, the "incoherent" quality of Williams' writing is a positive
achievement. At least, as a writer, he has not fallen prey to the "American" reliance on "ideation," which sifts its way through the density of language -- and by implication the density of the world -- "like a blighted collander." Had Williams been more American, his language would be more transparent, much less "opaque," much more the vehicle of ideas. Apart from the truthfulness or not of Pound's argument that the opacity of Williams' language is an "unAmerican" quality (Williams will raise the issue in his "Prologue"), the term -- opacity -- is in itself revealing. And striking in its accuracy. Opacity, as we have tried to show, is exactly what the reader experiences when he first comes up against the opening line of Kora. And it is, in the end as well, this opacity that he comes back to as he becomes conscious of the way in which any "explication" of "Fools have big wombs" is insufficient, given its actuality as a statement. He cannot get through it, except by ignoring the very words themselves in the order they appear.

"Fools have big wombs" thus resists any attempt to interpret out of it a referential meaning outside, or as it were, beneath its surface. The surface of the statement, "the words themselves," declares itself as a surface -- an opaque surface that breaks the silence of a blank space on the page. Four words, taken separately, "just words:"

fools
have
big
wombs
-- brought together in the context of a sequence, they form the simplest possibility of a sentence, and with four words that do not, one plus one, and therefore as a whole, yield a completed, hence transparent meaning. The
words precede, as Williams says. And so the "big" (still) sticks out. Not bigger or biggest, either of which would have set up a relation between two or more things, possibly the fool and the rest of "us." But "big" is final. It does not permit comparisons, nor does it allow for the assumption of a frame of reference external to the statement itself, in a way, say, the words "April is the cruellest month" depend for their effective content upon the association of April with the seasonal time of new growth, of beginnings, of change, of the resurgence of desire. The latter statement takes on meaning only when the reader brings this perception to it, and instead of calling attention to itself, as the opening line of Kora does, it posits an "understanding" or knowledge of human experience that (ironically) contradicts the seasonal associations. Williams might have argued that the words in the statement are being used, that is, shaped by the subjectivity of the writer whose point of view governs the thought he intends to express. On the other hand, "Fools have big wombs," as a statement, does not necessitate a reliance on such intentions. On the contrary, it undermines this priority, and in its effect, provokes an experience of language that brings thought to the edge of a crisis. "April is the cruellest month," in this sense, refers the reader back to some "thought" outside and prior to the statement. "Fools have big wombs," though resonant with possible associations, does not finally give way to a referential frame external to its actuality. It is for this reason that the opening line of Kora stands out as a writing act, an event in language. In his essay on Gertrude Stein, Williams says that

Stein's theme is writing. But in such a way as to be writing envisioned as the first concern of the moment, dragging behind it a dead weight of logical burdens, among them a dead criticism which broken through might be a gap by which endless other enterprises of the under-
The writing in *Kora* dramatizes the original consequences of this crucial discovery, which erupts in the text as a language crisis: a confusion. "My self was being slaughtered," we hear Williams saying.

What then about the usefulness of our discussion of the fool and his relation to a dense language? The sense Williams has of the fool has provided a context for the line "Fools have big wombs." Without some such search -- and the one offered here is only one of many possibilities -- how else could we have arrived back at the statement in the way we have done? The statement itself called for some such reading. Otherwise, it would have remained dumb, maybe so outside a readership that it could have been assigned to an irretrievable obscurity. It would thus have turned invisible. The context we have provided, however, could not explain it away. Somehow the statement springs back to its former state. It is this very toughness that harbours a tension we now begin to understand as a tension, similar to the one we noticed in the Fool's statement from *King Lear*. Two contrary forces appear to be at work in the statement pulling it in two directions: toward the desire for the ground of significance, but as well toward the desire for in-significance, though perhaps we should say "unsignificance," to adopt the term Williams drops into his poem "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" (*PB*, 4), not simply meaninglessness, but the positive absence of obsolete meaning which does not eliminate, in fact necessitates the call for (new) meaning. And right here, caught between these two forces, these two ways, the statement holds within it a
crisis through which language flows in as an actuality tied to a world in constant movement. And as in any crisis, there is a breakage involved, over from some state more or less fixed to an unknown condition which is undermining that fixity.

This crisis, for Williams, may very well concern that shift over from an "older" world wherein words are used as transparent vehicles to the "newer" world wherein words become themselves the objectivity, the opacity the writer engages whenever he sits down to write. Not signs but un-signs. "Foolish words." There is in the opening line of _Kora_ some such severance, some breaking away, negative in effect, but positive in the sense that any breaking away from an "older" form is a leap forward, a "plunge" (_K_, 51) into something new. And whatever is new is a beginning. "Yet I am right," we recall Williams saying to Turner, who suggested that Williams re-write the opening line to make it more comprehensible, in other words, more reasonable. But how does a writer say the experience of."Fools have big wombs" except by doing, by writing in the words.themselves -- and more especially when the mind finds itself in a blockage. Chance is there as well. With nothing but the blank page to begin with, "Fools have big wombs" is one possibility among many. It came to mind, for Williams, a start without the intentions of thought. This is what gives the statement the same kind of solidity Williams recognizes in Shakespeare's language, a writer for whom, as he says, "Words are deeds" (_EK_, 11), the very matter of his thought, "something he could not escape, opaque" (_EK_, 111).

. . . .

The actual beats at the edge of the Fool's statement in _King Lear_, but
in the opening series of three improvisations in Kora it breaks violently free. This distinction illuminates the forward push of Williams' writing. As a mirror, Shakespeare's Fool is a kind of force within Lear's mind that wants to, but cannot, escape the confinements of reason. Lear is the figure of "Reason in madness," that is to say, the figure of Reason trapped within its own limits. In Kora, on the other hand, the actual releases itself in the laughter of a fool's voice that re-connects the body in the mind to the substantiality of an actual world. "Fools have big wombs." Caught in this complexity, the writer inside the text of the writing enters a drama that enacts a movement of mind that subverts closed structures of thought wherein the actual is denied. Gaps begin to appear, both in the interstices between words and the space at the edge of words. The writing in Kora, so to speak, initiates through the act of negating, and in this sense is a pre-text -- or in other terms still, a "dadaism" that re-opens the drama of the world through its rien, rien, rien. "Count. One." A birth then, into writing as a movement within words, but as well -- and for an understanding of Kora this shift is fundamental -- into a birthing world:

This is a slight stiff dance to a waking baby whose arms have been lying curled back above his head upon the pillow, making a flower -- the eyes closed. Dead to the world! Waking is a little hand brushing away dreams. Eyes open. Here's a new world. (K, 73)

"Eyes open" -- and a world rushes in, a simple enough gesture, but as Williams came to know well, experience is so evanescent that it is almost impossible to catch up its immediacy, so quickly does it evaporate like
mist into habituated frames of perception and thought. The gaps between things that appear in the moment of perception are covered over, as words are also when they lose their original freshness. And this is all the more evident in the discursive use of language wherein experience is fixed in predetermined forms. The drama of the opening improvisation undermines this closure of meaning, and thus extends the tension between significance and unsignificance in the statement "Fools have big wombs."

Fools have big wombs. For the rest? — here is pennyroyal if one knows to use it. But time is only another liar, so go along the wall a little further: if blackberries prove bitter there'll be mushrooms, fairy-ring mushrooms, in the grass, sweetest of all fungi. (K, 31)

The defiance of the voice situates itself within a tension. Out of it, and because of it, the writer inside the writing begins to speak "'Out of deep need.'" And subversively, especially in relation to the demands of rational order. On this account, along the surface of the writing, there is to be discovered the remains, the mere shell of a discursive form. The shell reveals itself as a mode of abstraction, one instance of the way a predetermined systematization of experience imposes itself: first an assertion, then a question, then an answer to the question, then a qualification, then, finally, and almost inevitably, a proposition. This is the very cage out of which the fool's voice flies, and his gesture creates gaps that assert themselves as blanks, empty spaces appearing as "nothings" between the statements. A former coherence of thought (so we tentatively start to reconstruct the drama) has given way to the unsignificance of statements that are equalized once released from the dominance of the hierarchic structure of argumentation. It is out of this so-called "incoherence" (Pound's response) that we can hear in the writing itself the
birth of a new kind of value, one discovered in the refusal to let the mind become self-referential to its own constructs. To the fool outside, orders fabricated by the mind and overlaid onto things are distancings based upon a controlling order which is an imprisonment rather than a revelation of things.

"All things brought under the hand of the possessor crumble to nothingness" (K, 20), so Williams warns us in his "Prologue" to Kora, warns because this assumption of power over things has its cost: at its worst, the mind's closed orders can become vicious obstacles to the release of desire, more than obstacles, the instrument of a repressive mechanism which survives wholly through denial. We think of the "puritan" in Williams' In the American Grain, the "puritan" habit of mind that sustains itself through its divorce from the body of the world. It is this separation, in turn, that stands behind its methodical obsession to conquer what it cannot, or will not, experience in itself. The fool, on the other hand, estranges himself from that divorce, and in this severance, projects himself outward, into the objectivity of an otherness that now rushes in to invade his awakened mind. And the eyes open once the barriers are down.

And the voice speaks --

It seems really the body itself speaking, a very old, very certain, distinctly Rabelaisian and absolutely unflustered body, looking out through two eyes, a quick brain back of them, at some of the shows of the world. (AN, 359)

This statement from Williams' review of The Human Body (by Logan Clendening), a piece included in the "other prose" of A Novelette and Other Prose, articulates the emotional range of the body that spills out through the fool's voice: the defiance of a question ("For the rest?"), for instance, released through an answer that tempts us into meaning only to destroy it
at the same time. A difficult process to explain in static critical terms, and understandably so, but the multiple image of penny-royal that enters the improvisation in the answer reveals, however ambiguously, something of the way this complexity functions in the writing itself. At first, we may automatically assume that it must have some connection with "the rest"—perhaps those non-fools who need the assistance of some secret remedy which would liberate them to become the fools with "big wombs" they secretly desire to be, if only they had not retreated into predetermined forms that deny the particularity of the world, its substantiality. And it is this denial they turn back on the world through their oppression of the fool. Williams had explained to Turner the difficulty of living by "instinct" in a community that "would be destroyed by your mere presence did it not make an example of you, keep you subdued. These are the [real] fools and their breed is unnumbered." So "here is penny-royal," says the fool of a doctor. But who should use it, fools or non-fools? At this point, furthermore, we can't even be certain to whom the voice is speaking—himself? other fools? non-fools? The speech splinters in many directions at the same time. And the image of penny-royal, instead of clarifying, only confuses the matter more.

Being himself a doctor, Williams could quite easily have known the somewhat crazy history connected to this herb. According to Maud Grieve in A Modern Herbal penny-royal was sometimes known as "run-by-the-ground" because of the way it "'crepeth much upon the ground."\(^{10}\) The herb has (had?) for the longest time been considered the cure for any number of diverse illnesses. Grieve lists many: a blood purifier; a cure for "spasmodic, nervous and hysterical affections"; for colds; taken with wine it
heals bites; "applied to the nostrils with vinegar" it "revives those who faint and swoon"; and in other forms still, it can be used against gout, facial marks, splenetic conditions, ulcers, even leprosy and whooping cough; and more, it can be used to promote menstruation, perspiration, as a stimulant, as a way of eliminating gases from the intestines and the stomach. In other words, penny-royal (like aspirin today in our chemical world) has been understood as a kind of wonder herb. A cure-all. How seriously are we to take this advice offered by a fool who sets himself up against "the [unspecified] rest?" The reference to penny-royal could be nothing more than a pun that teases us into a meaning it simultaneously destroys, something only a fool would (or could) think. "It was deemed," Grieve says further,

by our ancestors valuable in headaches and giddiness.
We are told: 'A garland of Penny-royale made and worn about the head is of great force against the swimming in the head and the pains and giddiness thereof.'

A cure against the effects of influenza? Possibly. Or if we have in mind not influenza itself, but the image of it as an upheaval against which the mind encounters non-rational forces that cannot be controlled through systematization, then penny-royal could also be used in one of two quite contradictory ways, depending, of course, on whether we are fools or not, and according to any definition we give to the term "fool:" either to cure the confused condition (the "swimming in the head") which fools are subject to in the collapse of reason, or if we think negatively, to ease the clotting of the mind which prevents non-fools from being the fools they would like to be, could they but break the spell of reason. The interpretive activity can go in either direction. The writing calls for this play of meaning. And besides, if the gesture ("here is penny-royal") is read as
a defiance of stereotypical assumptions concerning disease, and its tone
certainly suggests as much, then it may be considered a mockery of a social
world bound to the illusion that all physical disorders can be "cured"
through the logical wizardry of medicine, whereas, in fact, as any fool
knows, disease is a natural condition of the body. Those fools need to be
"cured" of that assumption, so the fool implies, at least from this one
perspective. Yet in another very real sense, we cannot be sure which of
all the cures, if any, the voice in the text has in mind. And who, in any
case, is to use penny-royal? What, finally, is the disease? None of these
questions have determinable answers, and it would be critically absurd
(and presumptuous) to propose that they do.

However -- and possibly this is more to the point -- all the supposed
cures attached to penny-royal over the years are symptomatic of the under-
lying obsession men have with their bodies, another face of the terror
before the fact of their own physicality. There is also the further
implication that the disappearance of herbal knowledge, a result of the
separation of medicine from botany, is yet another indication of the 20th
century divorce of the mind from its ground in earth processes. The so-
called argument would then follow that the technique of herbal use belongs
to a former time when men were more intimately aware of the subtle inter-
connections between the plants of the earth and themselves as organisms
wrought of similar stuff. Who now "knows to use" penny-royal? We notice
that the voice does not say "how," even though we almost expect to hear
it. The knowledge has apparently disappeared so completely from contemporary
consciousness that very few even know to use it.

The image of penny-royal thus creates a whole complex of associations
and contexts that are left unresolved, left to play on the mind of the reader, first shooting one way toward one possible set of meanings, then shooting in what could be understood as an opposite direction, in this reversal disclosing a completely different set of possible meanings. And in between, there remains the opacity of an image that refuses to come to rest, as it might have, had it become either a simile, or symbol of some completed conceptualization or referential frame outside the text. The image, in short, is a wall.

"But time is only another liar" — so the reader is thrust forward again, across another gap in the writing. A wall is one such gap, at least the one we cannot go over or through. In language, "But" is a wall: in this improvisation, a qualification, an end to what was supposed to be an answer to a question with no ascertainable context. Another stoppage, and this despite the fact that the form of the statement apparently moves the argument forward. Perhaps now the history of penny-royal has been negated as another dead end, the herb nothing more than another falsity, a lie. There is no "ancient" wisdom retrievable from a remote past to cure the ills of the present. The present is exactly what we are in, and here are no logical transitions, no neat connections between the past and the present, no cures somewhere else in secret medicines. There is, in experience, only and always process, a one after an other after an other, not unlike the way the statements in the improvisation move, one after another with gaps between, of the same nature as experience. No way through, then, except by going straight ahead, in time, along the surface of an otherness that will not conform to rational orders. So "go along the wall," like a fool who is a fool because he stands outside the mind's closures,
but inside an objectivity that constitutes the opacity of an active world.

In some such way, we find ourselves pulled through, or more accurately, across the flat surface of the improvisation, dragging our understanding behind us like baggage, nevertheless drawn by the writing forward, and so down to the ground in the final proposition that calls into appearance those "fairy-ring mushrooms, in the grass, sweetest of all fungi." Gaps are thus not only walls. They are also edges, sharp dividing lines. Or "clouds," as the voice in the improvisation following this one says, on the "world's edge," the image a figure of that instant of perception when the eyes open and "the great pink mallow" appears "singly in the wet, topping reeds" (K, 31). Here the mind of the fool enters -- despite, no, because of the disjunctures along the way -- the same actual that was before apparently "subdued." This movement, a crossing over, is swift, like an arrow finding its own end, the voice coming to land at a moment of beginning. The dawn breaks, the eyes open, and there are the mushrooms "in the grass, sweetest of all fungi." The writing itself enacts the shift of attention that gives rise to a birthing world.

Fungi, that is to say, are manifestations, living manifestations, of an actual in which transformation is primary. From the perspective of earth, nothing remains static, no particular forms of life exempt from the endless push forward as new forms replace old. This is essentially what Williams says to Harriet Monroe in 1913: "Now life is above all things else at any moment subversive of life as it was the moment before -- always new, irregular" (SL, 23-24). Or to quote Charles Olson's well-known and precise formulation: "What does not change / is the will to change." Change, the fact of it, and time, the condition of things. Fungi are the very image of
this "will to change" that constantly renews itself through a destructive process.

We all know how amazed we are to discover mushrooms in the grass, they may be "fairy-ring mushrooms," after a rainfall in the close dampness of an early autumn morning -- the season, incidentally, that Kora opens out into -- where the day before we saw nothing. Mushrooms appear that suddenly and mysteriously, like flowers opening for the first time, splitting the earth and rising in night's silences. And yet, from childhood, we also remember how many times we were warned against just any mushrooms. Many of them, though beautiful in appearance, kill the organism that consumes them. This parasitic form of fungi survives by breaking up, and thus destroying the cells of the invaded body, in effect, not unlike the action of influenza bacteria. In either case, the human organism is victimized precisely because it is material.

Fungi are unique in terms of the way they contradict the more conventional categories we use to distinguish plant from animal life. No doubt the doctor-Williams would have been intrigued by this, the writer-Williams possibly even more so. It is their peculiarity through which they become very particular. They are plants, for instance, but they do not grow like plants. As Grieve informs us in A Modern Herbal,

\begin{quote}
Fungi are those plants which are colourless; they have no green chlorophyll within them, and it is this green substance which enables the higher plants to build up, under the influence of sunlight, the starches and sugars which ultimately form our food.
\end{quote}

They have adjusted to this condition by living "as parasites on other living plants or animals" or by living on "decaying matter." And further, unlike other plants, they are similar to animals "in chemical composition." They
too "absorb oxygen and exhale carbonic acid." And while some are "very agreeable to the smell," others, in decaying smell "more like putrescent animal than vegetable matter." 14

All of these contradictory qualities point to the possibility that fungi can be considered so-called "lower" plants, like the fool in the human kingdom, in fact, the prototype of the fool in the plant kingdom. Berries, like blackberries, belong to the "higher" plants, those that grow upward toward the sun and that use the energy of the sun to transform their chlorophyll into food. In direct contrast, fungi "derive their energy by breaking up highly complex substances and, when these are broken up in the living plant, the living plant suffers." 15 In this sense, they almost seem un-natural, but what is more natural than bacteria, moulds, mildews, toadstools and mushrooms -- and what, we might add, is more natural than the fool, whose anger and doubletalk subvert the pretension of "higher" thought by making men aware of their "lower" and more common nature, their physicality which subjects them to change?

"Decay" is a term we apply to the breakup of living substances. We don't mind using the word referentially: we talk quite easily about the "decay" of a system of beliefs, or the "decay" of words, as Williams does in a piece published in The Little Review in December, 1918, a special "American Number."

Anger spitting through a mush of lumpy stuff -- mouldy words, lie-clots -- transforms it into that which lets a world beyond come through, before that, blocked out. 16

Here anger becomes an epidemic force that cuts through "mouldy words," and by so breaking up a fallen ("decay," literally, as a "falling away or down") language, allows a world to appear that before remained "blocked out."
the anger that Williams talks about and the way fungi survive at all similar? There is some connection, we feel, but the voice in the text does not provide a discourse on the "subject." There is, nevertheless, an anger being released and a defiance as well, and though neither are explained as such, the effect is evident enough in the writing itself of the opening improvisation of *Kora*, which ends with a descent to the ground through a proposition that turns perception upsidedown: "if blackberries prove bitter," the voice says, "there'll be mushrooms, fairy-ring mushrooms, in the grass, sweetest of all fungi."

Perhaps we are being indirectly reminded that "decay" as it applies to living organisms makes most of us uneasy, disturbs us, forced as we are into a recognition that all living things, ourselves included, are subject to transformation. Mouldy bread, mildew on our shoes. The common cold. We live in the midst of fungi, our bodies prey to them. Still, we have no difficulty eating them in the form of mushrooms, the "sweetest of all fungi." There is a great deal of verbal and intellectual play in the improvisation, but the play is altogether serious. Change is inherent in any given form, and fungi are the very image of this constancy. They survive through the decay of living substances, breaking up complex forms (the human included) in order to keep re-appearing in form. This is the same life force that cuts loose in the fool's tongue, a flood of words that come flowing into the mind of the writer. And the act of writing in words is a "wedge," to use the title of one of Williams' books of poems, that opens up gaps, like the saxifrage through rock, another key image in Williams' work, or like the "fairy-ring mushrooms" through the earth, thus giving rise to the crisis without which writing could not become actual. Does writing as a shift into the play of language then give access to the substantiality of the world?
Or does the world, its otherness, force on the mind the equally radical nature of language, its substantiality? The questions spin on their own axes. Williams discovers a back and forth crossing over between language and the world as a context that necessitates the act of writing. That, in itself, is the breakthrough. What else to do on this bridge but write in order thus to find out what, if anything, may come of it.

"For what it's worth," the next improvisation begins, and the voice begins again, this time landing on the transformed body of one Jacob Louslinger, a type of fool, a dead bum who has been invaded by the earth:

For what it's worth: Jacob Louslinger, white haired, stinking, dirty bearded, cross eyed, stammer tongued, broken voiced, bent backed, ball kneed, cave bellied, mucous faced -- deathling, -- found lying in the weeds "up there by the cemetary." "Looks to me as if he'd been bumming around the meadows for a couple of weeks." Shoes twisted into incredible lilies: out at the toes, heels, tops, sides, soles. Meadow flower! ha, mallow! at last I have you. (Rot dead marigolds -- an acre at a time! Gold, are you?) Ha, clouds will touch world's edge and the great pink mallow stand singly in the wet, topping reeds and -- a closet full of clothes and good shoes and my-thirty-year's-master's-daughter's two cows for me to care for and a winter room with a fire in it -- . I would rather feed pigs in Moonachie and chew calamus root and break crab's claws at an open fire: age's lust loose! (K, 31)

The language of the improvisation beats time to the composition of this figure, possibly a deflected mirror of one of the fools with "big wombs": "broken voiced, bent backed, ball kneed, cave bellied, mucous faced --" the opaque words in the list giving way to the lovely moment of revelation. A "deathling." The exact word for a man whose decaying body shows him to be, in death, absolutely and utterly a creature of nature -- shall we say, an "earthling" as well? The body of Louslinger becomes the ground out of which flowers grow, earth substance. Juxtaposed against the particularity
of his corpse, a voice out of the social realm that estranged him: "'Looks to me as if he'd been bumming around the meadows for a couple of weeks.'"
The empty response gestures a collapsed language that numbs perception and shields the speaker by distancing him from the actuality of Louslinger's transformation. Subverting this narrow, self-enclosed (and smug) voice of cliché, the restless voice of the fool of a writer ("Shoes twisted into incredible lilies: out at the toes, heels, tops, sides, soles") enters the image of Louslinger's decay in death. He thereby aligns himself with Louslinger's fate, the instance of a man estranged from the "Neatness and finish" (K, 71) of social forms of speech that gloss his death and simply sweep it under the rug with a handful of empty words. The rug of clean minds,

Minds like beds always made up,
(more stony than a shore)
unwilling or unable. (P, 13)

The inability or the unwillingness to say "deathling" is a denial of the body's desire to escape the rigidity of perceptions predetermined by narrow social norms. "Minds like beds always made up" are, in this sense, caught in the divorce from the physical that Williams attacks in "science" and "philosophy." They have retreated from the substantiality of the world into categorical frames of reference, social norms another face of those forms that cut off the crab's feelers to make it fit into a box. If change is the one constant in a live world, then man is an organism in nature, continuous with its processes, his body made of the same stuff as other living things, a mushroom say, or one Jacob Louslinger. As Whitehead -- one of the tribe of 20th century thinkers Williams held in the highest respect, "O Whitehead! / teach well!" (CLP, 161) he says in "Choral: the
Pink Church," a hymn, in part, to those whose work bridges the divorce between body and mind -- so effectively reminds us in *Modes of Thought*, the body of man

is part of the external world, continuous with it. In fact, it is just as much part of nature as anything else there -- a river, or a mountain, or a cloud. Also, if we are fussily exact, we cannot define where a body begins and where external nature ends. Consider one definite molecule. It is part of nature. It has moved about for millions of years. Perhaps it started from a distant nebula. It enters the body; it may be as a factor in some edible vegetable; or it passes into the lungs as part of the air. At what exact point as it enters the mouth, or as it is absorbed through the skin, is it part of the body? At what exact moment, later on, does it cease to be part of the body? Exactness is out of the question. It can only be obtained by some trivial convention.

And Whitehead's further conclusion the doctor-writer Williams could only have assented to, and not without a certain amount of liberating laughter:

Thus we arrive at this definition of our bodies: The Human Body is that region of the world which is the primary field of human expression.¹⁸

A wild and terrifying conclusion for the rational mind to entertain.

What, for instance, would Williams' townspeople in Rutherford (in 1917) have said about Whitehead's statement? If not in Rutherford, then in Williams' contemporary America, the same America that refused to accept Marcel Duchamp's urinal (in 1917) as a work of art, and despite the fact that it was named "Fountain" and signed by "R. Mutt?"¹⁹ The separation of the human body from the body of the world to Whitehead (and to Duchamp as well) is only a "trivial convention," necessary perhaps, and understandable perhaps, but simply not true to man's creaturely nature. The consciousness of physicality is written all over *Kora in Hell*, an intimate medical sense of the human as an organism in nature. Three examples come to mind, all of them providing a context for the drama of divorce in the second of the
three opening improvisations.

Filth and vermin though they shock the over-nice are imperfections of the flesh closely related in the just imagination of the poet to excessive cleanliness. After some years of varied experience with the bodies of the rich and the poor a man finds little to distinguish between them, bulks them as one and bases his working judgments on other matters. (K, 46)

A man's carcass has no more distinction than the carcass of an ox. (K, 62)

Pathology literally speaking is a flower garden. Syphilis covers the body with salmon-red petals. The study of medicine is an inverted sort of horticulture. Over and above all this floats the philosophy of disease which is a stern dance. One of its most delightful gestures is bringing flowers to the sick. (K, 77-78)

"A flower garden" -- just what Jacob Louslinger's body has become in death, a "deathling" re-integrated back into the common ground where social distinctions carry no weight whatsoever. At this level of reduction, all men are creatures of nature. So the fool's voice in the improvisation slides past the voice of the social as the writing itself moves toward an affirmation of a world in change. The image of herb-flowers surfaces:
"Meadow flower! ha, mallow! at last I have you. (Rot dead marigolds -- an acre at a time! Gold, are you?)." Here is a more authentic basis of value, the fool's gold to set against a repressive social order that sifts the actual through its predetermined orders like a collander. By shutting out the very thing that is nearest to human desire, it becomes the front of a "puritanism" that closes "all the world out" (IAG, 112) and retreats "into one safe mold" (IAG, 112), "blind to every contingency" (IAG, 112) that would release the mind to the body of the world. The voice in the improvisation rejects this escape, preferring instead the energy and passion of the ground revealed in Louslinger's transformed body: "I would rather feed pigs in Moonachie and chew calamus root and break crab's claws at an
open fire: age's lust loose!"

The third improvisation more specifically and directly plays this release into desire against a puritanic society:

Talk as you will, say: "No woman wants to bother with children in this country;" -- speak of your Amsterdam and the whitest aprons and brightest doorknobs in Christendom. And I'll answer you: Gleaming doorknobs and scrubbed entries have heard the songs of the housemaids at sun-up and -- housemaids are wishes. Whose? Ha! the dark canals are whistling, whistling for who will cross to the other side. If I remain with hands in pocket leaning upon my lamppost -- why -- I bring curses to a hag's lips and her daughter on her arm knows better than I can tell you -- best to blush and out with it than back beaten after.

In Holland at daybreak, of a fine spring morning, one sees the housemaids beating rugs before the small houses of such a city as Amsterdam, sweeping, scrubbing the low entry steps and polishing doorbells and doorknobs. By night perhaps there will be an old woman with a girl on her arm, hissing and whistling across a deserted canal to some late loiterer trudging aimlessly on beneath the gas lamps. (K, 31-32)

In the social world surrounding the fool of a writer, sexuality is so covered over that the women in it come to deny childbirth. But he at least knows that human nature cannot be caged so easily. Either in Amsterdam or Rutherford, the same impulse to release desire ("age's lust loose!") presses through the obsessive concern of minds locked into "excessive cleanliness." Underneath the gleaming doorknobs and scrubbed doorways lie the dormant but restless "songs of the housemaids at sun-up -- and housemaids are wishes."

In this synapse, the voice in the writing jumps a gap and is drawn outside the norms of his community, toward the "dark canals" that call him, whistling their siren music, tempting him to stray, to become a vagrant in thought, and so embrace what he really desires, the "daughter" of the old lady. He
either allows himself to undertake the initiatory night journey across the

canal, or he curses himself to a life with "a closet full of clothes and
good shoes and my-thirty-year's-master's-daughter's two cows for me to care
for and a winter room with a fire in it --."

The italicized "interpretation" to this third improvisation, written
in a very matter-of-fact tone, almost like a tourist brochure, or a set
of stage directions, intensifies the experience of distance set up: the
portrait of a man who is just beginning to become a fool, just beginning to
awaken to those desires his community outlaws, just beginning to split
away from the social forms that shape his limited ego. And the distancing
works both ways, one alienation spawning another. The community (supposedly
in America, possibly Rutherford, or any small American town in the early
years of this century) clings to the form of a past world, an Amsterdam
say, that lodges in their minds as a "perfection" they superimpose onto
another place. They thus deny a present that should be met on wholly other
terms. It is this removal, the trap of it, that the voice in the improvi-
sation actively estranges himself from, possessed as he is by an unknown,
but more immediate world that comes to him across a gap. This other
world contains a darker realm of feeling that the daytime world of "Chris-
tendom" cannot accommodate within its narrow perspectives. Better in this
impasse to become "some late loiterer trudging aimlessly on beneath the gas
lamps," to become a vagrant wanderer, like Jacob Louslinger, a bum who went
contrary to the habituated norms of his society and roamed the meadows of
desire. This loosening of the mind the "interpretation" poses as a
destructive force that both estranges and relieves at the same time. A
closed world breaks up and scatters into the open spaces of the night, in
Holland so in America, where the dis-placed voice of the writer sets out, however stumblingly, to discover, as far as possible, the real value of a present immediate to his desire. The situation presented indirectly in the third improvisation and its "interpretation" is similar to that of an immigrant in a new world: he can either overlay it with some "Amsterdam" he carries in his memory, or take the risk, which is quite possibly the news about Jacob Louslinger that no one in town, except the writer -- "best to blush and out with it than back beaten after" -- wishes to acknowledge.

In the collapsed world of King Lear, the Fool and his doubletalk reflect the corruption of language into the transparency of flattery. In Kora in Hell, the fool of a word-man of a writer also fools in a fool's tongue, but more importantly, through this disturbance, undergoes the confusion of a mind turning a mirror on itself, first to reach the edge of its limits, only then to come into the influence of a more primary ground of its energies -- and we can add, outside the "dead weight of logical burdens." "The simple expedient of a mirror," we are told in Kora,

has practical use for arranging the hair, for observation of the set of a coat, etc. But as an exercise for the mind the use of a mirror cannot be too highly recommended. Nothing of a mechanical nature could be more conducive to that elasticity of the attention which frees the mind for the enjoyment of its special prerogatives. (K, 78)

Writing that makes the attention elastic by calling attention to itself as a writing also acts as a mirror that frees the mind to the "special prerogatives" of its own inherent nature. "Fools have big wombs" reveals in its opacity a sudden rupture of discursive meaning that is an opening, a gap that is a reduction to zero. A splintered voice breaks onto the empty space of the
page and does nothing more than begin to speak out its necessities, the
same necessities that have driven it to speech in the first place.

I'd write nothing planned but take up a pencil, put the
paper before me, and write anything that came into my
mind. (A, 158)

Williams wrote the Improvisations, as he says, "For relief, to keep myself
from planning and thinking at all" (A, 158). No plan and no "thought" but
the writing itself, and the scattered and opaque effect of the first series
of improvisations make evident this absence of a subjective order. The
words come first, what flows into the mind is heard and written down. "It
fell by chance on his ear but he was ready, he was alert" (CAN, 171), we
read in The Great American Novel, another text of improvisations written
not long after Kora in Hell was finally published.

"Talk as you will," says the voice in "Improvisation I.3" -- but such
"talk," governed as it is by the intentions of the will, is subservient to
an already determined frame, the words shaped by the speaker to justify an
end prior to the words. No risk involved, no chance. This is the very
sort of mis-use of language the writer in Kora wants to rid himself of, and
specifically by keeping his mind inside the writing that gets written by
writing, in this manner allowing the writing to determine the movement of
his mind. Kora in Hell thus maintains a hard surface and the language of
it does not pander to the burden of a referential frame external to the text
-- rather, undermines that habit of mind. The insistence throughout, what-
ever the particular nature of the subject-matter that finds its way into the
text, is that writing not become a vehicle for something else but be itself
the "matter" the writer engages. The shifts and leaps, the gaps between
words and statements, the absence of neat transitions between improvisations,
the mockery of discursive thought, the verbal puns, the ambiguity of image,
the reversals, the necessity for speech, the disjuncture of meaning made possible through chance juxtapositions: all of this unruly but anticipatory and open activity encourages the reader to understand Kora as the text of a drama. The normative assumption, that a writer simply expresses (i.e. "presses out" of himself) what he preconceives, words the front for his subjectivity, his so-called view of the world, or his beliefs, or his wisdom, or his "ideas," whatever, is challenged and thrown back on itself. In this reversal, writing ceases to be a means of furthering a personal cause and becomes a method, the end of which is contained in its own processes. In other words, writing is the very medium that draws the mind outside the barriers of discursive modes of thought, those modes that distance it from its more authentic place in a live world. As Williams says in a later essay, interestingly enough called "Revelation" (1947), "The objective in writing is, to reveal" (SE, 268). What else, but the mind's processes. In this same essay, he thus goes on to talk about a "lightning calculator" in the mind, which writing releases --

you know, the thing that made Shakespeare seem an intellectual. It worked. Watch it work, that's all there is to writing (if it works). Turn it loose. Let it turn itself into a codex on the page. That's writing, revelation . . . . (SE, 268)

Against which, a statement from Kora:

Bla! Bla! Bla! Heavy talk is talk that waits upon a deed. Talk is servile that is set to inform. (K, 17)

The fool's voice -- and this was the advantage for Williams when he first sat down to write the Improvisations -- becomes a necessity, is constituted in that moment the mind escapes its closed orders and enters the open space of writing. Now all forms of thought and preception that are divorced from the actual lose their authority, driven as they are up
against the wall of an immediate present. Now form is no longer even conceivable as a fixed entity, a separable whole. Now form is attached to the movement of experience. Or to quote Robert Creeley's more precise wording: "No forms less / than activity." Or more, if we are on the other side of the canal, with the writer in the opening series of improvisations, only now beginning to journey, only now crossing over.

Here the act of crossing over is the issue of an initiation into an experience of the world previously hidden beneath the layering abstractions of the mind. The writer inside the writing finds himself estranged from a former closure, but fool that he is, he also finds himself drawn into an openness made possible by writing, outside where the mind can be re-attached to an actual world. The drama of the opening improvisations, to this extent, reveals the first ascending shape, the first configurational appearance, in Kora, of another world that is just coming into the present of the writer who is just crossing over into it. The shift that constitutes the fabric of this dynamic operates in the writing. The writing, then, works -- and in reading Kora, we glimpse the awakening mind of the writer composing a writing consonant with the texture of an actual world, the one precisely that he lives.
"Flexibility of thought," Williams says in *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, "is so precious that sometimes it seems the only virtue of the mind -- the only virtue the mind needs" (EK, 126). If the whole of *Kora in Hell* has one underlying drive, it is this insistence upon "flexibility" as against the kind of thought that resists experience by attempting to fix into rigid categories its essentially open nature. This drive, we might add, is so basic to an understanding of Williams that it can be taken as one of the root assumptions of all his work as a writer. And as a reader as well. Here, for instance, is the ground theme of Pound's *Cantos*: "a closed mind which clings to its power -- about which the intelligence beats seeking entrance" (SE, 106). Or take the following statement of Whitman's significance for 20th century writing, again a reflection of Williams' desire for the same dynamic in his own work:

For God's sake! He broke through the deadness of copied forms which keep shouting above everything that wants to get said today drowning out one man with the accumu-
lated weight of a thousand voices in the past— re-establishing the tyrannies of the past, the very tyrannies that we are seeking to diminish. The structure of the old is active, it says no! to everything in propaganda and poetry that wants to say yes. Whitman broke through that. That was basic and good. (SE, 218)

And then reverse the same process, and we have, in Williams' reading of American history, a whole group of first immigrants (they are still arriving from places like Amsterdam in the early years of the 20th century), who came to America, a "new" place for them, and forced it to conform to a cultural form that had become "old" the moment they left it behind. Something wholly original was thus lost to them right from the start. They lacked the "flexibility" of mind to recognize what they did not know -- how could they? -- but which they might have experienced. The new place demanded a "complete reconstruction of their most intimate cultural make-up, to accord with the new conditions" (SE, 134), but the early settlers, most of them, turned their backs on this newness and retreated into the fixed perspective of a "past" they carried in their minds.

The battle between the "old" and the "new" -- really a battle between an inflexible and a flexible mind -- finds its counterpart in the internalized drama of Kora where Williams, as a writer, turns a mirror on himself. In the dislocation that ensues, the voice that strikes out, in the opening set of improvisations, for the open territory of the night-time world of desire becomes un-settled, becomes in fact a wanderer who strays from the "deadness of copied forms," his own former "closed mind" in back of them. He thus sets out uncertainly to discover what "new conditions" lie outside the imposed limits of any given completion of thought or perception. "It is to loosen the attention," we hear Williams saying over and over as we read Kora, "my attention since I occupy part of the field,
that I write these improvisations" (K, 14). Inside a field, of course, the mind is part of a complex of interacting forces. So the term "attention" here plays in two directions at the same time: against the military sense of attention as a motionless posturing or a frozen state of perception, and toward the kind of flexible attention that enacts a live consciousness of otherness. To illustrate, Williams turns to a specific instance, one that provides a context for his sharp antipathy toward perspectival forms of perception.

"Here I clash with Wallace Stevens" (K, 14). Leaving aside the more obviously personal basis of Williams' response to Stevens' letter --

Wallace Stevens is a fine gentleman whom Cannell likened to a Pennsylvania Dutchman who has suddenly become aware of his habits and taken to "society" in self-defense. (K, 15)

-- what is the nature of this "clash?" "Given a fixed point of view, realistic, imagistic or what you will" (italics added), Stevens says, everything adjusts itself to that point of view; and the process of adjustment is a world in flux, as it should be for a poet. But to fidget with points of view leads always to new beginnings and incessant new beginnings lead to sterility. (K, 15)

Stevens advocates the necessity for poets to maintain the stability of a given perspective on the world so that they not be stuck with "incessant new beginnings." And while Williams could have agreed with his assumption that "the process of adjustment" is tied to "a world in flux," he takes issue with Stevens' conclusion that a poet survives only by relying upon a "fixed point of view." Nothing could be further removed from Williams' own desire in Kora to go, as he says the imagination does, "from one thing to another" (K, 14) and from his subsequent desire to remain in a present that demands a continual re-adjustment of perspectives: the relativity, not the
centrality of the self implicit in Stevens' admitted "distaste for miscellany" (K, 15) and his desire for a 'poetic' point of view with which a poet can order the disparate nature of experience.

What Stevens sees as a liability to be overcome, Williams thus sees as a condition to be met. Granted, experience is essentially an open-ended process -- no disagreement there -- but according to Williams, it is this very fact that undercuts the viability, at least for the writer, of any given perspective or "mode" (K, 14) the mind may use to make the world adjust to it. The naturalist or the "scientific" (K, 14) perspective, or the "real- istic, imagistic or what you will" perspective are all finally rigid categories of thought, static frames of reference divorced from the live drama of experience, merely examples of a "fixed point of view" around which "everything adjusts itself." Such perspectives -- to Williams, "the walking devil of modern life" (K, 14) -- impose a form of predetermination onto things and thus subordinate them to an order into which they are made to disappear, as things. They may be, in this way, subdued by the mind, but right here, so Williams discovered by writing Kora, the mind necessarily forgoes the flexibility it both needs and wants if it is to survive as a live force in the world. The present can never be fixed into place. It moves in time, always forward, always irregularly, always new. "Time presses" (AN, 278). And so Williams answers Stevens by calling for the kind of writing that works contrary to perspectival reliances. Such writing, by provoking a crisis -- in effect like the epidemic in A Novelette through which the writer was suddenly thrown into a world cleansed of his own subjectivity -- would overcome the tendency of the mind to adopt a "fixed point of view." In other words, "incessant new beginnings" do not necessarily lead to "sterility," but can become the way the mind can constantly
renew its own resources. A few pages further on in the "Prologue," against Stevens' advice, Williams goes on to offer his own prescription: "It is," he says, "in the continual and violent refreshing of the idea that love and good writing have their security" (K, 22). Change keeps the mind alive, both in love and "good writing."

Many individual improvisations objectify Williams' statement, but one in particular is fascinating both for its texture and subtlety. The domestic drama in "Improvisation XVIII.1" (K, 64) reveals the cost of denying the "violent refreshing" of love; and it involves, curiously enough, a writer who uses the medium of writing to voice his misgivings to his wife. And he begins:

How deftly we keep love from each other. It is no trick at all: the movement of a cat that leaps a low barrier.

Once again, as in the opening improvisation, we hear a voice inside the words, but inside as well the immediacy of the gap between his wife and himself, separated as they are by the mediacy of a "barrier" based upon a sentimental idealism. The "you," so the voice intimates, denies her present condition by fitting, to use some words from the interpretation to "Improvisation V.1," "the emotions of a certain state to a preceding state to which they are in no way related" (K, 38-39). The irritation in the voice is transformed into a smooth-talk through which he engages in a play of words with the "you." "How deftly" -- skillfully, neatly, orderly, predictably, almost according to plan, to a reasoned order -- they prevent themselves from releasing themselves to what they desire. The mind is swift, surmounts barriers, not by meeting them head-on, but by constructing another barrier -- that is, by leaping over the present, or by falling back on the mental construct of a "past," an abstraction that closes the world out. What is
more natural than this retreat into subjectivity? There is no "trick" to it at all.

The voice continues to taunt the "you" with this kind of word-play as the drama of the improvisation continues. Words both conceal and reveal:

You have -- if the truth be known -- loved only one man and that was before my time. Past him you have never thought nor desired to think.

The "you" has locked herself into a perspective around which a former lover has "adjusted" himself, and the "past" she carries around in her head is a "thought" that conceals her real desire to be in a present. The voice admits his own failings as well. Both of them, he says, have retreated from the immediacy of their needs, what they would more openly desire, could they simply destroy the barrier separating them from their own time, the one they are in, now. Two no's on their part can lead to a yes that would negate the tyranny of the past --

But -- it is not that we have not felt a certain rumbling, a certain stirring of the earth, but what has it amounted to?

Nothing so far, because they are caught in a frozen state -- at attention -- the empty perspective of their "perfection" a view of a completed past now superimposed onto a present that calls for wholly new feelings. In their social role as husband and wife, in that narrowness, their two "apparently healthy" children make them appear to "have proved fertile." But they have never met in the present as lovers. "There is only one way out," says the voice, at first thinking that he must find some way (possibly through his "basket of words") to supplant "in your memory the brilliance of the old firmhold." But this, he quickly admits, "is impossible." And how can it be otherwise, given the doubleness of his
address?

The perspective into which the first love has disappeared is finally tough and unyielding: "Ergo: I am a blackguard." Through the irresolute but tense interplay of the writing in the improvisation, the voice arrives outside the perspective of his wife -- apparently where he began, but with one crucial difference: now the divorce between them has been brought into the immediacy of experience through the same words that, in this instance at least, have not been able to break the perspectives they are caught in. The voice thus becomes the enemy of what the "you" protects: "Ergo: I am a blackguard." By so "deftly" keeping "love from each other," they both suffer the abuse of their imaginations, the one force that could break the spell of their static relationship and draw them into the moment of the actual that now only rumbles beneath the surface of their lives.

The act is disclosed by the imagination of it. But of first importance is to realize that the imagination leads and the deed comes behind.

So we are told by the distant but clear voice in the interpretation, and this statement essentializes, in one swift thread of thought, the experience presented in the improvisation: to dis-close is an act of negating a closure, which is, in that reversal, an opening. As a live force, the imagination acts by revealing itself through the destruction of those perspectives that attempt to prevent it from acting.

How then to get the imagination to lead?

Having once taken the plunge the situation that preceded it becomes obsolete which a moment before was alive with malignant rigidities. (K, 51)

This is the risk that neither the voice nor the "you" in the improvisation is willing to take, though the voice suggests that he would take it were
all the barriers down. A "plunge" is a violent thrust forward (or downward) into an indeterminate situation, we say a stab in the dark, that harbours something altogether new. It is, at the same time, a rupture with a situation that turns into a "past" once the ties with it are severed. In this way a "plunge" is a movement away from the "malignant rigidities" of any given perspective, the "known" world of it giving way to an experience of reversal. The break with any structured "past" -- and the "perfect" memory of a former love is one such structure -- is a change that is really an "adjustment," a shift into a present caged by a perspective that does not admit of change. The order of any given "fixed point of view" maintains itself through a removal from time and its exigencies, which is exactly the nature of a "perfection" that even a "basket of words" cannot feed, so stubbornly does it resist the actuality of time. "Ergo: I am a blackguard."

Full-stop.

If the concern is writing instead of love, and if further, the writer too must stay on the track of the immediate to keep his mind flexible, then what is he to do in the absence of precedents? This is, in large measure, the field of exploration that the writing in the second set of improvisations in Kora jumps into -- the writing process itself, its possible despair as well as its possibilities:

1

Why go further? One might conceivably rectify the rhythm, study all out and arrive at the perfection of a tiger lily or a china doorknob. One might lift all out of the ruck, be a worthy successor to -- the man in the
moon. Instead of breaking the back of a willing phrase why not try to follow the wheel through — approach death at a walk, take in all the scenery. There's as much reason one way as the other and then — one never knows — perhaps we'll bring back Eurydice — this time!

Between two contending forces there may at all times arrive that moment when the stress is equal on both sides so that with a great pushing a great stability results giving a picture of perfect rest. And so it may be that once upon the way the end drives back upon the beginning and a stoppage will occur. At such a time the poet shrinks from the doom that is calling him forgetting the delicate rhythms of perfect beauty, preferring in his mind the gross buffetings of good and evil fortune.

2

Ay dio! I would say so much were it not for the tunes changing, changing, darting so many ways. One step and the cart's left you sprawling. Here's the way! and -- you're hip bogged. And there's blame of the light too: when eyes are humming birds who'll tie them with a lead string? But it's the tunes they want most, -- send them skipping out at the tree tops. Whistle then! who'd stop the leaves swarming; curving down the east in their braided jackets? Well enough -- but there's small comfort in naked branches when the heart's not set that way.

A man's desire is to win his way to some hilltop. But against him seem to swarm a hundred jumping devils. These are his constant companions, these are the friendly images which he has invented out of his mind and which are inviting him to rest and to disport himself according to hidden reasons. The man being half a poet is cast down and longs to rid himself of his torment and his tormentors.

3

When you hang your clothes on the line you do not expect to see the line broken and them trailing in the mud. Nor would you expect to keep your hands clean by putting them in a dirty pocket. However and of course if you are a market man, fish, cheeses and the like going under your fingers every minute in the hour you would not leave off the business and expect to handle a
basket of fine laces without at least mopping yourself
on a towel, soiled as it may be. Then how will you
expect a fine trickle of words to follow you through the
intimacies of this dance without -- oh, come let us walk
together into the air awhile first. One must be watch-
man to much secret arrogance before his ways are tuned
to these measures. You see there is a dip of the ground
between us. You think you can leap up from your gross
caresses of these creatures and at a gesture fling it
all off and step out in silver to my finger tips. Ah,
it is not that I do not wait for you, always! But my
sweet fellow -- you have broken yourself without pur-
pose, you are -- Hark! it is the music! Whence does it
come? What! Out of the ground? Is it this that you
have been preparing for me? Ha, goodbye, I have a
rendezvous in the tips of three birch sisters. Encouragez
vos musiciens! Ask them to play faster. I will return
later. Ah you are kind. -- and I? must dance with
the wind, make my own snow flakes, whistle a contrapuntal
melody to my own fugue! Huzza then, this is the dance of
the blue moss bank! Huzza then, this is the mazurka of
the hollow log! Huzza then, this is the dance of rain in
the cold trees. (K, 32-34)

"That which is past is past forever and no power of the imagination
can bring it back again" (K, 36): in writing, this past could be the sub-
jectivity of the writer, the imposition of a preconceived perspective onto
words used to "express" it, and the resulting aesthetic form that strives
for the symmetrical neatness of balance and coherence, but at the expense
of the experience of language, the actual words themselves in the ear of
the writer, if he is listening, which do not conform to the regular (or
regulated) patterns of aesthetic completion. The bird of the actual is
slippery -- in transition, in flight -- like the earth which is constantly
reversing stable orders: "laughs at the names / by which they think to trap
it. Escapes!" (P, 33). The caged bird is no longer a bird but the ghost
of one; the actual bird has escaped, or for the possessor, crumbled to
nothing. If it is so wily, though, how then, if at all, can a writer match
up to its movement in time? "Why go further?" Maybe there is no solution,
no method, no way through. Description is of no use, since it offers a mere "copy" of that world, nor can the writer escape into an aesthetic transcendence by shaping the words, forcing them to comply with a willed pattern. Both methods simply reflect the priority of an intention on the part of the writer that precedes the act of writing. Neither way thus works -- in both the actual is lost to a predetermined and hypothetical "past."

"Instead of breaking the back of a willing phrase," on the other hand, "why not try to follow the wheel through -- approach death at a walk, take in all the scenery." Who knows, "perhaps we'll bring back Eurydice -- this time!"

Orpheus, we recall, was given a chance by Hades to retrieve Eurydice from the world of the dead, but with one condition: that he not look back before they both reach the surface of the earth. Orpheus, of course, could not resist the temptation to look back upon the beauty of Eurydice, and besides, he was afraid that she might disappear. He thus got caught in a double-bind -- and he made the fatal gesture, looked back and lost Eurydice again. The gesture of 'looking back' -- in this context, at least -- is a retreat from the difficulty of the present, figuratively a reliance on the past, any past, even the moment before. As the image of Beauty, Eurydice must be revealed in the present where nothing is certain, where "There's as much reason one way as the other." And here we recall Williams' words from *The Great American Novel*:

> There is beauty in the bellow of the BLAST, etc. from all previous significance. -- To me beauty is purity. To me it is discovery, a race on the ground. (*GAN*, 171)

Eurydice cannot be dragged up from the dead. She must be discovered in the immediacy of experience, anew.
A personal intention prior to the act of writing is another such past, as is any fixed perspective that imposes a form onto language. The words, after all, are "just words." They cannot be expected to adjust to the mind. Or if they are forced into a patterned conformity, they thereby lose their substantiality and become ghosts of themselves -- and the world they embody disappears with them. In this impasse, why not then simply listen to them in all their indeterminacy? What is to be lost anyway, anything is better than a transcendence that is nothing more than a dependence on another time, that time, not "this time." In any case, what is the whole obsession for the completion of a decorous order -- the rhythm rectified, an apparent "perfection" achieved, the writing lifted out of the ruck -- but a stifling stasis, the possession of a world gone dead. Any such balance (a "perfection") must perforce be artificial, out of time. Any such "picture of perfect rest" must be a "stoppage," a separation from the actual which never ceases to move in time. At this end of thought, so the voice says, the poet, for the survival of his mind, forgets "the delicate rhythms of perfect beauty, preferring in his mind the gross buffetings of good and evil fortune."

The "buffetings" -- and "the tunes changing, changing, darting so many ways," nothing secure and at attention, the actual constantly forcing the mind to shift perspectives. "Here's the way! and -- you're hip bogged." The actual is that kind of dense wall, simply there, but if it is that, its surface is precisely what the mind desires, the "scene shifting" in "Improvisation XX.1," which transforms the same wall into the drama of experience: "Climb now? The wall's clipped off too, only its roots are left" (K, 69). The eyes by nature wander, here there and everywhere; they are "humming birds" that cannot be tied down by a "lead string," moving as they
do from thing to thing as desire moves in its search to actualize itself in the world. No aesthetic forms can "stop the leaves swarming; curving down the east in their braided jackets." If writing is to work, it must become an extension of this movement.

For the writer in the second improvisation of "Improvisation II," however, this kind of writing remains at the level of possibility. As yet he has not figured his way through to a method that would enable him to step onto a moving cart. It is one thing to acknowledge the storm of the actual, but much more difficult for the "heart" to become it in words, or as the voice says, "there's small comfort in naked branches when the heart's not set that way."

The greatest enemy to the full release of desire in writing — and this is the tune the eyes "want most" — is the mind itself, "the demon" that "drives us" (P, 272) and an uncertain power that "can trick us" (PB, 75) into settling for much less than what we desire. The interpretation to the second improvisation offers an exact diagnosis of the mind's limit, the manner especially in which it constructs those subjective "images," referential fronts for "hidden reasons" outside the work itself, to that extent, wholly solipsistic and determined by the will of the writer, "invented out of his mind" alone. These are the same "friendly images" that invite him "to rest" in an artificially manufactured aesthetic order. It is this temptation — we noted it in our discussion of A Novelette — that the writer in Kora at all cost, if he is to "win his way to some hill-top," knows he must resist.

And not surprisingly, out of the pressure of this necessity, the third
improvisation -- and this is a basic structural pattern underlying all the improvisations in *Kora* -- attempts to provide some means of escaping that temptation through the act of writing. The whole effort here is a play on language in which writing continually calls attention to its own processes. And the writer maintains this play without foregoing its tension in favour of an authorial stance wherein language is used to further a given fixed perspective. In fact, the writing specifically undermines that stance.

It is in this context that the riddling voice in the improvisation begins to speak:

> When you hang your clothes on the line you do not expect to see the line broken and them trailing in the mud. Nor would you expect to keep your hands clean by putting them in a dirty pocket. However and of course if you are a market man, fish, cheeses and the like going under your fingers every minute in the hour you would not leave off the business and expect to handle a basket of fine laces without at least mopping yourself on a towel, soiled as it may be.

Talk for talk's sake? Or language for language's sake? In any case, certainly not the grammar of predictable expectations. The writing here mocks the assumption that language can be used as a transparent vehicle through which the mind constructs a discursive order, but not without losing a contrary assumption: that the play of language can disrupt the mind's fixities by disturbing the language forms in which that order is fabricated. In the opening lines of this improvisation, as in the opening set of improvisations to *Kora*, we have the shell of a rhetorical structure, simply the shell alone. Inside, there is a voice. A bird in a cage. And this voice in its riddling manner playfully mimics the artificiality of language forms used for logical ends. Of course, we do not expect to see our clothes "trailing in the mud." Nor do we expect . . . etc. The fool's
voice mocks a discursiveness that is its own limit: "However and of course," a qualification immediately undermined by an assertion, these two forms of making statements clashing one against the other. In other words, the voice blasts the pretentiousness of any attempt to impose the static form of logic onto a world whose actuality resists that kind of purity. Clothes do break a line. Hands do get "dirty." And "fine laces" do get "soiled" by use. As do words. They turn up unexpectedly, or up unexpected roads; they disclose irregularities that no recourse to logic can tame. Better then, in this impasse, to clear the mind of its "secret arrogance," as if it could really fabricate (out of a "trickle of words") an order invulnerable to change. Any order so constructed would be nothing more than a fixed perspective, an illusion constituted solely on its divorce from the actual. The difficulty, then, is not to transcend particulars, but to move with them, which demands that a writer release himself to what is outside his own control. The "dip of the ground," for instance.

So it is that the voice addresses a "you," but even here the relationship between the speaking "I" and the addressed "you" is confused, the one becoming the other as the writing plays back on itself and begins to expose its own emptiness. The writing, in this sense, turns back on the writer:

Ah, it is not that I do not wait for you, always! But my sweet fellow -- you have broken yourself without purpose, you are --

The gap at the end of "you are --" is left as a gap. The writing has come to an end, perhaps even a dead-end. That is, talk for talk's sake can initiate the drama of speech, yet there is still a limit to what words can be expected to do, even for the fool who loves to play with them. The intention to escape the use of words for logical purposes is well enough,
but to what end does this intention operate?

The dialogue (or monologue of a writer who is split into two by his own doubletalk) here is broken by the intrusion of music, the sound of something that comes from outside the word-play which momentarily exhausts itself. And as this occurs, the voice finds itself being acted upon by the "you" that it initially addressed. The relationship has reversed itself. The music that enters the writing comes from a "you" that is other than the "I." In other words, the writer is now being drawn out of himself by the writing, and his attention shifts accordingly. The improvisation thus moves by shifts and leaps toward the possibility of a more authentic dance in words, not word-play in and for itself, which is really only another form of closure, but word-play that allows for the intrusion of an actual world. "-- and I?" says the writer -- as if to intimate that the "I" of the writer is both a one and an other, and that it is this tension that writing must somehow maintain. In the final lines of the improvisation, we notice that the doubleness of the "I" leaving and the "I" returning, and the doubleness of the "You" desired and the "You" left behind, is maintained. The writing itself has brought the writer to this crisis, for it is here that the mind is thrown back into a world that reveals a ground more primary to its desires. And thus the possibility of the dance begins:

-- and I? must dance with the wind, make my own snow flakes, whistle a contrapuntal melody to my own fugue! Huzza then, this is the dance of the blue moss bank! Huzza then, this is the mazurka of the hollow log! Huzza then, this is the dance of rain in the cold trees.

In a way, this one improvisation acts as a kind of prototype for all
the improvisations in Kora, particularly in its effect. The writing consistently calls attention to its own processes in the time of the composition. The writer (and the reader!) within the writing finds himself caught up in the objectivity of language, its actuality. And in each case, he begins to discover that writing, to be actual, must work toward a loosening of attention, a loosening experienced as a crisis within which a substantial world breaks in to declare its otherness. The event of this crisis -- we have called it a confusion (a mixing together) -- conditions the effect of the writing that comes of it.

In his "Prologue" to Kora, it is significant that Williams comes to talk about the "broken" nature of his writing in order thus to retrieve its value as such. What he sets down clarifies our experience of reading Kora so far. "By the brokenness of his composition," Williams says,

the poet makes himself master of a certain weapon which he could possess himself of in no other way. The speed of the emotions is sometimes such that thrashing about in a thin exaltation or despair many matters are touched but not held, more often broken by the contact.

II. No. 3. The instability of these improvisations would seem such that they must inevitably crumble under the attention and become particles of a wind that falters. It would appear to the unready that the fiber of the thing is a thin jelly. It would be these same fools who would deny tough cords to the wind because they cannot split a storm endwise and wrap it upon spools. The virtue of strength lies not in the grossness of the fiber but in the fiber itself. Thus a poem is tough by no quality it borrows from a logical recital of events nor from the events themselves but solely from that attenuated power which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance giving them thus a full being. (K, 16-17)

Williams talks about the speed of the emotions in this passage, and then himself attempts to enact the kind of thinking process which matches that speed. The writing here states, to be sure, but it does so by holding to a complexity of experience, the attention riding the syntax without
allowing the thought to resolve itself into a simplistic completion. The mind within the writing is alive to those distinctions without which complexity would be impossible. The language insists upon remaining on the heel of its own resources. Not the closed syntax of logic, but the movement Williams recognizes in Gertrude Stein. The syntax unfolds as the mind thinks its way through. How else to describe a line such as the opening in which the spaces of this pacing can be heard, however subtly: "By the brokenness of his composition the poet makes himself master of a certain weapon which he could possess himself of" — perhaps somewhat awkward sounding, but a distinction is held — "in no other way." The unnamed "certain weapon" is left unnamed, but the sentence makes clear that it comes to the poet through the "brokenness of his composition" where incompleteness is an operation, not a dead-end, as it very well might be had the "goal" been that of logical thought. The writer of this piece values distinctions — Marianne Moore points to this quality of Williams' mind in her review of *Kora*² — at the same time that he knows how incredibly difficult it is to catch the evanescence of experience.

To the "unready," however, those who refuse, or cannot step into the condition of indeterminacy, the kind of writing that composes itself as it goes must inevitably escape them. They may assume that the absence of logicality, or the presence of contradiction, is a weakness absolving them from the further responsibility of the writing, possibly concluding that it is nothing more than a "thin jelly." They miss the point altogether, since such writing does not depend for its livelihood upon the sort of referential order they expect of it. Williams says that the strength of "a poem" (i.e. any piece of writing) is not derived from its logicality or by its description of some event, both of which are preconceived ends outside the
text, but in the composing process itself where, he will say much later, the "mind / liyes" (PB, 75) (italics added). Readers who reject the improvisations for their "instability" are the "same fools who would deny tough cords to the wind because they cannot split a storm endwise and wrap it upon spools." Anything with texture -- a piece of writing, a storm, a painting, a tapestry, a flower, a drawing, what you will -- should be valued for its objectivity, and not for the discursive significance of its so-called "content": to Williams, a term that distorts and so misplaces the more immediate function of writing as an act. The "virtue of strength" in writing does not lie in the "grossness of the fiber" -- what the writing says -- "but in the fiber itself" -- the writing itself. Here the mind is released to a movement "which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance giving them a full being," the things in their particularity thus revealed to be alive, just this. Closed perceptions, on the other hand, freeze those same things into fixed perspectives. This is the point of stoppage, so Williams says elsewhere in his "Prologue," which the writer, "in desperation" (K, 17) sometimes, must work against. Loosening the attention makes it active once again. "Out! and the sting of the thicket!" (K, 60).

Here the drawing by Stuart Davis, which Williams used as a frontispiece for Kora, takes on a much larger significance than is at first apparent. The crisis of linear perspective in the drawing mirrors exactly the crisis of language in Williams' writing. The opacity of writing comes from the opacity of language, its medium. The words escape a use which, referential, would point to a perspective outside their own actuality as words. In the same way, Davis' drawing calls attention to its own texture, and by so doing, disrupts the closure of linear perspective. The print, in short,
enacts the texture of Kora, and thus confirms and enlarges the theoretical basis of Williams' attack on a given "fixed point of view" in his "Prologue."
Perspective ("to see through") hinges on the determination of a number of parts (these parts were once things) which form a whole (an order) when organized around a fixed point of view. And "view" is the key term. In art --

the art of picturing objects or a scene in such a way as to show them as they appear to the eye with reference to relative distance or depth (OED),

or in thought --

the relationship or proportion of the parts of a whole, regarded from a particular standpoint or point in time. (OED)

Perspective thus relies on a given view around which "the parts of a whole" adjust themselves into a hierarchic stasis. In this arrangement, things lose their particularity and are made transparent to a subsuming order. What we are dealing with, then, is a method or a way of apparently seeing through things. Stated even more simply, perspective as such is nothing more than a "trick" (K, 53) of the mind, for the fool of a writer in Kora, a form which is the very model of a mental construct based upon a denial of
process.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Signs* offers as precise an account as any of the way perspectival form achieves this artificial, hence illusory closure. Since experience is an open-ended process in which no assumed perspective is necessarily more important than another, the view of the world given through "classical perspective" is merely "one of the ways that man has invented for projecting the perceived world before him." Linear perspective is a construct with definable limits --

an optional interpretation of spontaneous vision, not because the perceived world contradicts the laws of classical perspective and imposes others, but rather because it does not insist upon any one and is not of the order of laws.¹

In what Merleau-Ponty calls "free perception"² (simply what happens in experience), we are fielded by many things acting on us simultaneously. At one time we may focus on one thing, but we can -- as we do -- quite easily shift our attention to another thing, not over there, but here, or to the side, or behind us. And so on and so forth. As we move in this field -- and we cannot help but move because we are alive -- then all these directions change accordingly. Any number of objects can come into perspective momentarily and then disappear as another and still another and still another draws our attention. In the field of experience all objects are potentially equal. Or potential equally, since everything is contingent. But if we reverse the process and allow our minds to retreat from this field and assume the fixity of a perspective -- here is what Merleau-Ponty has to say about the nature of this withdrawal:

Then ["in free perception"] I had the experience of a world of teeming, exclusive things which could be taken in only by means of a temporal cycle in which each gain was at the same time a loss. Now the inexhaustible being
crystallizes into an ordered perspective within which backgrounds resign themselves to being only backgrounds (inaccessible and vague as is proper), and objects in the foreground abandon something of their aggressiveness, order their interior lines according to the common law of the spectacle, and already prepare themselves to become backgrounds as soon as it is necessary. A perspective, in short, within which nothing holds my glance and takes the shape of a present.

The whole scene is in the mode of the completed or of eternity. Everything takes on an air of propriety and discretion. Things no longer call upon me to answer, and I am no longer compromised by them. And if I add the artifice of aerial perspective to this one, the extent to which I who paint and they who look at my landscape dominate the situation is readily felt. Perspective is much more than a secret technique for imitating a reality given as such to all men. It is the invention of a world which is dominated and possessed through and through in an instantaneous synthesis which is at best roughed out by our glance when it vainly tries to hold together all these things seeking individually to monopolize it. The faces of the classical portrait, always in the service of a character, a passion, or a love -- always signifying -- or the babies and animals of the classical painting, so desirous to enter the human world and so little anxious to reject it, manifest the same "adult" relation of man to the world, except when, giving in to his fortunate daemon, the great painter adds a new dimension to this world too sure of itself by making contingency vibrate within it.³

Merleau-Ponty's statement provides a basis for Williams' attachment to those artists, Cézanne and Braque for instance (A, 240), who showed the way through to the destruction of a "world too sure of itself," a world "dominated and possessed through and through" by the conventional habit of judging the value of art according to the extent that it faithfully "copied" a so-called "reality" outside the frame of a painting. The Hartpence story which he "told many times" (A, 240) signals the end of representational form and the beginning of a modernist movement in art comparable to the modernist movement in writing. The story is well-known, but it deserves to be re-told in this context. It stuck in Williams' mind as a turning point
Alanson Hartpence was employed at the Daniel Gallery. One day, the proprietor being out, Hartpence was in charge. In walked one of their most important customers, a woman in her fifties who was much interested in some picture whose identity I may at one time have known. She liked it, and seemed about to make the purchase, walked away from it, approached it and said, finally, "But Mr. Hartpence, what is all that down in this left hand lower corner?"

Hartpence came up close and carefully inspected the area mentioned. Then, after further consideration, "That, Madam," said he, "is paint." (A, 240)

Williams then goes on to talk about the significance of this humorous event:

This story marks the exact point in the transition that took place, in the world of that time, from the appreciation of a work of art as a copying of nature to the thought of it as the imitation of nature, spoken of by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, which has since governed our conceptions. It is still the failure to take this step that blocks us in seeking to gain a full conception of the modern in art.

In painting Cézanne is the first consciously to have taken that step. From him it went on, often by nothing more than the *vis a tergo*, rushing through the gap where the dyke has been broken. But with such a man as Braque it had basic significance. Braque is said to have taken his pictures outdoors, on occasion, to see if their invention ranked beside that of nature worthily enough for him to approve of it. (A, 240-241)

Of the writers who made this "step" in writing, Gertrude Stein comes readily to Williams' mind: "Gertrude Stein found the key with her conception of the objective use of words" (A, 241). In both art and writing, the medium of the work is experienced as an actuality: *how* we perceive alongside what we perceive.

Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase, No. 2* (1912), exhibited at the Armory Show in 1913, is exemplary in this sense. Duchamp simply does what Merleau-Ponty calls for; he makes "contingency vibrate within" his
painting. The static "nude" of representational art suddenly begins to move. She walks down a staircase, and in this turnabout, the conventional order of three-dimensional perspective is set upside-down, to be sure, a fool's gesture in an art world that had, for Duchamp, gone dead. Further, the so-called "nude" that comes down into another world has shed all her "propriety" to become a solid mass of blurred lines, a wall of confusion. The once frozen object possessed through perspective now asserts its own actuality in time. Like Williams' writing in *Kora*, Duchamp's painting illuminates in its very structure a crisis, an older world giving way to the insistent force of movement.

This is essentially what Duchamp in retrospect says about the effect of his *Nude*. In an interview with Pierre Cabanne, he answers the question: "How did that painting originate?"

In the nude itself. To do a nude different from the classic reclining or standing nude, and to put it in motion. There was something funny there, but it wasn't at all funny when I did it. Movement appeared like an argument to make me decide to do it.

In the "Nude Descending a Staircase," I wanted to create a static image of movement: movement is an abstraction, a deduction articulated within the painting, without our knowing if a real person is or isn't descending an equally real staircase. Fundamentally, movement is in the eye of the spectator, who incorporates it into the painting.4

Perspective allows the viewer to maintain the role of observer, un-attached to the painting itself as painting-being-perceived. And more peculiarly, in a portrait of the traditional reclining or standing nude, the viewer becomes a kind of 'peeping-tom' who looks over the artist's shoulder but without himself being seen. The spectator, in this relation to the painting, takes pleasure in what he sees, but without taking any risks. Perspectival art thus encourages the viewer to remove himself from time, to remain fixed in
a moment out of time in the "eternity" of closure where everything is self-referential, removed from what is contingent. In this way, it does what Merleau-Ponty says it does: "invents a world" divorced from the immediacy of experience in time. By simply having his "nude" assume movement, Duchamp throws a wrench into that world and so provokes a crisis. His painting becomes opaque -- the Cubist concern with surfaces -- and as it does, the once "still life" of representational form is split apart from the inside. The viewer, formerly an observer is in turn made suddenly aware of the illusion of perspectival forms, but more importantly, he experiences its de-composition.

Duchamp, however, as Arturo Schwartz says in *Marcel Duchamp*, did not revert to the "Futurist's attempts to create the illusion of movement." His mind worked differently, and like Williams in *Kora*, he was much more intent upon figuring his way out of the closure in the very medium of his painting. In other words, he let his mind play against perspective from within, and so dissected its limit, allowing movement to "appear like an argument" to have its own way in the painting. Thus his desire "to create," what he calls, "a static image of movement." This is the crisis out of which, or because of which, we might say, his "nude" has no other choice but to come down, to "descend" and assume the "movement of form in time." And it is this breakage of perspectival form that draws the viewer into the dynamic of the painting. Participating in the creation of its movement, he is no longer merely a spectator who sees without being seen. Or as Duchamp puts it, "Fundamentally, movement is in the eye of the spectator, who incorporates it into the painting." The dadaist humour of the painting, especially in the crisis of the spectator affected, is a "rien," an attack on all forms
of preconception (impressionistic views of movement included) that remove the mind from its situation in a live world. For Duchamp, in any case, the "rien" built into his Nude signals the historic end of that numbing habit of mind.

The Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2 had a tremendous liberating effect on Williams when he first saw it at the Armory Show. His memory of this major event comes through sharply in "Recollections," particularly the initial effect of the Nude on his mind:

In Paris, painters from Cézanne to Pisarro had been painting their revolutionary canvases for fifty or more years but it was not until I clapped my eyes on Marcel Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase that I burst out laughing from the relief it brought me! I felt as if an enormous weight had been lifted from my spirit for which I was infinitely grateful.  

As we have already said, by having his Nude become a "movement of form in time," Duchamp reverses the illusion of representational form and brings the viewer, now less an observer and more a participant in the drama of "descent," face to face with the actuality of the medium itself, the two-dimensional and opaque space of the canvas where a three-dimensional form once invented "a world" from a fixed point of view. The painting thus enacts a similar crisis of mind in the world of art as Kora does in the realm of writing. The moment of clapping his eyes on it brought home to Williams something unnamed but which he intuitively knew could be of crucial significance to him as a writer. In Duchamp's work, there was further evidence that "modernism" was now being created, the pioneering work of Cézanne, in this sense, finally coming home to roost. An "enormous weight had been lifted from my spirit." The destruction of the illusion of perspectival form was comparable to those modernist writers — like Joyce, Stein, and Williams
himself in *Kora* -- who dispelled the illusion of aesthetic forms that make language transparent to an order separated from the immediacy of writing as an act in words. We recall the section in his *Autobiography* where Williams affirms this important tie between the writers and the artists in the early part of the century. Again with the Hartpence story in mind, he writes:

> It is the making of that step, to come over into the tactile qualities, the words themselves beyond the mere thought expressed that distinguishes the modern, or distinguished the modern of that time from the period before the turn of the century. And it is the reason why painting and the poem became so closely allied at that time. It was the work of the painters following Cézanne and the Impressionists that, critically, opened up the age of Stein, Joyce and a good many others. It is in the taking of that step over from feeling to the imaginative object, on the cloth, on the page, that defined the term, the modern term -- a work of art, what it meant to them. It is a step that must take place inside the mind before the concept, like an egg, can be laid. It is to play ... not fall in among the strings. That's where it begins. As Ed, my brother, once quoted some Frenchman as saying "L'architecture, c'est poser un caillou sur un autre."

This is a hard climb -- it was for me -- a hard thing to accomplish, but it is that which must be accomplished before sentimentality can be abolished and the thing itself emerge, liberating the man. (A, 380-381)

The word must not freeze.

No doubt Williams was surprised, and no doubt delighted, to come upon, we assume accidentally, the drawing by Stuart Davis that he included as a frontispiece in the first edition of *Kora*.

The frontispiece? I had seen a drawing by Stuart Davis, a young artist I had never met, which I wanted reproduced in my book because it was as close as possible to my idea of the Improvisations. (IW, 29)

And he wanted it "reproduced" for very good reason, because the drawing,
Note: The drawing by Stuart Davis on page 156 of this dissertation was originally printed in William Carlos Williams' *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (Boston: The Four Seas Company, 1920). It was used by Williams as a frontispiece.
like the writing in *Kora*, plays with the notion of perspective and enacts that play in its structure, an accomplishment Williams would have whole­heartedly supported during the period he wrote *Kora*. Davis' print would have been unmistakable evidence that an artist, an American artist, one living not far from Rutherford at that, in Gloucester, had experienced the same shift in consciousness that he had undergone by writing the *Improvisations*. The analogy was exact: "It was, graphically, exactly what I was trying to do in words, put the Improvisations down as a unit on the page" (IW, 29).

We first glance at the drawing and notice two figures clothed in black. They look like priests, possibly out for a walk, perhaps conversing about some deep religious matter. They could be themselves caught in a frame of mind, outside the context through which they are at the moment passing, self-enclosed, lost in meditation. Or the heavy weight they place on the drawing could be deceptive. The figure on the left appears to be looking down at something on the ground in front of him. He could be pointing to an edge, a "dip" in the ground. A ditch? And yet all of this figuring on our part is tentative. Our eyes land initially on the two figures because they appear to be central to the drawing, or more correctly, the foreground around which the various parts of the drawing cohere. And their blackness in contrast to the rest of the drawing, as well as their "relatively" large size, separates them from their context.

Behind them, in what now appears to be a distance, we can see a motion­less horse and wagon in front of a carpenter's shop. And still further behind, a cluster of houses, the roofs of them covered with electricity poles, possibly the town out of which the two figures have just walked. A
peaceful enough "scene" in an ordinary day. Everything seems quite commonplace. And this sense of things is reinforced when our eyes turn to the left of the two figures where a woman with her back to us is caught in the act of hanging out her clothes in her backyard, behind her a cluster of what appear to be sunflower plants, a whole profusion of them growing almost wildy, in fact covering quite a large space of the drawing. To her left, a kind of ramshackle house, its chimney shooting up toward the left-hand corner of the drawing where we can just make out -- in relation to the two figures, they appear to be quite distant -- another group of houses sunken into a meadow-like space. And behind these houses, the landscape widens out to the hills which suggest the "horizon" of the whole scene. But it is an horizon confined to a corner of the drawing, separated as it is from the right-hand corner where there are more buildings. They look like factories. By this time, in any case, we begin to envision what could very well be a "view," a number of things drawn together through their "relative" distances from one another in the space of the drawing.

As viewers, then, we must be standing on a hill, from which point we watch the two dark figures approaching. And our own distance from them gives us an advantage over them, mainly because we can share the artist's own panoramic view of the whole scene at once. We thus share his perspective. We might rest content in this assumption and now simply turn away from the drawing, having taken a viewer's pleasure in it, if it were not for the two figures themselves. On second glance, they seem unusually large and overbearing. And why are they so dark? They stand out from the scene too much. They demand -- or possibly, absorb is more to the point -- our attention. And as we single them out, we suddenly begin to pick up details
in the drawing that escaped us when we first took in the scene as a "whole."
We look at the ground they are walking on and realize that they are almost
on the verge of stepping over a small but empty, non-representational space,
an abstract space made by the artist with a few straight lines. And what
had appeared to be a fence a bit ahead of them now looks flat on the page
as it almost veers off into the lower left-hand corner of the drawing.
Now other details surrounding the two figures begin to intrude on our
initial perceptions. The ground they are walking on is, in fact, drawn
on the same plane as the horse and cart in what formerly seemed to be a
background. That background, we discover, is really nothing more than an
illusion, simply an artist's trick. And what is that tall building in the
center of the upper half of the drawing, which separates like a barrier the
left and right-hand corners? It strains to become a foreground even though
it appears to be a part of the background. Is it a cathedral? Or just a
tall building straining to reach outside the limits of the drawing? It
assumes a centrality in the upper half of the drawing and calls attention
to itself, but for no apparent reason. It is simply there -- an empty
building with a tower-like front five stories high. And in its vacancy,
it somehow resists a simplistic representational interpretation of it.
Rather, its looming size seems to undermine the neatness of the rest of
the scene. By this time, we also notice that both clusters of buildings
in the upper left and right-hand corners of the drawing are not really in
the "distance." They only appeared to be because they were on the upper
half of the paper on which the drawing was drawn. Otherwise, there are
only those dark scribbled lines separating them from the lower half of the
drawing.
And finally, a little to the left and below the large vertical structure that has the semblance of a cathedral, two dogs, bloodhounds, are jumping over what must -- if the logic of the "scene" is to hold -- be bushes. Except that these bushes, which would be in front of the woman hanging clothes, are also flat on the page, only more so, as if the artist in this section of the drawing allowed himself to indulge in the act of drawing. These dogs may be jumping -- as dogs do -- over a series of bushes, but these bushes in their verticality form a certain pattern that resembles a wall made with lines on paper. And these dogs, in the absence of perspective in this space of the drawing, are thus allowed to move in a playful space. In direct contrast to the heavy earth-bound texture of the two dark figures, the two dogs, their counterparts in the drawing, are light in both colour and weight. Moreover, their circularity plays against the linearity of the two priestly figures. One of the dogs turns upward and the other downward. They are, in this sense, figures of movement in an otherwise "still life" scene, within which, now, the two dark figures seem stopped on an edge at a point of stasis. The dogs, on the other hand, move in an open space, one that is not determined by a given fixed point of view.

Davis thus manages, through his drawing, to create a tension between the two-dimensionality of the page and the three-dimensionality of linear perspective, which we, as viewers, experience only by participating in the movement of the drawing. Step away from it, and we are back on the hill as observers overlooking the scene. Step into the drawing as a drawing, that is to say, an act on the part of the artist, and we are drawn into the drama of that act. In the drawing, in other words, Davis reveals himself to be the fool of an artist, like the fool of the writer in Kora who enacts
the drama of writing in the words themselves. And the empty, cathedral-like form in the drawing -- is this, then, the doubletalk of an artist? A world of meaning emptied of substance, an obsolete form no longer of use? All the windows are out, and outside there are the moving dogs, creatures who play because it is their nature to do so. Are the two dark figures also playing? Or are they as serious as they appear? Where are they going? Who are they? Assume the position of the foolish dogs, and they suddenly become intrusive. Somehow, now, they do not belong. And so we go on -- one ambiguity revealing another and still another. Besides, of course, there is the "dip" in the road, not really a "dip," more specifically a gap in the drawing, black lines coming to two points. The drawing is thus vibrant with unresolved tensions, very much the same activity as in the writing of Kora.

The shock of recognition must have been almost instantaneous, for Williams a breath of fresh air. Davis lived in Gloucester, and the material of his drawing was local to Williams' own, no distance there. The small town surrounded by hills, the growing presence of industrial smoke, clothes hanging out in a fenced yard. In Kora, too, we find that "long unbroken line of the hills there" (K, 44), the "dirt and fumes" (K, 61) of industry, and "Improvisation II.3," as we have seen, opens with the image of "clothes on the line" (K, 33). Even the two figures in the drawing resemble the two voices in the improvisation who take a walk in the "air" of the place surrounding them, a "dip" in the road before them. And the dogs juxtaposed against the two figures in the space of the drawing, caught in the moment of
leaping -- the writer in Kora also talks about dogs: "Or if dogs rub too close and the poor are too much out let your friend answer them" (K, 53). Williams must have seen immediately that Davis' print emerges from the same context of his own present in Kora. Here was an image of small-town America in the early years of the century brought to that moment when a "new" age -- call it "modernism" -- is just about ready to burst in upon it. And the large cathedral-like building, is this then the image of an "old" world whose forms have now become emptied of substance? In any case, the crisis of linear perspective in the drawing does mirror a similar crisis of meaning in the writing of Kora. And that Davis manages to actualize this drama in the act of drawing, just as Williams had done in writing Kora, this fact alone would have made Davis a companion to Williams' own desire to place, as he says Stein does,

writing on a plane where it may deal unhampered with its own affairs, unburdened with scientific and philosophic lumber. (AN, 349)

During the early years of this century in the field of art this "lumber" consisted of the habituated response to art as a "copy" of nature, a sign pointing somewhere else. Interestingly enough, talking about the beginnings of abstract art in America, in an essay "On Abstract Art," Davis recalls the impact of the Armory Show from the American artist's point of view:

There was no American artist who saw this show but was forced to revalue his artistic concepts. The final charge was touched off in the foundations of the Autocracy of the Academy in a blast which destroyed its strangle hold on critical art values forever. Henceforth the American artist realized his right to free expression and exercised that right.8

Davis explains that though the term "abstract" would be defined quite differently by different abstract artists they would generally agree on one point. All of them initially opposed the predominant social definition of
art as a copy of nature's forms. "Art is not and never was a mirror
ter m e d e f n i i n g two-dimensiona l space on that
surface."10 In the drawing that Williams chose to use as a frontispiece
for Kora, this act becomes the very fabric of our experience of it, more
so, the very thing which is in the process of being defined as such. The
drawing itself, its actuality as a drawing, breaks the "optical illusion"
of perspectival form by forcing on us the objectivity of its two-dimensional
surface. It is, in other words, a "play" that enacts the "step over" that
Williams sees at the root of modernism from "feeling to the imaginative
object." The crisis on the edge of Kora thus finds its counterpart in the
drawing itself. In Davis' print, as in Duchamp's Nude, a perspective in
which nothing "takes the shape of a present" releases itself to a movement
that makes "contingency vibrate within it."
Or as Charles Olson so aptly says in "The Kingfishers,"

When the attentions change / the jungle
leaps in
even the stones are split
they rive

Any fixity, apparent (a stone say), becomes unfixed in change, split as it is from the inside out, or from the outside in. In either direction, the crisis remains real. Things move, and no effort of mind can make them stop. And this is what happened when our attentions, which at first seemed fixed, in the process of moving across the surface of Davis' drawing, began to "loosen," to use Williams' term. The elements of the drawing that before may have been understood as fixed in perspective themselves began to move, as dogs do when they leap over bushes, or as the feet do when they walk, or as the fool's voice does when it is released to its own nature—"Hey you, the dance! Squat. Leap. Hips to the left. Chin -- ha! -- sideways! Stand up, stand up ma bonne! you'll break my backbone" (K, 56). And elsewhere in Kora this same fool says, "And if you move the stones, see the ants scurry" (K, 36).

In I Wanted to Write a Poem Williams calls the Davis drawing "an impressionistic view of the simultaneous" (IW, 29), and perhaps he was thinking of the "impression" of that specific moment when a three-dimensional perspective which before seemed securely "representational" now begins to fall apart. The objects in that perspective suddenly come alive as objects with (no longer) any necessary relation to each other. Everything becomes dynamic — a "play" or a "dance," through which we discover that perspective is an imposed form that conceals the fact of change. And that is why it is an illusion, a lie. Quite possibly, this is also why we feel the ground shift beneath the feet of the two figures lost in conversation, who appear in this
respect to have erected a "barrier" to divorce themselves from the very world that clusters around them as they walk. The tension that appears between the static nature of perspective and the fluid nature of non-perspective loosens our hold on what we think we saw, enough to draw us outward into a sense of life forces just about ready to leap out of the confinement of an "optical illusion" -- the dogs, especially, but as well the substantial form of the anonymous woman absorbed in the act of hanging out clothes in her yard, a very human moment in the drawing. There is, of course, a certain amount of humour as well: the two dark, self-enclosed figures walk through a field of forces they do not even sense the presence of -- is the image of a "jungle" too strong? Possibly, but Williams would have enjoyed it, especially if we take the "jungle" to be the density of a world in which anything can happen at any time, experience is that unpredictable. This is the same fool of a writer who calls the world a "brutal jumble" (K, 36), and who tells his townspeople that "Hell's loose every minute" (K, 39) under their feet, rumbling like the earth itself, which they would "hear" (K, 39) if only they could step outside the narrow perspective of social forms that remove them from their own desire. But they cannot cage it by ignoring it, just as the objects in the world that move because they are alive cannot be caged so easily by an "optical illusion."

For that matter, neither can the particularity of Louslinger's decaying body be glossed over with empty verbal gestures. Time cannot be fixed in space, pictorial or otherwise. If perspective gives the lie to this fact, then it does so at the expense of what is actual, the same actual that is just about ready to spring upon the two figures, who will, in the next instant, fall into a gap in their path, one made by the artist on the page with a few dark lines, abstract and opaque. And once they do (and they will), the actual
which is presently outside their isolation, will provoke a crisis in the throes of which they will be -- and this future possibility is present in the drawing as we experience it -- thrown into an other that is the world itself: but new, for them.

"Anyhow, Floss and I," Williams says, "went to Gloucester and got permission from Stuart Davis to use his art" (IW, 29). No wonder he was excited by the drawing, so accurately does it correspond to the writing crisis which characterizes the texture of Kora. Davis does in his drawing what Williams does in his writing. They both actively push to subvert the way in which the closed form of perspective imposes itself on the essentially open nature of experience. And the playfulness of Davis' mind would have struck Williams instantly, the mockery in the drawing of any attempt to freeze the world which constantly breaks in to declare the actuality of its movement. Like the writing in Kora, Davis' "art" begins on the recognition that any reliance upon predetermined points of view survives only by denying the substantiality of the world. The artist in the drawing, then, is a double of the fool in Kora. Had he been a writer -- so the argument follows -- he would have done precisely what the writer in Kora does: make writing active to the opacity of language. The drawing "was, graphically," we recall Williams saying, "exactly what I was trying to do in words" (italics added).

For this reason alone, Davis' drawing should not be considered merely as a decorative illustration for some "secret" meaning in Kora, nor merely
as a frontispiece separable from the text itself. Williams chose to use it because it acts as a graphic commentary on the effect of his own writing on readers. What it does is illuminate the writing in *Kora* through the exemplification of another medium. And by all indications, by "reading" the drawing, Williams was finding out how to understand his own function as a "word man." There was, after all, value to his own "dark scribblings," and the drawing, coming as it did after the initial improvisations were written, was live proof that he was not simply muttering to himself in a closeted privacy. To this extent, the drawing is an integral part of the text *Kora*, one of the elements through which it finally turned into a text. "The one thing I possibly regret," Williams writes in his "Prologue" to the 1957 republication of *Kora*, "is the absence of Stuart Davis' attractive frontispiece" (K, 30).

Williams naturally made sure that he sent a copy of *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* to Davis immediately after it was published in September, 1920. And what Davis wrote back to him certainly must have pleased him. It would have confirmed the accuracy of his sense of the drawing, both of them working to re-establish the objectivity of art and writing. Davis responded to *Kora* as a re-opening:

> I see in it a fluidity as opposed to stagnation of presentation . . . . It opens a field of possibilities. To me it suggests a development toward word against word without any impediments of story, poetic beauty or anything at all except word clash and sequence. This may be a total misrepresentation of your motives. Best of all the work does not suggest any of the modern poets with whom I am familiar. I like the book and am glad to be associated with it."
SECTION THREE

A NEW STEP
Awake early to the white blare of a sun flooding in sidewise. Strip and bathe in it. Ha, but an ache tearing at your throat -- and a vague cinema lifting its black moon blot all out. There's no walking barefoot in the crisp leaves nowadays. There's no dancing save in the head's dark. Go draped in soot; call on modern medicine to help you! Why then, a new step lady! I'll meet you -- you know where -- o' the dark side! Let the wheel click.

In the mind there is a continual play of obscure images which coming between the eyes and their prey seem pictures on the screen at the movies. Somewhere there appears to be a mal-adjustment. The wish would be to see not floating visions of unknown purport but the imaginative qualities of the actual things being perceived accompany their gross vision in a slow dance, interpreting as they go. But inasmuch as this will not always be the case one must dance nevertheless as he can. (K, 66-67)
CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BIRTH OF THE IMAGINATION

One more step and the two dark figures in Davis' drawing perhaps will fall off the road into a dip in the ground, thrown as they would then be into an empty space that demands of them a complete re-adjustment of their minds to accord with new conditions. This shift would be the event of a dis-location, or a dis-placement, that draws the mind outside its territorialized enclosures: in terms of the texture of the drawing, a crisis of perspective that is an opening, a cleavage through which perception once again begins in a world the mind, as yet, has not possessed, but which it finds itself within. For Williams, these figures will have come under the influence of the imagination, their minds brought to the edge of a threshold where the world suddenly configures and assumes the form of an appearance (literally, a "shining forth"), out of a dark space, the world in that instant imaged forth. In the writing drama of Kora, this process is both precise and evanescent, at once a severance from a known world and a leap into an un-known world, un-known because prior to the mind's knowledge of it.
It is this contradiction that informs the image Williams presents of his mother at the beginning of his "Prologue" to *Kora*, "in Rome on that rare journey forever to be remembered" (*K*, 6). Once, she got lost, and by so losing track of a perceptual frame fixed in mind, estranged herself from her known world. In turn, she found herself in the midst of an unknown world in which things again became objective, actually present as the face of an otherness that appears outside, in the collapse of fixed perspectives.

"The place," so Williams writes,

*had been chosen by my brother as one notably easy of access, being in a quarter free from confusion of traffic, on a street close to the park, and furthermore the tram to the American Academy passed at the corner.* (*K*, 6)

Notice how the language — and the neatly structured syntax of Williams' writing re-enforces this play on words — maps out a possessed space, territorialized beforehand for Williams' mother by his brother: "chosen," "easy of access," "free from confusion of traffic," "close to the park," and finally, the strongest link with a known perspective, "the tram to the American Academy passed at the corner." Had Williams' mother simply conformed her mind to the map organized for her, she could quite easily have maintained her narrow perspective on this foreign place, toured the predetermined sights, and returned home with her perceptions intact. But this was not the case: "Yet never did my mother go out but she was in fear of being lost" (*K*, 6). It is, of course, the nature of his mother's mind that intrigues Williams. No matter how carefully her trip to Rome was mapped out beforehand, she of all people was incapable of remaining within this narrow boundary.

Elena Hoheb was that peculiarly estranged woman — "indeterminate,
night-bound," as Williams speaks of her in "From My Notes About My Mother" — who grew up in Mayaguez but ended up in Rutherford, New Jersey, "an alien in a remote land." In *Kora*, for a brief instance, Williams re-imagines her childhood inside the heat of a culture much more directly in touch with the physicality of desire, in vivid contrast to the "puritan" America that divorces itself from the body of the world, from say the body of one Jacob Louslinger in "Improvisation I.2":

> Weave away, dead fingers, the darkies are dancing in Mayaguez — all but one with the sore heel and sugar cane will soon be high enough to romp through. Haia! leading over the ditches, with your skirts flying and the devil in the wind back of you — no one else. (K, 62)

No one else, which is to say, the Elena who eventually was confined to Rutherford was an "alien" in temperament as well, one who followed the insistences of her own wild nature and wandered, like Louslinger, in the meadows of her desire, "over the ditches" and out into open spaces, "the wind back of you," as Williams writes. And this is the underlying drive that comes through her speech in *Yes, Mrs. Williams*, a book that finally got written, her words transcribed by Williams in conversation, no attempt on his part to interpret but simply an attempt to reveal her in speech, the exact particularity of it, moving out.

Like mother, like son. Williams does read himself into her in the "Prologue," and the figure romping through the sugar cane in Mayaguez becomes the image of his own nature emerging in the improvisations, his *Kora in Hell* the evidence of a similar disposition, a similar need to let go, to go out, tied to a fear of "being lost." Desire must be served, and against the ought of classificatory rules:

> By turning to the left when she should have turned right, actually she did once manage to go so far astray that it
was nearly an hour before she extricated herself from the strangeness of every new vista and found a landmark. (K, 6)

Should have? We are reminded of the self-enclosed, boxed world of the Puritans in In the American Grain, whose "doctrinaire religion, a form, that is to say, fixed -- but small" would not permit them to allow their senses to wander any more than they could allow a member of their company to wander from the precinct of the church, even from Boston to Casco Bay, for worldly profit. This their formula condemned. (IAC, 111)

Elena Hoheb possesses one such mind that cannot help but wander from fixed forms, and her whole sense of the world is determined by this inability, which Williams, in turn, sees as her peculiar strength. There are the "disreputable" men like "William, former sailor in Admiral Dewey's fleet at Manila" and "Tom O'Rourck," outsiders who clung to her, "their Penelope" (K, 6). Elena lives very much in the present, one thing at a time, a particularist whose estranged mind is continually being invaded by the objectivity of the world. For this reason,

She has always been incapable of learning from benefit or disaster. If a man cheat her she will remember that man with a violence that I have seldom seen equaled, but so far as that could have an influence on her judgment of the next man or woman, she might be living in Eden. (K, 7)

But this inability on her part not to resign herself to the things before her at the expense of habitual modes of perception makes her a prey to those same things. Hence, her estrangement from the normative, her tendency to stray, to go left when she should have gone right, is the other side of the fact that she is possessed by things, or the otherness of the world.

"And indeed she is," so Williams continues,

an impoverished, ravished Eden but one indestructible as the imagination itself. Whatever is before her is sufficient to itself and so to be valued. (K, 7)
She is, in a way, the figure of the maiden Kora who was drawn away by the beauty of the narcissus flower. Kora strayed so far from the protection of her mother Demeter that she became easy prey for Hades, a dark force who appears out of a gap in the earth; and by ravishing her, calls upon a destruction of her maidenhood, her purity. And yet, the wayward nature she embodies cannot be destroyed, is as "indestructible as the imagination itself."

This is the first point in the "Prologue" that Williams mentions the imagination, but without explaining this term he quickly shifts his attention momentarily away from his mother and presents what, at first glance, appear to be two un-related images: the figure of the poet Villon and the boll weevil in a song by Carl Sandburg. First Villon.

Williams quotes a line from Villon's "Ballade de la Grosse Margot" ("Ballad for Fat Margot"), a poem that concerns Villon's love-affair with a prostitute:

_Vente, grele, gelle, j'ai mon pain cuit! (K, 7)_

Villon, so Williams suggests, prefers to make his "bread" — and the colloquial sense of "bread" for "living" holds here — in the stormy elements, close on the immediacy of an indeterminate, wholly substantial world. In an "Introduction" to Bonner's translation of The Complete Works of François Villon, an essay that reveals a great deal about the larger context of the brief, almost casual, reference to Villon in the "Prologue," Williams draws attention to the contemporary relevance of Villon's work, the 20th century another period when the turn toward the conditional nature of experience has once again become a necessity. Besides, like Williams' mother, Villon was also an outsider, a poet estranged from a society hier-
archically structured, burdened with poverty, one of the fools with a big womb in 15th century France, but a poet whose poems, for this reason, "keep an intensity of consciousness about them that is not contrived."⁵

Significantly enough, Williams constructs a portrait of Villon that enlarges the methodological issue at stake in his mother's wanderings -- he must have wandered the city's shabbier dives whenever he felt the urge to go wherever the fancy took him.⁶ A prey to the world as well, wrongly accused of murder, the strength of his "indestructible" imagination nevertheless comes sharply through in the language of his poems. The flash of an image of Villon in the Improvisations -- "Villon ceased to write upon his Petit Testament [The Legacy] only when the ink was frozen" (K, 35) -- in a re-phrasing of Villon's own words reveals him to be, like Williams' mother, another figure of the imagination. The force that Villon embodies, which estranged him from the closed orders of his society, drew him out into the "field of his environment" (K, 65), to use some words from Kora. He thus adjusted himself to the world before him and became, in this manner, an instrument of his time. His time spoke through his live speech, the words themselves that he set down: "Vente, gresle, gelle, j'ai mon pain cuit!" "Nothing to do," so Williams argues, reminding us of his own plunge in Kora,

but follow the lead of the times which surrounded him, inventing with the sensitive ear with which he had been endowed and to which he clung -- his comfort as an artist.

Direct is the word for every word that Villon set down. There was no intermediate field to his address. He was directly concerned in the affairs of his life, took his responsibilities deeply and, as he grew older, bitterly, but saw no reason to seek to avoid them or to confess them. He was a poet, needed no intermediary, secular or sacred.⁷

The imagination that breaks forth in Villon's work, in Williams' terms,
permits the mind a fluidity through which it constantly keeps re-adjusting to changing conditions. And this toughness, this resilience, is very much of the same order as that of the boll weevil in Sandburg's "Ballad of the Boll Weevil." It can be placed

in the sand, in hot ashes, in the river, and other unlikely places but the boll weevil's refrain is always: "That'll be ma HOME! That'll be ma HOOME!"

(K, 7)

Like the influenza bacteria, or like the "fairy-ring mushroom," the boll weevil is yet one more image of a life force that feeds on itself, that is, thrives on change by sustaining itself through the principle of transformation. In *Spring and All*, Williams will come to speak of the "imagination as a force, an electricity or a medium, a place" (SA, 150).

Williams' mother thus resembles Villon in that she too is a living instance of a wayward force in the mind that enters the objective medium of the world -- the place of the imagination -- by wandering outside all fixed perspectives that would remove her from the condition of her perceptions. By getting lost, she experiences an actual world that is other than the mind's prefabricated orders. It is this power, both a weakness and a strength, that distinguishes her perceptions from the conventional and the predictable. The particular to her is particular, opaque, and not transparent to an imposed frame of reference. She gives herself up to "whatever is before her," which more often than not leads to startling and original perceptions.

An anecdote:

Looking out at our parlor window one day I said to her: "We see all the shows from here, don't we, all the weddings and funerals?" (They had been preparing a funeral across the street, the undertaker was just putting on his overcoat.) She replied: "Funny profession that,
burying the dead people. I should think they wouldn't have any delusions of life left." W. -- Oh yes, it's merely a profession. M. -- Hm. And how they study it! They say sometimes people look terrible and they come and make them look fine. They push things into their mouths! (Realistic gesture) W. -- Mama! M. -- Yes, when they haven't any teeth. (K, 7-8)

It is that final perception, the "dark turn at the end" (K, 8), that for Williams "raises her story out of the commonplace" (K, 8). She perceives what lies subdued, hidden in conventional perceptions: "Yes, when they haven't any teeth." The absence of teeth, "the thing itself without forethought or afterthought but with, great intensity of perception" (K, 8). She thus becomes, in the "Prologue," a prototype, a moving image of the way of the imagination. "She is," Williams says matter-of-factly, "a creature of great imagination. I might say this is her sole remaining quality" (K, 8). We might add, her sole defining quality, the very force that has made her a "despoiled, molted castaway" (K, 8); or stated in another way, her estrangement from mapped out perceptions is precisely the quality of her mind that permits her to break "life between her fingers" (K, 8). In short, she is a creature of great contradictions.

After Williams' anecdote of his mother, the "Prologue" suddenly turns direction, in this sense, unexpectedly "turns to the left," and we are thrown into another world, this time outside the interiorized one of his mother -- "lunch with Walter Arensberg at a small place on 63rd Street" (K, 8). The art world that appears in the next six paragraphs, in contrast to the moods of Williams' mother, is almost decadent, so removed, as it first appears, from the immediacies of Villon's poetry or the natural
tenacity of the boll weevil. But it is Williams' world, the immediate context of his writing; and here he begins to explore the struggle to affirm the imagination in a contemporary setting built upon its negation.

The push for the kind of consciousness so inevitably the substance of Elena's nature -- "the thing itself without forethought or afterthought but with great intensity of perception" -- in this public realm, has no choice but to move contrary, against the grain of "stale" (SA, 134) forms of perception that deny the objectivity of the world. Williams focuses on the art world primarily, and all the examples he draws attention to work toward the effort to break the "illusion" of conventional categories of defining art by bringing into play the indeterminate medium of shifting contexts, again the force of the imagination at work. "A stained-glass window that had fallen out and lay more or less together on the ground" (K, 8) becomes a new thing. A photograph of Duchamp's Nude "with many new touches by Duchamp" (K, 9) is not simply a reproduction but a new thing. Arensberg provides the account of "that old Boston hermit" (K, 9) who, despite -- or is it because of? -- the fact that he is as removed from the modern art world as it is possible to be, is not deceived by the illusion of representational art. He presses "actual rings with glass jewels from the five-and-ten-cent store" onto his "nudes" (K, 9). And what he makes is a new thing.

Extending the drive toward the New manifest in these scattered examples, Williams then goes on to propose his own artistic gesture. He would like to see a collection of "unusual creations" by artists "without master or method," one of which could be a painting by

a little English-woman, A.E. Kerr, 1906, that in its unearthly gaiety of flowers and sobriety of design possesses exactly that strange freshness a spring day
approaches without attaining, an expansion of April, a thing this poor woman found too costly for her possession, (K, 9)

These "queer products" could be shown "in some unpretentious exhibition chamber across the city from the Metropolitan Museum of Art" (K, 9). And they could be juxtaposed, also to good effect, against photographs of prehistoric rock-paintings and etchings on horn: galloping bison and stags, the hind feet of which have been caught by the artists in such a position that from that time until the invention of the camera obscura, a matter of six thousand years or more, no one on earth had again depicted that most delicate and expressive posture of running. (K, 9)

So it is that Williams leaps from one image to another, and lands back on the ground, lifting the lid of time and placing the present world of art into its larger context, a dadaistic gesture that discloses the self-enclosed "cultural" world that inhibits the imagination and that requires some one "negative" mind like a Duchamp -- or like the fool of the writer in Kora -- to cut across its pretensions. Those artists, A.E. Kerr among them, who have failed to master the art of illusion, as outsiders to a predetermined and wholly learned technique of painting, indirectly reveal the actuality of prehistoric art, an other kind of art through which the anonymous artists -- creatures of "great imagination" -- became instruments of a moving field of forces, inside the activity of human experience, immediately present to the actual. And they did this long before the advent of representational forms, at a time when there was no distinction between "art" and "life," or more accurately perhaps, when "art" as such was so much the extension of life-processes that the contemporary separation of "art" from "life," the nexus of Williams' criticism, was simply not possible. The neat symmetries of perspective, that conceived method of abstracting the perceiver from the perceived, had not yet occurred. The discovery of prehistoric art, a
dadaistic event to be sure, for this reason, threw into relief the illusory nature of representational forms of art and thought. There it was, another world manifest in artistic forms that enacted rather than "copied" a so-called external "reality."

Williams is struck by the fact of movement in prehistoric art, the fact of a shifting world ("running") immediate to the minds of the unknown artists, and in non-representational forms that catch the appearance of live forms, an indication that the artists who made them lived in what they saw: the human creature, themselves, in the midst of a world of creatures, not a privileged species around which things gather, but inside a world larger than itself and filled with a whole multitude of animate things. In this sense, prehistoric art presents an experienced rather than a conceived reality. Or as Max Raphael says in Prehistoric Cave Paintings:

Paleolithic art is centered around the animal; there is no place in it for the middle axis, for symmetry and balance inspired by the structure of the human body. Rather, everything is asymmetric and shifted. The objects are not represented as they appear when seen from a distance, as we are accustomed to seeing them in paintings from the times of classical antiquity, but as near at hand -- for the paleolithic hunter struggled with the animal at close quarters, body against body . . . .

Hugh Kenner in The Pound Era is quite right in suggesting that one day we may see as a "seminal force" in the beginnings of modern art (though modern thought may be more to the point here)

the spreading news that painted animals of great size and indisputable vigor of line could be seen on the walls of caves which no one had entered for 25,000 years . . . .
The first response was that they were surely fakes, and put there yesterday morning, but by 1895 physical evidence had disposed of any such notion, and a wholly new kind of visual experience confronted whoever cared.10

Williams' brief gesture toward these drawings in his "Prologue" indicates
that he was one of those who did care about the "wholly new kind of visual experience" available. The drawings would have confirmed his hunch that modernist art -- and modernist writing as well -- had become an historical necessity, not an aberration, but the issue of a re-valuation of experience. "The shock lay in this," Kenner continues,

that the horses and deer and aurochs brought the eye such immediacy of perception, though a disregard of up and down and through made them inconceivable in today's canons: and yet, they seemed not to rely on yesterday's canons either.

Behind Williams' strange, or apparently strange, proposal that the photographs of the drawings be hung in the anteroom of an exhibition for those "unusual creations" by artists "without master or method" stands an effort on his part to dislocate convention "canons" that make them so "inconceivable." The divorce mirrored in the "curious specimens," by sharp contrast -- that is, by dis-similarity -- would bring to light the power of the drawings, their authenticity in the context of so much artificiality of form and method, what results from stereotypical notions of art. Here, then, is an amazing turnabout in a society dominated by the illusion of progress and a naive faith in rationality, concrete evidence that supports a view that modernist attacks on perspectival forms are, at bottom, only one phase of a more large-scale revolution concerning the very nature of experience. What Williams is after, in other words, is nothing less than a destruction of predetermined modes of thought that deny the otherness of things. It is this otherness that so clearly figures, "without forethought or afterthought," in the imaginative world of the cave-drawings, a world not yet under the domination of fixed perspectives. Or as Sigfried Giedion comments in his study of prehistoric art, The Eternal Present: "Vertical and horizontal had not yet become the organizing principle. All directions were of equal
importance." As, we might add, they are in experience.

Much later, though, no less than 25,000 or so years later, there would be a radical change as this shifting world gave way to an intellectual revolution of such large dimensions that it would alter the very way in which the Western mind would thenceforth conceive of itself. Eric Havelock in his thoroughly engrossing analysis of Plato's Republic in Preface to Plato goes so far as to insist that Plato, and the triumph of Platonic thought, constituted itself on a radical departure from an earlier mode of consciousness, which Havelock calls the "Homeric" mind. Havelock understands Plato's "separation of knower from known" (a chapter title of his study) as the basic cleavage of the mind from the world that made possible a wholly new doctrine of the autonomous personality, one which self-consciously rallies its own powers in order to impose upon them an inner organization, the inspiration for which is self-generated and self-discovered. This self is then considered an "entity" -- a psyche or soul -- "which exists beyond time and place and circumstance." But more importantly, concomitant with this new self, for Plato, a thinking self, "it now became possible to identify the 'subject' in relation to that 'object' which the 'subject' knows." Knowledge as such became what is known, its "objects" thereby absorbed and made transparent to a system of organization that has its own "inner logic," in short, a closed system that imposes a statically structured, hierarchic order onto things. In its essential form, therefore, Platonism stands as the triumph of the changeless subject as prior to a world of moving objects, the triumph of knowledge as prior to a world of shifting appearances, the triumph of the "abstract" as prior to "image," and the triumph of some such metaphysical entity called "reality" as prior to "appearances."
Perhaps Plato's famous "Parable of the Cave," from the perspective offered by Havelock, does harbour a semblance of a former time in Plato's cultural memory that he re-interprets in terms of his proposed systematization of experience. His "Knowledge of the Forms" affirms an absolute subjectivity, the thinking self (a still center) existing undetermined by a constantly changing world. This same world subsequently gets relegated to the realm of shadows, mere appearances that simply reflect the true "reality" of abstractions, nothing in themselves. In Plato's cave, a group of men sit imprisoned in a somnambulistic state endlessly staring at shadows flitting back and forth on walls illuminated dimly by torchlight. One day, one of these men manages to escape through a hole where he sees the light of the sun entering. The story, of course, allegorizes the ascent of the Platonic mind from the world of appearances, up into the abstract realm of the Forms, the world of Knowledge. And Plato does construct his narrative in such a way that there is no mistake that the cave-men are trapped in the images they stare at on the walls of the cave.

By so discrediting a mode of consciousness caught up in change, Plato devalues appearances, and precisely because these moving things "break up sets of abstract unities and disperse them into pluralities of images and image situations." Not surprisingly, then, given his assumption that timeless abstractions constitute the essence of things, the imagination must be made subordinate to rational unities and the "'rolling' and 'wandering'" vision of the poet be replaced by philosophic discourse. In The Republic the "philosopher" accordingly emerges as that ideal figure of the autonomous mind, the thinking self as a being who understands the world through a
language of isolated abstractions, conceptual and formal; a language which insists on emptying events and actions of their immediacy, in order to break them up and rearrange them in categories, thus imposing the rule of principle in place of happy intuition, and in general arresting the quick play of instinctive reaction, and substituting reasoned analysis in its place as the basic mode of living.¹⁸

The platonic habit of organizing experience into abstract categories did win the day, Plato being, so Havelock argues, "one of those thinkers in whom the seminal forces of a whole epoch spring to life."¹⁹ And yet the earlier Homeric world that he subdued in order to do so did not disappear completely. It still lives, for instance, in the important term doxa or opinion. Plato uses this term to relegate what he defines as the illusory domain of appearances to a position below the transcendent realm of Knowledge. But when read back into historical time, as Havelock so carefully does, doxa still signifies the content of another mode of consciousness, prior to Plato, in which the self is constituted by the movement of things as they appear, and in which his hierarchically structured systematization of the world had not yet been, as it were, invented:

. . . it is this word that, precisely because of its very ambiguities, was chosen not only by Plato but by some of his predecessors to crystallise those properties of the poetised experience from which the intellectuals were trying to escape. Both the noun, and the verb doko, are truly baffling to modern logic in their coverage of both the subjective and objective relationship. The verb denotes both the 'seeming' that goes on in myself, the 'subject,' namely my 'personal impressions,' and the 'seeming' that links me as an 'object' to other people looking at me -- the 'impression' I make on them. The noun correspondingly is both the 'impression' that may be in my mind and the 'impression' held by others of me. It would appear therefore to be the ideal term to describe that fusion or confusion of the subject with the object that occurred in the poetised performance [of the Homeric poet] and in the state of mind created by this performance. It is the 'seeming show of things,' whether this panorama is thought of as within me or outside of me.²⁰
The perspective offered by Havelock's *Preface to Plato* thus allows us to understand the text of *Kora* as the enactment of a movement against—though Williams of course does not use this specific term—the "platonic" habit of freezing the world into abstract categories that deny the objectivity of things. The writing in itself, as we have seen, effects a crisis of the discursive manipulation of language, in which words become nothing more than a transparent vehicle for "ideas" that empty "events and actions of their immediacy." It is in the breakdown of this control that the particularity of the world comes into play, the ceaseless movement of things that "makes logic a butterfly" (K, 81). Or as we recall the fool of the writer saying, "Ay dio! I would say so much were it not for the tunes changing, changing, darting so many ways" (K, 33). Williams' writing, that is, works specifically contrary to a method of thought that constitutes itself on a hierarchic division of a "self" over the world. This is the same assumption—and here the methodological shadow of Plato still holds its grip—that stands behind the subjectivism so much the weather of his contemporaries that they have lost touch with a larger world outside the limits of human order. On the other side of this same order, or more precisely in *Kora*, on the horizontal edge of it, "all in a burst" (K, 71), re-appears another world close at hand: the dimension of *doxa*, a medium in which the self is confused, literally mixed up in the life of the object.Appearances now assume a nature of their own and become the context of dense surfaces within the play of which experience occurs, in time.

In "The Avenue of Poplars," the lovely poem from *Spring and All*, the poet drives "without personality" down a nameless street in a "wordless / world" (SA, 142), wrapped in the immediate and shifting play of the things
before him, the world simply there, and so here as well, a presence that activates desire and frees it from the enclosure of an "I" that defines its predetermined end against the things it controls along the way:

I do not
seek a path
I am still with

Gipsy lips pressed
to my own --

It is the kiss
of leaves

without being
poison ivy

or nettle, the kiss
of oak leaves --

He who has kissed
a leaf

need look no further --
I ascend

through
a canopy of leaves

and at the same time
I descend

for I do nothing
unusual --

I ride in my car
I think about

prehistoric caves
in the Pyrenees --

the cave of
Les Trois Frères (SA, 142-143)

In Spring and All, talking about the "great leap of the intelligence" into "the facts of the imagination" as a jump to "Cézanne or back to certain of the primitives" (SA, 134), Williams argues for the value of primitive art:
The primitives are not back in some remote age -- they are not BEHIND experience. Work which bridges the gap between the rigidities of vulgar experience and the imagination is rare. It is new, immediate -- It is so because it is actual, always real. (SA, 134)

Thinking about the cave of Les Trois Frères, Williams possibly had in mind the image, one of very few, of the human figures there amongst the animals, disguised as animals. These enigmatic figures appear to be dancing, maybe enacting, far back in the deep recesses of the womb-like cave, a ritualistic initiation into mysterious earth forces. The ground that everywhere pushes for release in Kora is of the same order. And Williams would continue to associate this elemental realm of experience with flowers opening, a mirror-image of the "running" movement that makes up the texture of the cave-drawings. "Or the lilacs," he says in "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,"

of men who left their marks,
by torchlight,
rituals of the hunt,
on the walls
of prehistoric
caves in the Pyrenees --
what draftsmen they were --
  bison and deer. (PB, 174)

Prehistoric art must certainly have been a wondrous discovery for Williams in the early years of this century. Here was unmistakable evidence of an imaginative world (buried underground) manifest long before the later triumph of the concept over the thing, the mind then still alive to things, its attention still attached to the "quick play" of the world. And in the caves, like Les Trois Frères, the artists of the tribe -- those creatures of "great imagination" -- retreated into dark interiors and cast images on
the blank walls. It was their own minds turned inside out. In torchlight, these figures would have shimmered — or as Giedion says, having had access to these caves, "in the caverns the flickering torch makes the different shapes come and go." In a world that appears, things do come and go, and no effort of mind can stop them, as no effort of mind can, in Kora, stop the leaves from swarming.

The discovery of the cave-drawings suddenly made it possible for writers like Williams literally to go back behind the platonic mode of thought. Behind its preconceived forms lay the beginnings of a more authentic evaluation of experience. Coming at these forms from the "back side" (K, 80), as the writer in Kora does — and here Williams' dadaist nature surfaces — quite a contrary, and as it were, negative "Parable of the Cave" thus becomes apparent. When that lone figure managed to escape from the cave and found himself in the closed realm of Knowledge, in that instant, he also removed himself from the un-known, those appearances that fabricate the world of the imagination: which is to say, in that ascent, the human as a creature of nature disappeared and became that curious phenomenon, the autonomous "self" who possesses the world through that completion called "Knowledge." The term "mimesis," so Havelock reminds us throughout Preface to Plato, then lost its original meaning. Before Plato, it was tied to the drama of experience, but from Plato on, it came to signify nothing more than a "copy," a static representation of something absent. Williams, in essence, echoes this distinction in his Autobiography:

It is NOT to hold the mirror up to nature that the artist performs his work. It is to make, out of the imagination, something not at all a copy of nature, but something quite different, a new thing, unlike any thing else in nature, a thing advanced and apart from it.

To imitate nature involves the verb to do. To copy is
merely to reflect something already there, inertly . . . .
But by imitation we enlarge nature itself, we become
nature or we discover in ourselves nature's active part.
(A, 241)

Or:

-- to place myself (in
my nature) beside nature

-- to imitate

nature (for to copy nature would be a
shameful thing)

I lay myself down: (PB, 110)
so we are told in "The Desert Music," a poem where Williams affirms poetic
form as the process of an act that calls attention to its own movement as
a justification of its form. 26

Thinking back a decade later, in A Novelette, Williams comes to the
understanding that the "excellence" of the writing in Kora "is, in major
part, the shifting of category. It is the disjointing process" (AN, 285).
The shift occurs in a new sense of language (as we have seen), but equally,
in a new sense of experience. The act of laying the mind down, "to place
myself (in / my nature) beside nature," is the enactment of a transformation
of consciousness, one that directly undermines a subjectivity that closes
the world out. In the text of Kora, it is this very "disjointing process"
that effects a "plunge" into a creaturely world of moving things wherein
the "self" as such is no longer (Whitehead's distinction in Science and the
Modern World) an "entity" but a "function" of nature. 27 Williams here would
certainly have nodded an assent to Whitehead's argument in Modes of Thought
that "a purely subjective experience of qualitative details" reduces human
experience to a "solipsist existence." In no way does it account for "our­selves as activities among other activities. It misses the point that we know ourselves as creatures in a world of creatures." Though much more bluntly, Williams says as much in "A Beginning on the Short Story (Notes)":

And who are you anyway? -- with your small personal limitations of age, sex and other sundry features like race and religion?
Unimportant.
You, even you are at the moment -- the artist, good or bad -- but a new creature. (SE, 306)

In Kora, the leap into the creaturely world of the human gives "birth to the imagination," at once the death of the mind's fixities (the "nightmare" of subjectivity) and the birth ("a waking from a nightmare") of the mind into the re-newed "objectivity" of the world, its particularity (K, 21). In this "disjointing" turnabout, what was before known, the self's possessions, gives way to the re-appearance of that which is un-known. "The raw beauty of ignorance," so Williams writes of this opening,

that lies like an opal mist over the west coast of the Atlantic, beginning at the Grand Banks and extending into the recesses of our brains -- the children, the married, the unmarried -- clings especially about the eyes and the throats of our girls and boys. (K, 21)

By going contrary to the mind's subjective orders -- that is, by being "ignorant" -- the imagination re-opens the rich experience of the world, and so re-turns the mind to the same ground Williams is so struck by in the cave-drawings. And how does Williams in Spring and All account for the "excellence" of the writing in Kora? "The Improvisations," he says -- coming at a time when I was trying to remain firm at great cost -- I had recourse to the expedient of letting life go completely in order to live in the world of my choice,

I let the imagination have its own way to see if it could save itself. Something very definite came of it. I found myself alleviated but most important I began there and then to revalue experience, to under-
stand what I was at —

The virtue of the improvisations is their placement in a world of new values — (SA, 116)

Possibly Williams was thinking of the large methodological implications, for his own writing, of this act of letting "the imagination have its own way" when he wrote his well-known (and justifiably often quoted) letter to Marianne Moore in 1934. The revaluation of experience this makes possible helps to account for Moore's sense of his "inner security":

The inner security . . . is an overwhelmingly important observation. I'm glad to have had you bring it up. Not that anyone will notice it. It is something which occurred once when I was about twenty, a sudden resignation to existence, a despair — if you wish to call it that, but a despair which made everything a unit and at the same time a part of myself. I suppose it might be called a sort of nameless religious experience. I resigned, I gave up. I decided there was nothing else in life for me but to work. It is the explanation for the calumny that is heaped on my head by women and men alike once they know me long enough. I won't follow causes. I can't. The reason is that it seems so much more important to me that I am. Where shall one go? What shall one do? Things have no names for me and places have no significance. As a reward for this anonymity I feel as much a part of things as trees and stones. Heaven seems frankly impossible. I am damned as I succeed. I have no particular hope save to repair, to rescue, to complete. (SL, 147)³¹

Of course, there is always the chance that Williams is transforming into a single occasion a shift in consciousness that took place over a period of years. Or if he did undergo some such "sudden resignation to existence" when he was about 20, it would have occurred somewhere around 1902-1906, the period he attended the Medical School of the University of Pennsylvania. Kora comes ten years or so later, but in it, the "nameless religious experience" that initiated Williams into the drama of the world enters the writing as an act of giving the mind over to the play of things. The "resignation," in other words, is nothing more (or less) than a leap into experience, at
once "a despair" because the mind is suddenly made vulnerable to forces outside its control, but a despair that allows for a sense of opacity otherwise impossible. The same things that now become actual outside the grasp of the self are experienced as "a part" of the self. By forgoing the enclosure of his own subjectivity, Williams found himself face to face with a world that simply exists. Keats (a very early influence on Williams) calls this methodological shift "negative capability" in an equally well-known letter that he wrote to his brother on December 21, 1817 — "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." We have called this state of uncertainty in Kora a confusion, a "plunge" into process that yields a tense doubleness. Things are at once "nothing" and "everything," at once "nameless" and "new." And since existence simply happens, is always going on, it can have no teleological end, as it does, say, in Plato's systematization of things. There is no where to go. "Heaven seems frankly impossible," Williams says. And nothing to do, except, for the writer in any case, write in order thus to reveal ("to repair, to rescue, to complete") the immediacy of experience.

In the early years of this century, however — and the structural quality of the writing in the "Prologue" to Kora makes this all the more apparent — this (new) sense of the mind's "negative capability" had first to enact a dis-location: the dominance of linear perspective in art, and in writing, the false assumption that language is only a vehicle transporting the reader to a discursive end behind or above the text. This is why artists like Davis and Duchamp (in Kora) and Juan Gris (in Spring and All) often play the surface of their work against the illusion of linear perspective. They seek to destroy that conventionalized expectation by drawing attention
to the opacity of art-objects. In *Spring and All*, for instance, Williams singles out a painting, *The Open Window*, by the Cubist Juan Gris— to Williams, another important modernist artist— and clarifies the historical condition of his compositional method: 33

> Things with which he is familiar, simple things— at the same time to detach them from ordinary experience to the imagination. Thus they are still "real" they are the same things they would be if photographed or painted by Monet, they are recognizable as the things touched by the hands during the day, but in this painting they are seen to be in some peculiar way— detached (*SA*, 110)

Williams then explains the artistic basis for this effect, this "detached" sense of things:

> This was not necessary where the subject of art was not "reality" but related to the "gods"— by force or otherwise. There was no need of the "illusion" in such a case since there was none possible where a picture or a work represented simply the imaginative reality which existed in the mind of the onlooker. No special effort was necessary to cleave where the cleavage already existed. (*SA*, 111)

In Gris' work, things are brought into the actual space of the canvas, detached from their former contexts, and so made real in a context that reveals their objectivity. Williams emphasizes the need for this cleavage— this detachment of things from imposed frames of reference— as a way of dislocating the viewer, in this way drawing him out into the objective space of the painting. By calling attention to its surface, Gris' art does not allow itself to be made transparent to a given "reality" external to its actuality, being instead a compositional act that cleanses perception of its fixities, its subjective control. In "former times," in say prehistoric times, this "cleavage already existed," so that there was no need to do what Gris, the modernist artist, must do in order to retrieve the kind of live consciousness evident in the cave-drawings. Williams' mother Elena is
the figure of the imagination precisely because, in her own nature, she lives this cleavage as well. She too is incapable of not being possessed by particularity. Both of them, for Williams, live the imagination of the world.

Williams' slight but surprising juxtaposition of the camera obscura with the cave-drawings now begins to develop a very specific sense of perception. Until the invention of this forerunner of the camera, he says, thinking about the movement of animals in the drawings, "no one on earth had again depicted that most delicate and expressive posture of running."

In its simplest form, the camera obscura is a primitive camera, really nothing more than a box with a hole in it to allow for the passage of light from the outside, the light then projecting the reflected images of things on the dark wall of the container. Its name (literally, "dark chamber") comes from the combination of the Latin camera ("a vaulted chamber," "a cave") and obscura ("cover over"). The term suggests that the drawings, in their particularity, reveal the actual instance of a time when men were themselves instruments, their eyes openings -- holes -- through which the light of the world projected the appearance of the world on the dark chambers of their minds. Like Williams' mother, they too were prey to a world outside their control, but which they engaged imaginatively, their desires surfacing in the moving forms they painted. The cave-drawings, in this literal sense, are live photographs of the drama of human experience, "simply the imaginative reality which existed in the mind of the onlooker."

And what appears in them is the human as creature, "looking out through two eyes, a quick brain back of them, at some of the shows of the world" (AN, 359).

Hence Duchamp's "ready-mades," especially The Fountain that Williams
mentions, come to have a much larger consequence than many may be willing to admit. A urinal? In 1917, in any case, a urinal would not, in any sense of possibility, become an object of art. In the accepted canons of the day (to re-phrase Kenner's statement on the cave-drawings) it would be inconceivable. This, incidentally, was the decision of the "hanging committee" (K, 9) of the "Palace Exhibition of 1917" (K, 10), the members of which refused to accept it "as a representative piece of American sculpture." This event "should not," Williams says without further explanation, "be allowed to slide into oblivion" (K, 10). A urinal serves the body's needs, but in a puritanical society that prefers to ignore the existence of the body (not so the artists of the cave-drawings), Duchamp's object enacts the kind of cleavage evident in Gris' art and which comes so naturally to Williams' mother. An object invisible because functional, by being detached from its context, hence mis-named, or re-named The Fountain, suddenly becomes actual again as a made-thing. Duchamp's act makes the urinal a fact of the imagination. No one in America had been struck by the objectivity of a urinal before him. And of course, that he should have chosen such a "low" thing as a urinal and re-named it such a "high" thing as a fountain would have amused Williams: a dadaist attack on artificially constructed hierarchies -- the world of art that rejected Duchamp's piece is one -- that disguise the commonality of the world. Duchamp's destruction of this falsity transforms the urinal into a new thing, his estrangement (as an artist) from its predetermined frame of reference -- the assumption that a urinal cannot be an object of art because it is mass-produced -- the very detachment that makes possible his reconstitution of its particularity. For Williams, Duchamp's "ready-mades" are further instances of an imagination that will not be subdued by habits of perception that freeze a moving
world into fixed forms. These are the habits that establish "false values" (K, 14), against which:

The true value is that peculiarity which gives an object a character by itself. The associational or sentimental value is the false. Its imposition is due to lack of imagination, to an easy lateral sliding. The attention has been held too rigid on the one plane instead of following a more flexible, jagged resort. It is to loosen the attention, my attention since I occupy part of the field, that I write these improvisations. (K, 14)

The writing in Kora dislocates by working specifically toward the destruction of the "easy lateral sliding" of the mind into abstract forms that arrange particulars according to external patterns. In one instance, "Improvisation IV.3," the writer moves reductively against a moral system that imposes a "sentimental value" onto death in order to disguise its actuality as a condition of experience:

The frontispiece is her portrait and further on -- the obituary sermon: she held the school upon her shoulders. Did she. Well -- turn in here then: -- we found money in the blood and some in the room and on the stairs. My God I never knew a man had so much blood in his head! -- and thirteen empty whisky bottles. I am sorry but those who come this way meet strange company. This is you see death's canticle.

A young woman who had excelled at intellectual pursuits, a person of great power in her sphere, died on the same night that a man was murdered in the next street, a fellow of very gross behavior. The poet takes advantage of this to send them on their way side by side without making the usual unhappy moral distinctions. (K, 37-38)

The juxtaposition here of two apparently un-related deaths -- and in a hierarchically structured social world they would be kept separate -- for the
voice in the writing who stands outside, estranged from the "usual unhappy moral distinctions" that close out the fact of death, reveals a common ground to both the murdered man and the "young woman" who once "held the school upon her shoulders." There are, then, no unchanging moral laws that transcend experience, no teleological ends governing human events. The two deaths simply happened on the "same night," a chance event in a world where death appears unpredictably. By refusing to make the conventionalized distinctions, so the voice in the interpretation comments, the "poet" can treat each death singularly. The particularity of each death, in other words, equalizes — restores to facts and events their commonality. The use of comparisons is thus a form of abstraction in which things are subordinated to a hierarchically structured system of values, in this case, a moral distinction socially determined that would have removed the mind from an indeterminate world where things do occur by chance, or more precisely, in chance. As we have already noted, Williams attacks "similes" in the "Prologue" because they are a mode of making comparisons that remove the mind from its primary engagement in process. "Much more keen," he writes,

is that power which discovers in things those inimitable particles of dissimilarity to all other things which are the peculiar perfections of the thing in question.

But this loose linking of one thing with another has effects of a destructive power little to be guessed at: all manner of things are thrown out of key so that it approaches the impossible to arrive at an understanding of anything. All is confusion, yet it comes from a hidden desire for the dance, a lust of the imagination, a will to accord two instruments in a duet. (K, 18-19)

The presentation of the two deaths in the proximity of time, not in the frame of a static order of laws, is a "loose linking" that destroys the habitual ways of fixing events into the given perspective of a closed system of significance — say, a moral system that would automatically assume that
the death of the "young woman" must be significantly different from the
death of a murdered man. This levelling of assumed frames of reference on
the part of the "poet" works contrary to the logic of "understanding." It
throws the mind into the condition of a loss of perspectival meaning. But
there is, in this loss, a gain. "All is confusion," the mind thereby
liberated to enter the "desire for the dance, a lust of the imagination."

The "jagged resort," or the "loose linking of one thing with another,"
is therefore a way of disorienting the mind's orders, of estranging it from
its own self-referential forms. Confusion is the positive effect of this
negative gesture, for in the underlying confusion of experience, the
imagination awakens to the quick play of its own powers. Elsewhere in the
"Prologue" we are given a kind of fool's diagnosis of the releasing force
of this destructive process:

The stream of things having composed itself into wiry
strands that move in one fixed direction, the poet in
desperation turns at right angles and cuts across
current with startling results to his hangdog mood.
(K, 17)

This statement is lifted from one of the interpretations to the improvisa-
tions that Williams chose to place in his "Prologue" with a group of others,
possibly because together they help to clarify the complexity of the disorder
operating in Kora in Hell. Underneath the almost disembodied texture of
the statement, however, resides the basic crisis that Williams experienced
by throwing himself into the writing. A secure self -- call it an "ego" --
consists of a closed perspective -- call it a personality say, or some such
unity that identifies itself through a separation from that which it cannot
know. Through the dominance of this kind of self, the "wiry strands" of the
world are brought under control, hence divorced from consciousness. The
isolate self, in this sense, invents its own world to escape the push of the actual, its objectivity. But "the poet," we are told, cuts across this "current," and "in desperation" because there is no other choice in this impasse. To remain locked in "one fixed direction" (a fixed moral system is one such direction) is to remain locked in a "nightmare" that negates experience. Williams says he wrote Kora "to loosen the attention," in this way to un-settle closed forms of thought. To write is the thing, finally, for the sake of writing, not in any case to use writing as a mode of conveying a package of predetermined judgments over to the helpless reader.

It is from this vantage point, mid-stream as it were, that we can evaluate more accurately what Williams calls the "broken style" (K, 6) of his "Prologue." And so characteristically throughout (our discussion has focused on the opening four pages) he refuses to argue from a discursive point of view what he, in fact, says. What is the so-called "subject" of the "Prologue"? There is no such stable "entity" in sight. In other words, the "Prologue" is itself a writing act, for Williams, one of a piece with the Improvisations as a whole, a further extension of the possibilities that began to dawn on him as "dark scribblings" translating themselves into the text Kora in Hell. Its "broken style" is at once a defiance of the unity of rational thought and an affirmation of a compositional method consonant with the sense of the imagination that Williams talks but does not "talk about." The writer in Kora, the improvisations behind him, now enacts the same method to probe and explore the ground of the writing that lies behind him. It is in this state of mind that Williams sat down to write the
"Prologue." He is not seeking to prove in logical terms the nature of the imagination, for that procedure would go against the grain of his writing in the improvisations: "Talk is servile that is set to inform" (K, 17) because such talking about is always a descriptive removal from the thing at hand, what is before the writer in its particularity. The writing in the "Prologue" proves itself in action, that is, un-covers its content through its own movement, and like the improvisations themselves, figures its way toward an understanding of the imagination through a method of writing that exemplifies its nature. In short, Williams composes, not in abstractions but through images whose objectivity determines the possibility of what comes to be thought. "No ideas but in things." We are told as much in a statement from the "Prologue." "The imagination," Williams writes,

gothers, Given many things of nearly totally divergent natures but possessing one-thousandth part of a quality in common, provided that be new, distinguished, these things belong in an imaginative category and not in a gross natural array. To me this is the gist of the whole matter. (K, 14)

In the opening pages, we have watched Williams leaping from "one thing to another," one image to another, one situation to another, without providing those discursive transitions that would subordinate these "things" to a given frame of reference, some theoretical point of view that determines the exact significance of the facts used to support it. First, an image of Williams' mother in Rome, then the disreputable people around her, a line from Villon, the unexpected appearance of Sandburg's boll weevil, verbatim snatches of conversation with Williams' mother, lunch with Arensberg, art pieces by Duchamp, Arensberg's story of the "old Boston Hermit," A.E. Kerr, prehistoric cave-drawings, the camera obscura -- and so on, a one and a one and a one, the images drawn into the field of the writing as particulars
that manifest, in their particularity, the nature of the imagination. They are brought together, not in a "gross natural array" (a sort of pot pourri of the poet's "sentimental or associational" self?), but as objects that reveal themselves to each other in their uniqueness, their differences from one another, which in turn constitutes their commonality. These images are presented as particulars not as transparent signs that "represent" a given view of the world prior to their appearance in the text. In Spring and All, Williams would call this kind of use (rather, mis-use) of image a "Crude symbolism" (SA, 100), the false value he attacks in Kora.

The movement of the writing in the "Prologue," in other words, the leaps across the gaps between images, as well as the shifts from one image to another without logical transitions, enacts the indeterminacy of the process of composition. The mind inside this process does not possess, but resigns itself to the objectivity of the material at hand; it is possessed by the play as well as the inter-play of images. Like both Juan Gris and Marcel Duchamp, the writer in the "Prologue" detaches each particular image from a former context (the line from Villon's "Ballade" is one such image, as is the Arensberg anecdote, and so on), and draws them into the blank space of his writing, one against the other, one alongside the other, the gaps between them left as gaps. He thus literally composes his way through to an understanding of the imagination which is experiential rather than "reasonable" (i.e. determined beforehand). Singly and together, the images themselves are complexes -- Pound defined the "Image" as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"\(^{35}\) -- and as such, they subvert a subjective possession of things that depends upon a separation of the mind from things. In this way, they simultaneously cut across imposed completions of "thought" and
re-establish the primary confusion of experience. In the resulting state of incompleteness, the same images that call attention to their particularity, as different as they are from one another, not only embody and reveal, but also perform the imagination as a force that by nature wanders, turns to the left when it should have turned right. And it does so, because it cannot help but go from "one thing to another," in time, the same present time that Williams recognizes in the cave-drawings, and the same present time that appears in the contemporary world of his writing.

The writing in the "Prologue" thus creates a dis-location, in effect, mirrors precisely the destruction of the illusion of representative form in art, in Davis' print for instance. Since there is no external frame of reference, no determinate "meaning" outside the actuality of the writing to which the writing refers, the reader discovers that he too, like the writer, cannot transcend its opacity. The writing turns into an objective event that draws his mind out into the process of its composition. His experience of the text becomes a crucial part of its activity. He too experiences the disintegration of his subjectivity and the consequent confusion of a crisis of consciousness, his mind turned inside-out, forced as it is to get lost in the writing as it goes.

One fascinating statement in "From My Notes About My Mother" is to the point in this context. After reciting an anecdote in his mother's words, without explanatory or interpretive comments, Williams characteristically becomes conscious of his reader and attempts to fill him in on what we might call his "broken" method of presenting his material:

Perhaps my way of telling this isn't exactly what you might prefer or expect, but in this family you are expected to understand what is said and interpret, as
essential to the telling, the way in which it is told —
for some reason which you will know is of the matter
itself. That is to picture it. "Figure to yourself,"
as my mother would often say . . . 36

The complex play — a triple-play — on the term "figure" is here revealing.
In a very simple sense, Williams is asking nothing more of his readers than
that they place themselves within the language of his mother in order to
experience her words directly, or objectively, or perhaps (drawing on Keats'advice) more tellingly, negatively, without that irritable reaching after
completed thoughts. They should "imagine" the movement of her mind, which
is what he is trying to do in his account of his conversations with her.

In another way, however, the term "figure" is a colloquial word that has to
do with the act of discovering a solution to a difficulty, in other words,
an intellectual process: for example, Williams figured out how to start his
car. And yet, the term "figure" also points to the form of a thing, to
the figure it cuts in space, its appearance, as say the appearance of the
five-pointed star against the "black table" in Williams' comments on the
poetry of Marianne Moore. As a method, the act of figuring proposes at
least three directions at the same time: toward perception as an act,
toward thinking as a process, and finally, toward the appearances that
constitute the texture of the world. The imagination manifests all three
directions at once. In its domain, form is a revelation of content, so that
how a thing is said is essential to what is being said. Or stated in
another way, the act of figuring is an act of imagining what is said, and
this, in its turn, is an act of discovering what is said, the process itself
the thing that affirms its own particularity. No imagining, no discovery.
No discovery, no experience of process.

In writing, then, meaning as such issues from the interplay between
reader and writer, both of them caught up in the field of the text. Meaning, too, like the mind, is a function of this drama, not an entity that exists outside it. In the "Prologue" — as in all of the writing in *Kora* — the leaps across blank spaces, the transformational shifts from one image to another, the refusal to define the imagination in discursive terms, or the reverse, the attempt to exemplify the imagination in writing that manifests its effects, the attention thereby drawn to the things before the mind "without forethought or afterthought but with great intensity of perception" — all of this activity in the writing is tied to the loosening of the mind's fixities that occurs when it is "slaughtered" by change and compelled to "stray," as Williams' mother does. In the "Prologue," she is also the figure of the imagination. Like mother, like son. For both, the imagination works, like the boll weevil, that creature who builds itself into any condition it finds itself in, or like the speech of the fool in *Kora* that adjusts itself to the objectivity of a world that never ceases to cleave the mind's orders. And incidentally, Williams' life-long attachment to "localism" begins in this same cleavage. "And to me especially," he wrote to Marianne Moore in a letter dated June 2, 1932,

you give a sense of triumph in that it is my own scene without mistaking the local for the parochial. Almost no one (or very few) has felt the full and conclusive impact of that necessity in the writing. The meaning of the objective, the realization of its releasing quality, instead of its walling effect when badly comprehended, has been nowhere so well forced to the light. It is the underlying reality as well as the supreme difficulty of an art. (SL, 123)
(Notes)," Williams could quite easily be articulating the initial crisis that informs the texture of Kora:

At first all the images, one or many which fill the mind, are fixed. I have passed through it and studied it for years. We look at the ceiling and review the fixities of the day, the month, the year, the lifetime. Then it begins; that happy time when the image becomes broken or begins to break up, becomes a little fluid -- or is affected, floats brokenly in the fluid. The rigidities yield -- like ice in March, the magic month. (SE, 307)

In this same essay, Williams urges writers to "take to the imagination" (SE, 307), in this sense, to allow writing itself to reduce the mind back into a process where nothing is determinable, where everything is asymmetric and shifted, like the world of the cave-drawings -- or in Williams' terms, the mind thereby finds itself in nature, inside the actual that writing becomes:

Arrived at that condition, the imagination inflamed, the excitement of it is that you no longer copy but make a natural object. (Something comparable to nature: an other nature.) You yourself become the instrument of nature -- the helpless instrument. (SE, 303)

In Kora, Williams' sudden resignation to existence gives way to the birth of the imagination, the condition, as he says in his "Prologue," of the "mind's florescence" (K, 22). As he discovers, when the "rigidities yield" and the fixities of the mind "break up," there is always an otherness ready to push through, an objectivity that refuses to be caged by predetermind forms of subjectivity, an actual world in which desire surfaces:

It's all one. Richard worked years to conquer the descending cadence, idiotic sentimentalist. Ha, for happiness! This tore the dress in ribbons from her maid's back and not spared the nails either; wild anger spit from her pinched eyes! This is the better part. Or a child under a table to be dragged out coughing and biting, eyes glittering evilly. I'll have it my way! (K, 56-57)

In the world of Kora, security is constantly being invaded by the epidemic
of the world, the mind constantly being drawn into a brokenness in which it flounders and gets confused, at war with itself, but for this reason, engaged by things, inside the tension of desire:

Nothing is any pleasure but misery and brokenness, THIS is the only up-cadence. This is where the secret rolls over and opens its eyes. Bitter words spoken to a child ripple in morning light! Boredom from a bedroom doorway thrills with anticipation! The complaints of an old man dying piecemeal are starling chirrups. Coughs go singing on springtime paths across a field; corruption picks strawberries and slow warping of the mind, blacking the deadly walls -- counted and recounted -- rolls in the grass and shouts ecstatically. All is solved! (K, 57)

And as the writer affirms the confusion of "brokenness," all former values are turned topsy-turvy; coughs become songs and the process of change ("corruption"), in the language of the writing, finds itself re-aligned with things ("picks strawberries"). When the mind warps and thus loses its subjectivity, there is no longer any further need for that irritable reaching after "fact and reason." Now everything becomes dense and multiple, actual. And we are reminded that ecstasy is a state of mind "out" of "place," in this instance, a state contrary to the stasis of the mind's fixities. "All is solved!" Solved because there is nothing to solve -- no such end when the mind is florescent, active to what images itself forth.

It is out of this immediate sense of the world that Williams openly attacks, throughout the text of Kora, but more publicly in his "Prologue," the sentimentalization of experience that occurs when language is understood merely as a transparency, not the density it is. Language, to the awakening
writer in *Kora*, carries the objectivity of the world in its own wild move-
ment. The play of words manifests the same processes embodied in Jacob
Louslinger's decaying body. The writing that comes of this play moves
against the opaque wall of words, or persistently attempts to, and through
this process, begins to reveal a way through to the imagination of an
immediate world. The former nightmare of the isolate self breaks -- or is
"slaughtered" -- and the feet once again assume the figure of the dance,
the body flexing itself, the "cracked mind" (K, 65) tense with expectations,
the writer thereby freed to enter a language play. This is what makes *Kora*
such a dense, complex work to read critically, and yet it is this very
quality of the text that constitutes its nature. In it the words themselves
are constantly shifting the attention away from one fixity or another,
forcing the reader to re-adjust to the condition of the writing as it goes,
because the writing itself, as the voice in one of the interpretations says,
is "interpreting as it goes." The reader who accepts this play finds himself
in the drama of the writing and moves with the composing. He shares the
time of the writing, which is precisely the demand -- and the challenge --
of improvisational form, a form that begins from scratch and which, for this
reason, forces the writer to allow the writing to compose itself, the
writing thus an extension of a field of activity within which the mind thinks
its way through, as Williams does in his "Prologue," interpreting as he
goes in the time of the composition. An improvisation is a state of mind
open to process and transformation, to the quick play of time.

Like father, like son:

*My little son's improvisations exceed miné: a round
stone to him's a loaf of bread or "this hen could lay a
dozen golden eggs." Birds fly about his bedstead; giants
lean over him with hungry jaws; bears roam the farm by*
summer and are killed and quartered at a thought. There are interminable stories at eating time full of bizarre imagery, true grotesques, pigs that change to dogs in the telling, cows that sing, roosters that become mountains and oceans that fill a soup plate. There are groans and growls, dun clouds and sunshine mixed in a huge phantasmagoria that never rests, never ceases to unfold into -- the day's poor little happenings. (K, 74)

There is, perhaps needless to say, a great deal of humorous, good natured fun here, but the point is that the writer's son is still free to roam the field of his desires. He moves inside the intimacy of the present -- "the day's poor little happenings." To him nothing is stable, anything can be any other thing. Forms change in the blink of an eye, a "round stone" becomes a "loaf of bread," or vice-versa, no matter, there is yet more to come, sometimes so quickly that "pigs" can even "turn to dogs in the telling" and "oceans" have no difficulty filling "a soup plate." The writer's son thus becomes one more figure of the imagination that does go "from one thing to another," and like the seemingly indestructible boll weevil, thrives on change. But further, the thing that really fascinates the writer about his son's flexible mind is the unabashed innocence of its openly aimless nature. He has simply not learned to predetermine his experience. The movement of his mind is conditioned purely by the things before it. He is always getting lost in his imagination. In fact, he does nothing but improvise:

His tunes follow no scale, no rhythm -- alone the mood in odd ramblings up and down, over and over with a rigor of invention that rises beyond the power to follow except in some more obvious flight. (K, 74)

And the pale negative, the inhibiting opposite of this "rigor of invention?"

Never have I heard so crushing a critique as those desolate inventions, involved half-hymns, after his first visit to a Christian Sunday school. (K, 74)

Kora in Hell has a pointed subtitle: Improvisations. Or as Williams says, "Here is dancing! The mind in tatters" (K, 57).
Buying a car, a revolution in the daily life of a doctor in small town America, who had to make the rounds, much faster and much more efficient than feet, or a horse, or a bicycle: needless to say, an event in Williams' life, critical enough to single out in an autobiography of a writer. Here was a completely new kind of machine — a self-moving thing — that demanded in its own particularity a careful attention to details to make use of it, a vehicle that might, especially if the operator of it were a writer with the kind of mind Williams possessed, change the very way he could think about the art of writing. In "First Years of Practice," Williams recalls his first car:

I walked to my calls or rode a bicycle. Then I hired a little mare, Astrid, for a few months. I made seven hundred fifty dollars my first year. Then late in 1911, I got my first Ford! A beauty with brass rods in front holding up the windshield, acetylene lamps, but no starter! Sometimes of a winter's day I'd go out, crank the car for twenty minutes, until I got it going, then, in a dripping sweat, leave the engine running, go in, take a quick bath, change my clothes then sally
forth on my calls. Once the thing kicked back and the handle of the crank hit me above the left eye. It might have been worse. The trick was to use the left hand in cranking, so that when the kickback came the handle would jerk out of the fingers instead of striking the wrist and breaking it. I had used the left hand, got it over the eye instead. (A, 127)

"The trick was" -- and we notice immediately the kind of mind that works against any difficulty as a specific difficulty, that cuts its way through an impasse, not by consulting a manual, but by finding a solution, any solution, with the material at hand. In other words, it simply improvises:

1. to compose, or simultaneously compose and perform, sing, etc., on the spur of the moment and without any preparation; extemporize. 2. to make, provide, or do with the tools and materials at hand, usually to fill an unforeseen and immediate need: as, he improvised a bed of leaves. (Webster's New World Dictionary)

The definition strikes to the heart of what happens in Kora. Williams had to learn how to compose and perform simultaneously -- or think and write -- and on the sharp, risky spur of the moment inside the writing. The words came first as the material at hand, and writing the act that fulfilled the need to find a way, a compositional way, of moving through his own slaughter. Starting the car and learning how to write: a possible connection, a remote one perhaps, but nonetheless possible.

In "Seventy Years Deep," an essay written very late in life, Williams reminisces about his long life as a doctor and writer in Rutherford, New Jersey, the town that remained his home straight through. And not surprisingly, he remembers those countless times bits and pieces of phrases broke into his mind as he drove, most likely because he drove. He would furiously attempt to write down the words before they escaped him. "When the phrasing of a passage suddenly hits me," he writes, "knowing how quickly such things are lost, I find myself at the side of the road frantically
searching in my medical bag for a prescription blank." And he explains further the urgency that lay behind his need to write while driving:

I burned internally with something I had just heard or that had occurred to my mind; it is evanescent, either you put it down at once -- or it is gone. I would look out of my car for a place to park. People must have wondered at me -- maybe a boy on a bicycle would be pedaling by -- but the urge was on me and I had to get it off my chest.  

The vivid memory of these intense moments should alone remind us that Williams did spend a great deal of time, and especially as a doctor, on the road, driving "unwitnessed to work," as Louis Zukofsky says, "no one but himself to drive the car through the suburbs." The short poem, "The Young Housewife" -- "I pass solitary in my car" (CEP, 136) -- was first published as early as 1916 in Others, only a few years after Williams got his first Ford.

In other words, right from the beginning, Williams could hardly have resisted the fact of the car as a technological object that brought into relief a (new) method of composition that he aligned so closely with modernist writing. The car was a natural image of the modernist concern with movement. Duchamp's Nude descends the stairway as a mass-in-movement, a self-moving thing, an auto-mobile. As any beginning driver quickly discovers, the car offers a sense of movement particular to itself. Get into it, and the first thing that becomes apparent is the separation of an out from an in, perhaps no momentous event, but the subtle cleavage that occurs makes available a consciousness of things otherwise unavailable. The mind thus finds itself inside an outside, and when the driving begins, the driver enters the play of a doubleness: not only an inside experienced as an outside, but now as well an outside experienced as an inside. The driver in
transit moves through a field of many surfaces, the eyes shifting and turning with photographic rapidity, things appearing and disappearing. That is, the writer finds himself in process, in a flow of events in which no given perspective is an end but simply a point in an activity experienced in its temporality. Driving the car, for instance, in "A Novelette":

And nothing -- opens the doors, inserts the key, presses the starting pedal, adjusts the throttle and the choker and backs out, downhill. Sees the barberry gouts. Seize the steering wheel and turn it sharply to the left, the lilac twigs -- that have lost prestige through the loss of plumage -- scrape the left front fender sharply.

(AN, 278)

No fixed laws, but the law of change. The dying lilacs scrape the fender, and sharply, as a particular does when it strikes the eyes.

The act of driving not only embodies a contrariety that reveals the open structure of experience, but also places the mind of the driver in a vulnerable situation. Inside the spatial dimension of an environment on the move, things by nature are experienced as an invasion of mind, the eyes inevitably being struck, in a way stung by particulars that appear in view and as quickly disappear. The driver who is capable of maintaining himself in this doubleness must pay attention to otherness, to "the thing itself without forethought" -- those particulars that draw him out into a process wherein his mind is reduced to its primary engagement in a shifting field of inter-relations. The effect is similar to the effect of the epidemic in "A Novelette," the stress of which "pares off the inanity by force of speed and a sharpness, a closeness of observation, of attention comes through" (AN, 273).

The poet/driver of "The Right of Way" in Spring and All (SA, 119-20) moves with this contrariety and affirms the negative state of emptiness.
that results from his resignation to experience.

In passing with my mind
on nothing in the world

-- the mind becomes itself a "nothing," a vacant cavity (for Williams, a state of "ignorance") that projects, as a moving film projects images on the screen, the appearance of things in time that strike his eyes.

Driving is the event of this invasion, this "rape," as it were, of the mind's closures. And it occurs as the mind makes its way through a field of opacities that do not yield to its limits: rather assert themselves specifically against those limits. "I saw," so the poem proceeds, as the poet passes through a field of shifting appearances, "an elderly man who / smiled . . . a woman in blue / who was laughing and leaning forward . . ."

Why bother where I went?
for I went spinning on the

four wheels of my car
along the wet road until

And of course everything, even the humourous laughter of the poet, hangs suspended in the gap following the prepositional hinge: "until" the mind is invaded again by something other, this time:

I saw a girl with one leg
over the rail of a balcony

Things thus become those very walls that make a closeness of attention a fundamental condition in the continual creation of a world -- the actual world of the imagination -- that constantly escapes the deadness of predetermined forms of thought. The same poet who wrote "The Right of Way" also declared in old age:

Only the imagination is real!
I have declared it
time without end.

If a man die
it is because death has first
possessed his imagination. (PB, 179)

Had the poet in "The Right of Way" not allowed himself to pass with
his mind "on nothing," he would have removed his nameless self from the
event of experience. His mind on "something" -- or as it were, something
on his mind -- he wouldn't have noticed anything. And the play on the
"right of way" he enjoys "by // virtue of the law" strongly hints that his
method of seeing runs contrary to established forms of perception. And
his speaking as well, for he adopts the frozen language of traffic signs
that police our movement through a territorialized space and makes it
operative again in his poem.

Maybe, then, this fool of a writer is heading straight into a ditch
or straight into a telephone pole -- or he may, like the two dark figures
in Davis' print, be on the edge of a dip in the road, about to have an
accident. In any case, Marcel Duchamp had an accident when he "decided his
composition for that day would be the first thing that struck his eye in
the first hardware store he should enter" (K, 10). Williams' wording is
exact: "the first thing that struck his eye," each word weighted, simulta­
neously simple and complex, again the thing itself without forethought. In
the opening pages of Spring and All, a text that directly extends the writing
in Kora, the world suddenly becomes NEW because it has just immediately
before come crashing down. Disasters and accidents, in other words,
destroy any given state of fixity simply by bringing into relief the opacity
of things, their specific and undeniable object-ivity. And we might point
out here that Williams' call for the NEW in his "Prologue" is based upon
the discovery in Kora that the experience of the NEW is the immediate effect
of a shift in consciousness. "A new world / is only a new mind" (PB, 76).
There is thus this crucial distinction between Duchamp's mind and the kind of mind that refuses to take its shape from what is before it: the one attempts to control things by retreating into a subjectivity that shuts the world out (e.g. the Puritans in Williams' *In the American Grain*), and the other adjusts itself to the fact of accidents, to the play of experience as an event in the world. Duchamp, in short, can think and act at the same time. He can make moves as he goes. We are told in *Spring and All* that "The pure products of America / go crazy" (SA, 131) because there is no way, no method in America to lift the world of its immediate desires into a revelation of itself:

No one
to witness
and adjust, no one to drive the car (SA, 133)

The pun, then, in *no one*, again the push for "the thing itself without forethought or afterthought but with great intensity of perception.

The necessity to keep adjusting to a changing field of awareness while driving a car mirrors exactly the necessity in writing as an act --

If one should catch me in this state! -- wings would go at a bargain. Ah but to hold the world in the hand then -- (K, 36)

to hold onto the words at hand. "Write going. Look to steer," so Williams says in "A Novelette" (AN, 278), a series of improvisations that uses the same method as in *Kora*.

Williams began writing *Kora* with no book at all in mind; he wrote, he says, "For relief, to keep myself from planning and thinking at all" (A, 158).
What else, then, could he have done but start from zero, from the blank page spread out before him, which he filled with "anything that came into my head" (A, 158)? The decision to begin "in earnest" (A, 158), to write because of the pressure of a personal bankruptcy of belief, in the circumstances, would not have been unusual. What became an amazement and a wonder for Williams (and for the reader) is the fact that the writing would for this very reason call forth what we earlier called a crisis of language, a crisis in language for the writer of Kora, for whom the words themselves became the actual material at hand. In the slippery speech of the fool's voice, the fool whose ears are all eyes, writing could now return to the elemental nature of words as they came ringing into the head of the writer, as they literally do in "Improvisation XXIII.1":

Baaaa! Ba-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Bebe esa purga. It is the goats of Santo Domingo talking. Bebe esa purga! Bebeesapurga! And the answer is: Yo no lo quiero beber! Yonoloquierobeber! (K, 75)

The particles of sound here enter from an outside, from the distance of an otherness that embodies the nature of a foreignness. But as they configure (or cohere), goats begin to talk, and the listening writer, wrapt by the liquid quality of these particles of sound, is tempted to lose himself in a sea of laughter. Or the reverse, repeat a phrase over and over, and soon it will willy-nilly disintegrate into particles of sound, even further, into the confusion of undifferentiated sound, all the syllables merging into one stream, precisely how they are first heard—as sound. And yet, as the improvisation implies there is, at this end, finally no virtue in simply getting drunk on sound for the sake of getting lost in the sea. For to be lost in the sea is an end, an end which leads to the death of speech. A suicide. "The sea is not our home" (P, 235), as Paterson will later tell
us. The pull is strong and real enough; language has that appeal (this is its peculiar power). But the writer has to resist that finality, must resist it, and pull himself back, toward that point where sound ceases to be mere sound and becomes morpheme. Sounds thus become words, and words a configuration of sounds. This is that tense edge, a threshold, that ties the imagination to the actual.

The same resistance occurs in "Improvisation XXV.2," but with one notable difference. Here sight rather than sound is the focus of attention. In flight as well as in submersion (in *Kora* ascent and descent are constantly doubling back on one another) there is the equal danger of a loss of that tension between appearance and disappearance which constitutes the field of experience. The writer of *Kora* desires to remain within the contrariety, within what Williams in "The Desert Music" comes to call the protective "film" (PB, 120) where the skin of any live thing meets the opacity of the world. It is the tension itself that resonates the music of existence:

The music
 guards it, a mucus, a film that surrounds it,
a benumbing ink that stains the
sea of our minds -- to hold us off -- shed
of a shape close as it can get to no shape,
a music! a protecting music . (PB, 120)

The tension is that "stain" that makes a thing as a creature of nature both a form and a figure, both an I and a You, both an "earthling" and a "death-ling," like Jacob Louslinger. And it is this tension that the writer in *Kora* wants, for it is here also that desire as a force comes into its own.

A man can shoot his spirit up out of a wooden house, that is, through the roof -- the roof's slate -- but how far? It is of final importance to know that. To say the world turns under my feet and that I watch it passing with a smile is neither the truth nor my desire. But I would wish to stand -- you've seen the kingfisher do it -- where the largest town might be taken in my two
hands, as high let us say as a man's head -- some one man not too far above the clouds. What would I do then? Oh I'd hold my sleeve over the sun awhile to make church bells ring. (K, 79)

The interpretation juxtaposed against this improvisation reveals (as so many of the interpretations do) the methodological shift of consciousness implied in the desire to stand at that point in the mind where the world may be "taken in my two hands." The shift, needless to say, is not into stasis, a fixed view of the world. It is not a journey, but an effect -- the estranged writer of Kora re-enters the play of the world from the other side, from the "back side" (K, 80) of perception, there where the world appears, not as a completed perception, but as the event of it, a creative act:

> It is obvious that if in flying an airplane one reached such an altitude that all sense of direction and every intelligible perception of the world were lost there would be nothing left to do but to come down to that point at which eyes regained their power. (K, 79)

It is the edge of the indeterminate the writer in Kora seeks.

"It is nearly pure luck," so the voice in the interpretation to "Improvisation XXIII.1" ("Baaaa!") , his tongue in his cheek, says, "that gets the mind turned inside out in a work of art. There is nothing more difficult than to write a poem" (K, 75). This is the same writer who has just said in the text of Kora: "A poem can be made of anything" (K, 70). Of course, it all depends upon the writer's ability to remain at "that point" where all the contraries that fabricate the drama of experience (both in language and in the world) are alive on the edge of the mind's limits; this point of consciousness writing reveals and enacts. The writer who composes and performs at the same time drives through the world in language. "It is something of a matter of sleight of hand" (K, 75). That is, on the other side of the language
crisis there is to be faced the skin of the evanescent transformations of
the words themselves, the experience of which bespeaks the alchemic nature
of a world outside that escapes the container of any given form. Or as we
are told in the final lines of the same interpretation:

The poets of the T'ang dynasty or of the golden age in
Greece or even the Elizabethans: it's a kind of alchemy
of form, a deft bottling of a fermenting language. Take
Dante and his Tuscan dialect -- It's a matter of position.
The empty form drops from a cloud, like a gourd from a
vine; into it the poet packs his phallus-like argument.
(K, 75)

That crucial "matter of position" concerns method, the how -- the "howl" in
Paterson II (P, 28) -- rather than just the what. Williams is explicit
about this distinction in his "Author's Introduction" to The Wedge (1944):

It isn't what he [the writer] says that counts as a work
of art, it's what he makes, with such intensity of
perception that it lives with an intrinsic movement of
its own to verify its authenticity. (SE, 257)

In "The Desert Music," the content of this declaration reverses itself to
become the persistent question that haunts the poet: "How shall we get said
what must be said"? (PB, 108).

This question, as yet unspoken, rather just being formulated on the
horizon of Kora, is nonetheless implicit in the very texture of its language.

Sometimes, however, in the text itself the intention to enact the play of
language falters, the writer then aware that he has not managed to lift the
experience of its substantiality into the event of a dance that "lives with
an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity." In "Impro-
visation XIII.3," for example, this inauthentic kind of writing becomes the
brunt of a light-hearted laughter:

The words of the thing twang and twitter to the gentle
rocking of a high-laced boot and the silk above that.
The trick of the dance is in following now the words,
"allegro, now the contrary beat of the glossy leg:
Reaching far over as if -- But always she draws back and
comes down upon the word flatfooted. For a moment we --
but the boot's costly and the play's not mine. The pace
leads off anew. Again the words break it and we both
come down flatfooted. Then -- near the knee, jumps to
the eyes, catching in the hair's shadow. But the lips
take the rhythm again and again we come down flatfooted.
By this time boredom takes a hand and the play's ended.
(K, 55)

To a considerable extent, we should note, the self-conscious insistence to
play the "flatfooted" game of words retrieves the writing here -- the larger
compositional space of Kora can accommodate even this exercise in writing --
and thus the attempt to dance with the "she," though never in fact
consummated, re-opens the necessity to find a way in which the "twang and
twitter" of desire can surface in the objectivity of the words themselves.
In other words, this one play ends in boredom, but the possibility of the
play itself remains real enough. "The pace leads off anew." And so in
another wholly different instance, when the tension between meaning and its
absence is maintained, the drive can be held in hand with anything that comes
to mind. And why not? "Why pretend to remember the weather two years back?"

In this initial line from "Improvisation XI.1," a short improvisation,
the words themselves appear as if from nowhere in particular, as does the
passage that follows:

Why not? Listen close then repeat after others what
they have just said and win a reputation for vivacity.
Oh feed upon petals of edelweiss! one dew drop, if it
be from the right flower, is five years' drink! (K, 51)

Who, for instance, is speaking? And why? To what purpose? The key word
in the opening sentence ("pretend") here floats in an apparently charged
space that is emptied of referential meaning: are we to read "pretend" as
an assertion or as make-believe or as a lie? The next sentence does not
resolve the ambiguity but maintains it by creating a gap between itself and
the preceding sentence. "Why not"? challenges the first question. It is either the same voice talking to itself, or another voice that is played against the first. Or both ways. As readers we cannot be sure which way to turn for a solution, but -- and this is the point -- we should not try to be sure. The writing simply invites us to participate in the dance made possible through the loosening of meaning. And when we do, when we enter the writing that composes itself as it goes, the structure of the language play becomes immediate to our involvement. The third sentence is now heard playing back against the second -- it could be another voice entering; or it could be the same voice coming from three directions; or it could be a dialogue, the third sentence tied to the first. All ways of reading this improvisation are possible. In fact, this variability is the precise quality of writing that strays in many directions at once, the effect of this passage very much the experience of experience.

Williams' statement on the viewer's response to Davis' drawing comes to mind: "an impressionistic view of the simultaneous." Writing is nothing more (or less) than the act of driving a car through a textual space, the words themselves the objects that come and go. By the third statement of "Improvisation XI.1," in any case, the pretension (whatever dictionary definition we attach to the word) of remembering the weather two years back now becomes symptomatic of an obsession for clarity that derives its power solely upon a retreat from the actual ambiguity of the present. And this effect is the function of the gaps between statements made possible by the absence of a fixed intention on the writer's part to say something preconceived. A clear memory, on the other hand, could lead to a "reputation for vivacity," but at the cost of losing that present alone which should --
so the writing itself proposes -- concern the writer, the immediacy of the "petals of edelweiss" of the same order as the immediacy of words. No amount of reliance upon past events can eliminate the present. And it is the present, the actual in writing, not writing that is a plagiarism of past writers, that makes the retreat into a repetition "after others" an inanity, a falsity, a "pretension." Even if the writing amounts to nothing more than a word, a phrase, a line, or a few lines, such as this improvisation, for the writer who wants to shift into the actual, it still has the value of immediacy.

Interestingly enough, the interpretation to the improvisation shoots back across the language road travelled, like a beam of dark light, and without explaining away the opacity of its language, which would have been a self-defeating gesture, it enlarges its methodological context:

Having once taken the plunge, the situation that preceded it becomes obsolete which a moment before was alive with malignant rigidities. (K, 51)

And isn't this what happens when we drive a car? Each moment along the way appears in a present and disappears into a past "alive with malignant rigidities," only then to be replaced by a "plunge" into another present, the past in that shift of attention suddenly "obsolete," and so on, the drive itself the form that lives with "an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity." An improvisation, a dance. And "a dance," we are told in Kora, "is a thing in itself" (K, 47). Driving a car, writing.

As even a brief reading of the above improvisation shows, improvisational form is both simple and complex at the same time. On the one hand, the writer does nothing special, he simply faces the blank page and begins to write what comes to mind in the act of writing; on the other hand, the
way to the words themselves may be blocked by all the demons within the mind that conspire to prevent it from driving through the field of writing. And yet, as the writer in Kora discovers, this kind of form is the only one that matches the experience of the actual in language. Indeed, improvisational form becomes a necessity in the sharp spur of the present at the heart of Kora. As Williams says in the "Prologue:"

... the thing that stands eternally in the way of really good writing is always one: the virtual impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose. It is this difficulty that sets a value upon all works of art and makes them a necessity. (K, 14)

In Williams' terms -- or in the terms established by the text Kora -- the imagination is not some container into which writers pour a predetermined content, but itself a force that re-opens the world by destroying the fixity of the mind's orders.

Perhaps extending Williams' lead Robert Creeley in an interview comes to talk about the act of writing in relation to driving a car. "A man who can't drive at all," he says,

is obviously embarrassed to go down a road that's opening before him. The most articulate driver is he who can follow that road with precisely the right response to each condition there before him. I would feel those might be in some way equivalent contexts.10

Like driving, writing is an indeterminate movement through a language field in which words are constantly appearing and disappearing as the writer goes. The road is opening before him. Or as Creeley explains in another interview in Contexts of Poetry, this time discussing "open form" writing (Olson's
"composition by field"), "... there can be no prior determination of the form except that which is recognized as the writing occurs,"¹¹ Creeley's account of the writing process is sharp and pointed, so clearly articulate, and yet it is significant that we can recognize in Kora the beginning of this sense of writing that would by mid-century, when Kora was finally being read as an early modernist text by such writers as Creeley, come into its own. By then, even Williams was talking about the poem as a "field of action" (SE, 280).¹² In the early years of the century, however, these terms were not available to Williams. There was the pressing sense that a new century demanded new forms of writing, but how that demand was to be met still lay dormant waiting to be discovered. For Williams, Kora begins the move in that direction and the instance of "the car" acted as one signpost along what must have seemed the crooked way. In "Improvisation IV.2" (K, 36-37), the single occasion in which the car does enter the textual space of Kora, the awakening mind of the writer acts on the tie between driving and the improvisational nature of writing. And significantly enough, the writing in this improvisation, like so much of the writing in Kora, works negatively, that is, works through the recognition of the terms in which writing fails as writing, again an indication that the text of Kora was a self-justifying activity and an exploration.

"How smoothly the car runs," so the improvisation begins, and so we are drawn inside the mind of the writer/driver, on the road in late summer or early fall, contemplating seasonal cycles as he drives past "these rows of celery." Then the thought immediately occurs that "they bitter the air," and the writer, without hesitating, quite smoothly gives in to the obvious temptation to read a generalized meaning into the scene. The air is a
sign of an end to one season and the premonition of another — "winter's authentic foretaste." In the abstraction of this gem of homely wisdom, however, the "rows of celery" disappear and are replaced by a frame of reference: the cycle of the seasons. The writer then predictably falls into a desire to rest in the age old wisdom based upon the lawful orderliness of nature outside the complexity of town life. The landscape of the farms invites him into an apparent timelessness — or a sense of change understood in the image of the seasons as predetermined phases of one universal law:

How smoothly the car runs. And these rows of celery, how they bitter the air — winter's authentic foretaste. Here among these farms how the year has aged, yet here's last year and the year before and all years. One might rest here time without end, watch out his stretch and see no other bending than spring to autumn, winter to summer and earth turning into leaves and leaves into earth and —

As the writing progresses, we notice that the syntax, as if to imitate the writer's thoughts, bends and coils inward upon itself, so that the language of the improvisation lulls the writer into a state of balance, the tension between the seasons eased, time itself disappearing into the "caress" of images —

how restful these long beet rows — the caress of the low clouds — the river lapping at the reeds.

The strained lyricism of the passage now subsumes the particulars, which in turn become nothing more than emotional effects, the scene so infused with the subjectivity of the writer that he reads himself into his own projections. No wonder he loses track of direction, even forgets where he is going. At this point, the undercurrent of humour running like a thread through this whole "miniature" drama becomes more explicit, but it is too late for the writer. This drive collapses inward upon itself as we finally reach some vague
destination only to find out that the house is empty. The writing journey has been to no avail. There is no one at the other end to receive the message. The words have failed to cross over:

It's all dark here. Scratch a hurried note. Slip it over the sill. Well, some other time.

The pun on "some other time" exposes the earlier "time without end" as an illusion. That earlier phrase is a fixed thought of a transcendence that is an escape from the town into the narrowness of an anthropomorphic view of the "country." The images in the improvisation are those "friendly images" which the writer "has invented out of his mind and which are inviting him to rest and to disport himself according to hidden reasons" (K, 33). A phrase like "winter's authentic foretaste" becomes a use of language governed by an intention to impose meaning onto things, the words themselves made to parrot the writer's purely private order that is disguised as a general law. The one spawns the other. This kind of writing leads to a closed order that reveals the writer's inability to drive through the opacity of words that do not conform to patterns of predetermination.

So let's begin again, as the next paragraph in the same improvisation does, and with exactly the same opening line: "How smoothly the car runs."

But this "other" time, we find ourselves inside a darker, much more dense landscape:

This must be the road. Queer how a road juts in. How the dark catches among those trees! How the light clings to the canal! Yes, there's one table taken, we'll not be alone. This place has possibilities.

The images of dark and light come from an outside, strike the eyes of the writer as they cast patterns, also jut in like unforeseen roads, and as things themselves do in a world that has possibilities because it exists in
time. This drive, instead of drawing the writer up into a peaceful state of transcendence, pulls him into an equivocal space that declares its unpredictability and at the same time forces him to recognize his own privacy as a privacy.

Will you bring her here? Perhaps -- and when we meet on the stair, shall we speak, say it is some acquaintance -- or pass silent?

Thus his own voice splinters off from an unnamed, secret intrigue and quickly turns sideways into a language play. In this sense, his privacy is undermined by his inability to maintain a consistent point of view:

Well, a jest's a jest but how poor this tea is. Think of a life in this place, here in these hills by these truck farms. Whose life? Why there, back of you.

The sentences simply drift into view, one surface after another, and so an incoherent speech emerges, one drawn into an ambiguous "place" that carries in its wake the push of desire:

If a woman laughs a little loudly one always thinks that way of her.

This is the same language of the Fool's voice in King Lear -- "Winter's not gone yet if the wildgeese fly that way" -- the words twisting inside a doubletalk that will not resolve itself into a discursive completion. The words themselves tease us playfully without permitting us to make them referential. Laughter takes the place of wisdom in the second half of the improvisation. The secret rendezvous never materializes; this "place" in which "poor tea" is served is not a place to live in, dependent as it is upon a nostalgia for an order emptied of a former vitality. That meaning, in this time, has been reduced to a merely decorative function. And yet the substance of desire is as alive as ever: "But how she bedizens the country-side." The dead-end of meaning is the other side of a release into
the absence of meaning, a rich and fertile vacancy that throws the mind back into the immediacy of its emptiness — the experience of the poet in "The Right of Way" — or as Williams says elsewhere in Spring and All, "the drift of [its] nonentity" (SA, 134).

Quite an old world glamour. If it were not for — but one cannot have everything. What poor tea it was. How cold it's grown.

There is no possibility for a life outside the realm of possibility, and writing that attempts to fabricate "an old world glamour" — to use some words from "The Desert Music," "out of whole cloth" (PB, 116) — is simply another cage to stuff the world into preconceived orders that survive by denying the conditional nature of desire. Writing that is actual moves outward, and away from closures, as the heart does in release. The re-awakening of desire this writing journey makes possible points to the future of another present:

Cheering, a light is that way among the trees. That heavy laugh! How it will rattle these branches in six weeks' time.

This improvisation resists, perhaps even defies outrightly, our critical understanding, but the point of the writing is certainly clear enough. The opaque language of it pushes for a condition of writing that will permit the writer to engage the complexity of language as a complexity. "It is chuckleheaded to desire a way through every difficulty" (K, 17), we recall Williams saying in his "Prologue." Improvisational form allowed Williams to drive within the field of the crisis that initially led to Kora, and by so doing, became the method that helped him drive the car out of Hell, out of the heart's dark confusions into the light of wholly new possibilities, the Kora within himself suddenly born into a new world. The descent, an
ascent: this turnabout makes all the difference in the textual space of Kora. Or as we read in one interpretation:

Often when the descent seems well marked there will be a subtle ascent over-ruling it so that in the end when the degradation is fully anticipated the person will be found to have emerged upon a hilltop. (K, 58)

The act of "fully" anticipating the downward movement of the mind into the opacities constituting the actual makes for the closeness of attention that driving through a writing crisis demanded. "Write going. Look to steer." This necessity to improvise in the midst of a bankruptcy of meaning explains how the history of the text Kora assumed its own inherent authenticity. As a record of Williams' crisis, the book that finally got published as Kora in Hell: Improvisations calls attention to itself as an imaginative space ("a field of action") within which Williams struggled his way forward into a new method of composition. The text in hand thus became the context through which he came to compose what is written by writing, Kora itself the very thing that embodies the form it enacts. How else, except backwardly, could Kora have come together? This is exactly what happens when a writer adjusts his attention to what lies before him in the context the writing proposes as it goes, the text of this writing an extension of the process.

Talking about "The Poem Paterson" in his Autobiography, Williams adamantly addresses what to him remains the specific nature of the writing process -- and its value as well:

The poet does not . . . permit himself to go beyond the thought to be discovered in the context of that with which he is dealing: no ideas but in things. The poet thinks with his poem, in that lies his thought, and that in itself is the profundity. The thought is Paterson, to be discovered there. (A, 390-391)

Williams is of course articulating a principle of form he had come on over
thirty years before, in Kora. The thought is Kora in Hell: Improvisations, to be discovered in the text itself. This is why the final design of Kora throws into relief (hence reveals) the fact of contextuality as the condition of experience that necessitated the act of improvisation. In this sense, even the subtitle to Kora in Hell came after the writing, not before, the term Improvisations, like Davis' drawing, a further illumination of the "dark scribblings"; or to be even more precise, the subtitle is one of the particulars that made up the final text. No ideas but in things.

Years before Kora Williams had written a letter to Harriet Monroe, the editor of Poetry magazine, outlining his intuitive sense of the basis for a new poetic, and what he foretells there later became the primary issue of Kora. First explaining that Poetry should be the kind of magazine that does not dogmatically enforce a view of what poetry ought to be, instead should be "a forum wherein competent poets might speak freely, uncensored by any standard of rules" (SL, 23), he then goes on to argue the contemporary need for this openness (c. 1913):

... most current verse is dead from the point of view of art (I enclose some doggerel showing one of the reasons why). Now life is above all things else at any moment subversive of life as it was the moment before -- always new, irregular. Verse to be alive must have infused into it something of the same order, some tincture of disestablishment, something in the nature of an impalpable revolution, an ethereal reversal, let me say. I am speaking of modern verse.

Poetry I saw accepting verse of this kind: that is, verse with perhaps nothing else in it but life -- this alone, regardless of possible imperfections, for no new thing comes through perfect. (SL, 23-24)

Williams could quite easily be accounting for the value of Kora in Hell, its
astonishing life. But this text still lay in the future. We can note, though, that even in 1913 Williams sensed the need for a specific kind of poetics. The one he wants would match up to life as a subversive process, each present a destruction of the past, no living form exempt from the fact of change -- and this includes poetic form. "Modern verse," so Williams says, must have something of this same quality, some "tincture of disestablishment," some "impalpable revolution," some "ethereal reversal." In this barrage of terms through which Williams strains for a clarity he does not yet possess in the letter -- he acknowledges this lack to Harriet Monroe, at least in so many words -- we can hear the struggle to define the very kind of writing that characterizes the texture of Kora, especially the subversive effect of its "broken" writing. Improvisational form imitates a life process that always moves in the present -- "always new, irregular." And like life, it is also a self-generating process determined by time, the actual time that binds the compositional space of the text.

In the twenties, with Kora now behind him, Williams came to praise the Cubist artist Juan Gris for this very actuality in his art. Gris also confirmed the reality of his medium, both the spatial opacity of the canvas and the temporal nature of the artistic process in which the artist creates an art-object that is not referential to some preconceived "reality" outside in a generalized distance, but is immediate to the particularity of the artist's engagement with the materials at hand. This is only to say that Gris recognized the contextual nature of his art and worked from that compositional basis. Williams understood him only too well; his own writing from Kora on began on the same plane of activity, the words themselves the medium he entered by writing. But more, in Spring and All
Williams singles out one painting in particular, The Open Window, as an exemplification of the importance of design in Gris' work:

Things with which he is familiar, simple things -- at the same time to detach them from ordinary experience to the imagination . . . .

Here is a shutter, a bunch of grapes, a sheet of music, a picture of sea and mountains (particularly fine) which the onlooker is not for a moment permitted to witness as an "illusion." One thing laps over on the other, the cloud laps over on the shutter, the bunch of grapes is part of the handle of the guitar, the mountain and sea are obviously not "the mountain and the sea," but a picture of the mountain and the sea. All drawn with admirable simplicity and excellent design -- all a unity -- (SA, 110-111)

Williams emphasizes the opacity of the images in Gris' painting ("One thing laps over on the other"), and by Spring and All he could talk about the value of the Cubist's fascination with surfaces as an attempt to disclose the medium of art as a live spatio-temporal field of activity. The design of Gris' painting (non-representational as it is) is the very composition that reveals the objectivity of those "simple things" detached from "ordinary experience to the imagination." The design, one opaque object juxtaposed against another opaque object, is thus a function of the imaginative field of the art-object, and this fact alone constitutes the "unity" of the painting. Like Williams, Gris had learned to paint by going. In "The Possibilities of Painting," an essay that Williams most likely read, he says:

Until the work is completed, he [the artist] must remain ignorant of its appearance as a whole. To copy a preconceived appearance is like copying the appearance of a model. From this it is clear that the subject does not materialize in the appearance of the picture, but that the subject, in materializing, gives the picture its appearance.13

The distinction Gris draws between methods of composition has its
direct application to the kind of writing that characterizes the text of *Kora*. Writing as an act forces the writer to remain inside the writing "as it goes," and for this reason, he will be "ignorant" of any such prior completion as a whole text, since the text as such comes into form only through the composing, its appearance conditioned by what happens in the writing. And not the reverse, which would be the case were the writer not to enter the writing, instead controlling it according to some "preconceived appearance" that takes precedence over the act of composition. To repeat, Williams had no book in mind, no narrative or discursive frame of reference in mind to determine the structure of the individual improvisations. He had no preconceived "subject" in mind, no teleological end in sight, nothing but the writing itself. The writing determined the possibility of the text. There was that risk involved. The time of *Kora* is the time of the composing process. The final "book" that came of this process is thus itself an appearance, the appearance of the text, its separate elements, like the particulars that make up Gris' Cubist painting, opaque surfaces that lap over one another without coalescing into a rational unity. They remain surfaces that play against one another to create the field of the text.

As early as 1914 Pound discussed the nature of "vorticism" in terms of the experienced "surfaces" of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's sculptures. Mike Weaver tells us that

Williams noted in the second *Blast* a manifesto by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska in which the sculptor spoke of deriving his emotions solely from the arrangement of surfaces; in sculptural terms this meant the planes and lines by which the surfaces were defined.14

The design of *Kora* is an arrangement of surfaces, the basic material of Williams' text, in writing terms, the words themselves that are first experienced as opaque planes of force. Or as Williams says in his "Vortex,"
a statement never published, but perhaps a direct response to Gaudier-Brzeska:

... in using words instead of stone I accept "plane" to be the affirmation of existence, the meeting of substances, whether it be stone meeting air or a sound of a certain quality against one of another or against silence.15

Davis noted the word-against-word quality of Kora, and his response is, to this extent, completely accurate. Kora begins on the crisis of language. The words themselves, in their opacity, constitute one surface of Kora. The improvisations that arise from their interplay, another surface. Two improvisations, one against the other, another surface. A set of three improvisations, all of them playing back and forth, another surface. Or one set of improvisations, one against another, or others, still another surface. Then add some equally dense "interpretations," and another surface appears. And these "interpretations," one against another, or against a single improvisation, or a group of them, more surfaces. Such a process of generating surfaces is potentially endless, of course, because the variabilities are endless. Kora is "a field of possibilities" -- Davis' phrasing -- and at every moment along the indeterminate way the writing remains active to the interchange of the play of surfaces. Davis' drawing, then, is another surface, as is the "Prologue." And even the term, Improvisations, the subtitle to the text, is yet another surface, likewise the title, Kora in Hell, and the cover with the stylized drawing of the ovum impregnated by a single sperm, which "completed the design" (A, 158), as Williams says in his Autobiography. To state it simply, the text Kora, "in materializing," came into the form of an appearance. There is consequently no attempt on Williams' part, as a writer, to merge all the elements according to a coherent pattern, no single determining "thematic" intention external to the text around which, or through which, all the parts are ordered hier-
archically. Rather, by allowing all the surfaces of the text to assert their particularity, Williams allows them to meet in an interchange that is an "affirmation of existence," Kora itself a live thing, an actual composition. Or as we read in the "Prologue":

... one does not attempt by the ingenuity of the joiner to blend the tones of the oboe with the violin. On the contrary the perfections of the two instruments are emphasized by the joiner; no means is neglected to give to each the full color of its perfections. It is only the music of the instruments which is joined and that not by the woodworker but by the composer, by virtue of the imagination. (K, 19)

Kora may thus lack a logical unity, a unity that would subordinate one particular to another, but it has instead an imaginative unity, a unity that permits a particular to be revealed in its particularity. What else, then, is the text at hand but a compositional space, a medium, or an actual place, all the separate elements of Kora lapping over one another within it to create -- in their interchange -- the contextual field of activity that constitutes writing as an act. The writer composes his text backwardly, as he goes. Pound may have been accurate in saying that Kora does not make sense, that the improvisations are incoherent, but this is precisely its strength as a text of writing. It resists the overlay of any kind of superimposed order that removes the writer from the writing process itself where the mind moves continually in a state of uncertainty. In fact, this resistance lies at the heart of the fool's voice that everywhere mocks the limits of the mind's forms:

All that seem solid: melancholias, idées fixes, eight years at the academy, Mr. Locke, this year and the next and the next -- one like another -- whee! -- they are April zephyrs, were one a Botticelli, between their chinks, pink anemones. (K, 81)
Perhaps the so-called "interpretations" that Williams wrote to accompany the improvisations are those "pink anemones" that grew between the "chinks" in the writing. They too exist in their own right. They are hardly discursive interpretations that explain away the density of the writing in the improvisations. They are, more essentially, pieces of writing that lap across -- thus disturb -- the language of the improvisations, in this way providing a context that throws the drama of the writing into a relief. They allowed Williams to come back against the "dark scribblings," but this time from a position outside the initial writing, himself a reader of the writing, an other, who by virtue of his distance can articulate (in more words) what might otherwise have remained wholly inaccessible, wholly trapped in their circular language. More often than not, the interpretations are remarkable for their dense clarity, at times acting as a wall, a kind of "foreign" perspective against which, or upon which various patterns of experience become visible for the writer (and for the reader as well) as the writing begins to assume the semblance of a shape. "I used to get very excited; the Interpretations had as much importance to me as the statements" (IW, 29-30), so Williams says. And rightly so. The interpretations are further improvisations, but unlike the initial improvisations that began in a state of crisis, they are purely the product of the writing. Williams must have been excited because he was finding out that writing could feed on its own resources, that it could, if the writer were attentive enough, thereby generate its own contexts. It could, in short, be actual.

Here a passing comment on

*that diversity of context in things and situations which*
the great masters of antiquity looked to for the inspiration and distinction of their compositions (K, 48)

in one of the interpretations takes on considerable importance. On the one hand, the interpretations must have been, for Williams, an exploration of the significance of the "dark scribblings," but just as crucially, perhaps even more so, they must have quickly disclosed the contextual nature of writing that is an act. The interpretations can thus be understood as the workings of a writer who is struck by the fact that writing is a field of activity, and he, a driver who can engage complexities of experience on their own terms, as complexities, without resolving them into static completions. Many of the interpretations thus sustain the tension between irresolvable contraries by holding these contraries in and for themselves — and in a language that seems to float in space, attached by context to individual improvisations, and yet curiously maintaining their own integrity as intense — and particular — moments of clarification. As the fog of confusion temporarily lifts, the mind of the writer in Kora slides into a cleansed space, the dimension of a complexity binding itself to an illumination, not unlike the "acme point of white penetration" that Williams envisions in the poems of Marianne Moore, in which "apprehension perforates at places, through to understanding -- as white is at the intersection of blue and green and yellow and red" (SE, 122). Moore's poems have value because she sticks to the edge of the "thought" at hand, thinking as she goes. "There is almost no overlaying at all," Williams says. "The effect is of every object sufficiently uncovered to be easily recognizable" (SE, 129). Readers "who would read Miss Moore aright," he adds, should not forget that in her work "white circular discs grouped closely edge to edge upon a dark table make black six-pointed stars" (SE, 129). Without the
context provided by the "dark table," the stars would not be visible, but with it, or through its otherness, there is possible that moment of perception when the density of things yields a pattern, here those "black six-pointed" things appearing out of the "white circular discs grouped closely edge to edge." It is this moment of reversal, that moment when the foreground and background shift relationships, that retrieves Moore's perception.

And Williams' perception as well in the interpretations. In effect, they have value for the same reason; the writer inside them, in statements that are acts of writing, retrieves those essential points of intersection where his understanding "perforates" the dense opacity of his confusions. In this way, they not only build a context for the improvisations, but at the same time build a pretext for "contextuality" as the bind that textures experience. In the play of diversity, for example:

There are divergences of humor that cannot be reconciled. A young woman of much natural grace of manner and very apt at a certain color of lie is desirous of winning the good graces of one only slightly her elder but nothing comes of her exertions. Instead of yielding to a superficial advantage she finally gives up the task and continues in her own delicate bias of peculiar and beautiful design much to the secret delight of the onlooker who is thus regaled by the spectacle of two exquisite and divergent natures playing one against the other. (K, 79-80)

Or in the actuality of disease, the human body in the context of a live world:

Pathology literally speaking is a flower garden. Syphilis covers the body with salmon-red petals. The study of medicine is an inverted sort of horticulture. Over and above all this floats the philosophy of disease which is a stern dance. One of its most delightful gestures is bringing flowers to the sick. (K, 77-78)

Or a statement of a possible poetics, in one of the clearest statements
Williams would ever make on the contextual nature of his own writing, a passage immediate following a reference to "our medieval friend Shakespeare":

That which is heard from the lips of those to whom we are talking in our day's-affairs mingles with what we see in the streets and everywhere about us as it mingles also with our imaginations. By this chemistry is fabricated a language of the day which shifts and reveals its meaning as clouds shift and turn in the sky and sometimes send down rain or snow or hail. This is the language to which few ears are tuned so that it is said by poets that few men are ever in their full senses since they have no way to use their imaginations. Thus to say that a man has no imagination is to say nearly that he is blind or deaf. But of old poets would translate this hidden language into a kind of replica of the speech of the world with certain distinctions of rhyme and meter to show that it was not really that speech. Nowadays the elements of that language are set down as heard and the imagination of the listener and of the poet are left free to mingle in the dance. (K, 59)

This last statement, really a manifesto, is a breakthrough in understanding for Williams in Kora, and the fact of it alone demonstrates a major shift on his part into a sharp consciousness of contextuality, a consciousness he discovered by writing the improvisations, and that the interpretations both enact and announce.

One especially exemplifies Williams' new found effort to write himself out into a "new direction" (K, 65). He himself gave it a singular importance. It is the one interpretation that stands alone to take the place of an improvisation in "Improvisation XXIII.3," which is to say, he decided to let the writing of it assert its own terms.

In many poor and sentimental households it is a custom to have cheap prints in glass frames upon the walls. These are of all sorts and many sizes and may be found in any room from the kitchen to the toilet. The drawing is always of the worst and the colors, not gaudy but almost always of faint indeterminate tints, are infirm. Yet a delicate accuracy exists between these prints and the environment which breeds them. But as if to intensify this relationship words are added. There will be a "sentiment" as it is called, a rhyme, which the
picture illuminates. Many of these pertain to love. This is well enough when the bed is new and the young couple spend the long winter nights there in delightful seclusion. But childbirth follows in its time and a motto still hangs above the bed. It is only then that the full ironical meaning of these prints leaves the paper and the frame and starting through the glass takes undisputed sway over the household. (K, 76)

It is the movement of the piece that declares its own surface, the fluid dance of a syntax in which the attention of the writer is active to the interplay between things and their context. The drive within this interplay is maintained on the sharp edge of a doubleness, the estrangement and the engagement of the writer held in suspension (here is a seed of Paterson), the writing itself moving with the complexity of that tension. Williams says that the "birth of the imagination is like waking from a nightmare," and perhaps he had this kind of writing in mind as the medium of that awakening. The language of this piece attaches itself to a present that is actual only in the dance of the mind, in the words themselves that carry the contrariety of experience. In this dimension, writing becomes an imaginative space where objectivity assumes a value of its own. And we recall Williams' comment in Spring and All that writing Kora opened "a world of new values" (SA, 116). Those "new values" have very much to do with the otherness of the world revealed in the experience of writing. The particulars in this passage are particulars, despite the fact that the apparent subject-matter, the "cheap prints" in "many poor and sentimental households" which "may be found in any room from the kitchen to the toilet," seems to beg for some referential frame. A frame in which their particularity can become transparent to a discursive intention on the part of the writer prior to their appearance in the text of the writing. The writer, at the same time, playfully seduces the reader into this expectation, but without in fact
allowing himself to fall into that kind of control. "Yet," he says, delaying a conclusion, thus extending the tension of the writing, "a delicate accuracy exists between these prints and the environment which breeds them." The prints are objects situated in the context so necessary for their existence. The environment "breeds" them. In this manner -- and the sexual undertones of the word "breeds" leads the writing — the reader is pulled into a verbal demonstration that generates its own insistences against the temptation to assign a discursive meaning to the "infirm" nature of the prints.

As if to play his own language back on himself, the writer, his tongue in cheek, then adds that sometimes, to "intensify this relationship" between the prints and their environment (he too intensifies this relationship, not by glossing over it, but by subverting it), "words are added," a "rhyme" attached to provide a context for the "picture." And although the words, as dead things in one sense, reinforce the emptiness of an environment that breeds these "pure products" (SA, 131), they remain just words, the rhyme one more particular to the writer. The subject-matter of these rhymes, he says, by now ironically, often "pertain to love." The prints, and the words attached to them, as the writing has hinted all along, nevertheless are actual. They exist in an "accurate" relation to the mind inside the house of their self-referential form, being so much the texture of that mind that there is no cleavage possible between the forms that control it and the things themselves that manifest this subtle control. These prints are objects -- the things themselves that constitute the perspective of "sentimental households." Still, as the writer says, this frozen state of perception cannot sustain itself for long. Change is inevitable. And when it occurs,
as it must, the fixed perspective will collapse and the underlying context in which these objects were once so orderly arranged will assert its variability, at which time the whole structure of relationships will be thrown into the relief of a confusion. The birth of this shift, in the moment of breakage, will reveal the contextual nature of the same things that were formerly invisible because hidden inside a closed form. We noted earlier how eagerly Williams jumped at the opportunity to use Davis' drawing as a frontispiece for Kora. Here we can see precisely how the writer in Kora does in writing what Davis does in drawing. The collapse of a fixed perspective -- in writing as well as in experience -- signals a birth into a world of "new values." Not surprisingly, for the fool with a big womb in Kora, the collapse bares the literal crisis of childbirth, as the writing winds down to an end that throws the household back into the context of a world larger than its own narrow enclosures. In brief, when "the full ironical meaning of these prints" escapes from their former caged state, the context that bred them suddenly "takes undisputed sway over the household."

This interpretation strikes a note of finality in Kora, especially for the way in which it re-enacts what the writing in Kora insists upon over and over. The event of childbirth that here holds "sway" over this particular household provokes a crisis, its former self-referential state split apart by the rich intrusion of change. And the image of birth, like so many of the images in Kora, works both ways. A crisis is a birth because birth is a crisis. By thus releasing the mind of the writer into the text of his desire, improvisational form authenticates a world that grounds that desire. And so we are told, half tauntingly, half playfully, but altogether
seriously by the fool of a writer in *Kora*, "Dig deeper mon ami, the rock maidens are running naked in the dark cellars" (K, 54). Desire may be hidden, or it may be denied, but it can never be negated. It always escapes -- and in the eyes of a writer who has a "sense" for the "strange blood that sings under some skin" (K, 49), in the most common of ways:

It is not the lusty bodies of the nearly naked girls in the shows about town, nor the blare of the popular tunes that make money for the manager. The girls can be procured rather more easily in other ways and the music is dirt cheap. It is that this meat is savored with a strangeness which never loses its fresh taste to generation after generation, either of dancers or those who watch. It is beauty escaping, spinning up over the heads, blown out at the overtaxed vents by the electric fans. (K, 75-76)
In that crisis, around 1917, when meaning became bankrupt, that time which Williams later called a "slaughter" of the self (A, 158), Williams did not — though we might expect him to — fall into a numbing despair. On the contrary, he accepted that occasion as a condition to be met, and he began to write "in earnest" (A, 158). The desire was to see how valuable the act of writing could be in this impasse. "For what it's worth" (K, 31), as the writer in Kora says. And there is an effect almost of relief in the writing that got written in this way. The fragmented (and fragmenting) voice that emerges in the text of Kora does so in the dense excitement of confusion. It leaps like a dog on the loose from one image to another, splintering in many directions at the same time, becoming itself a chameleon-like force whose speech is coloured by the intensity of its dislocations. Hence the writing that manifests this energy begins to make its own kind of sense. And it does so because we can hear, in this very voice, the language of a "self" being torn apart by a larger world outside its control, the words of
this crisis "set down as heard" (K, 59).

"The brutal Lord of All will rip us from each other" (K, 55), so we are told in "Improvisation XIV.l." And the "All" is ALL since it comes, as the actuality of the world does in Kora, within the swiftness of a simultaneity which destroys all fixed perspectives. The "All" is a many, a one and a one and a one, each one thing of a "many" no more or less (Hartley's words on the levelling effect of Dadaism) than any other one thing. Any reduction to zero, what we might call the democratization of the world, must by nature cut through the mind's closures. In the text of Kora, this reduction splits the mind of the writer into two and so transforms him into a doubletalking fool whose mind is "in tatters" (K, 57). The writing drama that comes of this transformation, in other words, constitutes itself through the tension of a cleavage: an older "self" disintegrates, or crumbles to nothingness, in the face of another "self," one that shifts and turns outside the narrow view of any given closed system of order. The initial "slaughter" thereby became -- to Williams' continual amazement -- an initial "blast . . . from all previous significance" (GAN, 171). The "blast" itself made possible a release into a new consciousness of the world. And this is the basis of why, at least for the writer in Kora, the experience of self-estrangement could become the very substance of the writing that subsequently began from scratch.

So it is as well that we read in "Improvisation XII.l" how the writer, "imagining himself to be two persons . . . eases his mind by putting his burdens upon one while the other takes what pleasure there is before him" (K, 53). The act of estrangement allows him to turn a mirror on himself, hence simultaneously envision himself as both in and out of his own limits, place the "burdens" of his life "upon one," while "the other takes what
pleasure there is before him." Becoming "two persons" the writer is freed
to enter the influence of the kind of consciousness within which particulars
assume a sharp objectivity, as things that are before because emptied of all
imposed or prefabricated frames of reference. And one of those particulars,
in this turnabout, may very well be a vision of a wholly different "self"
born in the tension between these "two persons," an other that appears as
an effect of that splitting apart. Merleau-Ponty in *The Primacy of Perception*
posits the reciprocal bind between perception and the movement of the body
in the world and explains the implication of this condition of experience:

That which looks at all things can also look at itself
and recognize, in what it sees, the "other side" of its
power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches
itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself.

The self that Merleau-Ponty has in mind is the self "that is caught up in
things, that has a front and a back." This self is, at the same time, both
a one and an other, both inside and outside its experience of the world,
both "visible and sensitive for itself." The writer in *Kora*, who says that
doors have a "back side" (K, 80) and that "there's more sense in a sentence
heard backward than forward most times" (K, 54), recognizes the doubleness
of his own self. "After thirty years staring at one true phrase," he says
at the beginning of "Improvisation XVIII.2,"

he discovered that its opposite was true also. For weeks
he laughed in the grip of a fierce self derision. Having
lost the falsehood to which he'd fixed his hawser he
rolled drunkenly about the field of his environment before
the new direction began to dawn upon his cracked mind.
(K, 65)

It is, then, through the "slaughter" of his fixed self in the language crisis
of *Kora* that the writer re-enters the waywardness of the world, both
estranged and engaged as he is. In terms of the ensuing drama, however,
perhaps we would be more accurate in saying that his estrangement frees him
to a "new direction," one in which his mind is released to a self "caught up" in the knotted otherness of things. And when this sense dawns on his "cracked mind," so we thus read,

Thick crystals began to shoot through the liquid of his spirit. Black, they were: branches that have lain in a fog which now a wind is blowing away. Things more. (K, 65)

"Certain men keep the real and are called vagrants" (EK, 116), Williams writes in The Embodiment of Knowledge. Called vagrants, that is, by a society that judges them, as it does the fool, or as it does the likes of one Jacob Louslinger -- "'Looks to me as if he'd been bumming around the meadows for a couple of weeks'" (K, 31) -- according to what it can accommodate within narrow perceptual frames. As the fool of the writer in Kora certainly knows, "the real" survives only by escaping those cages which deny the actuality of desire. Vagrants are those strangers -- Victor Turner in The Ritual Process calls them "'edgemen'" -- who go contrary to predetermined systems of thought, and who thus stand outside these enclosures in the midst of an unruliness at the heart's core.² This initial breakthrough in Kora (and it is a breakthrough occurring in the writing itself) reveals that other self constituted in the interplay between terror and relief, between loss and gain, the terms of such opposing states of mind constantly doubling back into one another, as they do, for instance, in "Improvisation XII.1" where the writer "notes" the emotional complexity of the confusion surrounding his 34th birthday:

The browned trees are singing for my thirty-fourth birthday. Leaves are beginning to fall upon the long
grass. Their cold perfume raises the anticipation of sensational revolutions in my unsettled life. Violence has begotten peace, peace has fluttered away in agitation. A bewildered change has turned among the roots and the Prince's kiss as far at sea as ever. (K, 52)

The whole passage is held together in the play of unresolved contraries: decay ("fall") and birth, falling and rising, violence and peace, the near and the far. The language of the writing enacts a fluid state of mind in which opposites remain unsettled and in a dynamic relation one to another -- an exact mirror of the texture of experience -- with no fixed frame of reference to locate them in a discursive space. "A bewildered change has turned among the roots."

So much of the tension in the writing of Kora is the effect of this change and the refusal of the writer undergoing it to forego contraries and settle into a stasis that would fixate the mind in one frozen perception. Opposites must remain unsettled. As the interpretive voice in Kora comments, however obliquely, substituting the image of a house to suggest the power of such closed forms over the mind:

*A house is sometimes wine. It is more than a skin. The young pair listen attentively to the roar of the weather. The blustering cold takes on the shape of a destructive presence. They loosen their imaginations. The house seems protecting them. They relax gradually as though in the keep of a benevolent protector. Thus the house becomes a wine which has drugged them out of their senses.* (K, 72)

And if the concern is a literary work the same analogy holds true:

*Neatness and finish; the dust out of every corner! You swish from room to room and find all perfect. The house may now be carefully wrapped in brown paper and sent to a publisher. It is a work of art.* (K, 71)

Inside and out -- "It is nearly pure luck that gets the mind turned inside out . . ." (K, 75): in the world of Kora, the one is constantly sliding
into the other, interchangeable, the way perception operates in time, actions rather than points of rest, or arrest. Or to use some lines from Robert Creeley's *Pieces* that bespeak this condition of experience so precisely:

> Inside
> and out
> impossible
> locations --
> reaching in
> from out-
> side, out
> from in-
> side -- as
> middle:
> one
> hand. 3

The two selves that come into play in *Kora* find themselves in those "impossible / locations," one inside a collapsing point of view, and the other outside, or rather, inside the outside that it apprehends as the world, everything other than what it knows, which is to say, what it possesses. For the estranged voice in the text, possession is a domination that divorces the possessor from what is possessed, since this tyrannization of "subject" over "object" prevents the thing possessed from being experienced in itself. Creeley's "one / hand." Self-possession is thus one more such form of removal, less a sign of "age" and more a trick, something the "subject" learns to do to protect its own territorialized domain from the "blustering cold" outside that then "takes on the shape of a destructive presence."

Williams says as much in "The Mind's Games," a later poem:

> The world too much with us? Rot!
> the world is not half enough with us --
> the rot of a potato with
a healthy skin, a rot that is
never revealed till we are about to
eat — and it revolts us. (CLP, 109)

The mind's games in "Improvisation XII.2" --

The trick is never to touch the world anywhere.
Leave yourself at the door, walk in, admire the pictures,
talk a few words with the master of the house, question
his wife a little, rejoin yourself at the door -- and go
off arm in arm listening to last week's symphony played
by angel horns from the benches of a turned cloud. Or
if dogs rub too close and the poor are too much out let
your friend answer them. (K, 53)

The laughter of this passage depends upon a reversal of a fixed habit of
response that falsifies experience. The mind can trick us out of a world
we are inside because we are alive and subject to change and transformation,
subject, as it were, to "rot." On the other hand, those who refuse to
acknowledge their ties with a live world are thrown back into the isolation
of a fabricated perspective ("last week's symphony") and so deny themselves
the present they, in fact, desire. Juxtaposed against these divorced minds
are those who are willing to risk a movement outside, to the other side of
the dark canal, or to use the key term that surfaces in Kora, descend into
the inescapability of an actual ground to human desire:

Something to grow used to; a stone too big for ox haul,
too near for blasting. Take the road round it or --
scrape away, scrape away: a mountain's buried in the dirt!
Marry a gopher to help you! Drive her in! Go yourself
down along the lit pastures. Down, down. The whole family
take shovels, babies and all! Down, down! Here's
Tenochtitlán! here's a strange Darien where worms are
princes. (K, 53)

A few years after Kora, while writing In the American Grain, Williams
would extend this sense of descent to a study of American history.
Tenochtitlán would then become the exemplification of a culture whose forms,
based upon the inseparable bond between the human as creature and the earth
upon which he dwells and acts, were manifestations of the fact of change, a
culture in direct antithesis to that of the American Puritans. As Williams
says,

It was the earthward thrust of their logic; blood and
earth; the realization of their primal and continuous
identity with the ground itself, where everything is fixed
in darkness. (IAG, 33-34)

In the American Grain dis-covers the dark region of the physical -- the body
and its desire -- that is figured forth from a primary ground, the same
source revealed in Louslinger's decaying body, or in the mushrooms that
appear because of the actuality of decay. And in that study of American
pre-history, figures like Daniel Boone and Edgar Allan Poe, among other
"vagrants," become further faces of the fool who recognizes the "earthward
thrust" that comes to bear in the language of Kora, rising on the horizontal
edge of the known, or from "down under," a phrase through which Williams
describes Whitman's origin as an American poet. "Beauty?" we are told in
"The Mind's Games,"

Beauty should make us paupers,
should blind us, rob us -- for it
does not feed the sufferer but makes
his suffering a fly-blown putrescence
and ourselves decay -- (CLP, 109-110)

In the dislocation operative in the language of Kora, the fool of a
writer thus breaks free to experience "a new direction" in himself. "It
lay there, another world, in the self" (A, 288), we hear Williams saying,
"a secret life I wanted to tell openly" (A, 288). This other world that is
re-affirmed in his Autobiography lies hidden beneath the mind's abstract
layerings. It is the one his "medicine" gave access to, "these secret
gardens of the self" (A, 288): the dark realm of the body and its desires,
the human as a creature of nature, like Jacob Louslinger, another element within the fabric of life forces, one of the things "caught up" in a world of things, all of them manifestations of change, of "decay." The instance of this discovery hovers on the edge of the awakening drama of Kora:

Imperceptibly your self shakes free in all its brutal significance, feels its subtle power renewed and abashed at its covered lustihood breaks to the windows and draws back before the sunshine it sees there as before some imagined figure that would be there if -- ah if -- But for a moment your hand rests upon the palace window sill, only for a moment. (K, 68)

Ah if. Again we are reminded that Kora is a beginner's text, one that enacts the crisis in which the "self" in Williams "shakes free in all its brutal significance," undergoes this process inside the writing, is just becoming conscious of desires that until now have remained underground, hidden. There is "some imagined figure that would be there if --"

It is within the empty gap of this anticipation that we begin to apprehend the emotional range of the textual world of Kora, the nature of the isolation running through it, the writer as a foreigner outside the norms of his society -- "o' the wrong side" (K, 40), as it were. Louis Zukofsky's image of Williams, in the 20's, in this respect, is an exact measure of the mind that is just coming into its own in Kora:

It is the living creature becoming conscious of his own needs through the destruction of the various isolated around him, and till his day comes continuing unwitnessed to work, no one but himself to drive the car through the suburbs, till they too become conscious of demands unsatisfied by the routine senseless repetition of events. 4

Of course, in Kora the world is not wholly given over to empty and rigid forms, so that the creaturely nature of the human does emerge, through the interstices -- this is a frayed world, tattered -- which is to say, the apparent senselessness of what comes to be taken as nothing more than the
mundane is only a product of a bankrupt system of thought. "The little Polish Father of Kingsland [certainly] does not understand" (K, 43) this dichotomy. And how can he? "These are exquisite differences never to be resolved" (K, 43). His religious resolution to "the routine senseless repetition of events" is an empty form carried out mechanically, by habit:

He comes at midnight through mid-winter slush to baptize a dying newborn; he smiles suavely and shrugs his shoulders: a clear middle A touched by a master -- but he cannot understand. (K, 43)

Along with this "little Polish Father" -- at least for the fool outside the frame of outmoded social forms which maintain themselves by subduing the push of desire -- are his equally mindless counterparts, those in "Improvisation XIII.1" with "half sophisticated faces," who have retreated into the cage of normative perceptions and have taken their positions there:

There's no business to be done with them either way. They're neither virtuous nor the other thing, between which exist no perfections. Oh, the mothers will explain that they are good girls. (K, 54)

These so-called "good girls," however, are the product of a moral system emptied of authority because so removed from the physicality of sexual needs. But who in the community can hear things backwardly, "o' the wrong side," besides the fool? The leaders, those in control of public power? Not one of them, according to the writer in Kora, can hear the insistence of that other self, as it presses for release -- in the streets, but more usually in the privacy of personal hells:

It is the water we drink. It bubbles under every hill. How? Agh, you stop short of the root. Why, caught and the town goes mad. The haggard husband pirouettes in tights. The wolf-lean wife is rolling butter pats: it's a clock striking the hour. Pshaw, they do things better in Bangkok, -- here too, if there's heads together. But up and leap at her throat! Bed's at fault! (K, 39)
The ground of life-forces "bubbles" beneath the authorities of the community, but they refuse to acknowledge it, be they "priests, school teachers, doctors, commercial agents of one sort or another," who the voice in the interpretation to "Improvisation VII.2" calls the "pestilential individuals," those who will not permit themselves to recognize the "depth of a sea beneath them" (K, 43-44).

"Yet even to these," the same voice ironically concludes,

sometimes there rises that which they think in their ignorance is a confused babble of aspiring voices not knowing what ancient harmonies these are to which they are so faultily listening. (K, 44)

Again, as is the case so often in Kora, the anger of the writer is translated into a laughter, the same things that appear at first glance "senseless" revealing a "back side" that remains "secret" because denied. So much of course, depends upon direction: if the ears are turned that way, the "confused babble of aspiring voices" are "ancient harmonies," the same persistent voices of creatures who speak because they must. As the fool of the writer does, particularly in that language crisis through which his mind plays back against the uni-form grain of his community, and who, for this reason, enters the confusion of voices -- his own voice splintering in many directions -- thus hears things from the other side, hears the constrained push of desire in his contemporary world.

"Oh call me a lady and think you've caged me. Hell's loose every minute, you hear?" (K, 39). You hear? But in Kora, so we are led to believe, very few minds do hear. Their ears are not turned that way. Another feminine voice in "Improvisation X.2" says as much: "our husbands tire of us and we -- let us not say we go hungry for their caresses but for
caresses — of a kind" (K, 49). In her world, she continues, there is "nothing to lead you astray" (K, 49), nothing to lure the mind away from its fixities, no language risks even that would activate the heart's unspoken desires, so to transform a dead place into a live world:

Risk a *double entendre*. But of a sudden the room's not the same! It's a strange blood sings under some skin. Who will have the sense for it? The men sniff suspiciously; you at least my dear had your head about you. It was a tender nibble but it really did you credit. But think of what might be! It's all in the imagination. (K, 49-50)

So another voice, the male voice of the writer, slides into the female voice. And the play, the dialogue, is also a play of language in which the writer becomes his own double, a female force within himself pushing to break out of confinement. "It's all in the imagination" of the world made possible through the mind's resignation to its insistences.

... ...

Some three decades after *Kora* was written, the image of King Lear driven to madness, swept up into the fury of the storm, came back into Williams' mind, emblematic by then of the inescapable desire of the mind to transgress its own tyrannies. The "storm" that reduces Lear to zero mirrors the confusion of the heart's movement in the world. Or as Williams says in the opening line from "Design for November":

Let confusion be the design
and all my thoughts go,
swallowed by desire: recess
from promises in
the November of your arms. (CLP, 87)

Confusion releases the mind from a past that has become obsolete, an imposition obstructing the heart's desire for a present. "When the world
takes over for us," so the poem "Lear" (CLP, 237) begins. Without this flowing in of the actual, without this confusion of thought, without this influence -- in this sense, the fool of the writer in Kora is "swallowed by desire" -- we would be trapped time without end within the subjectivity of "brittle consciences." And we would, in this way, remove ourselves from the world that is near to us because we carry it within ourselves as live creatures. The destruction of this kind of mental isolation ("Was it I?") dispells the threat of forever being confined to a caged vacancy, "walking / at a loss" down corridors emptied of desire. The "storm" is actual, is the actual which feeds the heart what it wants -- and as it flows in like an epidemic the mind, turned inside-out, gives itself over to the rich drama of its otherness, drawn out as it is into the imaginative field of its own nature. As Williams writes,

Today the storm, inescapable, has
taken the scene and we return
our hearts to it, however made, made
wives by it and though we secure
ourselves for a dry skin from the drench
of its passionate approaches we
yield and are made quiet by its fury

Pitiful Lear, not even you could
out-shout the storm -- to make a fool
cry! Wife to its power might you not
better have yielded earlier? as on ships
facing the seas were carried once
the figures of women at repose to
signify the strength of the waves' lash.

In the reciprocal interchange between Lear and his Fool, Williams thus envisions a doubleness within the mind, one side clinging to the enclosure of the protective house of predetermined forms, the other more "secret" side desiring a release from that fixity in the "passionate approaches" of the storm. The rage of the storm grounds the heart's desires. And so Williams says that "we / yield and are made quiet by its fury." The disquieting
power of "fury" quiets the heart because it thereby releases itself to its own feminine nature as "Wife to its power." This is the same "heart" that Williams calls an "unruly Master" (PB, 83) in a still later poem, "To Eleanor and Bill Monahan," where he openly confesses "to being / half man and half / woman" (PB, 84). And here Williams also writes,

The female principle of the world is my appeal in the extremity to which I have come. (PB, 86)

The "extremity" is the edge that the heart comes to when it returns to "the storm inescapable." So Lear is "Pitiful" because, finally, the storm is larger than reason's orders, king that he was, thrown as he is back into a primary ground of the human creature, the Fool his only companion in that moment his world comes crashing down. In this collapse, this "slaughter," Lear is drenched by forces outside his control but which mirror the common nature he had become deaf to, the "nothing" that splits his mind into a two, a one and an other, himself and his Fool, both sides within a polarity in constant transit -- in constant change, themselves "decay." And the Fool cries to witness this reduction of authority. "Wife to its power," Williams says, "might you not / better have yielded earlier"? Certainly, but reason does not sustain itself by yielding to what it cannot control -- or if it does, then it finds itself transformed into the fool's voice, in kind similar to the one that composes itself through the imaginative drama of Kora. Moreover, it is this voice itself that manifests an actuality which exists through its power to destroy and create simultaneously within a process experienced as a confusion, an inescapable mixture. As Williams says so aptly in a short poem, significantly titled "Descent":

From disorder (a chaos)
order grows
-- grows fruitful.
The chaos feeds it. Chaos
feeds the tree. (CEP, 460)

And "chaos" is the "unfathomable ground / where we walk daily" (CLP, 23), an
origin and a source, the other world of the feminine that asserts itself
from an underground, under because dark. And yet from here particulars
appear and flower as live things. "Chaos feeds the tree."

The feminine force of the ground is the same force -- "The female
principle of the world" -- that writing in the words themselves uncovers.
This should not have come as a surprise to the writer in Kora. In The
Tempers, the same writer had written, in a poem called "Transitional,"

It is the woman in us
That makes us write --
Let us acknowledge it -- (CEP, 34)

In Kora, that same "woman in us" becomes the other self of the writer. His
creaturely self surfaces in the heart's confusions -- and in every which way
in flight from minds locked in fixed perspectives that constrict the move­
ment of its desires. This is why, finally, in the text of Kora, the value of
the feminine is at stake. And we do bear witness to this force, the
various faces of it configuring again and again in all the female figures
in Kora who are, at one and the same time, a projection of the writer's
own re-awakening desire and the objects of his desire. The tension of this
dynamic, this dramatic pull in two contrary directions, constitutes the
experience of doubleness in the writing. The "Hell" of Kora discloses the
caged condition of the feminine in a society that refuses to acknowledge the
creaturely nature of the human, but just as importantly, perhaps ultimately
more so, this same "Hell" is the condition of creatures who by nature are
tied inescapably to earth processes beyond their control. It is, in
other words, in the "extremity" of this contradictory situation that all the feminine figures seem to appear in Kora: they are so many faces of the "female principle" — the same "Beautiful Thing" that comes and goes in Paterson III — which resides in the body of the world, and thus in the other self bound up with that world, but which is continually finding itself at odds with narrow forms of perceptions that attempt to subdue it.

The feminine heart appears in "Mamselle Day," for instance, whom the writer in "Improvisation IV.1" asks to "come back again" (K, 36); in the "young woman" (K, 34) at the explorer Amundsen's table in "Improvisation III.2"; in "VI.2" as "Persephone" who was "raped" (K, 41); in "XIV.2" as Villon's maîtresse — after he'd gone bald and was skin pocked and toothless: she that had him ducked in the sewage drain. Then there's that miller's daughter of "buttocks broad and breastes high." (K, 56)

And then there is as well "Juana la Loca" (K, 57), the crazy Queen of Spain in "XIV.3"; or "Bertha" (K, 58) in "XV.3"; or "white haired Miss Ball!" (K, 43) in "VII.2"; or the "lady" whom the writer in "XVIII.3" plans to meet "o' the dark side" (K, 67); or the "She" of "XXIII.2" who runs beyond the wood follows the swiftest along the roads laughing among the birch clusters her face in the yellow leaves the curls before her eyes her mouth half open. (K, 75)

And this "She" re-appears in the figure of "A la Maja Desnuda! O Duquessa de Alba!" (K, 40) in Goya's portrait of the nude Countess of Alba. This last instance of the feminine surfaces (in the writer's imagination) on the streets of Newark, a "lewd wonder" (K, 40) in the context of a society built upon the repression of sexuality. But the fool in Kora, as he says, is not "fooled that easily" (K, 40).

The writer in Kora thus goes contrary to modes of thought that codify
into rigid systems the feminine nature of the human, and he does so, not by escaping, but by straying, wandering -- in other words, by allowing himself (as Williams' mother did in Rome, on that rare journey never to be forgotten) to become a vagrant in thought. In this way, he becomes a stranger to his world, an outsider, who by virtue of his negative vision of things -- for Williams, the function of the imagination -- descends to a more elemental ground of experience otherwise hidden. And like Columbus in "Improvisation X.1," another vagrant, he returns to the field of desire, there where the mind is once again "At sea! At sea!" (K, 48), once again released to the movement of live things. The destruction of the one (subjective) self reveals that other (objective) self, the self that lives a world in constant process. The arc of this drama is experienced as a transition or a "crossing over," one that re-opens a substantial world, in Kora, a world in heat:

Open the windows -- but all's boarded up here. Out with you, you sleepy doctors and lawyers you, -- the sky's afire and Calvary Church with its snail's horns up, sniffing the dawn -- o' the wrong side! Let the trumpets blare! Tutti i instrumenti! The world's bound homeward. (K, 40)

On the wrong side, the side that is both bound (going) and homeward bound (tied): call this doubly-bound world, then, the side of Kora, in Hell, the mythological figure who is herself the "female principle of the world" incarnate. On the one hand, she is a mythological counterpart to the feminine self of the writer whose "eyes open" in the text that bears her name, and as such, she is the one "She" who ties together all the various feminine figures there. But the image of "Kora in Hell," the myth itself, discloses yet another, and more revealing dimension to the writing drama. Coming at the myth of Kora in its particularity, from what we can call its
"back side," we begin to glimpse at the horizontal edge of Kora the way in which the "slaughter" of the writer's self has its roots in the very nature of the world. Here Kora embodies the actual waywardness of a life-process that is itself constituted in the play of contraries. For the writer in Kora, the figure thus harbors within its wake the emergence of a cosmology to account for the experience of doubleness, not merely as an aberration from some fixed norm, but as the like texture of a substantial world. In the world as well, "order" or form grows from a negative ground, from "disorder (a chaos)." And in this very process, "grows fruitful."

In the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter," the main source for the myth of Kora, Kora strays, wanders and estranges herself from the enclosed protection of her mother Demeter. And so she finds herself in a meadow where she is drawn out of herself by the beauty of the narcissus flower, a flower that mirrors her own virgin beauty, her maidenhood. As she becomes absorbed by the particularity of the flower, she loses herself in the play of her own desires. It is at this precise moment, so the myth suggests, that she becomes vulnerable to forces outside her own control, although revealingly, she had herself summoned forth those forces through her awakening desire. The womb-like ground opens, and Hades (or Pluto) comes out of a gap in the earth, abducts and ravishes her. Kora finally finds herself down in the darkness of the underworld. The abduction in turn leads Demeter, her mother, on her wanderings in search of her lost daughter. In her rage and sorrow, Demeter causes a great famine. Eventually, to avert the total destruction of the earth and all of its creatures, Zeus, the figure of order
in the myth, agrees to allow Kora to leave the underworld where she is held captive by his brother, his darker half, the "Host of Many," as Hades is called. But before she ascends, Hades, as Kora explains to Demeter later, secretly put a pomegranate seed, the fruit often associated with childbirth, in her mouth. By tricking her in this way, he managed to get her to return to the underworld for one-third of each year.

The narrative of Kora's so-called "rape," as even this briefest account suggests, is double-edged. The sexual violence of Hades' abduction is an inseparable part of Kora's awakening desire. The one calls for the other. In terms of the text of Kora, the figure of the maiden Kora corresponds to the creaturely self which is bound to the world through its desires. And like Williams' mother, and like all the feminine figures appearing in the imagination of the writer, she too is drawn outside herself by the "unruly" heart. She too, by nature, strays from the mind's limits, wanders in the meadow of her desires, and thus becomes a prey to the multiple appearance and disappearance of the world: in the myth this plurality is embodied in the figure of Hades, the "Host of Many"; in Kora, the "Lord of All" (K, 55). And finally, Kora's own slaughter, an act comparable to the "slaughter" of the writer's self in Kora, is also the event of a destruction, the former enclosed "purity" of her isolate virginity broken apart or "cleaved" by forces larger than herself, but which she desires. Desires, because just here she can descend to the darkness of a more primary source, the ground of her heart's desires in Hades' underworld realm. As a force, the force of nature in man, desire is always a desire for an other that is other because un-known. And it is this force that lies behind the heart's need to escape boundaries and to be possessed by a world outside that contains its
own internal nature. Williams would later call this act of giving in a "resignation to existence" (SL, 147). In the "Prologue" to Kora, he points to his own return to source through the title, "The Return of the Sun." And the image suggests his own re-turning as a sun/son, the birth of an other self that issues from an elemental darkness. The lines of poetry that act as an epigraph, not only to the "Prologue," but also to the whole of Kora in Hell: Improvisations, catch the shadowy form of a feminine figure who is both desire and what is desired, "stained with shadow colors, / Swimming through waves of sunlight" (K, 6): an exact image of the movement of contraries which everywhere in Kora actualize the heart's need for a darkness yielding light. "Her voice was like rose-fragrance waltzing in the wind" (K, 6). Perhaps Williams was thinking of a "Kora" within himself, his own creaturely heart rising from the "Hell" of winter to re-enter an other, wholly new, birthing world, when he said in I Wanted to Write a Poem:

I thought of myself as Springtime and I felt I was on my way to Hell (but I didn't go very far). This was what the Improvisations were trying to say. (IW, 29)

Having said this much, however, it is still a misconception to then propose that the myth of Kora is a primary source for the writing in Kora, in discursive terms, a prior cause that explains its effect. Williams does say in I Wanted to Write a Poem that he is

indebted to Pound for the title. We had talked about Kora, the Greek parallel of Persephone, the legend of Springtime captured and taken to Hades. (IW, 29)

Still, the comment leaves a great deal unsaid. Did Pound actually suggest the title Kora in Hell for the improvisations? Or is Williams simply remembering a conversation about Kora long before he sat down to write the
improvisations, say when he visited Pound in London in 1912, as Mike Weaver suggests? Perhaps this conversation is even acknowledged by Pound through the quote from Propertius he used to dedicate Ripostes (1912) to Williams: "Quos ego Persephonae maxima dona feram" ("Which I take, my not unworthy gift, to Persephone," as Pound translates the line in Homage to Sextus Propertius). If, however, Williams had no book in mind when he threw himself into the "dark scribblings," it is not very likely that he had a title in mind beforehand. Furthermore, Kora never appears by name in the text itself, though one brief (almost negligible) reference to Persephone does jump into "Improvisation VI.2" (K, 41), and elsewhere Pluto, another name for Hades, is mentioned in connection with the "Chief of Police" in "Improvisation XVI.2" (K, 61). And we have already drawn attention to the "old woman" with "her daughter on her arm" (K, 32) in "Improvisation I.3," a faint hint of Demeter and Kora in the image, but again no actual references to them. These oblique gestures that point in the direction of figures in the myth of Kora, in other words, appear so randomly -- so accidently -- in the text that it is more likely that they simply came into Williams' mind as he wrote spontaneously with no predetermined "subject" in mind and without a prior intention to use them as specific points of textual meaning in the writing. More true to the improvisational nature of the whole text, the fact that it was written "going," the title Kora in Hell -- perhaps suggested through conversations with Pound, perhaps discovered by Williams -- came after the initial improvisations were written. We can suppose that Williams re-read what he had written, and in his own reader's response, after this fact, began to discover a mythological range of experience in his own writing.

The choice of the title Kora in Hell thus became, like the choice of
Davis' drawing as a frontispiece, a further extension of a text that wrote itself. It was another improvisational act, and the title one more surface alongside all the other surfaces that constitute the text. And like Davis' drawing, or the "interpretations," the title cuts back across the opacity of the writing and provides -- in gestural form -- the narrative of a myth that substantiates the splitting apart of the "self" in the writing, but equally, is in turn substantiated by the writing. In other words, the writing in Kora informs the myth of Kora as much as the myth informs the writing. To this extent, the title Kora in Hell is as opaque as the writing it announces. Along its surface, nevertheless, the writer in Kora begins to understand the mythological dimension of "the female principle of the world."

The reciprocal interplay between the substance of the writing in Kora and the substance of the myth of "Kora in Hell" stands on the horizontal edge of the drama in "Improvisation XVI.2." Here we are told that the "gods" have fallen, or are dragged down in present-day America -- "Giants in the dirt. The gods, the Greek gods, smothered in filth and ignorance" (K, 60). The gods (or goddesses) that at one time formed a mythology that projected human desire, in the historic condition of a society in which desire is pushed underground, drained of their energy, mirror a time in which the vacancy of mental forms -- "Oh, the mothers will explain that they are good girls" -- finds its complement in the apparent senseless nature of the world: "Here Hebe with a sick jaw and a cruel husband, -- her mother left no place for a brain to grow" (K, 60). Still, and this is the gain for the estranged writer in Kora whose self is being "slaughtered," the "gods," though apparently "fallen," have not really disappeared. The same particulars that are symptomatic of the barrenness of a culture divorced from the earth reveal
negatively their mythological — or in the language of Kora, their imaginative qualities. As the figures of desire, the gods now re-appear as "some imagined figure" rising out of a hidden cavity,

on rare nights for they will come -- the rare nights!
The ground lifts and out sally the heroes of Sophocles, of Aeschylus. They go seeping down into our hearts, they rain upon us and in the bog they sink again down through the white roots, down -- (K, 60)

Down to the same ground that spawns mushrooms and that decomposes Louslinger's body. This same ground becomes a "She" in the later In the American Grain, the mythological equivalent there of the grain-goddess Demeter. And it is this "She" who, calling De Soto out of his Europeanized mind, simultaneously estranges him from his historic past and draws him into the interior of her dark wilderness recesses, the cave of her woods. De Soto dies and is finally received back into the "She," the womb of his/her own nature --

Down, down, this solitary sperm, down into the liquid, the formless, the insatiable belly of sleep; down among the fishes: (IAG, 58)

The darkness of the absence of form brings into play the actuality of the un-known. Or in Kora:

That which is known has value only by virtue of the dark. This cannot be otherwise. A thing known passes out of the mind into the muscles, the will is quit of it, save only when set into vibration by the forces of darkness opposed to it. (K, 74)

As this interpretation to "Improvisation XXII.3" implies, the principle of negativity constitutes a fundamental aspect of the ground, that "un-known" region of experience through which the present appears, like a mushroom out of the earth, breaking into a form that is a moving image of process. Here too value becomes attached to the immediacy of desire, for desire comes into play once what is "known" is forced to be measured against its negation, in Kora, against "ignorance." "This cannot be otherwise," so the
interpretation suggests, because this principle constitutes the nature of experience. Anything "known" has been absorbed and made mediate (no longer immediate) in the instant that it is possessed in this way. Stripped of its particularity, a "thing known" leaves the mind as a live thing and disappears into the habit of "muscles," unless of course it is made to re-appear in its original state of apprehension through the "forces of darkness" that set the mind back into motion again, once again in a world of moving energies. The negative, in other words, in photography as in life, transforms the mind into a function of the world, a screen let us say, or a medium within which things are cast as appearances — in Kora, the "vague cinema" awakening "in the head's dark" (K, 66) is tied to the world of the imagination where the mind becomes an extension of change.

Imagination! That's the worm in the apple. What if it run to paralyses and blind fires, here's sense loose in a world set on foundations. Blame buzzards for the eyes they have. (K, 77)

And it is precisely "the eyes" of the fool of a writer in Kora that allows him an imaginative vision of the creaturely nature of men in his own immediate locale, the divorced world of his townspeople, where the "gods" go down to a saloon back of the rail-road switch where they have that girl, you know, the one that should have been Venus by the lust that's in her. They've got her down there among the railroad men. A crusade couldn't rescue her. Up to jail — or call it down to Limbo — the Chief of Police our Pluto. It's all the gods, there's nothing else worth writing of. They are the same men they always were -- but fallen. Do they dance now, they that danced beside Helicon? They dance much as they did then, only, few have an eye for it, through the dirt and fumes. (K, 60-61)

The "America" that surfaces in this lovely piece of writing is "fallen" only because no one as yet has discovered a means of overcoming the violent
deflection of desire in the senseless brutality of rape. There is, in
effect, no language to transform the force of desire into a performance
of it -- a "dance" -- which would both release and reveal it at the same
time. So we are told in "Improvisation VII.3" to "strain to catch the sense
but have to admit it's in a language they've not taught you, a flaw some­
where ---" (K, 44). The flaw is in the means, not the (unavoidable) fact
of desire. Or as the writer says, "few have an eye for it." If the writing
being written here matters at all, however, then the writer in Kora whose
own eyes are drawn into the conditional nature of the things before him has
already begun to compose an imaginative sense of that same "fallen" place.
"They dance as they did then . . . . It's all the gods, there's nothing
else worth writing of." The Greek gods may have disappeared in the modern
landscape, but the ground of desire that once spawned them has not changed.
They return in "a saloon back of the rail-road switch." The violence of the
rape of "that girl" is, needless to say perhaps, one of the severe costs of
repression. Deny desire and it will surface in grotesque forms. But from
the "back side," from the side of the imagination, for those who do have an
"eye" for it, the same act is the contemporary re-enactment of the myth of
Kora ("that girl"), the Greek maiden who was abducted by Hades ("the Chief
of Police our Pluto") and taken into the realm of the Underworld ("down to
Limbo"), there to become his Queen ("the one that should have been Venus").

No matter how many tricks the mind has up its sleeve to deny process,
and the violent tyrannization of the world in the instance of "rape" is one
such response, nothing can in fact escape. Process is the inescapable limit
of being alive in the world. Even an attempt to escape it by possessing
things in forms of total subjugation acknowledges its inevitability. Here
the myth of Kora reveals the contrariety of a life-process that all creatures are prey to as live things. "Now life" — we recall Williams telling Harriet Monroe in 1913 — "is above all things else at any moment subversive of life as it was the moment before — always new, irregular" (SL, 23-24).

In *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, C. Kerényi argues that in the Eleusinian Mysteries, the narrative of Kora, her abduction and return, formed the mythological basis for a cult that affirmed the contrariety of a life-process essentially "feminine" in its nature, tied as it is to a primary emphasis upon the earth as source. The more explicit agricultural emphasis of the myth (Demeter as the grain-Goddess) is thus not to be understood one-dimensionally as an end in itself, but another mirror of a creative force that functions through a fundamentally negative process. Explaining the parallels between the sowing of grain and the disappearance of Kora, Kerényi comments: "... the grain decays under the earth and thus, in this state of fruitful death, hints at the Kore dwelling in the realm of the dead." The cycle of the grain, that is, reveals the fate of all living things, the force of decay that all creatures of nature suffer simply because they are extensions of earth processes. Kora's "rape," in this sense, is a narration of the condition of a creative process that sustains, maintains, and nurtures itself in a state of constant and continuous crises. Life feeds on itself. It is, like the act of writing, improvisational in nature.

In the myth, then, the figures of Demeter and Kora are two sides of one process, not mother and daughter, but mother-in-daughter and daughter-in-mother, or possibly more accurate to the feminine ground of the myth, woman-as-mother and woman-as-maiden, motherhood and maidenhood as the two interchangeable states without which birth would not be possible. "They are," so
Kerényi says, "to be thought of as a double figure, one half of which is the ideal complement of the other." And here too Hades becomes a necessary part of a complex of forces. He is the Seducer, the god of Many, of death, of darkness, of an otherness that splits Kora's virgin heart into two, her maidenhood thus giving way to her motherhood. In the Underworld she becomes "her bridegroom's Kore," Hades' double, the Queen of his sphere of influence. In this same cleavage, of course, Demeter-as-mother loses her maidenhood, her daughter, which explains the sorrowful pain of her wanderings. In short, childbirth necessitates the violation of Kora's virginity. The mother, the maiden, and the dark lover are three complementary figures in the imaginary dimension of a creative force that constitutes itself on the interplay between slaughter and birth, between destruction and creation, between decay and growth, between a one and a many, between form and formlessness, between disappearance and appearance: in effect, very must the same subversive force that everywhere in Kora struggles to shake itself free in the writing. It is this future that the improvisations re-open and which the cover "design" of Kora both discloses and announces.

A text that began in crisis thus ends at a beginning. The drawing on the cover comes last, a final surface to the text of Kora. As Williams says in
his Autobiography, it "completed the design" (A, 158). The principle of crisis, implicit in the title Kora in Hell, is particularized in the stylized image of impregnation, the one image which folds the play of the world back into the text as it simultaneously folds the text back into the world. The imagination is finally that medium -- call it a "place" -- where the unspoken triad of Kora, language, experience, and the world, intermingle in a dance that is a composition of the real.

Only the imagination is real!  
I have declared it time without end. (PB, 179)

"I myself improvised the idea," Williams comments in I Wanted to Write a Poem,

seeing, symbolically, a design using sperms of various breeds, various races let's say, and directed the artist to vary the shadings of the drawing from white to gray to black. The cell accepts one sperm -- that is the beginning of life. I was feeling fresh and I thought it was a beautiful thing and I wanted the world to see it. (IW, 28-29)

Whether Williams was feeling fresh or not, the cover design affirms the emergence of a root principle, the final outcome of the "dark scribblings" that began with nothing in mind but the writing itself. Williams was literally driving himself out of Hell with a new sense of form. In writing as in the world, form is essentially the event of a crisis, in its most fundamental sense, as any doctor would know, the instance of the isolate ovum being torn apart by a single sperm -- many spermatozoa but only one "successful." Both proceed through a cleavage that makes a one, a two, hence a three, the number of birth. The text of Kora, we notice, is structured through a series of three's: three improvisations to each set, twenty-seven in all, in mathematical terms, three cubed. And the pun on "races"? The spermatozoa race to the ovum. Only one gets in. Birth, then,
comes out of a hunt --

The thing, the thing, of which I am in chase.

"Without imagination," Williams says in "Against the Weather,"

life cannot go on, for we are left staring at the empty casings where truth lived yesterday while the creature itself has escaped behind us. (SE, 213)

The "beauty" of the "creature" in Kora is re-aligned with the act of writing where the immediacy of the world becomes a "discovery, a race on the ground" (GAN, 171). A crisis (literally, a "splitting apart"), in short, is the event of an emergency (from "emerge," the act of rising from a liquid substance, say like language, of so appearing); or in the fluid language of Kora: "All beauty stands upon the edge of the deflowering" (K, 59). In the imagination, "beauty" is not some abstract entity existing in a transcendent form, perfect and remote from actuality, but is itself an effect created "on the edge of the deflowering" (italics added), the text Kora one such effect. No "deflowering," no "beauty." No "slaughter," no "plunge" into confusion. No abduction of Kora, no Demeter. No opacity of language, no writing that is actual. The cleavage of the ovum on the cover design thus projects the principle of "deflowering" through which whatever is actual continues. Destruction and creation are simultaneous. "Chaos feeds the tree." Mushrooms grow, children are born, plants sprout, books get written, and flowers cover the decaying body of Louslinger.

What's an icy room and the sun not up? This song is to Phyllis. Reproduction lets death in, says Joyce. Rot, say I. To Phyllis this song is! (K, 74)
CONCLUSION

AN OPENING OF THE DOORS

The "Prologue" is dated September 1, 1918 in the 1920 edition of Kora in Hell (K, 28). "As far as can be told," Williams says in I Wanted to Write a Poem, "it is the first piece of continuous prose I remember writing" (IW, 31). And he explains its impetus:

I felt I had to give some indication of myself to the people I knew; sound off, tell the world -- especially my intimate friends -- how I felt about them . . . . I paid attention very assiduously to what I was told. I often reacted violently, but I weighed what had been told me thoroughly. It was always my own mind I was making up. (IW, 30)

This "first piece" initially appeared in print in The Little Review, in two sections, the first, which ends with Wallace Stevens' letter, followed by a bracketed "(to be continued)," in April, 1919, the second a month later.¹

In I Wanted to Write a Poem, Williams also remembers this division of his essay: "When I was halfway through the Prologue, 'Prufrock' appeared," and he adds, "I had a violent feeling that Eliot had betrayed what I believed in" (IW, 30). Eliot "had rejected America and I refused to be rejected and so my reaction was violent" (IW, 30). According to Williams, "The Love Song
of J. Alfred Prufrock" was evidence of Eliot's retreat from a present that demanded "a new form of poetic composition, a form for the future" (IW, 30).

Aside from the synaptic -- and thoroughly characteristic -- way Williams identifies himself with the America he felt Eliot betrayed, the second half of the "Prologue" does indicate his violent reaction to Eliot's success in London. His anger was fuelled by an article by Edgar Jepson, a British critic who pointed to Eliot as an authentic American poet. More importantly, that it should have been his old friend Pound who would turn out to be the one to use his influence to get Jepson's article published in the American context of The Little Review stirred Williams into an attack. A shortened version of Jepson's "The Western School," edited and with a note by Pound appeared in the September 1918 issue of The Little Review.2 "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was first published in Harriet Monroe's Poetry in June, 1915, and again in Prufrock and Other Observations in 1917, in other words, before Williams wrote the "Prologue." Williams may thus have confused the date in his memory, but there is no confusion regarding his immediate response to Jepson in the second half of the "Prologue."

Jepson in particular holds up two poems by Eliot, "Prufrock" and "La Figlia Che Piange," as outstanding exceptions to the altogether laughable quality of certain "prize" American poems that appeared in Poetry. Eliot is, as Jepson concludes,

a real poet, who possesses in the highest degree the qualities the new school demands. Western-born of Eastern stock, Mr. T.S. Eliot is United States of the United States; and his poetry is securely rooted in its native soil; it has a new poetic diction; it is as autochthonous as Theocritus.

Not to stop there, Jepson goes on to eulogize:
Could anything be more United States, more of the soul of that modern land than "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"? It is the very wailing testament of that soul with its cruel clarity of sophisticated vision, its thin, sophisticated emotions, its sophisticated appreciation of a beauty, and its sophisticated yearning for a beauty it cannot dare to make its own and so, at last, live.

Never has the shrinking of the modern spirit of life been expressed with such exquisiteness, fullness, and truth.

Jepson ends by praising Eliot's "La Figlia Che Piange," and it is his specific phrasing that draws Williams' attention in his "Prologue":

It is instinct with every poetic quality the woolly masters lack [these so-called "masters" the prize American poets, like Sandburg and Masters, who published in Poetry], with delicate, beautiful, intense emotion, with exquisite, beautiful music. This is the very fine flower of the finest spirit of the United States.3

On the whole, Williams agrees with Jepson's scathing condemnation of certain American poems that appeared in Poetry, but what gets him is Jepson's gushy statement on Eliot. To him Eliot is the very instance of a poet who turned his back on America and retreated into the safety of a kind of poetry that panders to British critical tastes. In any case, Williams clearly does not take Jepson's critical assessment of American poetry very seriously, written as it is from a British perspective that is utterly alien to an actual America. On this point, Jepson's article, of no real use for American writers, hardly even warrents a serious answer. "It is silly," Williams says in his "Prologue,"

to go into a puckersnatch because some brass-button-minded nincompoop in Kensington flies off the handle and speaks openly about our United States prize poems. (K, 23)

And then he goes on to quote from Pound's note:

"Anyone who has heard Mr. J. read Homer and discourse on Catullus would recognize his fitness as a judge and
respecter of poetry" -- this is Ezra! -- (K, 23)

the amazement, then, to hear Pound supporting what to Williams' ear sounds like nothing more than the cloak of a reactionary dogmatism. Eliot is the "finest flower" to Jepson, not because Eliot's poetry is new, but more accurately because it conforms to fixed poetic conventions and standards that have no basis in an actual America. Williams thus offers his own blast:

It is convenient to have fixed standards of comparison:
All antiquity! And there is always some everlasting Polonius of Kensington forever to rate highly his eternal Eliot. It is because Eliot is a subtle conformist. It tickles the palate of this archbishop of procurers to a lecherous antiquity to hold up Prufrock as a New World type. Prufrock, the nibbler at sophistication, endemic in every capital, the not quite (because he refuses to turn his back), is "the soul of that modern land," the United States!

Blue undershirts,
Upon a line,
It is not necessary to say to you
Anything about it --

I cannot question Eliot's observation. Prufrock is a masterly portrait of the man just below the summit, but the type is universal; the model in his case might be Mr. J.

No. The New World is Montezuma or, since he was stoned to death in a parley, Guatemozin who had the city of Mexico leveled over him before he was taken. (K, 24)

In his "Prologue" Williams argues for an authentic American perspective, one grounded in a more primary sense of the earth, not a prefabricated "antiquity" divorced from an opaque present; "Prufrock, the nibbler at sophistication" typifies the retreat into an outmoded historicism. "No," says Williams, "The New World is Montezuma or . . . Guatemozin," not the illusion of some Theocritan pastoralism of which the present is a fallen version. Nothing could be more removed from the America Williams hears
both in his own work, particularly the text of *Kora* that follows the "Prologue" -- his answer to Jepson -- but as well in the work of those writers and artists, Duchamp, Demuth, Marianne Moore, Kreymborg, and Maxwell Bodenheim, who live the America that Eliot's work denies. Williams is determined to remain in the midst of American conditions and to write out of that specific context. Herein lies his defense of writers who stay in America and accept the absence there of some such stable entity as a literary tradition, an idealized whole against which the individual talent is measured and evaluated. For Williams, that kind of idealism is precisely what the text of *Kora* undermines and refutes. The America that surfaces in his writing reasserts its actuality in the particularity of its own conditions, and it is this difficulty that the writer should release himself to, his present, which is the only basis of anything "universal." So Williams, paraphrasing Kandinsky against Pound and Eliot, asserts his own priorities:

Every artist has to express himself.  
Every artist has to express his epoch.  
Every artist has to express the pure and eternal qualities of the art of all men.

So we have the fish and the bait, but the last rule holds three hooks at once -- not for the fish, however. (K, 26)^4

The implication is, of course, that Eliot's universalism attempts to jump the gun by leaping over the first two axioms. For Williams the last one "holds three hooks at once" because all three axioms form a complex, literature becoming universal only when it roots itself in the contextual field of its own time and space and when the writer in his own particularity becomes an instrument of that context. This is the "bait" that Williams offers through the text of *Kora*. 
The fight was on, and Williams was hardly ready to give up the battle to establish a modernist form of writing in America. "By a mere twist of the imagination, if Prufrock only knew it," he says, "the whole world can be inverted (why else are there wars?) and the mermaids be set warbling to whoever will listen to them" (K, 25). This much, in any case, Williams had figured out for himself by writing *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*.

 Williams had stopped publishing in *Others* at the end of 1916. The improvisations he published before *Kora* was published appeared in *The Little Review*, the magazine he supported after he lost faith in *Others*. In 1919, however, the text of *Kora* now behind him, he returned to *Others* with a special issue which he himself edited, but with one clear announcement: in "Gloria!" and "Belly Music," the two essays he wrote for the occasion, he points to the failure of *Others* and its demise as a magazine. Moreover, he attacks with a great deal of energy the whole state of American writing and criticism. Somehow or other, the revolution that was supposed to occur in America had fizzled out. Modernist writing still lay in an unrealized condition of possibility. There was yet to be established a full-scale beginning:

*Others* has come to an end. I object to bringing out another issue after this one. *Others* is not enough. It has grown inevitably to be a lie, like everything else that has been a truth at one time. I object to its puling 4 x 6 dimension. I object to its yellow cover, its stale legend. Everything we have ever done or can do under these conditions is being done now by any number of other *MAGAZINES OF POETRY*! *Others* has been blasted out of existence. We must have a new conception from the bottom up or I will not touch it.
And further along in "Gloria!" Williams summarizes his understanding of the sedentary quality of most contemporary writing:

We older can compose, we seek the seclusion of a style, of a technique, we make replicas of the world we live in and we live in them and not in the world. And THAT is Others. The garbage proved we were alive once, it cannot prove us dead now. But THAT is Others now, that is its lie.5

This is the same writer who in Kora discovered that writing must not be a copy of some externality, some hypothetical "reality" outside the writing, but must in itself be actual, immediate to its own movement, inside a world that keeps breaking into the mind to declare its opacity. But now, Williams says, the writers that "were alive once" have retreated into "the seclusion of a style," which he himself might have done had he continued in the "style" of Al Que Quiere and had not undergone the crisis of Kora. Writing should reopen the world, not close it out. Others has become another dead-end, another closure.

Williams in "Gloria!" is not bemoaning the present. The title alone suggests that he is excited by a call for another beginning, for something altogether new. The war was over, Kora was finally composed, American writing was still to be made. In the companion piece that concludes this issue of Others, "Belly Music" -- the music of the fool with a big womb? -- Williams launches a further attack on critics and writers who have escaped into the "seclusion" of established modes of thought, who refuse to acknowledge the fact that really new writing, modernist writing, must by necessity work contrary to such fixities. Concerning American critics, Williams writes, perhaps with the image of Jepson still present in his mind:

Never is their criticism a new SIGHT of a SOURCE, a flash into the future of art, wings under which a poet might spread his sparrow's wings and mount to the sky. They
SEE nothing. It is never a confidence in the purgation by thought. It is a puling testiness in most cases or a benign ignorance in others of the purpose of the work with which they are dealing. Imagine a man actually sensing the inspiration that is in a poem. Never. His path must be sopped of rain water, the edges cut free of even the long grass, the way paved and SWEEP before an American critic will walk into a new work. Where is a man who has a head for smashing through underbrush?6

Williams is impatient for a push through to another direction. In this sense, "Belly Music," the music of the body, follows the lead of Kora. Williams praises the magazine where fragments of that text appeared in print for the first time. "I praise the Little Review. I praise Margaret Anderson."7 He also supports the work of Pound, which he aligns with his own efforts:

I find matter for serious attention in Ezra Pound's discordant shrieking: to hell with singing the States and the plains and the Sierra Nevada for their horse's vigor.

It is the NEW! not one more youthful singer, one more lovely poem. The NEW, the everlasting NEW, the everlasting defiance. Ezra has the smell of it.8

And Williams has the smell of it in Kora where defiance of outmoded forms of writing -- the Dadaist's rien, rien, rien -- gives way to the possibility of "the NEW." Kora, then, is a beginning for Williams, and it is a beginning for modernist writing in America as well. "The virtue of it all," we are told at the end of the "Prologue,"

is an opening of the doors, though some rooms of course will be empty, a break with banality, the continual hardening which habit enforces. (K, 28)

In his own amazing fashion, by sticking with the material at hand, the words themselves, Williams had begun to write himself into a new century. Kora in Hell: Improvisations may be considered the first modernist text wholly written and published in America.
Aside from Williams' closest friends, Marianne Moore and Ezra Pound, Kora fell largely on deaf ears. After being published in 1920 in a limited edition, the text went underground and remained there, more or less intact, for 37 years, until the mid-fifties, when Williams' reputation had grown to such an extent that Ferlinghetti would want to republish it. Only Robert McAlmon, in a short, almost inconsequential review of Kora, pointed to the larger importance of the book in its specific historic context. "To me," he openly declared, "Kora in Hell is immeasurably the most important book of poetry that America has produced."  

McAlmon bases his assertion on a distinction between two kinds of writers. On the one side are those so-called "professionals, whose concern is style, technique, finished achievement" (Masters and Sandburg, for instance), who never risk writing anything that undermines the conventional expectations of their readers. They never question the form of their writing, and for this reason, quite predictably fall into a fixed manner. "Unless from an impulse to say something keenly felt," McAlmon says, "writing is without justification." In direct contrast are those other writers who move against this assumption and "attempt at least to explore and develop new experience" through a kind of writing that contradicts the unspoken, but predetermining faith in "logic, sequence, order -- the intelligible, rational, deducible." It is in this context that the book under review by McAlmon assumes a more significant place in contemporary writing:  

In America William Carlos Williams, and he beginning only with his improvisations entitled Kora in Hell, is conscious of the new form in relation to the dubiety of the day.  

Williams' writing accurately mirrors the collapse of belief in ration-
ality, which McAlmon sees as the fundamental texture of contemporary American life. And it does so because Williams has not retreated into an habitual style or technique. "There is in this book," argues McAlmon, the spasmodic quality of the active, imaginative, alternately frightened and reckless, consciousness. One will search in vain for sequential outline... It is incoherent and unintelligible to those people with lethargy of their sensing organs. They look for the order and neatness of precise, developed thought. It is not there.

Readers who do not turn away from Williams' writing for its lack of "sequential order," on the other hand, will discover that the absence of this expectation is precisely what makes Kora a portrait of a live consciousness that moves inside the weather of its times. McAlmon thus concludes that no book previously produced in this country has been so keenly, vividly aware of age conceptions, qualities, colors, noises, and philosophies as Kora in Hell. It is a break-away from poetry written by poets who set out to be poets. It is adventurous exploration.

Perhaps it is all too easy to dismiss McAlmon's praise of Kora by foregrounding its obvious biases. After all, at this time, he was co-editing Contact magazine with Williams. And yet, more truthfully, he must have been angered by the lack of critical response to Kora; his dig at poets such as Masters and Sandburg suggests as much. The nature of his remarks, and their tone as well, seem to be motivated by a sense that Williams' kind of writing should be given the serious attention it warrants; in America, Kora signalizes the same shift evident in the prose of James Joyce who, as McAlmon says, "first indicated the modern form." Some such statement needed to be made, Poetry seemed the place to make it.

It is ironic that a number of years after Kora was published another reader who recognized Williams' importance in the development of modern
American writing should turn out to be a foreigner, the French critic René Taupin. In *L'Influence du Symbolisme Français* (published in 1929, a time when Williams was receiving very little critical attention), he says, "Peut-être William Carlos Williams a-t-il composé la formule de l'art américain." And Taupin, coming from the outside as he does, has no difficulty seeing *Kora* as the one text that points to Williams' beginnings as an American writer:

> Ce livre *Kora in Hell* qui contient les *Improvocations* est probablement le plus important dans l'évolution de la poésie de Williams, même si on pense qu'il n'est pas le mieux réussi. Pour composer ces *Improvocations* il s'est posé toutes les questions artistique à l'ordre du jour, et en l'écrivant il a pris plus intimement contact avec ses dons.13

Williams says that the virtue of *Kora* "is in an opening of the doors," and he could not have been more precise. The act of composing *Kora* into a text opened many doors. And there they were, a great multiplicity of rooms, so many in fact that Williams would spend the rest of his life driving through the house of writing. Immediately, and on through the 20's, the titles were so many places that *Kora* made possible, so many dimensions to the writing act. *The Great American Novel*, *Spring and All*, *In the American Grain*, and so on, up to *A Novelette and Other Prose*, all of this writing, "The same method as in the Improvocations . . ." (IW, 49), as Williams says of "A Novelette: January." By 1929, when Williams was finishing this series of improvisations, he had so written himself into the improvisational method that he could (simply) write:

> What's your husband's job?  
> Let's see, what shall I say? he just drives cars. (AN, 287)

Williams might have added, because he must, because he is driven to. This is the same writer who had written back in 1919, "I am damned only when I cannot write."14
The writing came first, and as the publication history of Williams' early work indicates, for the most part against the odds. He paid to have Poems published privately in 1909, "around $50" (IW, 10). He "paid $50 to Elkin Mathews, the English publisher" (IW, 17) for The Tempers. And for Al Que Quiere, Kora, and Sour Grapes, the three books published by The Four Seas Company, "something in the neighborhood of two hundred and fifty dollars" (A, 158-159) for each book. "I never received a penny, so far as I remember, on sales" (A, 159). The Great American Novel was published in a limited edition by Bill Bird's Three Mountain Press (Paris) through Pound, Spring and All, again in a limited edition, through Robert McAlmon's Contact Press. Williams was finding outlets for his work but only through personal connections. In the American Grain was the first exception, accepted for publication by Albert and Charles Boni in New York. "It was my first book by a commercial publisher," Williams writes,

and I was dancing on air -- because to that point nothing I was writing had any market: I had either paid for it myself or had it accepted, for the most part, without pay. (A, 236)

And yet, in terms of sales, In the American Grain "fell flat" (A, 236) and was soon remaindered. Williams recalls that he "used to go up and down Fourth Avenue picking up copies for a dollar to give to my friends" (IW, 44). "The Descent of Winter" never did get published in book form, but appeared in one issue of Pound's Exile magazine. A Voyage to Pagany "was published by a man from Passaic, N.J., operating under the title of the Macauley Publishing Company . . . . It didn't sell either. Not so happy days" (A, 237). And then there was A Novelette and Other Prose. As Williams wrote Pound in 1930, "the Novelette is very close to my heart -- and no one will handle it here" (SL, 112).
"The particular thing," says the doctor-writer Williams at the end of Kora, offering his own prescription for the value of writing in a new century,

whether it be four pinches of four divers white powders cleverly compounded to cure surely, safely, pleasantly a painful twitching of the eyelids or say a pencil sharpened at one end, dwarfs the imagination, makes logic a butterfly, offers a finality that sends us spinning through space, a fixity the mind could climb forever, a revolving mountain, a complexity with a surface of glass; the gist of poetry. D.C. al fin. (K, 81)

Writing would remain a mode of consciousness woven into the inescapable movement of the world. It would be, in this sense, a condition of mind in which the dense opacity of things constantly translates itself into the event of experience. And the "gist of poetry" would concern this evanescent process. For Williams, then, the beginning is an end, and the end is a beginning, and a thing is an appearance that "makes logic a butterfly."

In the future that Kora opened, the imagination of the world did become the one "season" constant only in variability -- in image, "a revolving mountain" or "a complexity with a surface of glass." The imagination lives in contradictions that do not resolve themselves into completions and maintains itself in the intimacy of what Williams in Spring and All called "that eternal moment in which we alone live" (SA, 89).

The true seasons blossom or wilt not in fixed order but so that many of them may pass in a few weeks or hours whereas sometimes a whole life passes and the season remains of a piece from one end to the other. (K, 82)

And if Kora is a measure, the medium of the words themselves that carry "the life of the planet" remained the one "season" in Williams' life, all of "a piece from one end to another." From first to last, he was to be himself
a figure of the "word man, the best of all to my way of thinking."

Williams died in Rutherford on March 4, 1963, only a few years after writing what still reads as a final statement at the end of a lifetime involvement in words. In "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" we find lines where his writing life folds back into the initial appearance of language that made everything else possible, back into Kora:

But the words
made solely of air
or less,
that came to me
out of the air
and insisted
on being written down,
I regret most --
that there has come an end
to them.
For in spite of it all,
all that I have brought on myself,
grew that single image
that I adore
equally with you
and so
it brought us together. (PB, 169)
NOTES

PREFACE


PROLOGUE: MY SELF WAS BEING SLAUGHTERED

1 I Wanted to Write a Poem was published in 1958, but the interviews with Edith Heal took place in 1957.

At the outset of this study, I should acknowledge those critical interpretations of Williams' work that were useful in the initial stages. Of the numerous book-length studies of Williams, the following gave me significant insights into the overall structure of his work: James Guimond, The Art of William Carlos Williams: A Discovery and Possession of America (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968); James Breslin, William Carlos Williams: An American Artist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); and Thomas R. Whitaker, William Carlos Williams (New York: Twayne, 1968). Of more specialized interest is Rod Townley's The Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), a study that offers a very fine reading of Williams' early poetry up to and including Spring and All. Townley devotes a chapter to Kora. For the longest time, however, Kora had remained one of Williams' most neglected books. All too often, earlier Williams readers tended to shy away from its obscurities. But from the early 70's to the present, a growing number of readers have begun to recognize how important this "unique" book is for an understanding of Williams' development as a writer. Although no extended study of Kora has yet been published, the following three articles were helpful in my initial reading of the text: Sherman Paul, "A Sketchbook of the Artist in His Thirty-Fourth Year: William Carlos Williams' Kora in Hell: Improvisations," and Joseph N. Riddel, "The Wanderer and the Dance: William Carlos Williams' Early Poetics," both of these articles published in The Shaken Realist, eds. Melvin J. Friedman and John B. Vickery (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), pp. 21-44 and pp. 45-71 respectively; and Joseph Evans Slate, "Kora in Opacity: Williams' Improvisations," Journal of Modern Literature, 1 (May 1971), 463-476. More recently, but after the main body of this study was written, a number of scattered articles on Kora have appeared, among these
Ron Loewinsohn's "'Fools Have Big Wombs': Williams' Kora in Hell," Essays in Literature, 1 (1977), 221-238, a very sympathetic reading of Kora's textual complexities, a reading that both shares and supports the critical approach to Kora furthered in this study. By all indications, then, more and more readers are discovering how to read Kora. If this continues, the one book that Williams himself called a "secret document" will perhaps soon be recognized as an important text of early modernist writing in America. This study throughout proceeds on the assumption that it is this kind of key work, pointing as it does in two directions simultaneously: toward the origin of Williams' poetics and toward the origin of American modernist writing. At the beginning of his writing life as well as at the end, for Williams, they were the same thing.


5 "A Selection from The Tempers," with an "Introductory Note" by Ezra Pound, The Poetry Review, 1, No. 10 (Oct. 1912), 481-484. Pound's "Introductory Note" is reprinted in I Wanted to Write a Poem (pp. 12-13).


6 For a more thorough discussion of this period of Williams' writing life, which takes into account much unpublished material, see Rod Townley's The Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams, Chapter One, "Early Years, 1900-1909," pp. 22-54.

7 As Nicholas Dewey in his article, "Dr. William Carlos Williams: The Writer as Physician" (The Academy of Medicine of New Jersey, Bulletin, 16, No. 4 (Dec. 1970), 64-73) points out, pediatrics was a new field when Williams decided to specialize in it: "Before 1900 there had been little professional interest in the distinct problems of child health: at that date infant mortality during the first year of life was still as high as 15%. When Dr. Williams retired from practice at mid-century that figure had been reduced to just 3%" (66). Since there was no formal training available in America at the time, Williams had to go to the University of Leipzig in 1909-1910 to complete his qualifications. A lovely piece from The Embodiment of Knowledge, simply called "Children," shows Williams' deep attachment to the particular world of children: "The amazingly interesting and continuously satisfying thing about children is that they are not small adults but a race by themselves. It took the Greeks a long time to recognize the correct proportions between a child's head and his total body length; at first they used the adult ratio in making a child. Primitive people partly recognize this in the elf and gnome myths -- just kids. Really they are not small at all but full size. Only the most superficial conception compares them with adults: a whole world in itself" (EK, 57).

9 Ezra Pound, "Introductory Note" to "A Selection from The Tempers," The Poetry Review, 481-482.

10 Louis Zukofsky, one of Williams' most sympathetic readers, later singled this line out in "William Carlos Williams" (Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays of Louis Zukofsky (New York: Horizon Press, 1967), pp. 39-47), an essay written in the form of a letter to Williams. The "character" of this early line, he says, "owns all the phases of your later work, the catastrophic and gentle in its characters, in their signing hieroglyphics" (p. 40).


12 Alfred Kreymborg in Troubadour: An American Biography (New York: Sagamore Press, 1957) quotes a letter from Pound in which Pound says that Williams "is my one remaining pal in America -- get in touch with old Bull -- he lives in a hole called Rutherford, New Jersey" (p. 157).

13 Kreymborg, p. 186.

14 Remembering "Sub Terra" in I Wanted to Write a Poem, Williams comments on its significance for him at that early time: "I thought of myself as being under the earth, buried in other words, but as any plant is buried, retaining the power to come again. The poem is Spring, the earth giving birth to a new crop of poets, showing that I thought I would some day take my place among them, telling them that I was coming pretty soon" (IW, 21).

15 "The Wanderer" has rightly been considered a significant poem for an understanding of Williams' beginnings as a poet. For a convincing reading of its relation to the development of Williams' thought, see especially James Guimond, The Art of William Carlos Williams, pp. 14-25.

16 As Dijkstra says, when America entered the war, "A deadly seriousness began to take hold of the American public; a war mentality set in. The seemingly carefree, irreverent artists who had been tolerated by the public at large, and had even figured in many a good-natured exposé of modern art as examples of amiable frauds, began to find the atmosphere more and more oppressive. The freedom of thought and action they had enjoyed in New York became an 'illusion vite dissipée!'" (pp. 41-42).


According to Emily Wallace in *A Bibliography of William Carlos Williams*, Williams' letter was printed on May 12, 1917. She also notes that it "refutes local accusations that he is pro-German, but extends sympathy to 'German-Americans among my friends who are quite as honest as I am'" (p. 170).

It is possible that Williams has mistaken the date of the major influenza epidemic. In the spring of 1918, there were a few cases, but the great spread of the disease that claimed the lives of 18-20 million people occurred in the fall of 1918 during those four fateful months from September to December.

Williams in *I Wanted to Write a Poem* offers essentially the same account of his day-by-day writing: "For a year I used to come home and no matter how late it was before I went to bed I would write something. And I kept writing, writing, even if it were only a few words, and at the end of the year there were 365 entries. Even if I had nothing in my mind at all I put something down, and as may be expected, some of the entries were pure nonsense and were rejected when the time for publication came" (*IW*, 27). The text of *Kora* contains 85 improvisations, which means that if Williams did in fact write 365 improvisations, as many as 279 were either rejected or torn up by him when he first began to compose the improvisations into the text of *Kora*. Perhaps, one day, some of these "stray" pieces will turn up. In any case, this initial stage in the composition of *Kora* is now "lost" to readers — all the more reason why this intriguing text continually calls attention to its own actuality, or as we will argue, its opacity.

SECTION ONE: THE WORD MAN

CHAPTER ONE: RING, RING, RING, RING

"Notes from a Talk on Poetry," *Poetry*, 14, No. 4 (July 1919), 213.

Marianne Moore's "Review" of *Kora in Hell* appeared in *Contact*, No. 4 [Summer 1921], pp. 5-8.

"Sappho, A Translation by William Carlos Williams" (San Francisco: Grabhorn Press, 1957).


As we have already mentioned, Pound wrote the first critical statement on Williams. And Louis Zukofsky, in the late 20's, during a time Williams' work went largely unrecognized, singled out Williams ("of rare importance in the last decade") for special attention in his essay "American Poetry
1920-1930." Zukofsky points to the language of the work: "A collection of his works should contain only the facts of his words, even those which jar as they brighten in the composition -- for these, too, illuminate, as against the personally lyric padding, the idly discursive depressing stages of writing not the product swift out of the material" (Prepositions, p. 140, p. 141). Williams wrote an essay (in 1931) on Pound's A Draft of XXX Cantos, and he too emphasized the language of Pound's poems: "All the thought and implications of thought are there in the words (in the minute character and relationships of the words -- destroyed, avoided by . . . ) -- it is that I wish to say again and again" (SE, 107). The interest of all three poets clearly rests on the art of writing in words -- and here we are reminded as well of Marianne Moore, for whom, Williams writes in "Marianne Moore," "... a word is a word most when it is separated out by science, treated with acid to remove the smudges, washed, dried and placed right side up on a clean surface. Now one may say that this is a word. Now it may be used, and how?" (AN, 318).

6 "In Praise of Marriage," The Quarterly Review of Literature, 2, No. 2 (1945), 147.


Dijkstra reminds us that Gertrude Stein's first magazine publication in 1912, one piece on Matisse and another on Picasso, appeared in Stieglitz' Camera Work. Williams may very well have first encountered Stein's "emphasis on the word as an object" here. "Her work," Dijkstra comments, "was used from then on as an example of literary Cubism. During the time of the Armory Show her 'portrait' of Mabel Dodge gained a fairly wide circulation and that, together with the special issue of Camera Work, gave her all the publicity she needed to be mentioned repeatedly alongside the painters of the Armory Show, mostly in spoofs" (p. 14).

11 cf. Williams' statement, in the short but important essay "Revela-
tion" (1947), concerning writing as an act of consciousness that taps the "deeper veins" of the mind: "The non-rational, shall we say"? (SE, 269).

12 The term "category" is Williams' own. Science, he says in "ANovelette," "is a category of the understanding, just as philosophy is and in the same way -- inferior to the not so well developed though equally well practiced category of art" (AN, 305). Against their self-referentiality, Williams here points toward "art" (which includes writing) as a "category" that works in the "field" of the "actual" (AN, 305).

13 In a section of his Autobiography called "Gertrude Stein," Williams describes his first meeting ("I had looked forward to this with great excitement") with Stein in Paris (A, 253). "Later by mere chance," he writes, "I discovered in Sterne's Tristam Shandy a passage in which the qualities of certain words as words, like 'rough' and 'smooth,' were presented and discussed in a manner similar to that used by Miss Stein in certain of her writings. And when I wrote a short comment upon the subject, she was very pleased. She sent me several letters after that full of kindest regards and presented me with at least three books with her autograph and affectionate greetings inscribed in them" (A, 254). Then he goes on to quote at length from the essay, "The Work of Gertrude Stein." Williams must have been pleased with this "short comment": it was published in A Novelette and Other Prose (AN, 346-353); in Pagany, 1, No. 1 (Winter 1930), 41-46; and of course in Selected Essays (SE, 113-120). Emily Wallace mentions a copy of A Novelette and Other Prose in the Yale American Literature Collection inscribed by Williams to Stein: "Gertrude Stein / with appreciations / -- and apologies / W.C. Williams / 4/12/32 -- unfortunately full / of typographical / errors" (p. 31). For other comments on Stein by Williams, see "A Modern Primer" in The Embodiment of Knowledge (EK, 17-20) and "Al Pound Stein" (1935) in Selected Essays (SE, 162-166).


16 We have already pointed out Williams' response in his Autobiography to this influenza epidemic. For a readable attempt to recreate its week-by-week spread in the Fall of 1918, see Richard Collier's The Plague of the Spanish Lady: The Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919 (New York: Atheneum, 1974). Collier cites a kind of dadaistic jingle "then current in thousands of children's playgrounds across the United States" which would not have been lost on Williams' ears:

    I had a little bird,
    Its name was Enza,
    I opened the window
    And in-flu-en-za. (p. 75)

The non-sensical nature of the jingle reflects the non-rational nature of an epidemic which flows in from what seems like nowhere, from no known cause, but which "affected over one billion people -- then half of the world's population . . . (p. 303). Interestingly enough, Collier lists Williams'
Autobiography as one of his sources.

In The Embodiment of Knowledge, Williams distinguishes between "Realism" as a form of description that is "not susceptible to writing" and writing that is actual in itself: "To transcribe the real creates, by the same act, an unreality, something beside the real which is its transcription, since the writing is one thing, what it transcribes another, the writing a fiction, necessarily and always so.

The only real in writing is writing itself" (EK, 13). This is, in a nutshell, the basis of Williams' well-known distinction between writing that copies nature (realism as description) and writing that imitates nature's processes.

CHAPTER TWO: RIEN, RIEN, RIEN

These lines from "The Fool's Song" (CEP, 19) in The Tempers (1913), Williams' second book of poems, written as they were before such a thing as Dadaism existed by name, reveals the truthfulness of his statement regarding his sympathy toward Dadaism in the 1920's: "I had it in my soul to write it." This is only to say that Dadaism corresponded to something basic in Williams' nature.

1 Louis Zukofsky, Prepositions, p. 44.

3 In his Autobiography, Williams says he paid The Four Seas Company "something in the neighborhood of two hundred and fifty dollars" (A, 158-159).


6 Hartley, Adventures in the Arts, p. 249.


9 Williams recounts his first uncomfortable meeting with Duchamp in his Autobiography (A, 137).

10 Dickran Tashjian in Skyscraper Primitives, arguing quite rightly that "Williams' relationship to Dada has never been sufficiently explored" (p. 251), discusses Williams, along with Hart Crane and e.e. cummings, in the light of
American Dadaism. The chapter on Williams singles out *Kora in Hell* (pp. 92-101). Anyone interested in the cultural history of Dadaism in America will find Tashjian's study of this period informative.

11 Quoted by Nadeau in *The History of Surrealism*, p. 72.

12 Nadeau says that the Parisian Dadaists, Aragon, Breton, Soupault and Eluard, initiated Surrealism in 1922 as "a new current which no longer intends to confine itself to destructive agitation" (p. 73); however, we might keep in mind Tashjian's point that the historical distinction between Dadaism and Surrealism is blurry because critics and participants alike tend "to go with the movement in which [they have] the greatest intellectual or emotional investment" (*Skyscraper Primitives*, p. 223).

13 Tashjian in *Skyscraper Primitives* posits the hypothesis that this sparseness of comment on Williams' part is deliberate: he wants to divorce himself from European Dadaism as much as possible in order the more strongly to affirm the possibility of American forms of art and writing.


CHAPTER THREE: THE LANGUAGE . . . THE LANGUAGE

1 In an interview with Stanley Koehler (April, 1962), Williams, then 78 years old, recalls that his father "used to read poetry to me. Shakespeare. He had a group who used to come to our house, a Shakespeare club. They did dramatic readings. So I was always interested in Shakespeare . . ." (*Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, Third Series, ed. George Plimpton (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), p. 12).

2 "A Point for American Criticism" (SE, 80-90) was first printed in Eugene Jolas' *transition*, No. 15 (Feb. 1929), pp. 157-166.


5 In "An Approach to the Poem," Williams talks about the poem as "a thing made up of words and punctuation, that is, words and the spaces between them, as E.E. Cummings has sought to demonstrate" (*English Institute Essays 1947*, p. 52).
Unfortunately, the way this line is typeset in *Imaginations* blurs the more definite spaces between the three phrases in the first edition of *Kora* (1920). And there are other similar instances. In these cases, my own spacing corresponds to that of the first edition.

SECTION TWO: PERSPECTIVE AS CLOSURE

CHAPTER FOUR: FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH

1 Williams is thinking about *Contact*, the magazine he edited with Robert McAlmon from 1920-1923. As the title suggests, this venture was an attempt on Williams' part to bridge the gap between the writer and his world.

2 For an account of Williams' connection with John Coffee (also spelled Coffey by Williams), see especially his essay, "A Man Versus the Law," *The Freeman*, New York, 1, No. 15 (June 23, 1920), pp. 348-349. Williams' poem "An Early Martyr" was written for Coffee. "The Freeman," as Mrs. Williams says in *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, "bought the poem, paid for it, but lost their nerve and didn't publish it" (IW, 56). The poem was not printed until it became the title poem of *An Early Martyr and Other Poems* (1935), a book Williams dedicated to Coffee, "who had been," so Williams recalls in his *Autobiography*, "arrested and sent to Matteawan Hospital for the criminally insane.-- without trial -- to prevent him from getting up in court and saying his say as he had intended to do, that he was not insane, but that he was robbing to feed the poor since the city was doing nothing for them. I visited him there" (A, 299).


6 Williams published "Improvisation I," the opening set of three improvisations for what would later become *Kora*, in the October, 1917 issue of *The Little Review* under the title "Improvisations." At that time, these improvisations did not include the "interpretation" ("In Holland at daybreak"). Some months later, in the January, 1918 issue of *The Little Review*, another six sets of three "Improvisations" appeared, in *Kora* numbers III, IV, V, VI, VII, and VIII. In June, 1919, more than a year later, Williams again published in *The Little Review* another three sets of "Improvisations," in *Kora* numbers IX, X, and XIV.

7 Ezra Pound, *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound*, p. 124. In his brief review of *Others* (1917) in "A List of Books" (*The Little Review*, 4, No. 11 (Mar. 1918), 54-58), Pound also pointed to Williams' "opacity, a
distinctly unamerican quality, and not without its own value" (58). Although critical response to *Kora* when it was first published was sparse, to say the least, one critic refused to see the value of Pound's assessment of Williams' writing. In "William Carlos Williams, A United States Poet" (from Destinations), Gorham Munson, bringing up Pound's comment, writes: "Apparently Williams valued the counsel and it was bad, for whereas in *Al Que Quiere* he had written with weight and clarity, in *Kora in Hell* he set out to cultivate opacity and achieved impenetrability. The opaque is simply the strong man's blur and excusable only if it is the maximum luminosity a recalcitrant and profound subject will yield: profundity is scarcely the term to associate with Williams' writing" (William Carlos Williams: A Critical Anthology, pp. 99-100).

8 From the opening line of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.


11 *A Modern Herbal*, p. 626.

12 *A Modern Herbal*, p. 626.


14 *A Modern Herbal*, p. 331.

15 *A Modern Herbal*, p. 331.


17 "Saxifrage is my flower that splits / the rocks" (CLP, 7), from "A Sort of a Song," the opening poem of *The Wedge* (1944).


19 cf. the discussion of Duchamp's "Fountain" below, pp. 194-196.


CHAPTER FIVE: TO LOOSEN THE ATTENTION

1 No wonder Keats was once Williams' favorite poet.
Marianne Moore, "Kora in Hell" by William Carlos Williams," Contact, No. 4 [Summer 1921], 5-8. Speaking of the opening line of the passage we have singled out here for attention, Moore writes, "We do not so much feel the force of this statement as we feel that there is in life . . ." (p. 5).

CHAPTER SIX: THE FRONTISPICE?

1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Signs, pp. 48-49.
2 Signs, p. 49.
3 Signs, p. 50.
4 Pierre Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, p. 30.
5 Arturo Schwarz, Marcel Duchamp (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1975), n.pag. Schwarz quotes the following statement by Duchamp: "My interest in painting the Nude was closer to the Cubists' interest in decomposing forms than to the Futurists' interest in suggesting movement . . ." (n.pag.).
6 Cabanne, p. 31.
7 "Recollections," Art in America, 52.
9 Davis, p. 124.
10 Davis, p. 124.
12 Quoted by Tashjian in William Carlos Williams and the American Scene 1920-1940, p. 62.

SECTION THREE: A NEW STEP

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE BIRTH OF THE IMAGINATION

1 "From My Notes About My Mother," The Literary Review, 1, No. 1 (Autumn 1957), 6.
2 Reed Whittemore, William Carlos Williams: Poet from Jersey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), p. 16. Whittemore's biography of Williams is a lively enough study to read, but his tendency to simplify, at times to ignore completely, the intricate relationship between Williams' life and
his writing often leads to the kind of easy psychologizing that irritates more than it informs.

3 The section on his mother in the "Prologue" to Kora may, in fact, have set the pattern for what eventually became Yes, Mrs. Williams: A Personal Record of My Mother (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959). Williams says that the book spans the years "from 1924 to her death" (p. 39), so he must have had such a writing project in mind long before it was finally published. Wallace lists the parts of it published earlier, first in Twice a Year, Nos. 5-6 (Fall-Winter 1940-Spring-Summer 1941), 402-412, and then, "From My Notes About My Mother" in The Literary Review. Surprisingly, however, a large part of the latter piece was published much earlier in "A Memory of Tropical Fruit," one of the essays in A Novelette and Other Prose (AN, 324-326).

4 Anthony Bonner in The Complete Works of François Villon (New York: David McKay, 1960) offers the following translation of the line from Villon's "Ballade de la Grosse Margot": "Through wind, hail or frost my living's made" (p. 107).

5 "Introduction," The Complete Works of François Villon, p. ix. Williams also notes the tie between Villon's estrangement and his poverty, his father dead when Villon was a boy -- "faced from the beginning with disaster and thrown on the town, a princely Paris, which, with his imagination raging among the rude splendors of those times, he was obliged to witness right at his back door -- with an empty pocket" (p. ix). The fool of a writer in Kora also tells us that doors have a "back side" (K, 80).

6 "Introduction," p. x.

7 "Introduction," p. xiii.

8 Williams is referring to Duchamp's Large Glass, The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even. It broke, but instead of discarding the piece and beginning over, Duchamp incorporated the "accident" into his compositional process.


11 Kenner, p. 30.


13 Eric A. Havelock, Preface to Plato (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1967), p. 204. And this shift, Havelock says, involved the movement from "the kind of mind which accepts and absorbs the passing show [of the world] uncritically, and the intelligence which has been trained to grasp formulas
and categories which lie behind the panorama of experience" (p. 205).

14 Havelock, Preface to Plato, p. 201.
15 Havelock, p. 220.
16 Havelock, p. 225.
17 Havelock, p. 227.
18 Havelock, p. 283.
19 Havelock, p. 277.
20 Havelock, pp. 250-251.

21 The poems of Spring and All were originally untitled. In referring to them in this study, however, I have used the titles they are given in The Collected Earlier Poems.

22 Much later, Charles Olson was to say as much in his "Letter to Elaine Feinstein" about the so-called "primitive": "I mean of course not at all primitive in that stupid use of it as opposed to civilized. One means it now as 'primary,' as how one finds anything, pick it up as one does new -- fresh / first" (Human Universe and Other Essays, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 96.

23 Herbert Kühn in The Rock Pictures of Europe, trans. Alan Houghton Brodrick (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1966) speaks of these figures as magicians or shamans, and the caves such as those at Les Trois Frères as "cult-places" (p. 7). The human figures in Les Trois Frères are dancing. Speaking of one of them, "a naked man disguised in a bison's mask," Kühn comments: "The bent upper part of the body, the flexed knees, the outstretched arms, the leg held high all remind us of some of the cult-dances performed to this day by African, Amerindian and Asiatic tribes" (p. 8).


24 Giedion, The Eternal Present, p. 521. Some of these caves were, in fact, such vast labyrinthine structures, intricate networks of caverns, as say in Les Trois Frères, that there is no doubt that they were ceremonial rather than dwelling places. Describing Les Trois Frères, for instance, Levy writes: "Les Trois Frères needs half an hour's walk through a succession of corridors to the chamber whose principle figure is wholly visible only after the crawl through a pipe-like tunnel and negotiation of a rock-chimney, with a foot on either side of the chasm" (p. 13).

25 Since Havelock's whole argument turns on this distinction, the term "mimesis" recurs throughout his study. It is, however, singled out in

26 Writing to Louis Martz in a letter dated May 27, 1951 about "The Desert Music," Williams says that he plans to read on June 18th "a new 17-page poem at Harvard for the Phi Beta Kappa ceremonial at the Sanders Theatre." And he comments on the importance of the poem for him: "Whether rightly or wrongly, I feel that many of my culminating ideas as to form have entered into this poem" (SL, 300). Williams ascribes this sense of form as an imitation of nature's processes to Aristotle's Poetics, "misinterpreted," as he says in his Autobiography, "for over two thousand years and more" (A, 241).

27 Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 143. Weaver cites Williams' note in a copy of Science and the Modern World: "Finished reading it at sea, Sept. 26, 1927 -- A milestone surely in my career, should I have the force & imagination to go on with my work" (p. 48). Discussing Whitehead's "objectivist philosophy," Weaver quotes a key passage, in which Whitehead distinguishes between "subjectivism" and "objectivism." Objectivism begins on the assumption "that the actual elements perceived by our senses are in themselves the elements of a common world; and that this world is a complex of things, including indeed our acts of cognition, but transcending them.

According to this point of view the things experienced are to be distinguished from our knowledge of them. So far as there is dependence, the things pave the way for the cognition, rather than vice versa. But the point is that the actual things experienced enter a common world which transcends knowledge, though it includes knowledge. The intermediate subjectivists would hold that the things experienced only indirectly enter into the common world by reason of their dependence on the subject who is cognising. The objectivist holds that the things experienced and the cognisant subject enter into the common world on equal terms" (p. 50).

Or stated simply, as Williams does, "No ideas but in things."

28 Whitehead, Modes of Thought, pp. 146-147.

29 Following on the opening provided by Williams, Charles Olson uses the term "objectism" to delineate this sense of man as a live creature in a world of things, and like Williams, he too attacks the "plutonic" notion of the self as an entity. "Objectism," he says in the now familiar passage from "Projective Verse," "is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creatures of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use" (Human Universe and Other Essays, pp. 59-60).

30 cf. Williams' poem "Immortal," a kind of dadaist hymn to Ignorance whose powers, we are told, "Transcend reason, love and sanity"! (CEP, 21).

31 In this letter, Williams is responding to Marianne Moore's "Things Others Never Notice," a review of his recently published Collected Poems:
1921-1931 (New York: The Objectivist Press, 1934) that appeared in Poetry. It has since been reprinted in William Carlos Williams: A Critical Anthology. In her review, Moore mentions "an abandon born of inner security" (p. 130) in Williams' poems. She also draws attention to the objective nature of Williams' consciousness of things. "'The ability to be drunk,'" she writes, "'with a sudden realization of value in things others never notice' can metamorphose our detestable reasonableness and offset a whole planetary system of deadness" (p. 132). Williams was obviously pleased with her observations; in his letter he says that she has "looked at what I have done through my own eyes. I assure you that this is so" (SL, 147).


33 Weaver says that Williams saw a "black-and-white reproduction" of this painting by Gris in Broom, 2 [sic; should be 1], No. 3 (Jan. 1922), 41. Rob Fure in "The Design of Experience: William Carlos Williams and Juan Gris" (William Carlos Williams Newsletter, 4, No. 2 (Fall 1978), 15) identifies the painting as The Open Window (1921). For a further discussion of this painting see below, pp. 231-235.

34 Duchamp did not forget this event. In Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, he recalls that no one on the exhibition committee -- of which ironically he was a member -- knew he had submitted the "Fountain" because it was signed "R. Mutt." Duchamp says he wanted "to avoid connection with the personal" (p. 55). The tone of his comments, however, suggests that he was hardly surprised when his piece never appeared in the exhibit. He even strongly hints that the rejection itself was what he wanted. Asked by Cabanne if he would actually have been disappointed had the "Fountain" been accepted, he answers, "Almost. As it was, I was enchanted" (p. 55).


36 "From My Notes About My Mother," 7.

CHAPTER EIGHT: WRITE GOING. LOOK TO STEER.

1 William Eric Williams, Williams' son, provides a lovely first-hand account of his father's attachment to cars in "Cars," a brief essay published in the William Carlos Williams Newsletter, 3, No. 2 (Fall 1977), 1-5. Here he provides some anecdotes concerning what he calls "the classic man-auto duel" (1).

2 Weaver suggests that "Hartley could just as well have provided the subtitle to Kora in Hell: Improvisations through Kandinsky" (p. 42). Kandinsky in Concerning the Spiritual in Art mentions "improvisation" as a method. Parts of this book appeared in Alfred Stieglitz' Camera Work (April 1912) directly through Hartley's influence, Hartley having met Kandinsky in Germany in 1912-13.
3 "Seventy Years Deep," *Holiday*, 16, No. 5 (Nov. 1954), 54-55, 78. It is interesting to note here that Williams must be one of the few 20th century writers whose address -- 9 Ridge Road -- became public information, a part of the legend of American "localism" which he did so much to foster.

4 "Seventy Years Deep," 78. "By the Road to the Contagious Hospital," the opening poem of *Spring and All* (SA, 95-96) was originally written on prescription blanks, probably in the car.

5 "Seventy Years Deep," 78. Williams also comments on the curious literary fate of these fragments: "It amazes me when I realize that these same prescription blanks with my scribbled notes are now reposing in the library of the University of Buffalo, and at Harvard and Yale" (78).


7 "The Young Housewife" was published in a group of sixteen poems in *Others*, 3, No. 4 (Dec. 1916), 15-31.

8 Williams considered his "Author's Introduction" to *The Wedge* a key statement of his belief that poetic form must be an extension of experience, "form" in this sense understood as a function of writing and not a container separable from its so-called "content." Form is a revelation of content, which is what Williams is getting at earlier in *Spring and All* when he says that "poetry has to do with the dynamization of emotion into a separate form" (SA, 133).

9 The issue of method, the "how" of writing lies behind Williams' impatient -- and brief! -- response ("The Italics are God's") in *Contact* (No. 4 [Summer 1921], p. 15) to John Gould Fletcher. Fletcher had written a short, rather nasty note on *Kora* in *The Freeman*, 3 May 18, 1921), 238. In it he says that *Kora* "is merely a symptom: a symptom of the disease that is pervading America as it has pervaded Europe. This disease may be described bluntly as a lack of critical standards on the part of both writer and public. There is no cure for it except the raising of the critical standard. Those who accept this fact will know at what level to place Dr. Williams" (238). Williams in particular blasts Fletcher's stated assumption that writing "depends not on the kind but on the degree of statement," and he does so by quoting a passage from Fletcher's note with the above line italicized, for him a symptom of the narrowness of Fletcher's critical stance. And by typographically setting Fletcher's name upside down, Williams suggests that Fletcher should do the same -- that is, see the world from that position. Of course, Williams in his own dadaist way is simply indicating how diametrically opposed *Kora*'s kind of writing is to Fletcher's expectations.

10 Robert Creeley, *Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961-1971*, ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas, California: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), p. 116. Williams' writing has been a primary source for Creeley. His acknowledged debt to Williams has long been a matter of public record. In the interview with Linda Wagner from which this quoted passage is taken, when asked what one writer has influenced his work, Creeley says, "I think Williams gave me the largest example" (p. 123). This admission is similar to another one in "'I'm Given to Write Poems,'" where he says, "I think the most significant
encounter for me as a young man trying to write was that found in the work of William Carlos Williams. He engaged language at a level both familiar and active to my own senses, and made of his poems an intensely emotional perception, however evident his intelligence" (A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1970), pp. 61-62. A number of essays that Creeley wrote specifically on Williams are included in A Quick Graph.


The strong articulation of the same compositional method in Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" essay (Human Universe and Other Essays, pp. 51-61) must have instantaneously struck home for Williams. Olson's sense of "composition by field" so clearly extended his own sense of improvisational form. Williams acknowledged the essay by quoting it at length in his Autobiography (A, 329-332).


Weaver, p. 37.

Quoted by Weaver, p. 37. This piece has recently been published in A Recognizable Image, pp. 57-59.

CHAPTER NINE: A NEW DIRECTION


Victor Turner, The Ritual Process (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 128. Turner calls this transition a rite of passage that initiates the mind into a liminal space (from the Latin "threshold"). In this sense, the fool who breaks out of the mind's closures in Kora -- Williams' mother and Villon are further types -- are liminal people, those "edgemen" who are such because, as Turner argues, they are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon" (p. 95).

In this same context, Richard A. Macksey's essay ""A Certainty of Music:' Williams' Changes" (William Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. J.Hillis Miller (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 132-147) still remains an important discussion of the ritualistic nature of Williams' work. Macksey argues that Williams' writing bears striking similarities to the early Greek sense of the world as a process "of
continuous deaths and births between polar oppositions" (p. 137). He thus reads Williams' early work, especially "The Wanderer," Kora, Spring and All, and In the American Grain, as a series of "rites of passage" structured on a pattern of a descent followed by an ascent. "The structure of each transition," he writes, "takes the form of an unqualified plunge into that which the poet is ultimately to apprehend and master, whether it be the independent world of discrete objects, the anarchy of unkenneled speech, or the daemonic self that claps hands and sings behind drawn shades. In each case the rite takes the form of descent which means an abandonment and resignation, but in each case it also discloses an access to a new kind of personal utterance and mastery. The plunge is ultimately an ascent to an increasing command of the poet's materials" (p. 139).

3 Robert Creeley, Pieces, p. 4

4 Louis Zukofsky, Prepositions, p. 143.

5 Interestingly enough, Charles Olson in "Grandpa, Goodbye" from Charles Olson & Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeths, ed. Catherine Seelye (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1975) comes to talk about the element of "confusion" in Williams' work, an element that Olson associates with fire, as against Pound's light: "one achieves its clarities by way of claritas," he says of Pound, "the other goes about its business blind, achieves its clarities by way of what you might call confusion" (p. 101). As the figure of "confusion," Williams thus makes his way by "eating the substance of things" (p. 100). And this method of experiencing the world, we might add, is also the basis of the confusion at the heart of Kora. Olson sent Williams "Grandpa, Goodbye" and Williams wrote back saying that he took pleasure in reading it (p. 137).


7 "The visit to London," Weaver says, "produced the title for Kora in Hell, which Williams acknowledged as Pound's" (p. 6).


10 Kerényi, p. 109.


CONCLUSION: AN OPENING OF THE DOORS

1 "Prologue: The Return of the Sun," The Little Review, 5, No. 11 (Apr. 1919), 1-10; "Prologue to a Book of Improvisations, Kora in Hell, Now
Being Published by The Four Seas Company," The Little Review, 6, No. 1 (May 1919), 74-80.

2 Edgar Jepson, "The Western School," The Little Review, 5, No. 5 (Sept. 1918), 4-9. In his short note, Pound defends Jepson's right to speak: "Only a barbarous or religious nation," he says, "will try to suppress the expression of views different from those of its ruling or paying majorities" (5).

3 Jepson, pp. 8-9.

4 Weaver (p. 38) points out that Williams would have read this section of Kandinsky's On the Spiritual in Art in Blast, 1 (June 20, 1914), 119.

5 "Gloria!," Others, 6 (July 1919), 3.

6 "Belly Music," Others, 6 (July 1919), 29.

7 "Belly Music," 27.

8 "Belly Music," 28.

9 Robert McAlmon, "Concerning 'Kora in Hell,'" Poetry, 18 (Apr. 1921), 58.

10 McAlmon, 54-57.

11 McAlmon, 57, 59.

12 McAlmon, 57.

13 René Taupin, L'Influence du Symbolisme Français sur la Poésie Américaine (de 1910 à 1920) (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1929), p. 278, p. 284. In his determination to prove that American poets were heavily influenced by the French Symbolist poets, Taupin emphasizes the connections between Rimbaud's Illuminations and Kora. For a convincing argument that this comparison distorts the "American" quality of Williams' text, see especially Sherman Paul's "A Sketchbook of the Artist in His Thirty-Fourth Year: William Carlos Williams' Kora in Hell: Improvisations," The Shaken Realist, pp. 29-32.

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