WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS AND THE DANCE

by

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AESTRACT

The thesis is, that the dance, as metaphor and as ordering function, is central to an understanding of William Carlos Williams' poetry and of his activity as poet.

The first chapter, which is a ground for what follows, begins with a close examination of "The Rose" from Spring and All as a demonstration of some of Williams' basic principles concerning the act of making the poem. My emphasis is on what one can observe happening in the poem itself, the poem as enactment or dance. I then proceed to examine the prose passages from Spring and All as statement of those principles, in order to establish the meaning of some terms, imitation, engagement, imagination, as Williams uses them both as theory in the prose descriptions and as actuality in the poems.

The second chapter deals with the notion of dance as alternative to description, the action or enactment in a poem, which Williams calls imitation. I attempt to show what dance is, the metaphor of it, and how it might manifest itself in (as) language, that is to say, the energy of the poem as dance. Then, in the light of several poems included in the text of the chapter, I discuss imitation in terms of composition and invention, what Williams considers the basic activities of the poet in the making of a poem.
The third chapter deals with the act of engagement as dance, to engage in an activity, making love or writing a poem. I attempt to show, by reference to several of Williams' short stories and to *In the American Grain*, as well as to the poems, some of the kinds of perceptions and awareness that are characteristic of this kind of engagement, and how they shape the poem; and, in the end, to come to an understanding of what Williams means by penetration.

In the fourth chapter, measure as dance, I examine some of Williams' ideas and practice in the rhythm and form of the poem, to show how measure is the shape the dance assumes, and how Williams resolved some of his own difficulties concerning the problem of measure. And the chapter concludes with a restatement of, and an insistence upon, the importance of the metaphor of dance.

My purpose has not been to attempt a historic analysis or evaluation of Williams as critic and theorist, or as poet - though the fact of the thesis does imply certain judgements of value, and the text of it is, to some degree, analytical -- but to demonstrate and elucidate, by making the dance a basis for my discussions, some of Williams' primary concerns as poet. My emphasis, then, has not been on the views and theories of other critics, not on chronological developments in the poems themselves, but on the facts of the dance, immediate and actual.
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"THE ROSE" AND THE PROSE FROM SPRING AND ALL

Spring and All was published in 1923.¹ In I Wanted to Write a Poem Williams describes it as "poems interspersed with prose, the same idea as Improvisations", and says that:

The prose is a mixture of philosophy and nonsense. It made sense to me, at least to my disturbed mind—because it was disturbed at that time— but I doubt if it made sense to anyone else.

But the poems were kept pure—no typographical tricks when they appear—set off from the prose.²

The prose does make sense as a statement of some of his desires and intentions, the poems as poems—some of them among the best of Williams' earlier ones— and as demonstrations of some of the theory in the prose.

Linda Wagner calls Spring and All "one of the most uneven of Williams' books, representing as it does this period of transition."³ The transition she sees is, in general terms, from the work that was influenced by Pound and the Imagist

¹Dijon, France: Contact Publishing Company. Abbreviated hereafter as SA.

²I Wanted to Write a Poem, edited by Edith Beal (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 36-37.

movement and that which was termed "Objectivist" — the poem of the object, objectively treated; the intervening period was a concern with, among other things, the possibilities of Surrealism in his writing. There are in Spring and All many instances of devices characteristic of Surrealist work, such as the juxtaposition of disparate images, "Lights / speckle / El Greco / lakes / in renaissance / twilight / with triphammers" (SA, 56), as well as, in the prose sections, such "typographical tricks" as the misnumbering of chapters and eccentricity of punctuation in a travesty of the strict academic style.

But the sense of it comes through. Williams did not follow the Surrealists' example very far because he was concerned at the same time that people should understand what he was saying. He could not, as he saw some avant garde writers doing, separate the word from its referential meaning, "as

4 See Bram Dijkstra's The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams (Princeton University Press, 1969). As the title indicates Dijkstra's concern is with the influence of visual, as opposed to literary, art on Williams' early development as a writer. The Book's value lies in its exploration of the connections between the Cubist and Surrealist painters, Alfred Stieglitz as both photographer and owner of an art gallery, and Williams as poet (and would-be painter), and in the close examination of Williams' early poetry, especially that of Spring and All.

5"The Agonized Spires", The Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1951), 262. Abbreviated hereafter as CEP.
with certain of the modern Russians [who] would use unoriented sounds in place of conventional words." (SA, 92). He wanted to break through conventional attitudes toward writing in the way the Cubists had done it with painting, to open up new possibilities of expression, but it must be done by putting the energy into the word itself, with its meaning, to overcome the strictures of convention. As he says in the last paragraph of *Spring and All*:

> The word is not liberated, therefore able to communicate release from the fixities which destroy it until it is accurately tuned to the fact which giving it reality, by its own reality establishes its own freedom from the necessity of a word, thus freeing it and dynamizing it at the same time.

SA, 93.

The intention of this examination of *Spring and All* is to follow Williams' argument in the prose section, the product of his "disturbed mind", in order to see how he reached the above conclusion, as well as what that conclusion means, his own stance in a world of "-ists" and "-isms"; and to follow the process of one poem, the one numbered VII in the original text (SA, 30-32) and later titled "The Rose", as an exploration of the way it works, and as a ground for what follows. The poem comes first; it all leads to the dance.

The rose is obsolete
but each petal ends in
an edge, the double facet
cementing the grooved
columns of air—The edge
cuts without cutting
meets--nothing--renews
itself in metal or porcelain--
whither? It ends--

But if it ends
the start is begun
so that to engage roses
becomes a geometry--

Sharper, neater, more cutting
figures in majolica--
the broken plate
glazed with a rose

Somewhere the sense
makes copper roses
steel roses--

The rose carried weight of love
but love is at an end--of roses
It is at the edge of the
petal that love waits

Crisp, worked to defeat
laboredness--fragile
plucked, moist, half-raised
cold, precise, touching

What

The place between the petal's
edge and the

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

The fragility of the flower
unbruised
penetrates space.
The first line, "The rose is obsolete", would seem to deny the possibility of a poem about roses; it is a discursive statement, a comment on all the repetitive poems which consistently fail to say anything new about roses. In that sense, the rose is obsolete, no longer a flower but a woman, a concept, an ideal, or whatever the poet wishes it to be;

unless--unless
things the imagination feeds upon,  
the scent of the rose,  
startle us anew.  

That is, the rose itself, not the long history of poems about roses, is what concerns Williams, and us. The opening line is a starting point, it clears the way for the rose.

From that start the poem moves: "but" -- there is no stasis; "but each petal" -- it moves from the conceptual "rose" to a particular, a "petal"; but each petal ends in" -- the petal is not static but the direction of a movement, towards the line ending, towards the gap between this line and the next, an empty space on the page; "but each petal ends in / an edge". The verb "ends" has for its opposite "begins", and the petal begins where it joins the base of the calyx in the bud, the place from which, protected by sepals, it starts to grow. And it ends there, at the limit of its growing, the

The shift is from general or discursive to particular: the connective "is" in the first line gives way to "ends", a more vital verb, in the second, and the abstract "rose" is replaced by the specific "petal". By the use of the verb "ends" Williams suggests something of the growth process of the flower, just as the line break after "in" makes a pause, the eye moves to the beginning of the next line, "an edge", and in the pause registers the furthest extreme of the petal's growing, the edge. In this way the form of the poem imitates the form of the flower.

At the edge another dimension begins. The air is solid, "grooved / columns", or, if not solid, is tactile, composed of forces made concrete, like the line "infinitely fine, infinitely / rigid" in the second to the last section of the poem. "The double facet" suggests the hardness and sharpness of diamond, a finely wrought edge, "cementing", holding together at the crucial edge the forces. What forces? They are the limits that contain, like Blake's Reason, the energy; the

7Cf. Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where the Devil says: Energy is the only life and is from the Body, and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy."

thing, the rose, exists within its limits, and space exists outside -- and at the limits there is antagonism, they cannot both be in the same place, the rose occupies what used to be occupied by space. So the definition of the rose is that thing that used to be space and now is not, is a rose. It is, perhaps, obdurate.

The edge is fine, but, unlike the blade of a knife, there is no test of its fineness, "cuts: without cutting /
meets:--nothing:--renews: / itself in: metal or porcelain:--". There is nothing to meet at the edge, that tangible space always stays beyond the limits of the petal, but one can try another tack, "in metal or porcelain", it may still be a petal. "Whither? It ends--". Since there is no where to go, nothing to meet, the edge itself becomes important, holds the poet's eye; a suggestion of that further dimension, what happens at the edge, something is here that may lead to a rose.

But if it ends
the start is begun
so that to engage roses
becomes a geometry--

It is "to engage roses" -- "engage" comes from the French engager, which is a combination of en-, having a sense of movement in, "bring into such:condition", and gage, "pledge, thing deposited as security", as, for example, the glove,
called a "gage" thrown down as a challenge to fight. The word has a variety of uses in English, but all are concerned with the movement into a relationship, whether being engaged to marry, or to do a job, or, as in architecture, "to fasten, attach", or the mechanical application, to engage a gear or cogwheel, or the military sense of coming into conflict, crossing swords. In all cases the result of the engagement is some sort of relationship or contact, between things, or people, an involvement with the other that is, in a way, formalized, made official, or explicit.

Engagement as conflict, between armies, is a useful example, because it gives a physical representation of what happens. The engagement begins when the opposing troops can no longer ignore each other's presence and must deal in some way with each other. They maneuver for advantage, every move made in relation to a movement or position of the opposing side, in preparation for the clash, which is the meeting of the two forces, where the body of one touches the body of the other. Since they are, unlike the cogwheels, antagonistic, they must either continue the engagement until a resolution is reached, or withdraw. But the key to it is getting in touch with one another.

This is the sense of "engage" that comes closest to Williams' meaning -- the geometry of engaging roses becomes
a problem in logistics. It is the geometry of a given situation, one can use only what is at hand. So the shape of the solution is discovered in the lie of the land, and the geometry takes shape according to the particulars of the situation. In this sense, then, the engagement of the rose is open, not bound by preconceived structures, but free to follow the progress of the patterned exchange, which is a dance, as in "Danse Pseudomacabre":

Everything that varies a hair's breadth from another is an invitation to the dance. Either dance or annihilation. There can be only the dance or ONE.

And so "the start is begun" -- to create a geometry of perception, the poet's eye trying various directions of approach in order to find the rose, and hold it:

9 Cf. Benjamin Lee Whorf, An American Indian Model of the Universe (International Journal of American Linguistics, XVI, 2): "Just as it is possible to have any number of geometries other than the Euclidean which give an equally perfect account of space configurations, so it is possible to have descriptions of the universe, all equally valid, that do not contain our familiar contrasts of time and space. The relativity viewpoint of modern physics is one such view, conceived in mathematical terms...."

10 Collected in The Farmer's Daughters (New York: New Directions, 1961), p.210. This story was Williams' first to be published and so is among his earliest work in the short story form; it was published in The Little Review, VII. 1 (May–June 1920) 46-49.
In the composition, the artist does exactly what every eye must do with life, fix the particular with the universality of his own personality—Taught by the largeness of his imagination to feel every form which he sees moving within himself, he must prove the truth of this by expression.

SA, 27.

The particular is the rose, but it is not so easy to "fix" it — a butterfly can be held and examined by putting a needle through its head, but you have a dead butterfly to look at. And the poet must "feel every form which he sees moving within himself", which is the shape and life of the flower. For the "truth" of the rose is easily damaged or lost. So the poet's attention fixes at the place where the petal ends, at the edge; it is not the centre of the rose, but it is where the rose is defined most clearly. In navigational terminology, the petal's edge would be the fixed point from which to take one's bearings and calculate a position. So the poet's sightings, the converging lines of the fix, make up the geometry of perception, or engagement; and, when he has included all the angles, we presume that the rose will be there, surrounded.

The poem is based on a collage by Juan Gris called "Roses". Dijkstra points out that, in the collage, "the roses are photographic, cut out of a flower catalogue per-

Dijkstra gives an account of the poem and the collage in The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech, 173-176.
haps, or from a poster, and literally pasted into the composition. In the making of collages images are juxtaposed and surfaces overlapped; anything can be pasted (or painted) beside or on top of anything else. The whole collage then is a context, and that new context may jar one's usual perception of the image; in fact, it is no longer the same image. So, a piece of grass, picked and dried, incorporated in a woven composition (context, from the Latin, contextus, contextere, to weave, so, to be woven with), exists in that particular warp and woof, an existence different from that it enjoyed in the other field, the one it grew in. The rose of the collage is not the rose in the garden, or the rose before Gris cut it out of the catalogue -- a new context makes a new rose.

In the prose passage directly preceding "The Rose"

Williams says:

But such a picture as that of Juan Gris, though I have not seen it in color, is important as marking more clearly than any I have seen what the modern trend is: the attempt is being made to separate things of the imagination from life, and obviously, by using the forms common to experience so as not to frighten the onlooker away but to invite him,

The rose is, etc.

SA, 30.

\[12\] Ibid., 174.
The rose of the poem is then "a thing of the imagination", just as the collage is. The poem is not a copy of the collage, but an enactment of it, and the invitation it makes is to an experience of the imagination, which is a dance.

In the collage is the shape of a broken plate, the rose "figured in majolica--". The figuring of the rose, representing it in a picture, is an example of the separation Williams refers to above. Like the stained glass window fallen out of its frame and broken on the ground, the rose on the broken plate is a new thing, separated from its ordinary existence by the imaginative perception of it; an edge has been bared, "sharper, neater, more cutting". And this edge is the point of fix, it opens new possibilities.

Somewhere the sense makes copper roses
steel roses--

This is a new angle in the geometry, the rose "worked to defeat / laboredness", in metal, the fineness of it. The effect is that of drawing one more line, a different approach, to try to define some point. In Euclidean geometry the inter-

13See Dijkstra, fig. XXI, for a black and white reproduction of the collage.

Selected Essays abbreviated as SE.
section of two lines is enough to make that definition; but, in Cubism, as in some of our mundane perceptions, we often try many more perspectives. So the Cubists talked about showing an object from all sides simultaneously, surrounding it, with the arrows all directed in, toward the thing itself. Williams' "sense" then is in part his understanding of what these painters, and, in this case, Juan Gris, were after in their work; it is also that faculty that is trying to grasp, make "sense" of things, to come to an understanding of them -- not to take the rose and fit it into a system of things, but to partake of its reality by creating it again in the imagination. Each break in the poem allows him to shift and start again, move again, toward the rose.

There is only one end stop in the body of the poem as it finally appears, in both CEP and Selected Poems, and that is at the end of the last line.\(^{15}\) Each of the previous sections ends in a silence, either a word hanging in space, as "waits", or one reaching out somewhere, as "pushing--". As suggested above the poem's form is imitative of the form of the flower. The edge "meets--nothing--", goes nowhere, "it ends--". And the nothing at the edge of the petal, what defines it, is a gap in the poem, a space on the page. The line movement is hesitant, in that each section is incom-

\(^{15}\) In SA the last line is "penetrates spaces" -- no end stop.
plete, each push goes out to the edge, hangs there, and we return to start again.

Williams refuses to let the perception be completed (a closed book), in the sense that he holds back from letting the reader have the flower and be done with it -- he holds back simply that we might be had by the flower. As he wrote 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. 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.... verse with perhaps nothing else in it but life--16

and, in another letter the same year: "In a sense, I must express myself, you're right, but always completely incomplete if that means anything." (SL, 26).

The impulse of a lazy mind might be to accept anything, so long as it resembles a rose, and the perception (engagement) is completed, no loose ends. The Cubists insisted that there was more to be seen and known. Not that the simple reproduction of an image might not be enough; rather that the conventions had become fixed, and the audience's perceptions (and anticipations) likewise. So the Cubist painters broke

their pictures open — objects were turned in upon themselves, folded over, stretched round to show all sides at once; the air, the space surrounding, was shown to be a field of tensions and forces, having body; and the picture itself was shown to be, first of all, what it always was: "a matter of pigments upon a piece of cloth stretched on a frame." The effect was often to shock the viewer, but the intention was to do more, to open up possibilities of perception. As Williams says of Juan Gris' collage, its purpose is "not to frighten the onlooker but to invite him." (SA, 30).

Williams is insistent in directing the attention, his own as well as the reader's, to focus on the rose. The words of the poem with their "tactile associations force us to consider the rose completely in terms of the concrete existence it represents, rather than allowing us to give it a metaphorical, or otherwise literary 'significance'."

Crisp, worked to defeat laboredness—fragile plucked, moist, half-raised cold, precise, touching

The words are tactile, all denoting qualities of a rose, and including the possibility of roses in majolica, steel, or

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18 Dijkstra, 174.
copper, as well as roses in early morning gardens or refrigerators. Williams says later:

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.

Au, 380.

Then, although the words above are adjectives, and do describe the petals of the rose, they are more than just a collection of descriptive words; they have their own textures, they are themselves objects, like the petals, as well as meanings, and so build up, like layers of paint, the concrete reality of the rose, as if in bas-relief. But the last of them, "touching", leads forward to the next section, to "What" and "The place between the petal's / edge and the". The touch is not made, the lines hold back, hold the reader back; although the rose is concrete it is also "fragile". What Williams (like Juan Gris) will not allow his reader to do is to settle for a concept, a copy: "Very well. I am not in search of 'the beautiful illusion'." (SA, 3). There is more to a rose than that (says he).

So each new beginning, each section of the poem, is a new tack in the geometry. And each time the attention must shift. In the Prologue to Kora in Hell he says:
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. Here I clash with Wallace Stevens.

SE, 11.

With each shift in the poem the attention is "loosened"; the effect is no different from that achieved by the Cubist painters. This is the source of disagreement with Stevens; in the letter that Williams includes in the Prologue Stevens writes:

My idea is that in order to carry a thing to the extreme necessity to convey it one has to stick to it; (...) But to fidget with points of view leads always to new beginnings and incessant new beginnings lead to sterility.

SE, 12.

For Williams the "easy lateral sliding" of the "lack of imagination" was a result of the fixed point of view:

Minds like beds always made up.
    (more stony than a shore)
unwilling or unable.\(^{19}\)

for any single approach, held (stubbornly) for a length of time, becomes a convention or habit. And Williams insists that we "make it new".

\(^{19}\textit{Paterson} \ (\text{New York: New Directions, 1963}), \ p.13\)
Abbreviated as \textit{P}.\)
While the attention is being loosened it is also being tightened; that is, if it follows the movement of the poem, the shifts of approach will have that loosening effect, but, for this to happen, it must follow the poem, must be focussed, tightened down, directed by it. The direction of the poem is the avoidance of any path that does not lead to the rose; roses in majolica or steel do not shift the attention away as, say, Eliot's "Multifoliate rose / Of death's twilight kingdom" does in The Hollow Men, but hold it to the thing that is a rose, fixed.

It is there, at the point of fix, "at the edge of the / petal that love waits". And it is from there "a line starts". The lines in this section, the second to the last, move with a greater assurance as the line moves out from the "petal's edge" and "penetrates / the Milky Way". In mathematics a line is the path of a point moving, having length but not breadth, and direction; it is an illusion, for the sake of convenience, the concrete representation of a theoretical concept. Similarly, the "line" of the poem is illusory, "infinitely fine, infinitely / rigid". But it is"of steel"; that is, it is of the same temper as the "grooved / columns of air", in terms applied to the Cubists, "the 'orthodox' solidification of intangible spatial qualities".²⁰ At the

²⁰Dijkstra, 173.
edge then, where the "line" begins, is the spatial definition of the rose, its shape; and the "line" indicates the direction of a line of force — the force of the petal's fine edge, the force of the flower's fragility, the force of the poet's perception, inexorable.

So that

The fragility of the flower
unbruised
penetrates space.

It is free — the lines move without hesitation, and the period makes it final. Here, at the end, the poem gains a dimension, a shift into infinite space after the constrictions of the fix, and the rose blooms. In a sense the movement has reversed, in that the lines of the geometry always pointed inward, from outside, toward the rose. And the reversal is just the movement outward, from the rose as centre, outward and through, "penetrates space." This new dimension is not a spatial one, as the shift from two- to three-dimensional, so much as it is a quality of the new existence of the rose — the rose started as nothing, "obsolete", and ends as a vital presence. So that the last section takes the whole poem by the tail and turns it inside out; each petal of the bloom, roughly corresponding to each section of the poem, each cutting edge, is thus joined to make up the whole flower, and what holds it together is its "fragi-
lity". At its edges it is non-dimensional, penetrant. It exists in the imagination.

That is the end of the engagement; Williams has, for the moment, overcome that one thing: "the virtual impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the senses, close to the nose." (SE, 11). The question that arises is simply what does Williams mean by "the imagination". He addresses the prose passages of Spring and All to that question; that is, to give a theoretical statement of the stance he takes in the whole book, poems and prose: "To whom am I addressed? To the imagination." (SA, 3). Not merely to state that position, but to explain it, so that one could understand not only what the imagination was to Williams, but why that understanding was crucial to one's approach to poetry, in fact, to all works of art.

"There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world." (SA, 1). That is the beginning of, and a key to, Williams' argument. Instead of providing, or provoking, access to that world of contact, he says, "Nearly all writing, up to the present, if not all art, ... has been...a search for 'the beautiful illusion'. Very well. I am not in search of 'the beautiful illusion'." (SA, 3). His interest, then as an artist, is emphatically in "what [the reader] is at the exact moment that he is," in "this moment"; and he is concerned with removing
that "constant barrier". As he says in the essay "The Simplicity of Disorder": "So all things enter into the singleness of the moment and the moment partakes of the diversity of all things." (SE, 97). And so:

To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force—the imagination. This is its book. I myself invite you to read and see.

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

SA, 3-4.

The breakthrough into the moment, into a world of contact, could not be an absolute thing; the struggle might never be over for more than a moment — in a letter to Ralph Nash in 1954 Williams was still insisting: "a man must... fight his way to a world that breaks through to the actual." (SL, 323-324). For the actual world is simply that which is in process around you all the time; the word means "of or pertaining to action", and it comes from the Latin root verb ago, I act, the past participle of it actus, simply the doing of a thing. Williams says in the Autobiography: "To imitate nature involves the verb to do." (Au, 241). The actual world then is one in which things move, do, act upon each other, the sense is that of contact, being in touch
with things: "...life becomes actual only when it is identified with ourselves. When we name it, life exists." (SA, 41). So, for Williams, the actual is that in which we are actually involved.

It is that world in which we live that Williams wants to break through to in his poetry, and he is fighting against the whole idea that art is a "lie":

What I put down will have this value: an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from 'reality'--(...) The work will be in the realm of the imagination as plain as the sky is to a fisherman--

SA, 22.

Ritual, or symbolism, that directs the attention to itself rather than to the 'reality' that gave rise to it, that is, its origin in experience, is what Williams objects to; its "associations" are "strained", instead of being grounded in the actuality of one's experience, as natural associations.

A myth is alive when the experience that gave rise to it is comprehended, and, in this, case, comprehended should be taken to mean included in one's experience. So, the ritual expression of the experience of the myth is a re-enactment of the original as it actually happened:

A rite cannot be performed unless its "origin" is known, that is, the myth that tells how it was per-
formed for the first time. During the funeral service the Na-khi shaman chants:

"Now we will escort the deceased and again experience bitterness; We will again dance and suppress the demons. If it is not told whence the dance originated One must not speak about it. Unless one know the origin of the dance One cannot dance."21

Or, put another way, blasphemy is simply saying the name of the god when one does not know the reality of that god.

The separation Williams saw in Juan Gris' collage, "to separate things of the imagination from life", was necessary to show that a work of the imagination has a reality of its own, that it is not "illusion":

This [separation] was not necessary when 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, 35

But the "cleavage" does not indicate that works of art are unrelated to ordinary experience; in fact, for Williams, the opposite was true — what he wanted was to break through to a world of experience that was alive, "as plain as the

sky is to a fisherman—":

So long as the sky is recognized as an association

is recognized in its function of accessory to vague
words whose meaning it is impossible to rediscover
its value can be nothing but mathematical certain
limits of gravity and density of air

The farmer and the fisherman who read their own lives
there have a practical corrective for--

they rediscover or replace demoded meanings to the
religious terms

Among them, without expansion of imagination, there is
the residual contact between life and the imagination
which is essential to freedom

The man of imagination who turns to art for release
and fulfilment of his baby promises contends with the
sky through layers of demoded words and shapes. Demoded,
not because the essential vitality which begot them is
laid waste--this cannot be so, a young man feels, since
he feels it in himself--but because meanings have been
lost through laziness or changes in the form of existence
which have left words empty.

Bare handed the man contends with the sky, without
experience of existence seeking to invent and design.

SA, 19-20.

When the prevailing myths are lifeless, the man is "bare
handed", starting from scratch; so *Paterson* is, among other
things,"a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands"
(P. 10).

The impulse is, in some sense, a religious one; that is,
that the "religious terms", as opposed to "demoded meanings",
are alive, not abstracted from, but expressive of, the rela-
tion of forces and events in nature, in touch with the actual.\textsuperscript{22}

In Asphodel, That Greeny Flower he says:

If we are to understand our time,
    we must find the key to it,
    not in the eighteenth
and nineteenth centuries,
    but in earlier, wilder
    and darker epochs
So to know, what I have to know
    about my own death,
    if it be real,
I have to take it apart,
    What does your generation think
    of Cezanne?
I asked a young artist.
    The abstractions of Hindu painting,
    he replied,
    is all at the moment which interests me.

\textit{FB}, 162-163.

Yvor Winters says of him: "Dr. Williams is a good example of
the type of poet whom I should call the contemporary primitive."\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22}Cf. Blake's \textit{The Marriage of Heaven and Hell}:

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with
Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorn­
ing them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains,
lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged &
numerous senses could percieve.
And particularly they studied the genius of each city &
country, placing it under its mental deity;
    Till a system was formed, which some took advantage
of & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or
abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus
began Priesthood,
    Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales.
    And at length they pronounc'd that the Gods had
order'd such things.
    Thus men forgot that all deities reside in the human
breast.

\textsuperscript{23}In \textit{Defense of Reason}, 3rd ed. (Denver: Alan Swallow,
It is Cezanne and "certain of the primitives" who best exemplify Williams' ideas of the imagination:

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. It is experience dynamized into reality.

SA, 68.

Where Winters finds him "wholly incapable of coherent thought" without having had the "good fortune to receive a coherent system as his birthright," Williams is more interested in bridging that gap, between art and experience, "the virtual impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things... close to the nose." (SE, 11).

Williams was no mystic. What he was looking for was hardly different from John Dewey's objective in Art as Experience; Dewey saw that his "primary task" as "one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of the fine arts...is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience." He argues that art has lost its

24 Ibid., 93.
26 p.3.
meaning (by this he means not just a literal translation of the "message" of a work, but its total effect on the viewer) because it has been separated from the experience that gave rise to it, "when the esthetic is already compartmentalized, or...when works of art are set in a niche apart instead of being celebrations, recognized as such, of the things of ordinary experience." Like Williams Dewey is concerned with the moment, for the experience of a work of art takes place there: "The live animal is fully present, all there, in all of its actions. (...) The dog is never pedantic or academic." The emphasis, then, according to Dewey, should be on what is happening, the activity, without any removal in time or attitude, and he found that this "academic" removal was not restricted to any one area:

All the "fine" arts in order not to become merely refined have to be renewed from time to time by closer contact with materials outside the esthetic tradition. But literature in particular is the one most in need of constant refreshment from this source, since it has at command material already eloquent, pregnant, picturesque, and general in its appeal, and yet most subject to convention and stereotype.


28 p.19.

29 p.240.
Since he had decided he would never be a painter, Williams had to deal in that same "literature in particular", with its "demoded meanings", "convention and stereotype". But, unlike many writers, he was in constant "contact with materials outside the esthetic tradition", because he had his medical practice. "The poem," he says, "springs from the half-spoken words of such patients as the physician sees from day to day." (Au, 362); and, when asked where his language came from, he replied, "From the mouths of Polish mothers." (Au, 311).

To take the happenings of every day and "invent and design" an artistic expression, to make a poem, that is, the experience is "dynamized" by "the energizing force of the imagination." (SA, 70). Or, as he says in the essay "Against the Weather": "The imagination is the transmuter. It is the changer." (SE, 213). Williams' contention, stated or implied, is always that the world of the imagination is more valuable and more real than the world of ordinary experience: "It is the imagination on which reality rides--It is the imagination--" (SA, 76); and so "the exaltation men feel before a work of art is the feeling of reality they draw from it. It sets them up, places a value upon experience--" (SA, 61). The value, then, is placed, not just on what Dewey calls

30 See Preface to SE, p.xiv.
"esthetic experience", but on all experience. The imagination was, to Williams, the source of life in poetry, and in all art; and the world of the imagination was a new world.

In the early parts of *Spring and All* Williams sets up a fantasy to illustrate his meaning. He has "the imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions", destroy the world. Completely. But the history of the world repeats itself exactly, and, with the approach of spring, it has all grown back, "EVOLUTION HAS REPEATED ITSELF FROM THE BEGINNING." (SA, 8).

A perfect plagiarism results. Everything is and is new. Only the imagination is undeceived.

SA, 9.

As a result of this "process of miraculous verisimilitude" (SA, 11), "men look about in amazement at each other with a full realization of the meaning of 'art'." (SA, 9). For this new world, simultaneous with the old, is the world of the imagination, separated from ordinary life, but contiguous with it; in this world of the imagination the "demoded meanings" have been revitalized "to the religious terms". Here the possibilities of Pound's dictum: "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree," may be realized; that is, a possibility of language:

The value of the imagination to the writer consists in its ability to make words. Its unique power is to give created forms reality, actual existence and the unique proof of this is the work of the imagination not 'like' anything but transfused with the same forces which transfuse the earth—

SA, 49-50.

Pound's "meaning" is simply Williams' "force of the imagination", a language restored to its potency by the imagination.\(^{32}\)

In "The Rose" we can see the flower come to life in another dimension, as it "penetrates space." It goes from nothing, an "obsolete" existence, to a reality that is alive; the rose of the poem is a new rose, and its energy cuts through to an experience of roses that is new. And it is new by the power of the imagination.

The poem is not to be understood as a copy of a rose in nature, nor of Juan Gris' collage; Williams (in a letter to Frank Moore) is insistent:

To copy nature is a spineless activity; it gives us a sense of our mere existence but hardly more than that. But to imitate nature involves the verb: we then ourselves become nature, and so invent an object which is an extension of the process.

SL, 297.

and again in the Autobiography, he says:

\(^{32}\)See below, pp.43-47, for a discussion of the potency of language.
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 anything else in nature, a thing advanced and apart from it.

To imitate nature involves the verb to do.

Au, 241.

and even again, in The Desert Music:

NOT, prostrate, to copy nature but a dance! to dance two and two with him--

PB, 109.

It is the verb, to do or to dance, the activity of creation, not the copy:

I mean that there will always be prose painting, representative work, clever as may be in revealing new phases of emotional research presented on the surface.

But the jump from that to Cezanne or back to certain of the primitives is the impossible.

SA, 68.

"The Rose" then is not a description of the collage, but an enactment of it; the collage is "dynamized" into "a separate form". (SA, 67). The forces that move the poem are the forces that move the collage are the forces that move the rose in the garden -- "a rose is a rose is a rose", "transmuted" in (by) the imagination.
So, art that "holds the mirror up to nature" (SA, 50) is "a sham nature, a 'lie'" (SA, 51), for it sets up a false value; the mirror deals in surfaces where there should be penetration. Shakespeare then holds no mirror up to nature but with his imagination rivals nature's composition with his own. He himself become "nature"—continuing "its" marvels—if you will. (SA, 51).

"Bare handed" he invents.

Williams describes the plight of the man who would swallow the ocean, finding it too vast (just as nature is too vast for "even the most robust constitution"), comes to the realization that "the stomach is full, the ocean no fuller, both have the same quality of fullness." (SA, 28-29). With that knowledge he no longer seeks to copy nature (swallow the ocean), but to achieve "some approximate co-extension with the universe, which is possible by aid of the imagination" (SA, 27), which is an act of imitation. This is the "interpenetration, both ways" of the Preface to Paterson (P, 12); as Miller states in his essay of introduction: "A primordial union of subject and object is the basic presupposition of Williams' poetry."  

33 William Carlos Williams, p.6
In this sense the space that the rose's fragility has penetrated is the space between the reader's (or the poet's) imagination and the rose itself. It is then that the rose breaks through into our experience, and transforms what we have always known about roses, by presenting us with new knowledge. We are not experiencing a rose -- for that we can go to the garden -- we are experiencing a poem, and the poem is of roses; the forces that move in the poem are an enactment of the forces that move in the rose. Jon Furberg points out in *Principles of Interaction between Romantic Poems and Reader* that "an alteration in the way we think about the smell of a rose does not, cannot, change the way we smell the rose." And Williams writes in "Shadows":

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unless--unless
things the imagination feeds upon,
the scent of the rose,
startle us anew.
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*R.B., 152.*

It is not the thought but the experience, of the poem or of the rose, that can transform what we know of roses; the result, when next we go to the garden, is a new, or renewed, experience.

The end of the poem is an end to the engagement. A resolution has been achieved (for the nonce), in that the contact between reader and rose has been established. But Williams is careful in the poem not to let himself, or you, touch the rose — part of its peculiar existence is its un-touchability. What he has allowed (in fact, forced — if you followed the poem's lead) is that you experience something of the rose's own reality, as well as, and by means of, his own experience of it. The engagement is similar to the movements of the two armies moving at each other, and finally achieving that "interpenetration"; the result of it is some kind of understanding, an experience. It is a movement, "a tension of attraction and repulsion, of incarnation and transcendence, which is like the relation of dancer and dance."\(^{35}\)

And so we arrive at the dance.

\(^{35}\) Miller, ll.
"In description words adhere to certain objects, and have the effect on the sense of oysters, or barnacles." (SA, 90). Dance is the alternative to description -- it imitates, or enacts. It is a function of the imagination. In Spring and All Williams says that the imagination is rightly understood when John of Gaunt's words are related not to their sense as objects adherent to his son's welfare or otherwise but as a dance over the body of his condition accurately accompanying it.

SA, 91.

And it is "wrongly understood when it is supposed to be a removal from reality...to imagine possession of that which is lost." (SA, 90).

And so, the dance:

Go, say I sent thee forth to purchase honour,
And not the King exil'd thee; or suppose
Devouring pestilence hangs in our air
And thou art flying to a fresher clime,
Look what thy soul holds dear, imagine it
To lie that way thou goest, not whence thou com'st.
Suppose the singing birds musicians,
The grass whereon thou tread'st the presence strewn'd,
The flowers fair ladies, and thy steps no more
Than a delightful measure or a dance;
For gnarling sorrow hath less power to bite
The man who mocks at it and sets it light.

Richard II, I, iii, 282-293.
Gaunt's speech "affirms reality most powerfully", not by attempting to describe Bolingbroke's expectations for his period of exile, but by enacting in a poem an expression of "the body of his condition", creating it in the imagination, so that:

By this means of the understanding, the play written to be understood as a play, the author and reader are liberated to pirouette with the words which have sprung from the old facts of history, reunited in present passion.

To understand the words as so liberated is to understand poetry.

SA, 91.

Just as the Cubists' paintings were liberated from the literal description or representation of a thing, so the words, liberated from their literal sense as description, can move with (accompanying) the thing, "charged with meaning", or, as Williams puts it: "poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it--" (SA, 91). Poetry, the language of the poem, moves the world, and the moving force is the imagination:

...not when his words are disassociated from natural objects and specified meanings but when they are liberated from the usual quality of that meaning by transposition into another medium, the imagination.

SA, 92.

The word "dance" is metaphorical; that is, it stands for
something, a condition, a place, an activity, that is essentially indefinable. Imitation, as Williams uses the word, cannot be distinguished from the dance. Both imitation and the dance are metaphorical, and what they stand for is, more or less, metaphor itself; that is, "metaphor" is also without absolute definition — it stands for certain relations or functions of the imagination and language. So, for our purposes, metaphor shall be simply the poet's only possible language in any one instance (or poem). Though it need not be strictly factual, in the sense of being susceptible of objective proof, metaphor is actual. And if it is not, well, as Albion Moonlight puts it:

I would never read a poem of his again.
So it is with governments. You can sense the fraud.¹

The word "dance", I have said, is metaphorical;—what it represents is a quality of language that has been "transmuted" by the imagination -- that quality is the dance. Charles Olson describes a poem as "...energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader."²

²Selected Writings of Charles Olson, edited by Robert Creeley (New Directions Paperbook No. 231, 1966), p.16.
That "energy" is not in any significant way different from Williams' "force of the imagination" manifested in a poem. The dance then is an expression of that energy. The poem, according to Olson, is "a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge." Like the poem the dance is a "construct", a container, or shape, for that energy; it is the form the energy assumes in expression. That form, the dance, is both noun, the thing, its shape, and verb, the action, its energy; or, as Robert Duncan put it, perhaps in answer to Yeats: "The dancer is the dance."

But what is it that is a dance? It is movement, certainly, but not ordinary movement; or, ordinary movement is not necessarily a dance. Dance is a figure, like metaphor:

I speak in figures,  
well enough, the dresses  
you wear are figures also,  
we could not meet  
otherwise. When I speak  
of flowers  
it is to recall  
that at one time  
we were young.  
All women are not Helen,  
I know that;  
but have Helen in their hearts.

PB, 159.

And it is tied to ordinary movement in exactly the same relation as metaphor is to ordinary speech.

The images evoked by the word "dance" are visual, as
a body moving in front of our eyes; audial, in that one generally imagines the movement to be accompanied (though that word defines baldly a complex relationship) by some sort of music, or rhythm; and tactile, as the feeling of the dance, even if one is just an observer, perfectly still, the tensions of the movement imitated in one's muscles and joints. The "image" of the dance, then, is like Pound's "Image", which he defines as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." For the third aspect listed above, the "feeling", corresponds roughly to the meaning of the thing; a further correspondence then can be seen with Pound's "three 'kinds of poetry'" in "How to Read":

MELOPOEIA, wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning.

PHANPOEIA, which is a casting of images upon the visual imagination.

LOGOPOEIA, 'the dance of the intellect among words', that is to say, it employs words not only for their direct meaning, but it takes count in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we expect to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play. It holds the aesthetic content which is peculiarly the domain of verbal manifestation, and cannot possibly be contained in plastic or in music. It is the latest come, and perhaps most tricky and undependable mode."


4"A Retrospect", Literary Essays, p.4.

5Literary Essays, p.25.
Although "logopoeia" is specifically verbal and allows a range of possibilities of meaning that the language of the dance cannot contain, the dance remains an apt metaphor for the "three 'kinds of poetry'", or the poem that functions within those three categories; that is, the activity of the poem, reading or writing it, is what I am calling the dance.

The dance movement is linear, in that it begins at some point in time and progresses through time until it is completed. Both the poem and the jazz run share this linear quality, the elapse of time as they move forward. The dance may consist of a series of stances or tableaux, but these cannot be separated and treated as autonomous units. Similarly, neither the poem nor the jazz run can be broken down into components that will exist on their own. For, in all three, one movement or stance leads to, and away from, another, and the value of it, dance, poem, or jazz run, is in the experience of the whole movement, whether it happens in an instant or an hour; and that experience is not linear, but something more like Pound's "intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."

What makes a movement a dance is what makes an ordinary experience a poem, that is, "the energizing force of imagination" (SA, 70). Williams says in Asphodel:

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

PB, 179.

and Isadora Duncan, in her introductory chapter, writes:

"Nothing seems to exist save in the imagination...." Later

Isadora says:

Before I go out on the stage, I must place a motor in
my soul. When that begins to work by legs and arms and
my whole body will move independently of my will. But
if I do not get time to put that motor in my soul, I
cannot dance."

And Williams:

But poetry is the machine which drives it, pruned to a
perfect economy. As in all machines its movement is in-
trinsic, undulant, a physical more than a literary char-
acter. In a poem this movement is distinguished in each
case by the character of speech from which it arises.

And, at another time, Isadora says:

The dancer of the future will be one whose body and
soul have grown so harmoniously together that the nat-
ural language of that soul will have become the movement
of the body."

6*My Life*, Black & gold ed. (New York; Liveright, 1944),
p.1.


8"Author's Introduction to *The Wedge*", *Collected Later
Poems*, Revised ed. (New York: New Directions, 1963), p.4
Abbreviated hereafter as CLP.

9*Irma Duncan, Duncan Dancer* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan
University Press, 1965), p.25
The movement of poem and dance are expressive, each with its own language. And neither points to a meaning outside itself; as Williams says in "Revelation":

> The objective in writing is, to reveal. It is not to teach, not to advertise, not to sell, not even to communicate (for that needs two) but to reveal, which needs no other than the man himself.

SE, 268.

The dance is expressive — as Zorba says: "Is it possible to talk by dancing? And yet I dare swear that's how the gods and devils must talk to each other." Watch the hands of a deaf-mute — sign language is nothing if it is not a dance. Henri Focillon calls his final chapter "In Praise of Hands", a tribute:

Language, first experienced by the whole body and mimed in the dance, was also formed by the hands. In everyday use, movements of the hands gave zest to the language, helped articulate it, separate its elements, isolate them from a vast sonorous syncretism, and helped to give rhythm to language, even to color it with subtle inflections. (...) There is no need to choose between the two formulas over which Faust hesitates: in the beginning was the Word, in the beginning was Action; because Action and the Word, the hands and the voice, are united in the same beginnings.

Before he could speak, the man danced — speech and dance reveal the man inside. So the poet, who is a word man, speaks


and writes:

How shall we get said what must be said?

Only the poem.

. . .

Only the poem!

Only the made poem, the verb calls it into being.


For the poet, the dance is in the language:

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.12

So, to swing back a little, the dance is a quality of language, expressive of the force of the imagination. It is, for Williams, what distinguishes poetry from prose. Prose is a "statement of facts...fictional and other--" (SA, 67);

12 William Carlos Williams, Kora in Hell (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1957), p.49. Abbreviated hereafter as KH.
poetry is a "new form dealt with as a reality in itself. (...) the form of poetry is related to the movements of the imagination revealed in words." (SA, 67). The poem is imitation:

NOT, prostrate, to copy nature but a dance! to dance two and two with him—

PB, 109.

And in the poem the words are freed from the necessity of communicating data:

...That they move independently when set free is the mark of their value. Imagination is not to avoid reality, nor is it description nor an evocation of objects or situations, it is to say that poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it— It affirms reality most powerfully and (...) it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but—

SA, 91.

The play and the dance are actual, they are just not ordinary. They both move the world.

Ernest Fenollosa's studies of the Chinese language led him to an exploration of what happens in the language of a poem, how the energy comes across in the Chinese, and in English.13

His discoveries are remarkably similar to those of Bronislaw Malinowski, an ethnographer who spent many years living among the Trobriand Islanders in the western Pacific, though one was dealing with the complex written language of a highly developed and long-lived culture, and the other with the unwritten and rudimentary language of a primitive one. Malinowski's conclusion is simply that "Language, and all Linguistic processes derive their power only from real processes in man's relation to his surroundings." 

This power in language, that of the magical incantation, or the power given to Adam to name "every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air", is characteristic of language in its primitive state. Fenollosa says that the Chinese language, with its pictorial rather than phonetic nature, has retained much of that original magic because its etymology is constantly visible. (...) The very soil of Chinese life seems entangled in the roots of its speech.

There is mystery in it, "primal" just means first things, and

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15Ibid., p.336.


17Fenollosa, p.150.
first things were actions; Focillon: "Action and the Word, the hands and the voice, are united in the same beginning."

It is not abstract, but what William Barrett calls for, "restoring to man his sense of the primal mystery surrounding all things;"¹⁸ that is, against abstraction, "transfused with the same forces which transfuse the earth." (SA,50). It is a reality as live as the world is.

Fenollosa argues that that vital reality expresses itself in language that is essentially verbal, not nominal:

A true noun or isolated thing does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snapshots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things, and so the Chinese conception tends to represent them.

The sun underlying the bursting forth of plants—spring.

The sun sign tangled in the branches of the tree—east.

"Rice-field" plus "struggle" — male.

"Boat" plus "water", boat-water, a ripple.¹⁹

Or, as Alan Watts says in his Introduction to The Philosophy of the Tao, "one who thinks in Chinese has little difficulty in seeing that objects are also events, that our world is a collection of processes rather than entities."

As, for example, the fist, a noun in English, is not so

¹⁸Irrational Man, p.275.

¹⁹Fenollosa, p.141.
much an object as a stage in an action, Fenollosa's "cross-sections" or "snapshots", the energy of the thing, caught.

Malinowski found, in studying language formation, that "grammatical categories...are the reflection of the make-shift, unsystematic, practical outlook imposed by man's struggle for existence in the widest sense of this word."\(^{20}\)

The form of the language, then, parallels natural processes and everyday experience; its roots are in the earth as man's experience is also rooted there -- as Williams says: "Nothing can grow unless it taps into the soil." (\textit{Au}, 334). That "makeshift, unsystematic, practical" aspect of language is what Williams saw himself and Pound looking for in their poems:

We seek a language which will not be at least a deformation of speech as we know it--but will embody all the advantageous jumps, swiftnesses, colors, movements of the day--that will, at least, not exclude language as spoken--all language (present) as spoken.


And the form, the original form, of the sentence, represents an action; Fenollosa says:

All truth has to be expressed in sentences because all truth is the \textit{transference of power}. The type of

sentence in nature is a flash of lightning. It passes between two terms, a cloud and the earth. No unit of natural process can be less than this.\textsuperscript{21}

So, Olson's definition of the poem as "...energy transferred ...all the way over to, the reader," the energy or power of it comes through from the original sentence, for the original sentence is magical act, or enactment. As Malinowski found: "in its primitive uses, language is a mode of action and not an instrument of reflection."\textsuperscript{22}

It is interesting to note that the "to be" copula is the predominant verb in discursive writing, and that it is hardly a verb at all -- the word "discursive" is the clue. Fenollosa argues that the transitive, or strong verbs represent more closely the way the world actually works; for example, in the English sentence, "The sky is blue", the verb has no action in it -- it serves as a connective between noun and adjective and does not suggest any perceptual action, that is, the eye seeing a blue sky. The shift from a world of actual perceptions to one of static qualities is part of the process of abstraction:

There is in reality no such verb as a pure copula, no such original conception, our very word \textit{exist} means "to stand forth", to show oneself by a definite act.

\textsuperscript{21}Fenollosa, p.142.

\textsuperscript{22}"Problem of Meaning", p.312.
"Is" comes from the Aryan root as, to breathe. "Be" is from bhu, to grow.\(^2^3\)

So, to restore contact with that world that Williams saw in the primitives, cave painters or Cezanne, one must find a language to express it, the "world that breaks through to the actual." (SL, 324). And the language that acts is verbal:

The form of the Chinese transitive sentence, and of the English (omitting particles) exactly corresponds to this universal form of action in nature. This brings language close to things, and in its strong reliance upon verbs it erects all speech into a kind of dramatic poetry.\(^2^4\)

Williams' world was made up of things, animated by the force of imagination. An idea, reflective, abstracted from experience, as, say, a theological argument about the "good" or the "god", cannot be sensibly considered. So Williams insists, "No ideas but in things." (P, 14). For things are not necessarily just rocks or hubcaps, discrete as an object can be; for the other way around seems more natural, where a thing is a stage ("limiting term") of an action. With what Einstein told us of relativity, that rock might be just energy anyway: "The stone lives, the flesh dies / --we know nothing of death" (P, 64). So ideas which are "in things" do

\(^2^3\)Fenollosa, p.144.

\(^2^4\)Ibid., p.143.
not live in a world apart, as in "the 'UNIVERSE of discourse'", but are expressive of (and grow from) the interrelated actions of the actual world, in

...the only two universes which count, the two phenomenal ones, the two a man has need to bear on because they bear so on him: that of himself, as organism, and that of his environment, the earth and planets.  

Williams' world of things, animated by the imagination, is imitated (invented) in the poems: "To imitate nature involves the verb to do." (Au, 241). And to do is to cause to dance.

The dance is action or movement, in the body or in the poem. The following is one of his poems that Williams called "The Dance":

In Breughel's great picture, The Kermess, the dancers go round, they go round and around, the squeal and the blare and the tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles tipping their bellies (round as the thick-sided glasses whose wash they impound) their hips and their bellies off balance to turn them. Kicking and rolling about the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those shanks must be sound to bear up under such rollicking measures, prance as they dance in Breughel's great picture, The Kermess.

CLP, 11.

It is not until the second to the last line that Williams

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25 Charles Olson, "Human Universe", Selected Writings, p.54.
26 See also "The Dance", PB, 32.
uses the verb "dance", yet the poem does not sit still for a moment; that is, except for the identical first and last lines which, like a picture-frame, contain the action.

The "ou" diphthong is repeated seven times in the poem, four of them in the word "round" or "around"; not only does it suggest the healthy roundness of the bellies, it also imitates the shape of the mouth cavity in blowing an instrument like a bagpipe. The dance is a round, like the song of several voices, turning, for if you want to keep moving and the space is not large, you go round and then around again. The "ou" blows through the poem, the breath of the piper, reserved in the pig's bladder under his arm, gives the poem breath and being.

In his "Author's Introduction to The Wedge" Williams makes "Two bald statements: There's nothing sentimental about a machine, and: A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words." (CLP, 4; also in SE, 256). This poem, then, is more like a whirligig than a sewing machine; its components, the words, are abundant with things, the names of them and their actions. Thus, the three words "squeal", "blare", "tweedle", though they are nouns, the names of things, carry enough energy to overcome the inertia of "bugle", "fiddles", "bagpipes", the "bellies" and "hips", even to stir up the "wash" of that first sentence. For, though they are strictly nouns, those words, the sounds the instruments make, enact the
activity of the players, and animate the dancers; as Rihaku observed, and Pound translates:

The foreman of Kan Chu, drunk, danced
because his long sleeves wouldn't keep still
With that music playing,

"Exile's Letter"27

There are relatively few true verbs in the first sentence of Williams' poem, they are "go", "go", "turn", and "impound"; but the adjectives, "round", and the nouns, the sounds and all the dancing things, get their signal, to "go-go", and they do, they move. In the second sentence the lines are propelled by the participial forms, "kicking", "rolling", "swinging", and "rollicking", until, at the last, they break into the full verbs, "prance" and "dance". But by this time the "butts" and "shanks" have been well under way and those verbs come almost as an afterthought; that is, they are not needed to spur on the poem's movement, but function more as a denouement, winding the poem down to the last line, as if making a comment on all the action that has preceded them.

So, the title, which is, in the strict grammatical sense, a noun, provides a key to the way the poem works, that is to say, by the verbal energy invested into the things of the poem:

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 whole thing.

SE, 14.

Williams' sense of the movement, expressed in energetic language, imitates in the poem the action that Breughel's compositional genius captures in the picture; and the "attenuated power" in the language is the imagination, or metaphor, which is a dance.

When a man lives on the prairie, or the open ocean, his poem will move, perhaps, in a straight line outward, toward the visible horizon. But if he doesn't, if he lives in the city, or writes on 8 1/2" paper, he finds limits and must discover his own possible horizons; as Olson says in a "Note... for this book": "The lines which hook-over should be read as though they lay out right and flat to the horizon or Eternity." 28 Since the man must move, when his space runs out, he comes round again, as does, of course, the man on the ocean too, though his cycle takes longer. So the dance is a round, the circle being the natural movement.

The rose is a circle of petals; so is the poem "The Rose", and when the last petal's edge is fixed, the flower is transformed, comes to life, "penetrates space." Or, in

28 Selected Writings, p.158.
another poem of the same title, it is "A grace of petals skirting / the tight-whorled cone" (CEP, 369), the skirt moves around the outside. In "Daisy" the poet twirls the flower, looking at it:

But turn and turn
the crisp petals remain
brief, translucent, greenfastened,
barely touching at the edges:
blade of limpid seashell.

CEP, 208.

homing in on that last line, the light shines through the petals. "Primrose" (CEP, 209) presents the flower in the first line: "Yellow, yellow, yellow, yellow!", and the poem circles outward, its circumference is all of summertime, returns to reaffirm "clear yellow!", and around again around the flower's centre. The flower's form, the petals that open outward, is the expression, clear and explicit, of that circular motion; so the poems, in imitation, move the same way -- the dance of the flowers is a round.

To engage the world, be engaged in it, is to dance, for to dance means to move with (or across, or against) whatever or whoever is your partner. So the poem's movement follows the movement of whatever is its subject, as, for example, in "Philomena Andronico" (CLP, 120-121), where a young girl is in the street "reflectively bouncing / the red ball" while the more active boys are "busy / at ball / in the worn lot /
nearby". The movement is slow,

(Not as she had done
formerly
screaming and
missing
But slowly
surely) then
pausing throws
the ball
With a full slow
very slow
and easy motion
following through
With a slow
half turn--
as the ball flies
and rolls gently

and the poem moves with it; the long "o" sounds, especially in "slow" and "slowly", draw out the energy of the verb "throws", stretch it into a continuous motion. Or, a simple comparison of the first and second stanzas above, the way the line breaks, as in "surely) then / pausing throws", and the "s" sounds in the second, slow down the fast forward movement of the first stanza, shows clearly how Williams has imitated the action of the scene.

The ball, though its arc is a further expression of the throwing action, is free, and "flies / and rolls" now on its own, the action is rolled right up inside the sphere, moving. The other child misses, though the ball is almost stopped, "waiting" at his feet, and runs after it; the girl
slowly
regains her former
pose

Then shoves her fingers
up through
her loose short hair
quickly

Draws one stocking
tight and
waiting
tilts

Her hips and
in the warm still
air lets
her arms
Fall

Fall
loosely
(waiting)
at her sides

The poet's eye, like a movie camera, follows the ball in a
panning movement until it has rolled out of the picture,
then returns to focus on the girl, and holds that angle for
the rest of the poem. While she waits for the ball, she
shoves her fingers through her hair, draws her stocking
tight, tilts her hips, and finally lets her arms fall, wait-
ing; the diminishing force of the verbs brings the action to
the final "pose", standing and waiting. But each shot, what
Fenollosa calls "cross-sections cut through actions" or
"ideographs", is both action and pose; and the accumulated
energy of them informs that final pose (or poise). The ener-
gy with which it penetrates and activates the reader's ima-
agination is the energy of the dance in the poem, perceived by the poet's eye, imitated verbally in the poem, and transferred "by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader."

The movement in a circle, the roundelay or rondeau, occurs in many of Williams' poems. In some it is the cycle of birth, growth, death, decay, rebirth that is natural to any live thing, whether it is the soil or a civilization. In a poem such as "The Term" the movement is explicit:

A rumpled sheet
of brown paper
about the length
and apparent bulk
of a man was
rolling with the
wind slowly over
and over in
the street as
a car drove down
upon it and
crushed it to
the ground. Unlike
a man it rose
again rolling
with the wind over
and over to be as
it was before.

CEP, 409.

Right there, "Unlike / a man it rose / again... / ...to be
as / it was before", the cycle, rolling on, "perpetual mo-
tion", the process continues. So, in "Perpetuum Mobile: The
City", the process of the city circles on:

Neither the rain
Nor the storm—
can keep them
for love!
from the daily
accomplishment
of their
appointed rounds—

Guzzling
the creamy foods
while
out of sight
in
the sub-cellar—
the waste fat
the old vegetable
chucked down
a chute
the foulest
sink in the world—

And go
on the out-tide
ten thousands
cots
floating to sea
like weed
that held back
the pristine ships—

And fattened there
an eel
in the water pipe—

No end—
There!
There!
There!

CEP, 388-389.
The eel, the garbage, the daily rounds of the city are the cycles the poem moves in -- a cycle of life, "There is no end / to desire--", it continues, the perpetual motion of it all, in a single moment.

The world happens as it does, all at once, and the man dances as he can:

But only the dance is sure! make it your own. Who can tell what is to come of it?

in the woods of your own nature whatever twig interposes, and bare twigs have an actuality of their own this flurry of the storm that holds us, plays with us and discards us dancing, dancing as may be credible.

PB, 33.

Williams' expressed interest is in "the moment", so for the moment one dances. But the moment, myself sitting here, the typewriter, the sounds of the street, a man in a red jacket walking by, the taste in my mouth, and all else that might be in my mind, how does one put it all into language, a language that will carry the energy of that moment and awareness of it, that will have the simultaneity and effect of, say, a painting, or sculpture.

To express the moment in language, one must break it
into components, since the movement of language is linear. So the circular dance is a possibility to achieve some kind of simultaneity in the language, as in Williams' "Spring Strains", which Dijkstra calls "an elaborate attempt at painting a Cubist picture in words."\(^{29}\)

In a tissue-thin monotone of blue-grey buds crowded erect with desire against the sky tense blue-grey twigs slenderly anchoring them down, drawing them in—

  two blue-grey birds chasing a third struggle in circles, angles, swift convergings to a point that bursts instantly!

  Vibrant bowing limbs pull downward, sucking in the sky that bulges from behind, plastering itself against them in packed rifts, rock blue and dirty orange!

  But—(Hold hard, rigid jointed trees!)

  the blinding and red-edged sun-blur—
  creeping energy, concentrated counterforce—welds sky, buds, trees, rivets them in one puckering hold!
  Sticks through! Pulls the whole counter-pulling mass upward, to the right locks even the opaque, not yet defined ground in a terrific drag that is loosening the very tap-roots!

  On a tissue-thin monotone of blue-grey buds two blue-grey birds, chasing a third, at full cry! Now they are flung outward and up--disappearing suddenly!

CEP, 259.

\(^{29}\)Hieroglyphics, p.64.
The energy of the scene, as Williams puts it, is "terrific"; it is, except for the movement of the birds, a "still-life", yet the dynamic forces, the "strains" of spring, make it a dramatic occasion. The tree's roots hold in the earth, the branches pull down the sky's fabric, the tension is of matter and surfaces; the forces are made concrete, the sky a fluid or fabric, the sun's heat a welder's torch. The contest of "rock blue / and dirty orange!", the sun and the sky, with the downward pull of the tree and the ground, of "sucking", "puckering", counter-pulling", "bulges", with all its violence of force and "concentrated counterforce", is happening on a simple backdrop, the "tissue-thin monotone of blue-grey buds", with the three "blue-grey birds", swifts probably, playing on it. The tissue is like the surface tension of a fluid, stretching and billowing with the "strains", without breaking, containing the action. But the energy seems too much, and the birds, the only things loose, "are / flung outward and up--disappearing suddenly!"

Dijkstra describes the movement of this poem as "non-sequential...-- that is, movement which, instead of developing in a linear, 'narrative' fashion, moves, circles, as it were, within a narrowly defined visual space."30 In fact, the space could easily be enclosed within the frame of a picture, that is to say, the poem as canvas. There is pract-
tically no passage of time in the poem, the action ends a moment or so after it begins, just long enough for the swifts to make a few darting moves, and disappear. If we see the poem as a still-life canvas, then what happens in it is the drawing in of the lines of force, with each line tightening the strain, and the colours are added, then the paint built up into textured layers. The moment of the poem is physical, the spatial relations made concrete -- you can run your fingers along and feel the textures. But it is also alive -- that one word "puckering" animates the "welds" and "rivets" of the sun's pull, and in the trees the buds are "tense", "erect with desire", at the ends of the "vibrant bowing limbs". The whole is like the tightly wound centre of a golf ball, the compositional energy, in the verb forms and the verbal and animate adjectives. When it bursts open, the birds are gone, one is at both the beginning and the end of the poem at the same time, "In", or "On a tissue-thin monotone of blue-grey buds", aware of that instant of energy, when a spring has just sprung; and the dance it creates has that body sense of touching and moving, tendons, muscles, and joints.

The world is composed as it lies (lives) there, just happening, when we look at it, and composed again in the poet's eye as he makes it in the poem:
It isn't what he 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.

CLF, 5.

For to make is to choose from the random elements available and put them together, as the musician invents a composition, or to compose, so that something like compost is simply what has been put together, composed. The composition of a thing, as you find it, a landscape of a situation, is an expression of the dynamics of it, energies and tensions, inertia and momentum. This is the kinetic of the poem, or of the world.

The poet, then, like the farmer

...pacing through the rain
among his blank fields, with
hands in pockets,
in his head
the harvest already planted.

CEP, 243.

must seek out, in the unpromising world of early spring, "black orchards / darkened by the March clouds--", the shape of his composition. There is "room for thought", for the farmer's "deep thought"; his fields are blank like the poet's page. So, Williams says:

31The "science of the relations between the motions of bodies and the forces acting upon them", from the Greek, kineo, to move.
When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you, he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them—without distortion which would mar their exact significances—into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses.

CLP, 5.

The poet "takes words as he finds them", that is, as they fall within the range of his attention, or perceptions. As Charles Olson says in his essay "Projective Verse", part of which appears as Chapter 50 in Williams' Autobiography (Au, 329-332):

The objects which occur at every given moment of composition (of recognition, we can call it) are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem, must be handled as a series of objects in field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to hold, and to hold exactly inside the content and the context of the poem which has forced itself, through the poem and them, into being.32

The composition of the poem as it takes shape in its field (range or area) is exactly an imitation of the composition of the poet's experience in its field, the range of his attention. And the "tensions" that hold are the kinetic of the created poem.

The farmer hasn't got his crops in yet, "A cold wind ruffles the water / among the browned weeds", but the furrows

32 Selected Writings, p.20
have been laid out before. What he must do is overcome the hostility of this world that "rolls coldly away", "the brushwood / bristling by / the rain-sluiced wagonroad", and plant the seeds. The poet, on the other hand, has an open field in which to compose; the shape of the harvest, the poem, is as yet undetermined because his composition is always like the first ploughing, it must deal with every rock and stump in the process.

But there is a difference,

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.

Au, 241.

That is, to imitate nature, creating it in a poem, is to invent:

But to imitate nature involves the verb: we then ourselves become nature, and so invent an object which is an extension of the process.

SL, 297.

For nature, like the rose, has no need of the poet's words to affirm its reality; as Williams says: "since reality needs no personal support but exists free from human action, as proven by science in the indestructibility of matter and of force, it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not
a mirror up to nature but--" (SA, 91). "It", that is to say, the imagination, "creates a new object", and the new object is the dance, or metaphor.

The nature of the poem, then, is simply not the same as the nature of the reality, for the world of nature is transfigured in the poem. So, for example, the problem in writing a poem such as Paterson, which is a poem of the city, as well as to, and for it. The city of the poem is also the man who is called Paterson, and is not a copy or representation of the real city. But if it is to be an enactment of it, the city in the poem, there must be a relation between the two:

To make a start,
out of particulars
and make them general

.
.
.

For the beginning is assuredly the end--since we know nothing, pure and simple, beyond our own complexities.

Yet there is no return: rolling up out of chaos, a nine months' wonder, the city the man, an identity--it can't be otherwise--an interpenetration, both ways.

P, 11-12.

The city, the man, and the poem itself, "an identity"; the poem, an "object", invented, "which is an extension of the
process”, penetrates, and is penetrated by, the reality of the actual city. And again, that relation, nature transfigured in the poem by the creating power of the imagination, is a dance.

The farmer, at the end of his poem, appears silhouetted, as if on a stage, "looms the artist figure of / the farmer—composing / --antagonist." (CEP, 243). He composes then in two senses: first, that he has the plan of the harvest patterns in his head — this makes him an "artist figure"; and second, that he is a "figure", he figures in the composition of the poem, just as, say, the figures in Van Gogh's "Potato Eaters" compose that picture. So the farmer is not a true artist, not only because it is not the first ploughing of the land, but also because he is not the creator, or inventor, of "a new object, a play, a dance". But both farmer and poet, each with his own methods, are transforming a cold world, antagonistic to their efforts, and each engages in his own dance.

What holds the poem, its kinetic, is the position and relation of the objects in it, which is a tension of composition; as in "The Red Wheelbarrow":

so much depends upon

a red wheel barrow

glazed with rain water
There is no verbal action in the poem: the "glazing" of the wheelbarrow with rain has already happened, it almost seems to be varnished; the chickens are there, but not apparently moving; and "depends" seems to indicate a condition or state of dependence, not an action. Yet the poem's energy and vitality are undeniably there.

Though nothing in the poem moves, there is an action, simply by the kinetic nature of the composition. The verb "depends", like the first line, "I must tell you", of "Young Sycamore" (CEP, 332), casts a kind of urgency over the whole poem — "so much" of what a poem is, or can be "depends / upon" your being able to see and feel the wet wheelbarrow and the chickens; and not just to see them as separate objects, but as a whole, composed, and held by an inner tension. The energy must come through to your awareness, reveal itself there, or the poem is worth nothing. That energy is implicit in an object where it lies under your gaze, and is expressive of the diverse relations of the object and its surroundings; and it is directed by the prepositions, "upon" and "beside" and "with". The poem's unity, or composure, then, is a result of the urgency of the first line, the tension it casts over the whole, and the sensual qualities of the objects in it, the
facts of their existence and the poet's perception of them, as they fall into place:

In the composition, the artist does exactly what every eye must do with life, fix the particular with the universality of his own personality—Taught by the largeness of his imagination to feel every form which he sees moving within himself, he must prove the truth of this by expression.

SA, 27.

Williams' eye holds the wheelbarrow and chickens in its fix -- the fix that holds the photographic image to the paper, the snapshot freezing the action, holds the compositional energies, carries them over to the reader.

To imitate, not to copy, one must understand the dynamics of the thing; so Williams, in "To a Solitary Disciple" (CEP, 167), gives instructions:

Rather notice, mon cher, that the moon is tilted above the point of the steeple than that its color is shell-pink.

Rather observe that it is early morning than that the sky is smooth as a turquoise.

Rather grasp how the dark converging lines of the steeple meet at the pinnacle-- perceive how its little ornament tries to stop them--
See how it fails!
See how the converging lines
of the hexagonal spire
escape upward--
receding, dividing!
--sepals
that guard and contain
the flower!

Observe
how motionless
the eaten moon
lies in the protecting lines.
It is true:
in the light colors
of morning

brown-stone and slate
shine orange and dark blue.

But observe
the oppressive weight
of the squat edifice!
Observe
the jasmine lightness
of the moon.

"Rather", that is, than copy the scene, seeking out similes
to describe it, notice the components of it; and not just
"notice", but "notice", "observe", "grasp" -- that is, the
movement is toward the thing, from focussing one's eyes on
it to "grasping" the physical and spatial relations, and
achieving the "interpenetration, both ways" of Paterson. Not
by a process of simile, but by penetration, the moon becomes
a flower in the early morning; it is transfigured in the
composition to "the jasmine lightness", a shared quality of
light, the colour and the fragility of flower and moon. The
scene is "transmuted" in/by the imagination, and, like the
"instant action" of "Spring Strains", in an instant, at the end of the poem, the energy of the scene impresses itself on the reader's imagination.

So, Williams' insistence is that the poet imitates nature, enacts it, invents a dance of it. And the kinetic, whether the poem swings like "The Dance" or enacts a scene like "The Red Wheelbarrow", expresses a dynamic world, of light and energy. So the language that moves, circles, drives that energy over to the reader, a language "able to communicate release from the fixities which destroy it" (SA, 93), partakes of that dynamism, the world's life and diversity, as does the dance, imitating it:

Only the poem!

Only the made poem, the verb calls it into being.

PB, 110.
In "January Morning: A Suite" the world is happening with exclamation marks:

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

*CEP*, 163.

It moves, and Williams, who is something of a "song-and-dance man", moves with it:

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

*CEP*, 164.

The poem is of early morning, "the domes of the Church of / the Paulist Fathers in Weehawken / against a smoky dawn--", and the actions are just beginning, the freshness and energy when the world is new again, "the heart stirred-- / are beautiful as Saint Peters / approached after years of anticipation." (*CEP*, 162). The poet, travelling (probably) up
to Manhattan, engages in, by watching, listening, and writing, the activity of that world; each of the fifteen sections of the "Suite" is an aspect, or stance, of the scene, and the poet's part is to dance.

In the final section Williams addresses the poem to his mother:

All this---
was for you, old woman.
I wanted to write a poem that you would understand.
For what good is it to me if you can't understand it?
But you got to try hard--
But--
Well, you know how the young girls run giggling on Park Avenue after dark when they ought to be home in bed?
Well, that's the way it is with me somehow.

CEP, 166.

The young girls out past their bedtime, the energy of it, with the sense of illegality, or immorality of it, is similar to that of the young doctor "dancing with happiness"; it is not really extroverted, in the sense that it is a display, nor really wrong in any way, but rather the exuberant expression of the occasion, the girls knowing they are not behaving as they "ought", and the doctor allowing his feelings, as the ice breaks and he thinks of summer, to break through the demeanor of a professional man. The activity,
giggling or dancing, is a sign of life, expressive of an immediacy of contact with one's surroundings and activities. That immediacy was characteristic of Williams' mother:

Thus, seeing the thing itself without forethought or afterthought but with great intensity of perception, my mother loses her bearings or associates with some disreputable person or translates a dark mood. She is a creature of great imagination. I might say this is her sole remaining quality. She is a despoiled, molted castaway but by this power she still breaks life between her fingers.

SE, 5.

As he says in the poem, "For what good is it to me / if you can't understand it?"; she is a "castaway", but is still capable of "seeing the thing itself...with great intensity of perception", "a creature of great imagination." So, if she cannot understand the poem, then there might be something wrong with the poem. That she "loses her bearings" is not evidence of, say, an inability to concentrate, but rather of a certain kind of focus; what Warren Tallman finds characteristic of Robert Creeley's work, "an exceptional capacity for concentration often drawing him into deep alliance with whatever is at hand",¹ might also be said of Mrs. Williams, for, in a "deep alliance" with something, one can easily lose touch of such vexatious details as the direction home.

Her ability to be intimately involved with the immediate situation is evidence of what Williams has called a "loosen-ed" attention, capable of "following a more flexible, jagged resort." (SE, 11). It is a matter of focus, keeping in touch with the world as it happens, an ability Williams shares with his mother.

Mrs. Williams' "great imagination" is in evidence right through Yes, Mrs. Williams, in which the poet son has transcribed his mother's stories, comments, and general conversation. She "breaks life between her fingers", and captures the pungent core of events, as for example, in a letter beginning "Dear Sonny" and offering "some details" since he had "said something about knowing your ancestors":

My father was from Holland extraction, he was a merchant associated with two Germans in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, they received cargos from Europe of rice, flour and I don't know what. I was only eight years old when I lost my father, I didn't know much; a fierce dog was put at night to guard the cargo newly arrived, the name of the dog was Moro. One night he came home like a demon dragging his long chain. It had rained much and the earth was mud, he went to my father's room howl and howl went all over, the house was in mourning the master was gone. Wasn't that strange?

or, at another time:

I do' know. She just said she didn't feel well and she lay down and she died. Yes, she was a Cristianscience.

YMW, 125.

or: "Caracoles! I used to dance, like a hurricane and always with foreigners." (YMW, 89).

When she was very old, "a small woman with straggling white hair, clumsy hands, lame, extremely deaf and only recently recovered from the removal of cataracts from both eyes" (YMW, 24), "in her last years, when it was impossible for us to keep her at home any longer" (Au, 351), she was put in the care of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Taylor. Mrs. Taylor looked after the recalcitrant old woman, because she could no longer do anything for herself, and Harry Taylor cooked. She "liked Harry Taylor because he was far subtler than his wife: he was in short an artist manqué. (...) He had been a dancer." (Au, 353). On one occasion

it seems that, being well liquored up the day before and feeling tip-top, he had found Mother gloomy and depressed. He wanted to liven her up and had started a pirouette. She opened her eyes, she knew it was good, and gave her whole attention. At that, the two there alone in the room, he went on with the routine until, with a final burst of virtuosity, he completed it with an entrechat that had Mother enthralled and applauding.

Au, 355.

The event is also recorded in a poem, "The Artist", ("Mr. T. / bareheaded / in a soiled undershirt"), where
My mother
where she sat
in her invalid's chair
was left speechless.
Bravo! she cried at last
and clapped her hands.

PR, 101.

Mr. Taylor, whose parents had not allowed him to become a professional dancer, was an artist, simply because, although he too was "a despoiled, molted castaway", cooking for an old lady, and drinking too much, he remained a dancer, and danced; and Mrs. Williams was roused from her depression, "she opened her eyes", because "she knew it was good, and gave her whole attention." Old and sick as she was, her attention was still "whole"; she is "taken by surprise", taken up from her chair into the dance, by her ability to participate, to "go from one thing to another," (SE, 11), and by the energy of it, "that attenuated power which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance giving them thus a full being." (SE, 14). To be there, in the moment, and to move with it.

In the first chapter it was "to engage rose"; here it is to engage an old lady whose senses are almost worn out, and, by a work of the imagination, "an entrechat / perfectly achieved", to restore her for the moment to an "active and alert commerce with the world." The engagement loosens the

3Dewey, Art as Experience, p.19.
attention from conditioned or preconceived responses, so that it is free to move as the occasion leads, and tightens it down, focussing it on what is happening. It is active, enactment, and the artist must "fight his way to a world that breaks through to the actual." (SL, 324). This act of engagement is central to Williams' life (activity) as an artist -- as he wrote to Kenneth Burke: "Poetry ...is the flower of action." (SL, 137).

Our five senses are capable of focus. The eye is perhaps the simplest example; that is, we have focal vision, how we see when we are looking at something, and peripheral vision, when we see something, perhaps out of the corners of our eyes, but are not looking, directing our eyes to it. In hearing it is the difference between listen to, and hear, or "I think I smell something" as opposed to "Smell that gravy!"; feel instead of touch, and so on. The senses directed, or focussed, can be called active, since, if we bother to look at something, then our attention becomes actively involved in the occasion. That involvement is the subject of the poem "Smell!":

Oh strong-ridged and deeply hollowed
nose of mine! what will you not be smelling?
What tactless asses we are, you and I boney nose
always indiscriminate, always unashamed,
and now it is the souring flowers of the bedraggled poplars: a festering pulp on the wet earth
beneath them. With what deep thirst
we quicken our desires
to that rank odor of a passing springtime!
Can you not be decent? Can you not reserve your ardors for something less unlovely? What girl will care for us, do you think, if we continue in these ways? Must you taste everything? Must you know everything? Must you have a part in everything?

CEP, 153.

The "tactless asses", man and nose, pick up a scent and follow it, like the man said; even though it is "souring", "festering", "rank odor", he follows his nose, and tact is hardly the answer.

Dewey's "commerce with the world" is both "active" and "alert"; that is, then, the focal senses might be active -- but it is not true to say that the peripheral senses, the larger awareness, are passive, merely receiving data of varying degrees of vagueness, and causing the focal senses to be directed towards the source of the data. For that awareness, the fact that the nose can smell at all, and can lead the man down garden paths, is proof of an alertness, even if it is different from that of the dog, ears perked up, or nose to the ground, an alertness to possibilities, not yet specified, but there.

The act of cognition, or re-cognition, causes a shift of attention, to focus, and engage the thing; so then, the act of dancing is one with the act of perception. But this act, the insistence on the particular "thing", instead of the "concept", what can be perceived, is not the affliction of
the man whose mind is not large enough to understand the
forest and deals just in trees; the man does not walk around,
continually in awe, overwhelmed by his senses, for the act of
perceiving is at the same time an act of creation, and the
poet's eye is inventing, shaping, composing. So, in the
"Prologue to Kora in Hell", Williams says:

Although it is a quality of the imagination that it
seeks to place together those things which have a common
relationship, yet 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 particulars
of dissimilarity to all other things which are the
peculiar perfections of the thing in question.

SE, 16.

That is to say, the man of "discernment" that Williams talks
about can pick his way among the trees. It is misleading to
set up as alternatives, as Tony Tanner does, "momentary awe"
and "systematic theology"; for the first is to put oneself
abjectly under the thing itself, bowing down before it, and
the latter, to put oneself lordly over it. For what "system"
we find is most likely of all to be in the object, if anywhere,
"the peculiar perfections of the thing in question."

The area of the man's awareness may be small, as in "The
World Contracted to a Recognizable Image":

4 The Reign of Wonder (Cambridge University Press, 1965),
Paterson".
at the small end of an illness
there was a picture
probably Japanese
which filled my eye

an idiotic picture
except it was all I recognized
the wall lived for me in that picture
I clung to it as to a fly

He is getting better, perhaps, "the small end of an illness",
when he need not be concerned with large things, such as
whether he will live, but must wait, his senses impaired
somewhat, until he can get up. But it is also the "small end",
like the telescope held wrong way round, focussing the
whole world into one small circle of vision. So the picture,
"idiotic" and probably small as well as Japanese, "filled" his
eye, just as the world fills that small hole at the far end
of the telescope -- "idiotic", "except it was all I recognized",
it was a world. Both the wall and the world "lived for me in
that picture", not theoretically, but actually, or factually;
and he lived through his re-cognition of it, which is an act
of perception -- the life is in the act, "systematic theology"
has nothing to do with it.

Because Williams' approach to the world is with his eyes
open, ready for anything, he is said to deal with the "anti-
opietic",⁵ that is to say, with things that are not normally

considered the material of poetry. Thus, A. Kingsley Weatherhead finds that, according to the Coleridgean definition of imagination and fancy; "The first principle is that Williams works by fancy rather than imagination." And, as an alternative, he sees Robert Lowell as a poet of imagination, because he fits the things of the poem into a large schema, which is of the Imagination, or "systematic theology". Since Williams' system of theology (which he never admitted to having) is of the thing itself, the range of his perceptions includes much that others might dismiss as peripheral, and allows it to assume an importance equal to anything else. The difference between Williams and Stevens, and perhaps the reason for Williams' continued irritation at Stevens' use of the word "anti-poetic", can be seen in the following nutshell statements; Stevens says: "Not all objects are equal. The vice of imagism was that it did not recognize this." And Williams" "Imagism was not structural: that was the reason for its disappearance." For, to Williams, the object itself, as soon as you lay your hands on it to make a poem, becomes a new thing; that Imagism

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7 See, for example, IWW, 52.


9 "The Poem as a Field of Action", SE, 283.
did not allow for the verb, the shape of the dance, was its end.

So Williams' inclusive awareness finds sparrows hopping "ingenuously / about the pavement / quarrelling / with sharp voices", and "the old man who goes about / gathering dog-lime", whose "tread / is more majestic than / that of the Episcopal minister". These things occur at the edges, in the gutters, of a busy world, but to Williams, they "astonish me beyond words." (CEP, 124). Or, we see in "The Girl":

```
with big breasts
under a blue sweater

bareheaded--
crossing the street

reading a newspaper
stops, turns

and looks down
as though

she had seen a dime
on the pavement
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CLP, 123.

the attention shifts to focus on a particular, from "big breasts", perhaps what first caught Williams' eye, or the "blue sweater", to "bareheaded", to the "newspaper", to the "dime" which wasn't there; that is, something catches her eye, she looks to see what it is. Williams does no different.

As Dubuffet says:

"I am struck by the high value, for a man, of a simple permanent fact, like the miserable vista on which the window of his room opens daily, that comes, with the passing of time, to have an important role in his life."
I often think that the highest destination at which a painting can aim is to take on that function in someone's life.\textsuperscript{10}

This engagement with the facts of the world is central to the stories collected in \textit{The Farmer's Daughters}; in an essay on "The Accident" Warren Tallman finds Williams "less interested to interpret his townspeople than to dance with them." For to dance is to engage with the actual happenings of their lives, often, like a conversation, "a relatively simple back-and-forth movement."\textsuperscript{11} This kind of movement, conversation as dance, can be seen in "Four Bottles of Beer" (\textit{FD}, 191), where the doctor visits a sick boy at home. The boy sleeps almost the whole time, there is no narration or description, the story is a record of two people, the doctor and the boy's mother, talking. The boy lies there -- over and around him move the figures of two dancers:

What's that your mother says?  
She says to tell you he won't eat nothing.  
What language is that? Russian?  
No, Polish.  
What did she say? Tadke, what's that?  
That's his name. What you call Theodore. Where was you this morning?

The dancer, when he is not well acquainted with the way she

\textsuperscript{10}Cited in \textit{Irrational Man}, p.58  
\textsuperscript{11}"Williams' Perception in 'The Accident'", \textit{TISH} (Vancouver, B.C.), 43 (no date or pagination).
moves, must feel out his partner, move, correct, move again, always staying within the range of his knowledge, until he becomes easier with her. She asks him:

...How long you had that maid?
Eight years.
Does she cook for you?
Yes.
And you eat it?
Why yes.
I couldn't eat nigger cooking.
You don't know what you're talking about.
Yes, that's what my husband tells me.

It is "down to earth", their talk, his questions pointing to particulars, "What's this, cut up onions?" or, looking at the boy's hair, "Why don't you cut it off, except he'd look like a priest." She turns on the brand new radio:

What do you like, songs or orchestra pieces?
Wow, that's too loud. Turn it down.
Yes, we like it soft, too, we turn it down sometimes so you can hardly hear it. Do you like men singing?
Gee, that's awful.

and then he drinks some of their homemade beer, likes it, puts the four bottles she gives him into his satchel, and,

Look out you don't drop 'em. Good-bye.

The story ends here, the dance continues.

They are frank and open in their comments, "Wow, that's too loud", "I couldn't eat nigger cooking", "Gee, that's awful". There is a gap between them, of language, education,
and culture, and the whole apparatus of polite and social discourse disappears in that gap:

"But this language of yours," said one of the instructors, himself an obvious Britisher, "where does it come from?"

"From the mouths of Polish mothers," I replied

Au, 311.

The contact is immediate because if they are going to talk at all they must talk about what is there, within reach, that they both understand. So she talks about him and his family, and he looks around the room, touches something, her wedding picture, and they talk. The limits of the situation, limits of expectation, need to be overcome, or transcended; then the engagement takes place on a "human" or "real" level, spontaneous as a dance is.

The dance might be called "body language"; Williams, in "Water, Salts, Fat, etc."\(^{12}\) a review of The Human Body, by Logan Clendening, M.D., says:

The book presumes knowledge of the body itself as the source of all knowing: which should come as a refreshing novelty to post-Freudian man and woman.

Refreshing, in that it treats "the body as a unit. (...) The body is a thing which when we see it roundly as the source of all good we see well, and when we see it cut up for this or

\(^{12}\) A Novelette and Other Prose (1921-1931) Toulon, France: TO Publishers, 1932), pp.121-126.
that special set of purposes, we see badly and (if uncorrected) degenerately -- in the manner of a puritan."\textsuperscript{13} Simply that if one is going to dance, one cannot separate the head to look at the Arthur Murray diagram, and then expect the feet to step lively into the dance. The sense of it is of the \textit{whole} body, that is to say, both complete \textit{and} sound, the movement, action, perception of the body itself.\textsuperscript{14} It is that kind of knowledge that informs the physician's touch, (note well that it is "physic", not "psychic", the art of healing those things that can be touched, or felt), \textit{tactus eruditus}, the exploratory touch that is gentle and assured through long practice. That touch engages, penetrates -- it is a dance.

Williams, as a doctor was allowed privileged insights into the private workings of a family:

...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 can quickly write down on anything at hand, any piece of paper I can grab.

\textit{Au}, 289.

That urgency comes over into the writing, between consultations at the office, at unlikely hours of very early morning, and the

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 122, 123.

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Charles Olson, \textit{Proprioception}. See above, Chapter II, note 3.
urgency to get it written:

The best stories were written at white heat. I would come home from my practice and sit down and write until the story was finished, ten or twelve pages.

*IWW, 63.*

It is the urgency, when the body is in a state of dis-ease, not just ordinary, functioning all right, but under attack, "various engagements between our battalions of cells playing at this or that lethal maneuver with other natural elements." (Au, 286). In those engagements, the defenses are down, the body weakened and vulnerable; dis-ease "loosens" the attention, removes preconceptions and expectations, and something may creep in, something of beauty.

So, in "Danse Pseudomacabre" (PD, 208), a baby is sick:

> If it lives it will be an idiot perhaps. Or it will be paralysed—or both. It is better for it to die.

There it goes now! The whining has stopped. The lips are blué. The mouth puckers as for some diabolic kiss. It twitches, twitches faster and faster, up and down. The body slowly grows rigid and begins to fold itself like a flower folding again. The left eye opens slowly, the eyeball is turned so the pupil is lost in the angle of the nose. The right eye remains open and fixed staring forward. Meningitis. Acute. The arms are slowly raised more and more from the sides as if in the deliberate attitude before a mad dance, hands clenched, wrists flexed. The arms now lie upon each other crossed at the wrists. The knees are drawn up as if the child were squatting. The body holds this posture, the child's belly rumbling with a huge contortion. Breath has stopped. The body is stiff, blue. Slowly it relaxes, the whimpering cry begins again. The left eye falls closed.
The dance is "mad", "pseudomacabre", and the doctor's observation of it neither clinical nor morbid; it is a statement of the facts, "discerned" by the practised eye of the physician, the physical reality of it. But it is not without beauty, the "diabolic" kiss, and the body "like a flower folding again", just as intestinal bacteria are called flora;\(^\text{15}\) one cannot refuse to dance with it, step by step, whatever the "huge contortion" that is "rumbling" in it. For Williams states:

That which is possible is inevitable. I defend the normality of every distortion to which the flesh is susceptible, every disease, every amputation.\(^\text{16}\)

\[FD, 208.\]

and so:

Everything that varies a hair's breadth from another is an invitation to the dance. Either dance or annihilation. There can be only the dance or ONE.

\[FD, 210.\]

It is the variation, "a hair's breadth", that opens a crack, an opening for the dancer; as he says" "The true value is that peculiarity which gives an object a character by itself."

\[SE, 11.\] So the man of discernment uses that "much more keen

\(^{15}\) Cf. William Blake, \textit{The Marriage of Heaven and Hell}, "Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of truth."
...power which discovers in things those inimitable particles of dissimilarity to all other things which are the peculiar perfections of the thing in question." (SE, 16). Dis-ease is one case of the "more flexible, jagged resort" (SE, 11).17

Dis-ease, dissimilarity, disparity, dissonance, displacement, the prefix "dis-" means "asunder, away, apart, or between, one by one, utterly", as well as a simple negation; so Mrs. Williams' ability to "break life between her fingers" (SE, 5) is a key to engagement and dance. In "Book Four" of Paterson Madame Curie is doing something similar, in her experiments with uranium:

- a furnace, a cavity aching toward fission; a hollow, a woman waiting to be filled

- a luminosity of elements, the current leaping!

Pitchblende from Austria, the valence of Uranium inexplicably increased. Curie, the man, gave up his work to buttress her.

But she is pregnant!

...A dissonance

17 Cf. in "The Desert Music" the lines, "The / jagged desert" and "Let's cut through here--" (PB,110, 111), also Bob Dylan's song "Just like Tom Thumb's blues", which begins "When you're lost in the rain in Juarez" -- that is, Juarez as a "jagged resort". See also Sherman Paul The Music of Survival (Univ. of Illinois Press: Urbana, Chicago, London, 1968), which is "A Biography" of "The Desert Music".
in the valence of Uranium
led to the discovery

Dissonance
(if you are interested)
leads to discovery

P, 206-207.

Are you interested? in the fact, perhaps, a theory, "Dissonance /.../ leads to discovery", or the reality of it, the possible discoveries of an interested approach. Perceive the dissonances and step right in. The "hair's breadth" variation opened, and the engagement ensues -- so she is pregnant, a penetration, fruitfully accomplished. "Poor Joseph, // the Italians say", for he was not interested enough, "a cavity aching / toward fission; a hollow, / a woman waiting to be filled". From the fission of uranium is discovered the "radiant gist" (P, 218), a fruitful discovery, like the unborn child, for someone was not afraid to penetrate. The "gist" is the "true value", a source of heat and light, "that peculiarity which gives an object a character by itself", "without forethought or afterthought but with great intensity of perception." (SE, 5).

Dissonance then is the key. "There can be only the dance or ONE." It is the difference between things that allows the dance. In "The Rose" it is "at the edge of the / petal that love waits", for the edge divides the flesh of the petal from the fluid of space, the two cannot occupy
the same location at the same time, and the tension at the edge is a dissonance; so that when "The fragility of the flower / unbruised / penetrates space", it is an act of love.

Penetration cuts through the outer surfaces and finds inner surfaces, deep inside and tender to the light. It is a great irony then that the "radiant gist" itself is just another surface. But to penetrate is all:

--through metaphor to reconcile the people and the stones.
Compose. (No ideas but in things) Invent!
Saxifrage is my flower that splits the rocks.

CLP, 7.

To "invent" is to come in upon something, an act of making, as Focillon describes the cave man "chipping the flint and fashioning needles out of bone", to grasp the thing in his hand and penetrate to its meaning by inventing an object from it. So saxifrage is the poet's flower, growing in rock clefts, and with its roots penetrating to crack it open; for the poet's invention, if it is ever to "reconcile / the people and the stones", must be relentless as that little plant, to dislodge those

\[18\] Life of Forms in Art, p.69.
Minds like beds always made up,
(more stony than a shore)
unwilling or unable.

P, 13.

by force of imagination. So, in "To Daphne and Virginia",
the poet says:

And I am not
a young man.

My love encumbers me.

It is a love
less than

a young man's love but,

like this box odor
more penetrant, infinitely
more penetrant,
in that sense not to be resisted.

PB, 77.

It is the telling contact, "not to be resisted."

In "The Poem", Williams insists:

It's all in
the sound. A song.
Seldom a song, It should

be a song--made of
particulars, wasps,
a gentian--something
immediate, open

scissors, a lady's
eyes--waking
centrifugal, centripetal

CLP, 33.

"It's all in", you mean he's beat? No, it's "all in / the
sound", sound as a bell, "A song. / Seldom a song. It should", "should" what? Not a song? You mean it should.... But no, "It should // be a song--", a song. A song, "made of / particulars, wasps, / a gentian--", the particulars can be touched, and seen, the sharp edges, the "asp" of "wasps", and the blue flowers, soft, of the gentian, "something / immediate, open", immediate and open, the particulars move along, instantaneous, poof, poof, before your eyes; for the shifts of the poem, between the anticipation and the realization, open up possibilities of perception, and the particulars are there, right there, for you to see. The rhythm of the words, and of the perceptions themselves, the stop and start, as in "A Sort of a Song":

and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.

creates a structure of possible meanings, and movements, all-right, you can go this way or this way or...., to bring the reader to the point where he can look in to the gaps in the poem.

So, in the third section, we find the same kind of shifts, "scissors, a lady's", but it is also the "lady's / eyes--", and they are waking. For it is "open // scissors", and open eyes, "open" and "scissors" widely separated to
dislodge the mind already made up, the attention "loosened".  
"Something / ...open", an open poem, open flower, or scissors,  
to cut through and to gently (as a gentian) open:

The barriers which keep the feet from the dance are  
the same which in a dream paralyze the effort to escape  
and hold us powerless in the track of some murderous  
pursuer. Pant and struggle but you cannot move. The  
birth of the imagination is like waking from a nightmare. Never does the night seem so beneficent.

SE, 18.

And so, wakened, he steps into the dance, "centrifugal, centripetal", the eye's circle and the circle made by the dancers,"  
"they go round and / around" (CLP, 11), like children, seeing  
for the first time ever.

The variation, or dissonance, "leads to discovery", just  
as illness or "defeat" may do; so, in "The Descent":

No defeat is made up entirely of defeat--since  
the world it opens is always a place  
formerlly  
unsuspected. A  
world lost,  
a world unsuspected,  
beckons to new places  
and no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory  
of whiteness  

PR, 73.

The new world, "formerly / unsuspected", is found, or invent-  
ed, as Williams says in "To Daphne and Virginia":

A new world  
is only a new mind.
And the mind and the poem
are all apiece.

PB, 76.

It is a world open to possibility, as Madame Curie's discovery was, or Darwin's, who "opened our eyes / to the gardens of the world, / as they closed them." (PB, 167). Who are they? They are "Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who by divulging the secrets of the atomic bomb made man hostage to its destruction." That is, the possibility they chose is the opposite of Madame Curie's, not pregnant but deathlike, destroying the possibility of life.

Or, the new world is America, and they are the Puritans, the ones who brought their religion with them, who were afraid to come in contact with it, its seductive grandeur; so they drew back from it, hid behind their preconceptions, and effectively closed their senses to it. So, in "Cotton Mather's Wonders of the Invisible World" (IAG, 81-104) they, the good Puritans, fearful for the stability of their careful life, kill off those (they called them witches) who partook of the real "wonders", the magic possibilities of that world.

But there were others, such as Daniel Boone whose "whole soul, with greatest devotion, was given to the New World." (IAG, 139). Or Pere Sebastian Rasles, a Jesuit missionary

who lived with the Indians, and whose perception of the new world allowed him "to be positive, to be peculiar, to be sure, generous, brave—TO MARRY, to touch—...not to sterilize, to draw back, to fear, to dry up, to rot." (IAG, 121).

Or, in "Dedication for a Plot of Ground" (CEP, 171-172), Williams commemorates "the living presence of / Emily Dickinson Wellcome", his English grandmother", who "grubbed this earth with her own hands," fought to stay, and won, well named and well come to the new world; and the poem ends with a warning:

If you can bring nothing to this place but your carcass, keep out.

A carcass is just a thing to be got rid of. But when Mrs. Wellcome died, Williams writes in "The Last Words of my English Grandmother" (CEP, 443-444), her death is not a "passing away", but a last act and a new engagement:

What are all those fuzzy-looking things out there?
Trees? Well, I'm tired of them and rolled her head away.

And Pere Rasles' "fine sense, blossoming, thriving, opening, reviving", is in the spirit of the new world, the openness of his vision, and Williams' too. All are signs of the life of the man, and his love for the Indian "is an affirmation, it is alive." Rasles was "a great MAN. (...)
...a moral source not reckoned with, peculiarly sensitive
and daring in its close embrace of native things." That em-
brace is total, inclusive, an act of love, a penetration to
the inner parts, intimate, and is no different from the em-
brace at the beginning of *Spring and All*:

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

THE DANCE AS MEASURE

In "An Essay on Leaves of Grass" Williams says that:

Verses, in English, are frequently spoken of as measures. It is a fortunate designation as it gives us, in looking at them, the idea of elapsed time. We are reminded that the origin of our verse was the dance—\(^1\) and even if it had not been the dance, the heart when it is stirred has its multiple beats, and verse at its most impassioned sets the heart violently beating. But as the heart picks up we also begin to count. Finally, the measure for each language and environment is accepted.\(^2\)

Measure, in the archaic sense of a dance, as "to tread a measure", is the shape or pattern of that dance movement. Sherman Paul calls measure "the controlling feature of the dance". What he makes clear, and rightly so, is that the measure "is determined by the organic quality of the thing perceived and, in turn, determines the movement, and form, of the poem.\(^3\)

\(^1\)Cf. Focillon: "Language, first experienced by the whole body and mimed in the dance, was also formed by the hands." Life of Forms, p.68


\(^3\)The Music of Survival, p.75
Williams suggests that, like the "folk" dance, there is a measure which is indigenous to "each language and environment"; so, in *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower*, he speaks of the voyage of Columbus to America:

> How the world opened its eyes! 
>   It was a flower
> upon which April 
>     had descended from the skies! 
> How bitter 
> a disappointment! 
> In all, 
>     this led mainly 
> to the deaths I have suffered. 
> For there had been kindled 
>     more minds 
> than that of the discoverers 
>     and set dancing 
> to a measure, 
> a new measure! 
> Soon lost. 
> The measure itself 
> has been lost 
> and we suffer for it. 
> We come to our deaths 
> in silence. 
> The bomb speaks.

*PB*, 167-168.

The bomb is the bitter fruit of that flower. Other minds were not "kindled", men lost the magic power of speech. So, to "come to our deaths / in silence" is not to act, or dance, as Mrs. Wellcome in her last words did dance, but to be dragged there by the voice of the bomb. For something went wrong, the "new measure" was "soon lost", soon after the Europeans arrived, because they did not know what it was, or were too afraid or too clumsy to understand it.
The measure was there, before the "discoverers" found America, born of the new world, just as Tenochtitlan flowered there, "spread its dark life upon the earth of a new world, rooted there, sensitive to its richest beauty, but so completely removed from those foreign contacts which harden and protect, that at the very breath of conquest it vanished." (IAG, 32). The "foreign contacts", like the foreign bodies that take over when one is in a state of disease, might have led to new discoveries, even if Tenochtitlan, "sensitive to its richest beauty", had perished; but the chance was lost, the "foreign contacts" were not "whole" men, willing to step wholly into the dance. That measure, of the new world, was native, and, in some sense, organic, to do with the rhythms of seasons, the flowers that might grow there, and the perceptions of the man who was able to see, as the Indians saw, what was there before him; to shield one's eyes behind religion or law, imported from Europe, was not only to fail to see the measure, but to destroy it.

So the man whose eyes are open looks and sees, and "taught by the largeness of his imagination to feel every form which he sees moving within himself, he must prove the truth of this by expression." (SA, 27). To go back to a much-repeated point, Williams writes in a letter to Kay Boyle;

\(^4\) See above, p.84.
"Poetry is creation of new form—" (SL, 134), and in his "Prologue to Kora in Hell": "Nothing is good save the new." (SE, 21.). And, at the same time, not to be forgotten: "Nothing can grow unless it taps into the soil." (Au, 334). It is to make, of the materials that are there, like Shaker furniture, "of white pine, applewood, birch—what they had" (Au, 334), "totally uninfluenced by anything but the necessity, the total worth of the thing itself, the relationship of the parts to the whole," to make a thing which is an expression of those necessities, the rhythms of the land and life on it, according to that measure, and so, a new thing.

That new thing is not what Whitman accomplished in his poetry:

Nature, the Rousseauists who foreshadowed Whiman, the imitation of the sounds of the sea per se, are a mistake. Poetry has nothing to do with that. It is not nature. It is poetry. Whitman grew into senseless padding, bombast, bathos. His invention ended where it began.

SL, 135-136.

What he did do was "the first thing that was necessary before we could look beyond the stalemate that was created by the classic measure...[viz.] to break it apart." (SL, 331). But he

...was taken up, as were the leaders of the French Revolution before him with the abstract idea of freedom. It slopped over into all their thinking. But it was an idea lethal to all order, particularly to that order which has to do with the poem. Whitman was right in
breaking our bounds but, having no valid restraints to hold him, went wild.

\textit{SE, 339.}

Williams says that Imagism "was not structural: that was the reason for its disappearance." (\textit{SE, 283}); and, in "This Florida: 1924", he writes, apparently in frustration:

And we thought to escape rime by imitation of the senseless unarrangement of wild things--
the stupidest rime of all--

\textit{CEP, 330.}

Much later, he says in "Measure: --a loosely assembled essay on poetic measure" that: "We now know that there is no such thing as free verse. That is no more than a contradiction in terms."\(^5\) So, Williams' objective is to find a new classic measure, an American classic:

There will be none until we invent it. Almost everything I do is of no more interest to me than the technical addition it makes toward the discovery of a workable metric in the new mode.

\textit{SL, 287.}

thus, \textit{Paterson} is, among other things, "a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands" (\textit{P, 10}), to be a model for, perhaps, "a new language, an unnamed language which Whitman could not

\(^5\) \textit{Spectrum}, III, iii (Fall 1959), 155.
control....a new language akin to the New World".6

In his essay "Notes Apropos 'Free Verse'", Robert Creeley discusses the notion of measure in terms not of "assumed senses of literary style", where order, as often as not, means how are you going to fit that into an octave and sestet,7 but of the "basic activity of poetry".8 That is, it is as poet he talks of these things, as well as, as reader, and the poet is the man to bend your ear towards. Creeley stresses the root sense of verse as "a line, furrow, turning -- verte, to turn....", so that a poem, a "free verse" poem, "'turns' upon an occasion intimate with, in fact, the issue of, its own nature rather than to an abstract decision of 'form' taken from a prior instance."9

In the light of that, Williams' poem "The Farmer" can be seen as a description of that "turning", the farmer's previously ploughed field, with all the turns laid out from last year, as opposed to the poet's unprepared ground, in which he must discover (or invent) the shape of his harvest,

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6Whitman: A Collection, pp.150, 151.

7Note Williams' dislike of the sonnet form; as he wrote to James Laughlin: "Order is what is discovered after the fact, not a little piss pot for us all to urinate into - and call ourselves satisfied." (SL, 214).


9Ibid., p.56.
the poem. It is also a demonstration, or enactment, of that process, as the poem "turns" in the field of its composition, and the lines find their shape in the contours of the experience, the poet's experience, as the poem comes to be (to be is to breathe) under his hands.

Creeley suggests a useful parallel in the improvised jazz run, where the music is not bounded by a written score; as, for example, in "Shoot it Jimmy!":

Our orchestra
is the cat's nuts--

Banjo jazz
with a nickelplated
amplifier to
soothe

the savage beast--
Get the rhythm

That sheet stuff
's a lot a cheese.

Man
gimme the key

and lemme loose--
I make 'em crazy

with my harmonies--
Shoot it Jimmy

Nobody
Nobody else

10 See Vivienne Koch, William Carlos Williams (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1950), pp. 51-53, for an account of the reaction of an English critic to this poem.
but me--
They can't copy it

CEP, 269.

The improvised run moves in a realm of possibilities, the limits of which are, for Jimmy, a key to work in, and a rhythm to work around. One sound leads to, or from, another, each one chosen, or appearing, according to the moment of the artist's imagination. It is no different in a dance movement, where each position, or move, leads to, and from, another; and the act of moving involves a choice, however far it may seem to be from the dancer's conscious mind, to choose what move from the range that is possible, and to move it. This is simply composition by field. 11

Jimmy's voice in the poem, and the voice of the poet, imitate the jazz run, "Man / gimme the key // and lemme loose--"; but it is not "wild", as Whitman's was -- it can "soothe // the savage beast--"; for when a piece of music is good, it is described as "tight" -- it is not random. In fact, as Richard Grossinger points out in "The Doctrine of Signatures", "any attempt at randomness is countered by the fact that no condition is random, that any action or thought is instantly textual." 12 So the context, which has the root

11 Cf. p.62 above.
sense of a woven pattern, limits the possibilities of notes and sounds; none of them will be random, or "free" in any abstract or absolute sense. And the shape that results, if the man be good and his music tight, is measure.

Williams lived through what he called "a formative time whose duty it is to lay bare the essentials" (SL, 133), and to discover the forms by which men could live and create. But the world he lived in had lost the knowledge of any unifying standards by which anything, verse or morals, could be measured. He wrote in a letter to John Holmes:

What shall we say more of the verse that is to be left behind by the age we live in if it does not have some of the marks the age has made upon us, its poets? The traumas of today, God knows, are plain enough upon our minds. Then how shall our poems escape? They should be horrible things, those poems. To the classic muse their bodies should appear to be covered with sores. They should be hunchbacked, limping. And yet our poems must show how we have struggled with them to measure and control them. And we must SUCCEED even while we succumb....

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SL, 315-316.

Focillon argues in *The Life of Forms in Art* that the artist must find in the rough material of the world the forms of

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13See p.10 above.

14Cf. Symonds on "choliambi"; "the harmony which subsists between crabbed verses and the distorted subjects with which they dealt--the vices and perversions of humanity--". (P, 53).
his creation; and the converse, that the perceiver find in the forms evidence of their source, that rough material, "the marks the age has made upon us". And this shaping, with the hands, or eye, or ear, is creation -- "Poetry is creation of new form--". So, to measure: "measure serves for us as the key: we can measure between objects; therefore, we know that they exist." (SL, 331). To measure is to hold the thing itself in the hand, to hold it long enough to say, there it is! -- before it is gone again; it is the struggle to hold oneself and a world whole when we are devastated and threatened every day, because there was no way to say what we wanted to say:

\[
\text{It is difficult} \\
\text{to get the news from poems} \\
\text{yet men die miserably every day} \\
\text{for lack} \\
\text{of what is found there.}
\]

PB, 161-162.

and so "We come to our deaths // in silence. / The bomb speaks." (PB, 168).

Williams found a measure that worked, for his writing, late in his life, a flexible measure, which takes into account the variability of the modern world, as, for example, it is expressed in Einstein's theory of relativity.\(^{15}\) It first appears in the passage in Paterson (Book Two, Part III), beginning "the descent beckons / as the ascent beckoned",

\(^{15}\)See, for example, SE, 283, and SL, 332 & 335.
published separately in *The Desert Music and Other Poems* and in *Pictures from Brueghel* as "The Descent" (PP 73-74). This measure is characterized by the three-part line, and the "variable foot" used to measure it, and many of the later poems (*Asphodel* is a notable example) are written in it.

Williams explains the working of the line in a letter to Richard Eberhart (SL, 325-327), and various critics, John Thirlwall is one, \(^{17}\) have written about it.

But the theory of it must always give way to the real thing, the poem itself. For the theory never can account for the result, and no good poet follows a set of rules, even his own rules, without variation. As Williams says in the *Spectrum* essay:

> In all iambics in worthy hands there lurks a triple beat that transforms them into anapests when they are read with a subtle understanding of their true nature. The understanding poet can take advantage of this when it suits his purposes. (...) It has made for variation in the measure which hides from the ear, giving the beat of the heart itself, which is complex and never merely plodding, as the man himself in his deeper nature. \(^{18}\)

Those complexities of rhythm and measure, always to some degree variable, defy codification; if the poem works, then there is no more to say -- as Pound puts it: "LISTEN to the

\(^{16}\) See *IWW*, 80-83, for an account of the poem.

\(^{17}\) See "Ten Years of a New Rhythm", *PE*, 183-184.

\(^{18}\) "Measure", pp. 137, 138.
sound that it makes.\textsuperscript{19}

In "The Poem", then, the rhythms of perception measure out the world; and there is

---something immediate, open

scissors, a lady's eyes - waking centrifugal, centripetal

for in the space between "open" and "scissors", or "a lady's" and "eyes", is a space in which your eye and ear and mind turn to follow the poet's turning -- he holds and turns it in his hand for you, measuring it out, he "gets the measure" of it, not like Prufrock saying "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons," but holds his, and your, attention, to the "particulars" of the actual world, there, before your (and his) eyes.

So, in \textit{Asphodel}, the line moves in triads, each section a foot step, and a perception, and the attention follows, turning here and here as the eye and ear turn:

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.

\textit{PB}, 179.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{ABC of Reading} (New York: New Directions, 1960), p.201.
The man of imagination will step into the dance, or engage the rose. "It is at the edge of the petal that love waits", and so, it is to the edge we go to find it, to the very edge:

But love and the imagination are of a piece, swift as the light to avoid destruction.

PB, 179.

The act, of love, of engagement, of penetration, of the dance, is the act of the man alive. His senses are awake, ("The birth of the imagination is like waking from a nightmare.") and he notices: "Hark! It is the music! Whence does it come? What! Out of the ground?" (KH, 13). It is the ground-music of existence, and if he is alive, he dances:

y they prance or go openly
toward the wood's edges
round and around in rough shoes and farm breeches
mouths agape
Oya!
kicking up their heels

PB, 10.

If the man be a dancer, he dances; if a poet, he follows the dancing movements of the world and imitates it in words:
So a dance is a thing in itself. It is the music that
dances but if there are words then there are two dan­
cers, the words pirouetting with the music.

KH, 32.

The poem, also "a thing in itself", moves in, over, through,
against that music:

The words of the thing twang and twitter to the gentle
rocking of a high-laced hoot 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.

KH, 43.

So now:

Turn back till I tell you a puzzle: 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 dodg­
ing wheels and clouds crossing two ways.

KH, 36.

for

Now is the time
in spite of the "wrong note"
I love you. My heart is
innocent.
And this the first
(and last) day of the world

The birds twitter now anew
but a design
surmounts their twittering.
It is a design of a man
that makes them twitter.
It is a design.

PB, 82.
So, to dance, as the "happy genius" of "Danse Russe":

dance naked, grotesquely
before my mirror
waving my shirt round my head
and singing softly to myself:
"I am lonely, lonely,
I was born to be lonely,
I am best so!"

CEP, 148.

To dance, to the music of "The Botticellian Trees", where
"In summer the song // sings itself // above the muffled
words--" (CEP, 81). For, in "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives", "The dance is sure." (CEP, 195), as sure as can be,
"dancing, dancing as may be credible." (PB, 33).

To conclude: there are perhaps three conclusions -- the
first is from "The Desert Music":

Only the counted poem, to an exact measure:
to imitate, not to copy nature, not
to copy nature

NOT, prostrate, to copy nature
but a dance! to dance
two and two with him--

PB, 109.

and the second is the last lines of the same poem:

And I could not help thinking
of the wonders of the brain that
hears that music and of our
skill sometimes to record it.

PB, 120.
and, at the very end, obdurate, comes the poem (poet), as always, and it (he) is "covered with sores... hunchbacked, limping", to dance, whichever way he (it) can, for

We know nothing and can know nothing
but
the dance, to dance to a measure
contrapuntally,
Satyricaly, the tragic foot.

P, 278.
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