



WILLIAMS' *VITA NUOVA*: *SPRING AND ALL* AS INITIATION POEM, OR
THE RED WHEELBARROW IN CONTEXT

William Carlos Williams, responding to a *Partisan Review* questionnaire in 1939, reminisced about a very precocious love affair: "Me and Dante [sic] loved at the age of--well, anyway she was about nine at the time" [*Interviews* 83]. Couple this with Williams' recollection, in his factually unreliable 1951 *Autobiography*, of youthful times poring over the Gustave Doré illustrations of the *Inferno* in his father's library and failing "to discover from them the anatomical secrets which so fascinated me at the time--the text escaped me" [15]--and one does not have a very promising basis for maintaining this poet's lifelong involvement with Dante. But such is not my purpose.

Although Dante's name appears from time to time in Williams, nowhere does he display anything like detailed intimacy with the texts. Yet Williams was not only aware of Dante from an early age; he was also aware that Dante was the idol of his college friend, Ezra Pound. When Pound departed for Europe, leaving Williams at home, and particularly when Pound took up the cause of a new poetic friend Eliot, who was just as intensely Dantean, Williams must have felt betrayed and jealous. Dante may have been a great poet of the past, he decided, but the expatriates misunderstood him. Dante was great because he celebrated his own nation and its vernacular language: "Why it's the New World itself in the very blood and ghost of Dante's *Vita Nuova*. Blast them all if they can't see it. And they can't. Eliot is at the head of them too. First he runs away from it, and then he looks back with what? . . . with a desire to shut it away

for 'tradition.' Good God!" [*Letters*, 12 July 1933, 141].

Laurence Lipking, in *The Life of the Poet: Beginning and Ending Poetic Careers*, also sees Dante as a poet of beginnings. In this suggestive study of poetic development, Lipking describes a three-stage career pattern, which he calls "Initiation" or the moment of "breakthrough," "Harmonium" or "the moment of summing up," and "Tombeau" or "the moment of passage (when the legacy or soul of a poet's work is transmitted to the next generation)." No poet, he observes, can avoid these testing moments, "moments that question whether his work exists, whether it amounts to anything more than the sum of its parts, and whether it will continue to exist. Most poetic careers include poems that not only illustrate these problems but directly confront and debate them" [ix].

For Lipking, the prototypal "initiation poem" is Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, and his other examples are Blake's *For the Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Yeats's *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*--all works sharing the peculiarity of mixing verse with prose commentary in a single text.

This feature is somewhat misleading in Lipking's study, for several modernist poets have, I think, written substantial "initiation" poems without resorting overtly to prose: Pound's "Mauberley," Crane's "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," Stevens' "Comedian as the Letter C." After Yeats, Williams alone among the great modernists produced a work that fits Lipking's account perfectly: his almost forgotten masterpiece *Spring and All*. The juxtaposition of this text with Dante's *Vita Nuova* is startling, perhaps, but the generic congruence is exact. Even so, the poet's confrontation with prose is, as we shall see, a more complex problem in Williams' development than the simple generic likeness implies.

The integral text of *Spring and All* marks, I believe, the culmination of Williams' early

efforts to establish a distinctive "career," in Lipking's sense. The most fully achieved of a series of longer early works, it completes Williams' poetic initiation, and enables his subsequent development towards *Paterson*. Certainly, *Spring and All* satisfies Lipking's description of the way initiation poems function in a poet's development, and his discussion illuminates this work as the pivotal text, as well as the finest product, of Williams' early career.

I am not insisting on Dante's "influence" in Williams' work, so my argument does not depend on his assumed intimacy with the *Vita Nuova*. There is tantalizing evidence, however, that the *Vita Nuova* was an example present to Williams' mind. Elsewhere, Williams' most extensive treatment of Dante is in his later essay "Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist" (1939). There Williams summons the *Divina Commedia* to measure the stature of a work for which he feels a more natural sympathy, the Spanish *Libro de Buen Amor* by Juan Ruiz, the Archpriest of Hita. Williams draws a contrast of both form and substance. Formally, he notes the "scrupulous order" maintained by Dante, as opposed to the "carefree disorder" of the Spaniard, "going along from point to point like a child picking flowers under a hedge." This looseness may be "very bad," according to some standards, but "it is wise, always, to beware of that sort of order which cuts away too much." In Dante, Williams claims to find a division between the artist and the moralist: "The blessed and the damned are treated by Dante, the *artist*, with scrupulous impartiality. The drawing is the same . . . the same meticulous care for 'the good' whether in heaven or hell, the same address toward the truth." Both writers, he notes, have love as their theme, heavenly and earthly. "But earthly love in its own right (Paolo and Francesca) is condemned in the *Commedia* and celebrated to the full in the *Book*--free to the winds. Dante restricts, the archpriest expands. Dante fastened upon his passion a whole

hierarchy of formal beliefs Yet as an artist he seems to pity Paolo and Francesca by the grace with which he has portrayed them" [*Essays*, 200-205]. Williams almost grudgingly allows Dante's greatness, but sees it emerging despite himself, against the "weather" of his times, which demanded both formal symmetry and religious orthodoxy. These attitudes, frequent of course in Williams, appear throughout *Spring and All*.

More specifically, however, both *Spring and All* and its predecessor *Kora in Hell* are, like the *Vita Nuova*, made up of a series of poems interspersed with prose commentaries. In one of the commentaries in *Kora*, Williams alludes directly to Dante's youthful book, with its argument for the vulgar tongue: "Take Dante and his Tuscan dialect--It's a matter of position. The empty form drops from a cloud, like a gourd from a vine; into it the poet packs his phallus-like argument" [*Imaginations* 75]. Although the text of *Spring and All* seems formally anarchic, one of Williams' best critics, Christopher MacGowan, has without mentioning Dante discerned in its twenty-seven poems a formal structure involving nine triads--a highly Dantesque arrangement [128-29].

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Williams in his opening pages announces his purpose with a flourish: "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" [89/178].¹ Dante begins his work with the often cited phrase "In my book of memory" [3]. If this is, as I suspect, a deliberate echo on Williams' part, it suggests that his

purpose is a conscious inversion of Dante's: to replace the force of "memory" (the past, tradition) with "imagination," the immediate apprehension of present reality. *Spring and All* to be sure lacks a Beatrice, but that is because Dante's Beatrice is dead, and Dante worships only a spiritualized, disembodied memory.

II

In *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic*, Michael André Bernstein shows how the scope of poetry in the first decades of this century was narrowed to a point where it could "no longer deal adequately with 'the extensive totality of life'" [3]. The aesthetic ideals of Pater in England and Poe in America, refined by the *symbolistes* and Mallarmé in France and their Parnassian counterparts in late nineteenth-century England, wrote a poetry capable of expressing exquisite verbal and sensory nuance, but little else; thus, poetry found itself marginalized by the novel, by prose. Pound himself, filled with epic aspirations and having arrived at imagism, in some ways the *reductio ad absurdum* of aestheticism, wondered in print "whether there can be a long imagiste or vorticist poem" [*Gaudier-Brzeska* 94]; and Bernstein's study tells how Pound in *The Cantos* rose to the challenge and reclaimed for the poet equal authority with the novelist or historian. Bernstein extends his discussion to Williams, but focussing exclusively on *Paterson* and the later career, he overlooks Williams' early efforts, roughly contemporary with Pound's, to wrestle with similar problems.

Williams' early poetic initiation, before *Spring and All*, was a long and fairly arduous

process marked by several false, or at least indecisive starts. The first of these was a youthful unpublished "epic" written in imitation of Keats's *Endymion*. This work, which according to Williams' biographer Paul Mariani occupied him for three years, is a grotesque fantasy about a "prince whose entire family had been wiped out by poison administered by the prince's father;" it is "rambling and confused," but it points to the poet's "deeply felt need to erase as effectively as he could his dependence on his parents and to strike out on his own" [53-54].ⁱⁱ The subject, a conspicuous variant of the Freudian family romance, is transposed in later versions into a Bloomian combat with poetic fathers.

"The Wanderer: A Rococo Study" (1914; revised 1917), which stands near the beginning of the published canon, is described by Mariani overtly in Harold Bloom's vocabulary as "Williams' poem of initiation, his early crossing Finally here Keats was submerged in order that Whitman's presence might surface" [113]. The poem (which I see as the second of several attempts at an initiation poem) begins with a crossing on the Brooklyn Ferry of American literary tradition asking, "How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?"ⁱⁱⁱ Like Keats's quester, Williams' also pursues a visionary feminine figure (both of them Romantic avatars of Beatrice); like Whitman's, he also expands his vision in space and time ("Abroad," "Soothsay"). But Williams' speaker, more vigorously than Whitman's, enters the real world of the city ("Broadway") and the harsh realities of political strife ("The Strike") before taking his leap into the "filthy Passaic," where the female figure is revealed not as a romantic vision but an old beggar woman, and the poet is baptized--paradoxically purified in the filth--and born into new life: "For I knew the novitiate was ended/ The ecstasy was over, the life begun." But the real world, Williams soon discovered, is not claimed for poetry so easily.

If Williams was working towards a poetics that celebrated present and local reality, he realized that he also had to redefine the function of the past, of tradition, within a culture. The challenge of Pound and Eliot made this an urgent priority. This challenge he met eventually in the brilliant essays of *In the American Grain* (1925), where he constructs his own "usable past." Van Wyck Brooks' influential 1918 essay, which put this phrase into currency, differs from T.S. Eliot's subsequent "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) in ways most useful to Williams: Brooks demands a homegrown American "tradition" instead of Eliot's Eurocentric one; furthermore, he sees the past as, at least to a degree, the creation of the present, not as an "ideal" coherence. The past, he argues, "has no objective reality; it yields only what we are able to look for in it" [382].^{iv} *In the American Grain* is clearly in line with Brooks on this point, except that for Williams, however "meagre" the birthright of the American writer may be, it is still a present danger: "If history could be that which annihilated all memory of past things from our minds it would be a useful tyranny." But since the past maintains a subjective existence, willy-nilly--"that of the dead which exists in our imaginations has as much fact as we have ourselves"--since it "lives in us practically day by day, we should fear it." But academic history (Brooks too decries the history of "the professors") "follows governments and never men. It portrays us in generic patterns, like effigies or the carvings on sarcophagi It is concerned with the one thing: to say everything is dead" [188-89]. Williams' project, then, is to confront the past in order to combat the past. Williams' intense questioning of history prepared him for the writing of *Paterson*, paradoxically one of the most thoroughly historicized of American poems by this anti-historical poet.

But even before *In the American Grain* and the essays of Brooks and Eliot, Williams had

broached this subject in a key poem, a poem that explicates "the carvings on sarcophagi," virtually ignored by Williams' commentators, called "History" (1917)--a text that belongs with Pound's "Near Perigord," Frost's "The Black Cottage" and Eliot's "Gerontion" among the profound shorter meditations on metahistory, the so-called "crisis of historicism," written during this period. This complex poem, dark with shadows of Shelley's "Ozymandias," is set in a museum housing stone relics of Middle Eastern and Egyptian divinities. The description of the museum with its parkside setting strongly suggests the Metropolitan Museum of New York.⁶ The day is Sunday and the museum visitors are "worshippers," but as they enter they are greeted with "the stink of stale urine," and the museum is simultaneously a place where the past is worshipped and a public toilet:

I come here to mingle faience dug
 from the tomb, turquoise-colored
 necklaces and wind belched from the
 stomach; delicately veined basins
 of agate, cracked and discolored and
 the stink of stale urine!

Enter! Elbow in at the door.
 Men? Women?
 Simpering, clay fetish-faces counting
 through the turnstile.

Ah!

Williams, with his medical humour, plays on *double entendres*, the gender labels on washroom doors, "faces" punning on "feces," the "delicately veined basins" resembling plumbing fixtures, and the final exclamation being ambivalently a sign of either aesthetic emotion or bathroom relief. The museum is a shrine for waste.

Once inside this repository, Williams' speaker contemplates the sarcophagus of

Uresh-Nai, "built to endure forever." Uresh-Nai, we learn, was once priest to the goddess Mut, "Mother of All." (Do I detect an allusion to Duchamp's Dadaist urinal, exhibited in 1917 under the name "R. Mutt"? Any reference I've consulted gives the name of the goddess as Nut.) The speaker questions the arrogance that would transcend time, an arrogance that has in fact "endured six thousand years," and imagines the dead priest's voice giving commands for his coffin. Its construction may be an act of love, but

love is an oil to embalm the body.
 Love is a packet of spices, a strong-
 smelling liquid to be squirted into
 the thigh. No?
 Love rubbed on a bald head will make
 hair--and after? Love is
 a lice comber!

Gnats on dung!

Williams, playing ambivalently on the contrast between the preserving qualities of embalming fluid and the short shelflife of semen, deflates the romantic pretensions of love as an eternal force into comical superstitions (with a sidelong glance at Rimbaud's "Chercheuses des Poux").

The third and fourth sections of this multi-vocal poem further complicate the contrasting voices, the speaker now addressing a second person "you," while the dramatic monologues from the tomb again claim eternal life and love:

Here I am with a head high and a
 burning heart eagerly awaiting
 your caresses, whoever it may be,
 for granite is not harder than
 my love is open, runs loose among you!

Thus the ancient priest, ironically transposed across an ocean and put on public display: but Williams' voice can find in the priest's desire for eternal life only denial of the vitality of natural

cycles:

Your death?--water
 spilled upon the ground--
 though water will mount again into rose leaves--
 but you?--would hold life still,
 even as a memory, when it is over.

The poem, however, ends outside the museum, in the city park (a scene foreshadowing the first book of *Paterson*) where the speaker affirms the true nature of time. This "northern scenery is not the Nile," perhaps, but

Are not these Jews and--Ethiopians?
 The world is young, surely! Young
 and colored like--a girl that has come upon
 a lover! Will that do?

The question returns us to the present with a jolt--and realization that the inhabitants of this city in their ethnic diversity are the living, free descendants of the museum figures and their enslaved populations, Jew and black: The past is alive in them.

Kora in Hell, which inaugurated Williams' great decade of experiment in the 1920's, is his first book-length "poem." Its inexplicable omission from the 1986 *Collected Poems* obscures its crucial importance in the poet's development. Before *Kora*, Williams had published three small miscellaneous collections of short lyrics, including the discarded 1909 volume of juvenilia, but no extended work (apart from "The Wanderer"). *Kora* marks Williams' most concerted effort before *Spring and All* to break through to "reality" by breaking the confines of the autonomous, or in Bakhtinian terms "monological," lyric poem.

The opening "Prologue," which has received more critical attention than the prose poems that follow, carries on Williams' argument with Pound and Eliot, as well as with several

others--including H.D., Marianne Moore, and Stevens. It is a personal manifesto not only defining the kind of poem Williams intended to write, but, more importantly, giving those poems a *raison d'être*, the context of a poetics which denounces any repressions or impediments to creative power: poetry is not, *pace* H.D., "a very sacred thing;" a book of poems is not, *pace* Stevens, "a damned serious affair": "There is nothing sacred about literature, it is damned from one end to the other I'll write whatever I damn please, whenever I damn please and as I damn please and it'll be good if the authentic spirit of change is on it" [*Imaginations* 13-15].

The texts that follow are labelled "improvisations," and Williams' recollections in 1958 emphasize their spontaneity: "For a year I used to come home and no matter how late it was before I went to bed I would write something" [*Imaginations* 3]. Perhaps the most astonishing fact about these improvisations is that they are not a tissue of clichés. But this release from inhibitions is clearly Williams' defence against the aesthetic requirements of Poundian imagism, which focuses on craft and verbal concentration. Quite aside from the biographical fact of Williams' full-time medical career, the advantage of such a program is clear. Michael Benedikt, in the introduction to his anthology *The Prose Poem*, emphasizes the genre's psychological release from formal constraints: "The attention to the unconscious, and to its particular logic, unfettered by the relatively formalistic interruptions of the line break, remains the most immediately apparent property of the prose poem" [48]. One might not think of the free verse of the *Al Que Quiere!* poems as a formal constraint, but such an objection would be shallow: The printed format of the poems, the insistence on the meaning of line ends, the aura of "poem," still had to be questioned.^{vi}

Formally, the genre of prose poem seems inevitable for Williams (who had read both

Rimbaud and Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*). Free verse itself, remember, was still a tentative experimental form circa 1920. The relation of free verse to prose poem is one of complementary opposition: If one function of free verse is to undo and make visible the conventions of verse, preserving only the lineation, so one function of the "prose poem" is to undo and make visible the conventions of prose, preserving only the justified margins. Free verse and prose poetry together, wholly dependent as they are on print, mark the farthest remove of poetry from any pretension to speech or song toward the direction of pure writing. The conventions of prose, at least as they are found in ordinary narrative or expository prose, uphold ideals of transparency, conciseness, and linearity. But Williams' writings in *Kora* fulfil Pound's admonition, quoted in the prologue: "The thing that saves your work is opacity, and don't forget it" [*Imaginations* 11]. Williams' poems present "prose" which is not transparent but opaque--non-sequential, non-rational, non-referential, each segment followed by an "explanation" that fails to explain anything.

This more formalistic way of considering the hybrid genre of prose poem suggests a more complex dual purpose in Williams' development than Benedikt's simple emphasis on liberation from formal constraints. The ideal of spontaneity, seconded by Williams himself, seems to imply a direct presentation of lyric subjectivity in an intense, autonomous and monological text; yet the prose itself--the medium of the novel and of expository non-fiction--subverts this effort. This is the direction Jonathan Monroe pursues in *A Poverty of Objects: The Prose Poem and the Politics of Genre*: the prose poem rejects poetry's "dream of itself as a pure *other* set apart in sublime isolation" [19]; instead, "because it gestures toward opening up literature to prosaic speech, themes, and subject matter previously considered unworthy of aesthetic attention, the

prose poem serves to legitimate and, at the same time, undermine literary culture" [22].^{vii} The genre, he speculates, perhaps appears at historical moments "when the lyric and the lyrical self seem most sublimely autonomous, detached, set apart from reality" [28]. The relevance of Monroe's whole discussion to Williams' poetic programme and to *Kora* specifically seems obvious, though Monroe, oddly, mentions Williams only in passing. When Pound asked his famous question whether there can be a long imagist poem, he answered it himself with his own initiation poem "Mauberley," and the first cantos, which found their own way to assimilate the prosaic. The prose poems of *Kora* constitute Williams' parallel attempt to confront the same dilemma.

But *Kora* was, I think, only one point in Williams' early development, not its culmination.

The best critique is his own, in *Spring and All*: "I let the imagination have its own way to see if it could save itself The virtue of the improvisations is their placement in a world of new values--their fault is their dislocation of sense, almost complete" [116-17/203]. Williams' pursuit of opacity led him into nonsense. The prose poetry of *Kora*, liberating as it was, did not open to him the present, realistic world of prose fiction that, as Bernstein argued, had been closed to poetry. Laurence Lipking's intuition about the centrality of prose to the modernist poet is sound. The modernist poet is necessarily obsessed with relationships between verse and prose: Almost every one of the major modernist long poems confronts "the prosaic" one way or another.

The Cantos, *Paterson*, *The Sea and the Mirror*, *The Anathémata*, *Helen in Egypt*--all incorporate chunks of prose; the *Four Quartets* alternate between "lyric" and "prosaic" passages; the *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* thematize "prose" as a metaphor for the everyday. The assimilation of "prose" seems one of the essential factors in the success of the

modernist poet.

III

Although *Kora in Hell* exhibits strong elements of Dadaist subversiveness, both Williams and Pound, as Christopher MacGowan has noted, "differed radically from the European Dadaists in their continued insistence upon the fundamental value of art as a mode of expression" [96]. In *Spring and All*, Williams discovered a format that could release his inhibitions, his subversive intentions, and at the same time maintain the full claims of art. The surface of the text is full of "fooling around"--in Williams' misleading phrase. Chapters are numbered in no order, numbers repeated, even printed upside down; sentences are left hanging. As William Marling has noted, the Dada influences in Williams' milieu were highly typographical, "prevalent in Stieglitz' publications, especially the Picabia-edited *391*" [175]. But this prose, far more fully than the *Kora* prologue, in fact articulates "a subtle theory of poetry which rejects both the mirror and the lamp, both the classical theory of art as imitation and the romantic theory of art as transformation." In its place (the words are J. Hillis Miller's), Williams proposes "a new *objectivist* art in which a poem is 'Not prophecy!/ Not prophecy!/ but the thing itself!'" [309-10]. Rejecting what he calls the "beautiful illusion," Williams sets himself the task of breaking through the "constant barrier [of language] between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world" [88-89/177]. And the poems, among them some of Williams' most celebrated, interact with this contextualization of prose in such a way that the

whole of *Spring and All* is a far more imposing achievement than either the prose or the poems taken separately.

Edward Said's analysis of poetic beginnings offers valuable guidance here. The first career steps that he describes build, I think, toward Lipking's moment of the initiation poem in a way that closely mirrors Williams' breakthrough in *Spring and All*. As the writing proceeds, notes Said, the writer first finds himself increasingly concerned with knowing whether his course is the "right" one. "Ought he, for instance, to be producing one kind of sequence of works, or another? Does a given subject attract him for the right reasons? Or the wrong ones?" [250]. Then, he continues, there comes a time when the writer "becomes aware of certain idiomatic patterns in the work, or even of his work's idiolect." The writer learns how to "be himself in ways that have become habitual for him because of the work he has already done" [254-55]. By the time of *Spring and All*, when Williams had added a fourth collection of lyrics to his work (*Sour Grapes*, 1921), he had fully established his "idiolect," his personal "style," his "voice," which Said defines as "the extended signature of a writer, his characteristic way of connecting signs to one another" [254].

This step prepares for the next, when "the speech of a text emerges at a midpoint in the writer's career, after a certain amount of his writing has appeared as writing only--that is, as non-speech At a crucial mid-point in the career, the writer's text *has itself become a discourse*, a praxis by which statements can be made Discourse not only 'takes over the expression of temporality, but it creates the category of person' And this can only occur if the text has already acquired the volume to authorize statements, or utterances, or further writing, that confirm the text as text" [157-8]. Mere length, in other words, has its rewards. This

strikes me as a good reason for the necessity of long poems, poems massive enough to constitute within themselves the discourse and the "voice," long enough to constitute within themselves the authorship of their author. Paradoxically of course, in many modernist poems like *Spring and All* or the major work of Pound and Eliot, this authorial voice comprises a fragmented multiplicity of apparent voices.

Another approach to this development is suggested by Tilottama Rajan's important article "Romanticism and the Death of Lyric Consciousness." Rajan, borrowing terms from Bakhtin, argues that "pure lyric is a monological form, where narrative and drama are set in a space of difference As a purely subjective form, [lyric] is marked by the exclusion of the other through which we become aware of the difference of the self from itself. . . . Moreover, since lyric, in Hegel's analysis, is based on a hermeneutics of feeling which allows the author to reproduce his own mood in his hearer, lyric utterance communicates internally to a reader who is an echo within the poem and not a separate voice." A full semiotics of genre, says Rajan, "would see the pure lyric as using its proximity to song in order to mute the gaps between signifier and signified by conferring on the words the illusory unity of a single voice" [196].^{viii}

Rajan, whose focus is the Romantics, takes this starting point to demonstrate how those poets succeeded in placing their lyrics in situations that resist monological reading, that demand inter-textual, inter-discursive reading--as when Blake added the *Songs of Experience* to the *Songs of Innocence*, or Wordsworth absorbed "The Boy of Winander" into *The Prelude*. But she does not refer to the later Romantic tradition emphasized by Michael André Bernstein, the tradition stemming from Poe and Pater (who read *The Prelude* as a series of brilliant but fragmentary "poems" embedded in so much prose), which reasserted the monological nature of lyric. This

tradition, which produced Mallarmé and his English contemporaries of the Nineties, strove for brevity, purity, and intensity; and the imagist poetic, especially as practised by Williams' friends Pound and H.D., continued this line of development, even while proclaiming itself a poetry that re-entered the real world.

In imagist poems like Pound's "The Return" or H.D.'s "Oread," we are presented with evocations of a subjective, mythical world, in texts that, though written in free verse, nonetheless recreate the aural internal voice of monological lyric:

Whirl up, sea--
whirl your pointed pines,
splash your great pines,
on our rocks,
hurl your green over us,
cover us with your pools of fir.

H.D.'s well known poem "Oread" creates a unique auditory form non-symmetrically, without benefit of stanza or rhyme. Its parallel structures ("Whirl . . . whirl," "pines . . . pines") extend into echoic sequences ("Whirl . . . hurl . . . fir," "great pines . . . "green . . . pools") that turn back on themselves ("over us/ cover us"). This careful cultivation of traditional sound effects preserves the poem's proximity to song, its aspiration to the condition of music, counteracting its non-metricity and ensuring its acceptability as "lyric."

Only one of Williams' poems in *Spring and All*, I think, operates this way:

petals aslant darkened with mauve

red where in whorls
petal lays its glow upon petal
round flamegreen throats

petals radiant with transpiercing light
contending

above

the leaves
reaching up their modest green
from the pot's rim

and there, wholly dark, the pot
gay with rough moss [96/184].

This poem is framed by its movement from "darkened" to "light" and back to "dark," and by its echoing parallel repetitions of "petals" and "pot." Within this structure one hears the echoes of "mauve"/"above," "where"/"whorls," and the assonantal sequences "whorls"/"glow"/"throats" and "leaves"/"reaching"/"green." But Williams rarely shows this kind of interest in the intricate interplay of phonemes; more typically, his language is flat, unmelodious, stripped not only of the metaphor, connotation, and symbolism that he decries in the prose passages, but of the aural melodiousness of traditional lyric.

Paradoxically, in order to break the "constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world" [88/177], Williams must raise the reader's consciousness of his medium of perception, of writing as writing. His call in the prose for "an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations," for example, is followed by a poem (V) beginning "Black winds from the north/ enter black hearts." But after trying to achieve the innocent seeing (that sensory *tabula rasa* of Stevens' "Snow Man," who is able "not to think/ Of any misery in the sound of the wind"), Williams' poem ends in failure, a "winter casing of grief," a lapse into crude symbolism dismissed with the comment, "How easy to slip/ into the old mode." Williams dramatizes the confining habit of symbolism.

The next poem (VI), however, an *ars poetica* for the whole text, turns instead to the very

"codes" (the poem employs the Barthesian term) of the written language:

No that is not it
 nothing that I have done
 nothing
 I have done

is made up of
 nothing
 and the diphthong

ae

together with
 the first person
 singular
 indicative

of the auxiliary
 verb
 to have [103-4/191]

If this is "lyric," it is most unsonglike. It is an insistent, self-conscious denial of Rajan's "lyric utterance [which] communicates internally to a reader who is an echo within the poem and not a separate voice" [196]. Lyric subjectivity becomes here a mere diphthong.

Similarly, the brilliant poem beginning "The rose is obsolete" not only denies all the familiar connotations of the most poetical of flowers, but it does so in a broken rhetoric that calls attention to the virtual inarticulacy of its own language: Its figuration depends on the fortuitousness of pun,

whither? It ends--

the brokenness of anacoluthon,

But if it ends
 the start is begun

the stifling of aposiopesis,

The place between the petal's
edge and the

and the capitulation of paradox,

The fragility of the flower
unbruised
penetrates space [107-9/195-96]

The poem is as much about the difficulty of writing as it is about the flower itself.

The alternation of prose and verse is itself, of course, Williams' principal means of maintaining the reader's consciousness of the writing medium. These two forms of writing define each other by opposition, yet at the same time dramatize the breakdown of definition. As Jonathan Monroe observes, the prose poem, "both prose and poetry, but neither prose nor poetry exclusively," is "the place of confrontation where the distinction between these threatens to collapse. It is also the place where the distinction doggedly maintains itself despite itself The prose poem depends for its very existence not only on the continued difference of its two defining terms but even on their continued oppositional status" [20]. Thus Williams' strategy of setting highly prosaic "poems"--poems whose very status as "poetry" was contentious in 1920--within a context of "prose," whose status as prose is subverted by Dadaist dislocations appropriate to the genre of "prose poem," forces the reader to contemplate the conventions, in their operation and in their absence, of each of these genres.

Yet while one's consciousness of writing as writing in *Spring and All* is enforced by the lyrical-theoretical prose, this should not obscure the effect of the sequencing of lyrics that, instead of existing for themselves alone, seem to talk to each other. These poems, writes James

Breslin in a pioneering analysis of the work as an integral text, are "striking for their toughness and spontaneity, their abrupt and radical shifts of tone and direction" [50]. Poems XIV and XVI, for example, both deal with death, first from a male perspective, intellectually, as if ordered and prettified by a mortician:

of death
 the barber
 the barber
 talked to me [126/212]

then from the female (a figure who resembles Eliot's Sibyl),

O passionate cotton
 stuck with
 matted hair

Elysian slobber
 from her mouth
 upon
 the folded handkerchief

I can't die

--moaned the old
 jaundiced woman
 rolling her
 saffron eyeballs

I can't die
 I can't die [129/215]

Between these two is a poem that slyly depicts the promises of religion in terms of the Hollywood movie industry:

The decay of cathedrals
 is efflorescent
 through the phenomenal
 growth of movie houses

whose catholicity is
 progress since
 destruction and creation
 are simultaneous

without sacrifice
 of even the smallest
 detail even to the
 volcanic organ [127/213]

The parallel is maintained not only through coincidental notations like the theater organ, but through sustained use of liturgical vocabulary. Beginning with the apparently colloquial use of "phenomenal" (which suggests phantoms, appearances), we hear "catholicity," "sacrifice," "schism," "perpendicular" (as in Gothic architecture), "witness," "incense," "intoned." Thus the art of film, which pretends to an ultimate degree of realism (the poem also mentions Tolstoi), is unfolded as yet another non-transparent medium of illusion.

Another sequence (XIX-XXII) contrasts male and female erotic emblems, moving from satyr-like boys wearing "two-horned lilac blossoms/ in their caps--or over one ear" [135/221] (the poem subverting elegiac connotations of the flower recalled from Whitman, or perhaps from Eliot's "lilacs out of the dead land"), to the oceanic feminine:

The sea that encloses her young body
 ula lu la lu
 is the sea of many arms

The flesh is firm that turns in the sea
 O la la
 the sea that is cold with dead men's tears--
 Deeply the wooing that penetrated
 to the edge of the sea
 returns in the splash of the waves

a wink over the shoulder
 large as the ocean--

with wave following wave to the edge

coom barroom-- [136-37/222-23]

The immediate literary references here again include Eliot ("Wallala leialala"), the Sirens episode of *Ulysses*, and perhaps Poe's "Ulalume." This is followed by an ironic look at heaven:

one day in Paradise
a Gipsy

smiled
to see the blandness

of the leaves--
so many

so lascivious
and still [137-38/223]

The poem, slight as it is, is clearly heightened in its effect by the eroticized landscapes of the previous two, preparing the fine dissonance between the words "lascivious" and "still." This is Williams' version of Keats's frozen lovers on the Grecian urn, or Stevens' impossible heaven in "Sunday Morning" ("Does ripe fruit never fall?"). The gypsy, who reappears in poem XXIV, is here followed without break by Williams' most famous text:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens [138/224]

What is the effect of contextualizing this poem within the sequence? In isolation, the

poem is a visionary gesture. But how does its context fill the open container of "so much depends"? One might observe the continuities: Does the final "and still" in the gypsy poem have the finality of closure? Or an upward intonation, meaning "and yet"? Should we note the linking anaphora: "so many . . . so lascivious . . . so much depends." One might claim that the movement from the gypsy's unsatisfactory paradise by contrast affirms the values of solid earth. Or one might emphasize the movement from the unchanging stillness of paradise to the fleeting epiphanies of temporal life. Or one might contrast the erotic excitation of the first poems with these still images of domestic satisfaction.^{ix} Whatever the interpretive claim, the certainty is that this poem, so often used to illustrate the autonomy of imagist insights, is altered and enlarged by its context within the whole of *Spring and All*.

Williams continued to write short poems, a great many of them, and he published them in collections without the support of prose connecting tissue. But after *Spring and All*, he had without question established a "career" in a way that the author of *Al Que Quiere!* had not. Subsequent volumes, though they might still have on their own the appearance of mere "miscellany," which Stevens had criticized in the early Williams, would become contextualized automatically within the career as a whole, with *Spring and All* as its manifest point of departure, its annunciation of a poet's new life.

Spring and All is the crucial "initiation" text in Williams' early development not only because it articulates his poetics most fully and exemplifies them in its poems, but because it gave Williams an ample stage for acting out his authorial personae in all their complexity, and because it allowed him to break out of the self-enclosing boundaries of monological lyric. Williams in *Spring and All*, as Laurence Lipking says a poet must do in his initiation poem,

directly confronts and debates problems most urgent to his own authorship: he affirms that his poems do exist, unique in their voicing, and that they together amount to much more than the sum of their parts.

Lipking's third question--whether the work will continue to exist--is, through one of the catastrophic accidents in the history of modernism, more problematical: *Spring and All*, published in France in 1923 in an edition of scarcely two hundred copies, was not reprinted entire until 1970. It thus missed its moment for becoming the classic of modernism that it ought to have been--the alternative to Eliot's great initiation poem of 1922. One wonders what the development of poetic modernism would have been if "The Waste Land" itself had suffered a similar fate.

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NOTES

i. Page numbers are given first for the text in *Imaginations* and then for the *Collected Poems*.

ii. Mariani quotes two short passages; the MS is at the Beinecke Library.

iii. Williams' "January Morning" (1917) is a similar rewriting of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

iv. There is some discussion of Williams and Brooks in Bryce Conrad, *Refiguring America: A Study of William Carlos Williams' 'In the American Grain'* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1990), especially chapter 1.

v. The editors of Williams' *Collected Poems* refer to an article on the recently purchased sarcophagus in the *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*: the occupant of the sarcophagus (whose mummy had disappeared) was one Uresh-nofer, priest of the goddess Mut; he was a kind of priest whose "standing as the highest class of Egyptian priesthood is certain" [118, 120]. Williams conflates Mut with the sky-goddess Nut, shown bending over the earth, but the article contributes little else of detail. One exception to the critical silence on this important poem is William Doreski, *The Modern Voice in American Poetry*, who sees the poem as early use of Williams' Dadaist collage technique, representing "a clean break with the visionary-romantic poetic he briefly embraced as a novice" [60].

vi. For rewarding discussion of verse form in Williams, see Stephen Cushing, *William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure*.

vii. I am indebted to my colleague Lorraine DiCicco for bringing Monroe's book to my attention, as well as for several other suggestions in the preparation of this paper.

viii. I am aware that in erecting my argument on a foundation provided by Lipking, certain risks arise introducing Bakhtin by the back door.

The two writers have radically divergent views on the constitution of "authorship." Bakhtin's concept of the author is embedded in his dialogical model of the reader's relation to a text, the author in the text being neither a biological person, nor a character, but existing, invisible, on a separate plane (see Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, chapter 3, especially pages

87-94). Lipking's is closer to the traditional concept of the author as producer of a series of texts through a career, which is tied in certain necessary ways to the biological life of their writer. For my purposes, however, I see no functional incompatibility between the two, insofar as both Bakhtin and Lipking (and myself as well) understand that the "author" is necessarily a readerly construct from a number of texts.

ix. I wrote this before reading Burton Hatlen's remarks on the two poems, which he sees as a pair, in "Openness and Closure in Williams's *Spring and All*." His article examines a tension in the work between a European, or closed, poetic and an American, or open, one.