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Agonized Approaches to the Moment: William Carlos Williams, the Camera, and the Dream of a Natural Poem

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agonized approaches to the moment

*William Carlos Williams,
the Camera,
and the Dream of a Natural Poem*

Nearly all writing, up to the present, if not all art, has been especially designed to keep up the barrier between sense and the vaporous fringe which distracts attention from its agonized approaches to the moment.

William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*

Life is not about significant details, illuminated by a flash, fixed forever. Photographs are.

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

A Polemic

What do we see when we look at a photograph? And why do so many people, especially writers and readers, see a threat when they look into the photographic image?

This first question's banality reveals its urgency: we are too used to photographs, to their daily presence in our lives and in our sense of vision. If photography historian Graham Clarke is right to summarize the contemporary condition as "a world dominated by visual images" and photography as a "pervasive" currency of experience, we should be interested in the photograph's near invisibility (11). Why do we so casually accept it as the truest way to represent the world and, often, ourselves?

Humanity has appropriately marveled at our newfound ability to "record, rather than paint, trace, or draw an image" (Clarke 11). But we have become too entranced in the photograph, whose chemical and mechanical processes seem to generate a truth more fundamental than any of the other representational arts and whose ubiquity affects the very way we perceive the world. Too often, we lose sight of the fact that photography, too, is just another image, another "illusion" (Clarke 11). We forget the photograph possesses a unique "relationship to and over nature" and reflects, as much as nature, "the way *we* seek to order and construct the world," which Susan Sontag, in her landmark 1973 critique *On Photography*, flatly terms "aggression" (Clarke 11, emphasis mine, Sontag 7).

Sontag is not the only writer to see the photograph's easy realism, especially in applications like the Hollywood movie, advertising images, and network television, as dangerous to the role of words in our everyday lives. She observes that a

generation born amongst photos is one that “lingers unregenerately in Plato’s cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth” (3).

W.J.T. Mitchell describes this conflict between visual artists and writers as being between “natural” and “conventional” signs. Presumably, the visual arts create natural, or mimetic, signs that directly copy the physical world’s appearance – its surface. Language operates through conventional signs that have arbitrary relationships to the real world and possess meaning only because they are socially agreed to (75). This removal from the physical world, proponents of the word argue, makes humans “capable of articulating complex ideas, stating propositions, telling lies, expressing logical relations, whereas images can only show us something in mute display” (79).

Photography’s danger is that its super-mimetic ability to copy the surfaces of objects, especially as commandeered by consumer-culture producers, the technocracy, and increasingly authoritarian governments, threatens to dwarf its metaphysical poverty. We image-consumers see the photograph as a natural sign, a “replication,” and we do not wonder *what is missing, what does the photograph not show?* (Clarke 23). Each photograph is “framed by a set of ideological assumptions and values” that, by definition, cannot be demonstrated (ibid.). We must learn to read photographs, both what they show and what they silently elide, better.

Or we might simply learn to read better. After painting, reading has been most threatened by photography. But while we know how painting reacted to and ultimately subsumed the photograph (the rise of Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, etc. al.), literature’s synthetic relationship to the photograph has been grossly misunderstood.

Reading is as adaptive an art as painting. And as readers and writers, it is too late and too passive to simply bemoan the camera, the movie as triumphant imaginative rivals. There are fluid points in the narrative of the photograph's reign over the arts - sites at which we can point and say, *here, things have been irrevocably changed*. Here, we can begin to understand what is lost and what is gained when literature responds to the new mechanics of vision.

William Carlos Williams and the Photograph

William Carlos Williams, who was among the first to witness painting's revolutionary response to photography and who was close friends with America's first important photographer, pioneered a linguistic approach to the photograph. Yet his radical new style – clearly different from the other great Modernists he sometimes befriended but more often hated – has been misunderstood. Williams' shocking and often pedestrian-seeming word choices have too often been categorized as "American" rather than contextualized as an appropriation of the photograph's dual abilities to emphasize and isolate the physical world.¹ Williams' innovative lines have too often been read as echoing Cubism or the breath and are over-looked as being shaped by the fast but penetrating glance, a technique stolen from the camera.

Williams' major work began only a few years after he visited New York City's pivotal 1913 Armory Show, where Europe's conception of modern art famously disembarked onto American shores. Looking back after nearly fifty years, Williams

¹ Marjorie Perloff indicates that Williams' early poems are often characterized as "easy" Imagist lyrics, pleasant little poems that lack the 'depth' of, say, the poetry of Stevens or Eliot or Dickinson" ("William" 160). On this point, we agree: to think Williams is easy is to completely avoid his relationship to the visual and to simplify how language invokes the visual. It is to give credence to the photograph's claim to be a superior signifier, one whose natural relationship to the world William invokes without complicating.

still recalled the Armory Show as pivotal in his development, writing in his autobiography of seeing Duchamp's famous readymade, *Fountain*,

a magnificent cast-iron urinal, glistening of its white enamel. The story then current of this extraordinary and popular young man was that he walked daily into whatever store struck his fancy and purchased whatever pleased him—something new—something American. Whatever it might be, that was his “construction for the day. ... The “Nude Descending a Staircase” is too hackneyed for me to remember anything clearly about it now. But I do remember how I laughed out loud when first I saw it, happily, with relief.

(134)

Here Williams reports of being struck by Duchamp's *Fountain* and “relieved” by, if eventually numb to, Duchamp's famous painting. Later in life, Williams was to confess greater joy in *Nude Descending a Staircase*, saying that amongst all the “revolutionary canvasses” of Europe, only Duchamp's painting made him feel “as if an enormous weight had been lifted from my spirit for which I was infinitely grateful” (Dijkstra, 9).

Duchamp's famous painting, which overlaps static frames – photos – of a body in motion, clearly appropriates the camera's vision. And a readymade – a toilet floating on a white wall in a gallery – is a sort of three-dimensional photograph. Williams reacted to these pieces' focus on and isolation of everyday objects – the descending human figure, the toilet. But Williams may have been too close to painting for many of his admirers to recognize his growing awareness of the possibilities of the photograph. Marjorie Perloff, discussing this same autobiographical scene, attributes Williams' “relief” to his less significant realization “that art need no longer deal with

exalted subject matter,” as if the artistic freedom Williams sought was the liberty to speak about toilets (“Williams” 170). She completely ignores the sense of objectness, the tautological state of being only an object, that both these visual works strengthen, and how this objectness might relate to Williams’ own declaration, “No ideas but in things!” a famous Williams anthem that Perloff skeptically devalues (159).² While such a swerve from a holistic treatment of Williams’ interest in the visual is common, it also misconstrues both his manifest priorities and a central thread of his work. Williams’ interest in purely Cubist spaces was short-lived. His interest in the photographic presentation of objects lasted until his last book.

But we have begun this story too quickly. Let us start from the beginning, with the pivotal friendship of Williams and the first “modern” American photographer, Alfred Stieglitz. Stieglitz was not just an artist in his own right, but a medium through which most of the New York avant-garde was connected: he was director of the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, more famously called the 291 and another important port for European art; he was married to painter Georgia O’Keeffe; and he surrounded himself with many of New York’s most capable painters, photographers, and writers. To cite just one example of Stieglitz’s enormous reach, he published two of Gertrude Stein’s now-famous (and famously difficult) “portraits of painters,” her first major magazine publications, in 1912 (Dijkstra 13).

Stieglitz is usually mentioned in Williams’ criticism as the individual who exposed Williams to European art. I want to suggest a different and more central relationship: Stieglitz, through his photography, showed Williams how to see. While

² Interestingly, Perkins isolates the same biographical episode and cites William proclaiming that Duchamp’s *Fountain* “created a new thought for that object” (257). It is exactly these inconsistencies in Williams’ criticism that I hope to resolve.

the exact origin of Williams' and Stieglitz's friendship is not known, they were certainly friends and regular correspondents by 1922 (Dijkstra 86). That is to say, Williams was probably well acquainted not only with the experimental painting to which Stieglitz was connected, but also with Stieglitz's own innovations in photography. Many of Stieglitz's most famous photographs had already been taken by the early 1920s, and he had amassed both an artistic and critical body of innovative work. Famous Stieglitz images, like *The Steerage* (1907), *Dancing Trees* (1921), and *Apples and Gable, Lake George* (1922) were surely known to Williams (Fig. I-III).

More importantly, Williams was exposed to Stieglitz's photographic vision, "based on [Stieglitz's] belief in sharply focused photography": a shrunken spatial field but, in that isolation, intense focus on a single object (Dijkstra 95). Stieglitz's pictures, in contrast to the softly lit, slightly unfocused, clearly Impressionist-influenced work of other early photographers, do away with the painterly illusion of photography. Instead, they depict sharply demarked forms, but cropped so starkly as to provide little visual context – a visual isolation on a single object that a human would struggle to maintain and that borders on the abstract.

In Stieglitz's own publication, *Camera Work*, his photography is described as "the elimination of the subject in represented Form to search for the pure expression of the object" (Dijkstra 98). Such a visual style significantly overlaps with language: a photograph that shows a detailed object, floating by itself in an abstracted space, approaches the very nature of a noun, whose universality requires the very alienation from everyday life that also makes it a conventional rather than natural sign. When looking at one of Stieglitz's more extreme photographs, we may very well be looking

at a mental construction of a noun (if that were possible) – an image so abstracted as to communicate only its presence.

Roland Barthes, one of the dominant voices on the nature of the photograph, places the photograph's near-ability to operate as a noun – a signifier - at the center of the paradox of photography: "In order to move from reality to its photograph it is in no way necessary to divide up this reality into units and to constitute these units as signs" (17). The photographic image, Barthes concludes, "*is a message without a code*" (ibid., emphasis author's). In other words, photography approaches a semiotic purity that surpasses language; it seems to indicate reality without modifying it, without utilizing an arbitrary signifier.

Photography's ability to focus attention on physical objects and to naturally signify their surfaces merges with Williams' own linguistic interests. In a 1934 compilation of artists' thoughts on Stieglitz, Williams opens his piece with a passage on naming - specifically, how colonial Americans named birds. Such an unusual introduction reflects Williams' epistemological, rather than merely aesthetic, interest in Stieglitz's work. Williams contends that Americans called the birds they saw "robins" as a means for retreating

for warmth and reassurance to something previously familiar. But at a cost.

For what they saw were not robins. They were thrushes only vaguely resembling the rosy, daintier English bird. Larger, stronger, and in the evening of a wilder, lovelier song, actually here was something the newcomers had never in the lives before encountered. Blur. Confusion. (*Essays* 134)

Williams here describes a misnaming and proves the error by appealing to a physical reality; language is placed in conflict with what can be seen. Language, for

Americans, is initially a shield, later an “unrelated authority,” that obscures reality into artificial signs - names, nouns, familiar Barthesian codes (143). These wrong names construct a purely verbal space in which large, wild birds are known as and declared to be the same as their tamer English cousins. But the real image of American birds, whose bodies are focused on in Williams’ description, shows language to be false. We can observe the difference between our language and the world it purports to describe. Williams does not grant conventional language status as the most accurate semiotic system. Unlike the photograph-skeptics whose concerns opened this essay, Williams feels that language’s poverty, its lack of natural signification, can only be corrected by seeing not “blurs” but clearly – by seeing like Stieglitz.

Stieglitz bridges the object-centered but spatially distorted Cubist canvases, which Williams rejected for not being part of America’s “own tradition,” and the American need to see clearly the shapes of its particular national life (Williams, *Essays* 157). Stieglitz specifically characterized himself as an American artist, working in the “American grain,” and taking pictures of Americans in conventionally American situations. But these pictures are not simply images of some nostalgic agrarian past, and Stieglitz is not a 20th-century counterpart to the Hudson River school of 19th-century landscape painters. Stieglitz was explicitly interested in tight zooms; motion (especially the fast motion of urban life); night scenes; isolated, significant details; and, over all, subordinating people and objects to the visual demands of the European interest in the materialism of artistic media. Stieglitz’s photographs are like Cubist paintings in so far as they flatten the pictorial space and make conspicuous the very process of illustration and its abstraction of the objects of the

world, whose identities as masses and forms, rather than as symbolically or emotionally freighted icons, was increasingly placed at the center of the visual arts. Cubism, Dadaism, and related art movements moved objects from the real world in two separate directions: toward a purity of essence freed from traditional associations (“toilet” as crude) but also toward an existence so isolated from everyday life as to unduly privilege sight as the medium of existence (only by removing a toilet from a bathroom can we really “see it” as art).

Stieglitz’s mechanical vision of American allowed Williams to see an object not “as an association” or as an “accessory to vague words whose meaning it is impossible to rediscover” but “as plain as the sky is to a fisherman” (Williams, *CP1* 187, 189). Here, watching Williams look at the sky, we can sense a little of William’s own sense of vision. The sky, as a visual object, is markedly negative – often times, it’s simply a field of blue. Even physically, the sky is “nothing but mathematical certain limits of gravity and density of air” (187). This very passivity allows the sky to be circumscribed by competing definitions: Wallace Stevens famously admonishes us to remember that the sun, as blank as the sky, is not “a voluminous master folded in fire,” alluding to what both he and Williams would have seen as a deceitful religious translation of the sun (329).

A fisherman, in contrast, would see the sky as flush with “essential vitality” charged with its own objectness, its own identity and ontology (Williams, *CP1* 188).³

³ One thinks of D.H. Lawrence’s opening to *The Rainbow* (1917), in which he invokes the sexual vitality of a godless but still fertile land:

So much warmth and generating and pain and death did they know in their blood, earth and *sky* and beasts and green plants, so much exchange and interchange they had with these, that they lived full and surcharged, their faces always turned to the heat of the blood, staring into the sun, dazed with looking towards the source of generation, unable to turn round. (10-1, emphasis mine)

I quote at such length to give a sense of what the sky, liberated from all meanings except the biological, procreative, meaning of Darwinian Nature, might have looked like to Williams’ fisherman.

In the face of such energy, Williams resists other writers' attempts to bypass the physical and existential nature of the sky, to "invent or design" it with "demoded," or archaic, words (ibid.). Williams ultimately places faith in the low, crude, "bare handed man" (ibid.). Stieglitz, such an aesthetic brute, was uninterested in conventional cultural production and thus shaped art not out of tradition but by modulating, enhancing, and abstracting the very inner lives of the objects around him.

The closely watched, unusually abstracted Stieglitz-image, to Williams, is separate from language, and thus saved from the oxidation of tradition. Indeed, much of the early prose in *Spring and All* seems designed to contrast Stieglitz-inspired verbal images and nonvisual expression. Usually, the visual content arises, after some apocalypse, to replace the nonvisual.

For example

This final and self inflicted holocaust has been all for love, for sweetest love, that together the human race, yellow, black, brown, red and white, agglutinated into one enormous soul may be gratified with the sight and retire to the heaven of heavens content to rest on its laurels. There, soul of souls, watching its own horrid unity, it boils and digests itself within the tissues of the great Being of Eternity that we shall then have become. With what magnificent explosions and odors will not the day be accomplished as we, the Great One among all creatures, shall go about contemplating our self-prohibited desires as we promenade them before the inward review of our own bowels—et cetera, et cetera, et cetera ... and it is spring—both in Latin and Turkish, in English and Dutch, in Japanese and Italian; it is spring by

Stinking River where a magnolia tree, without leaves, before what was once a farmhouse, now a ramshackle home for millworkers, raises its straggling branches of ivorywhite flowers. (180)

The reader struggles with how to take this. Williams, madly channeling the nationalistic and militant language of modernist and Futurist propaganda, moves from a “holocaust” to declarations of love to a vision of Heaven in which all life is agglomerated into a grotesque stomach that devours itself. As if realizing he verges on nonsense, Williams throws in a few self-deprecating “et ceteras.”

But beyond this ridiculousness, purposeful or not, lies an imaginative mission that begins with the “annihilation of every human” and ends with “ivorywhite flowers” (179-80). Thematically, we move from civilization to Nature – a common enough reversion. Stylistically, Williams also moves us from a prosaic extreme of language that communicates very little despite its super-loquaciousness – gigantic multi-line sentences, packed with double predicates and in which nearly every noun is modified (even if only by itself: “heaven of heavens”) – to a (relatively) simple image: “a magnolia tree, without leaves, before what was once a farmhouse, now a ramshackle home for millworkers, raises its straggling branches of ivorywhite flowers.” “Magnolia tree” is the first physically representative image we receive in this paragraph, and “raise” is a clear, visually expressive verb (“boil” is fairly straightforward but, like “digest” to which it is joined, really suggests a molecular, rather than observable, action).

This magnolia tree is conspicuously isolated. It does not operate in the text as a symbol – nothing in the passage previous to this phrase freights it with rhetorical, argumentative, or logical weight. Instead, Williams is introducing a novel and,

presumably, physical object into the poem, as if to suggest *all my previous noise is nothing compared to this thing*. Williams shocks us by cutting through all his rhetoric with a simple noun. The only possible reception to this alien phrase floating out of the text is to picture it.

But the image we see is not embellished or painterly. There is no impressionistic play of light and color upon leaves, no wind, no sound, smell, or motion, and certainly no intellectual rhetoric instructing the reader how to perceive this image. Williams flat declaration, especially when juxtaposed with the sheer verbosity that precedes it, suggests a reality, an objectness, to the magnolia tree that painting never gives. This magnolia tree is expressed so simply; it has the immediacy of existence and the simplicity of a presented, and not organic, existence.

Compare this image, and the contrast it provides within the passage, to Stieglitz's *Apples and Gable, Lake George* (Fig. III). Stieglitz's photo, like Williams' image, isolates the recently leaved branches of an otherwise barren tree, with a house in the background. The photo is closely cropped, detailing a single limb of apples, whose smooth, solid-colored skins contrast with the backgrounded house's busy siding and its angled roof. Indeed, with so little extra visual detail (this photo feels, even for Stieglitz, especially casually composed), we are forced into absolute attention: we notice the water on the bottom fruit, a drop forming, about to fall. Like Williams' contrasting prose sections, Stieglitz's picture of a literal calm after a storm forces us to contrast the experience of life – fast, noisy, blurred, in the words of Williams, “the vaporous fringe” – with this perfectly still, perfectly close, “agonized [approach] to the moment” (178). The apples stand out against the visually noisy house as more detailed and, thus, more manifestly real.

It's difficult to express exactly what we see when we look at a photograph. Its transparent nature – it presents itself not as an object but as a window in which the real world actually existed – saps our urge to be very definite about its content. To speak of verbal photographs is even more difficult. Barthes' solution is to break the photograph into several "connotation procedures," which are inherent in the presentation of the photograph, but, unlike technique in painting, do not interfere with pure flatness of the photograph and thus are invisible.⁴ I argue that Stieglitz and Williams use similar connotation procedures, the most important of which is "aestheticism," or the designing ideology behind how one takes photographs or shapes word-images.

Stieglitz believes the camera accesses a machine vision that perfectly presents the objects it captures – the camera provides perfect natural signs. Photography differs from bodily vision in that it frames new ways of seeing, ones whose unfamiliarity estranges and recharges our relationship with the world. Unlike bodily vision, the camera can be highly focused (or not), tightly composed to include and exclude, and narrowly zoomed or expanded to ranges of vision impossible for humans to sustain. These views are highly, even artfully, constructed – the object is not, and the contrast between isolating artifice and natural signification only further enhances the objectness of the image.⁵ Furthermore, photography isolates time. Stieglitz's art implicitly emphasizes the need to divide time into tiny sections, split-seconds, to truly see. This photographic moment, the tenth or sixteenth of a second during

⁴ Barthes' "The Photographic Message," in *Image, Music, Text*, describes these techniques in full. They have largely been subsumed into usual critical practices when discussing photography, so I will avoid a full restatement here.

⁵ Sontag observes that "the photograph discloses. That is, the identification of the subject of a photograph always dominates our perception of it ..." (92). Presumably, the more radical the difference between our expectations and the actual object, the more thrilling and successful a photograph will be.

which the camera absorbs light, can be elongated into a frozen eternity in the photograph, and that eternity can be analyzed by the human eye for the telling detail by which humans experience a deep perception – existential proof - of what they are witnessing.

Williams' photographic poem, then, captures the objectness of Stieglitz's photographs by building a diction of nouns – the part of speech that most stress an object's mere being. Williams avoids the more purely verbal adjectives and adverbs, which have no direct equivalency in the realm of objects.⁶ He represents photographic time by cutting his lines and sentences (when they exist) along the limits of the photographic image. Each line lasts as long as a camera's shutter-speed – long enough for a quick but identifying *glance*. Each line's content is limited to what can be quickly seen: identifications, colors, shapes, the effects of light, but usually not verbs, as action cannot exist in an instant. Different angles, particularly zooms - distance from the observer to the subject - will be the main medium through which the poem moves, not time or linear narrative. New lines, often, will present new, autonomous perspectives.

Photography and Poetry | Observation/Speech

Having established similarities between Stieglitz's and Williams' visual styles and a set of characteristics governing the photographic vision, Williams' poetics should seem less a radical outgrowth of Cubism, a visual style with which most Williams poems show little affinity, and more a response to and an appropriation of the photograph's all-too human ability to emphasize, extract, isolate, and compose. "The

⁶ Perkins describes Williams' poetics as consisting of choices not to "cogitate [the object presented] or ask questions about it," not to "compare it, or make it into a symbol, or associate it with anything" Instead, the poet must "dissociate the thing ... *isolate it, put white space around it, make it stand out by framing it*" (264, emphasis mine). His unconscious slip into the language of photography is telling.

Pot of Flowers,” the second poem in *Spring and All* (1923), allows us to interrogate these differing aesthetic vocabularies, as many believe it is based upon Charles Demuth’s water-color painting *Tuberoses* (*CP1* 184, Dijkstra 172). Yet, Williams’ poem shares little in common with Demuth’s delicately rendered, even effervescent, work.

Pink confused with white
 flowers and flowers reversed
 take and spill the shaded flame
 darting it back
 into the lamp’s horn

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. (*CP1* 184)

The subject of this poem is difficult to discern: if the subject is Demuth’s painting, we can barely construct it from the broken phrases and images that reveal little of the spatial relationships between objects. Williams also avoids a lyrical voice; we are privy to neither the psychology of the speaker nor how the Demuth painting might affect him. Indeed there is no first-person in this poem; it is not a Keatsian-style ekphrastic ode in which a clearly defined speaker meditates upon a piece of art and transports to a vivid, imaginative sphere where art is as real, if not realer, than life.

Yet the poem is not fragmentary or discursively broken; we can see a clear difference between the presentation of this flower pot and the paper box in “The Red Paper Box,” a *Spring and All* poem that Marjorie Perloff correctly identifies as a Cubist poem (119). In “The Red Paper Box,” the poem’s “particulars refuse to cohere” (Perloff 120). Disparate sentences, which Perloff observes approach the abstruseness of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, do not seem to describe the same object (119). “The Pot of Flowers,” in contrast, maintains a strict fidelity to the object observed; indeed, the poem is nothing but an attempt to recreate the flower pot in words. The poem’s dynamism, then, comes from the multivalent visual approach Williams utilizes in pursuing this goal – his description is constantly moving.

If Williams’ lines seem disjunctive, connected only because they are observations of an unmoving subject, it is because photographs, always isolating to emphasize objectness, seem disjunctive and disconnected from each other. “The Pot of Flowers” moves not as a narrative, but as a collage of isolating perspectives. The reader is transported through varying distances toward or away from the painting, moving both linearly from the buds down to the vessel that contains them, and closer to or farther away from the subject, but always orienting around a few basic objects, “the pot,” “flowers,” “petals,” that are always both the visual focal point and the subject of the implied sentences each line constitutes. This sequence complies with the visual-grammatical structure that we know as the montage, and that is how “The Pot of Flowers” reads: a series of photographic insights meant to be summed into a whole picture.

“The Pot of Flowers” opens with an image common throughout *Spring and All*, color without form, “pink confused with white.” Like a Georgia O’Keefe painting,

itself empowered by the camera's zoom, we are positioned so close to the visual subject – in this line, a single petal – we cannot discern the object we are looking at. The real becomes an abstract field of color. “Confus[ion]” represents the viewer's vertigo at experiencing an alien perspective; if it weren't for the title, we wouldn't know we were looking at flowers.

Williams' next image, and the next line, zooms out to a wider perspective: “flowers and flowers reversed/ take and spill the shaded flame.” These couplets provide an autonomous and complete perspective, a single cohesive image that does not depend on what comes before. “Pink confused with white” is one, admittedly fuzzy, image of this flower pot. “Flowers and flowers reversed” is a separate, more expansively seen image. These lines are adjacent, but are not casually or linearly linked; the enjambment between the lines represents only the pause needed to shift from one viewing position to another. Other lines are similarly haphazardly placed above each other. In a later stanza, Williams again presents us with a snapshot of the petals' very center, “red where in whorls,” zooms out to a “petal” that “lays its glow upon petal,” and then pans down to the flowers' stems, their “round flamegreen throats.” Each line (or, occasionally, stanza) is simultaneously a separate phrasal unit that seems unrelated to what has come before (why constantly return to “petals” if this poem was a connected viewing experience?) and a completely independent image, small enough to be seen in a photographic glance.

The language of zooms and pans is not a glib connection to photography – the objects we're presented seem isolated and invested with the sense of objectness that typifies the photographic image. The poem's main objects – “flowers” and the constituent object “petals” – are usually isolated, by line, from any other word except

references to lighting or color. Petals “aslant darkened with mauve” or “radiant with transpiring light” but cut off from any greater sense of spatial location, never arranged into a “flower” or a plant, compel the reader to picture petals – we must, their physical characteristics are being described – but large, without a physical scale, naked, glimmering, glorious like the photographic object as presented in Stieglitz’s *Dancing Trees* or Edward Weston’s *Pepper* (Fig. IV). “Petals,” whose repetitions at the beginning of lines borders on anaphoric, emerge from the poem as not just something “aslant darkened with mauve” or “radiant with transpiring light” but active and realized as a word almost autonomous of the phrases that surround it; all these “petals,” which Williams never diagrams visually as any painting must, seem to float in their own space.

The poem’s refusal to place any of the objects it signifies into a visual perspective causes each object to be read as having an equal visual emphasis. At times this causes nouns to float off the page, at other times it oddly flattens them into conspicuously constructed pictures. For example, the somewhat paradoxical figuration of “flowers and flowers reversed” flattens foreground into background; we cannot distinguish between flowers and the shapes between flowers, much like how *Dancing Trees*’ close cropping encourages us to see the trees not as trees but as shapes whose relationship to their surroundings is more dynamically visual than purely physical. *Dancing Trees* is not a serious pictorial attempt to describe trees, but a design. Likewise, the image of “flowers and flowers reversed” flattens the flowers into a photographic surface in which the urge to isolate space has lead to a visual, and semantic, construction that belies reality even as it appeals to novelty.

Though a source of light is given in the poem, a candle, almost all of Williams' verbs and adjectives reinforce an impression of the individual objects glowing, reverentially presenting themselves as present and aesthetically central enough to generate their own light and to act, individually, as autonomous visual centers. The image of "flowers and flowers reversed" "spill[ing]" light back into a lamp inverts the physical relationship – the lamp should illuminate the flowers, not vice versa. The image of a "petal" "lay[ing] its glow upon petal" activates the flowers into the center of the image – the locus of light, the origin of photographic classification and differentiation. We can only differentiate what we can determine, what the camera can see, to be different. Autonomous lighting reveals the intensity with which the speaker observes and isolates this pot of flowers – like Weston's *Pepper*, Williams cuts out of his pictures the light streaming in from the outside world, which, if recognized, might fix the flowers and pot into a physical locality at the cost of visually marginalizing them. Both artists would prefer for their images to glow as if radiating importance.

The poem ends when the viewer reaches the pot's bottom, "wholly dark" and "gay with moss." Spatially, we have seen the entire pot, and the accrual of all this seeing ends in a non-visual signifier, "gay." The poem leaps from visual description to emotional discovery: indeed, minute visual observation of petals and leaves glowing leads directly to gayety, a joy that is bright and lively. The authenticity of visual examination allows the poet to bridge to a moment of non-visual authority, although the poet's pronouncement upon the flower pot, that it is "gay," itself oscillates between a visual and non-visual meaning. This single moment of non-

visual discourse only barely transcends the visual, and, if the poem effectively sees, barely needs to.

Williams' worshipful verbal descriptions do a great justice to the visual impression of Demuth's poems and its emotional content, but "The Pot of Flowers" tugs oddly at *Tuberoses'* structure. Where Demuth sees soft, liquid, but cohesive forms, Williams sees starkly differentiated and piecemeal objects. Of course, "The Pot of Flowers" depicts a still-life, a classical subject of painting; Stieglitz's camera captured faster and uglier scenes. We will return later to what photographic vision does to the painting, but in 1923, neither Stieglitz nor Williams was particularly interested in still-lives. Their photographic approaches instilled their visions with too much energy for water-colors; they were drawn to explore less conventional beauty. Indeed, the central impulse within *Spring and All* is to renew the beauty of a world locked in a decidedly cold, bleak, and wind-tossed winter:

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the
waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

This first stanza of "Spring and All," the first poem in its namesake collection, portrays a very different spring from the pastoral paradise one might expect (*CP1* 183). Flowers have not blossomed, the earth is not warm; instead, the viewer begins in a climactic limbo – like Kora, Roman goddess of the dead and of seasonal changes, a figure who had interested Williams since his 1920 publication of *Kora in Hell*. If life is in this field, it spreads, like a disease, from the "contagious hospital" that looms over the scene.

Of course, this landscape's ugliness is what attracts Williams, so adamantly opposed to "beautiful illusion" that art usually offers. Sontag observes, "Nobody exclaims, 'Isn't that ugly! I must take a photograph of it.' Even if someone did say that, all it would mean is: 'I find that ugly thing ... beautiful'" (85). Her real point is that skillful photographic technique can make almost any object beautiful and, indeed, that photography categorically opened the world, especially the relatively ugly world of Industrialism, to a new type of beauty – a beauty not of whole forms but of collage, disjunction, and construction. Photography, or the cropping, isolating, lighting, zooming, and revealing of a photographic subject, opens this otherwise grim winter scene to aesthetic interest, revealing the beauty of a spring just before it blossoms:

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines—

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches—

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind—

As in "The Pot," there is neither a lyric *I* nor metaphors; everything is directly presented to the viewer. The poem moves through these photographic glances. Williams offers us, initially, an image "... the/ waste of broad, muddy fields," which he zooms to an image of "brown with dried weeds," and zooms again to "standing

and fallen.” These increasingly close moments of perception are broken into separate lines: each line is a single, cohesive visual step, focused upon one object, that closes the distance between the viewer and the field of weeds.

In the absence of figurative language, seeing itself becomes an act that, like metaphor, bridges the gap between what the physical world and language. The zoom expands from a purely visual framing into an interrogatory tool through which the very inner nature of things can be revealed. As Williams takes closer and closer verbal pictures of his subject, “stuff of bushes and small trees/ with dead brown leaves under them/ leafless vines,” he also moves towards a position of ontological authority, eventually climaxing in the statement, “Lifeless in appearance, sluggish/ dazed spring approaches-”. By playing up his close observation, Williams appropriates what Sontag identifies as an essential photographic strategy, “turning ... things into living beings” (98). Even without admitting to a direct vision of life, proximity is clearly key to Williams’ intuition. If these blown-up images of weeds were actually displayed, the human eye would automatically compose from them a visually dynamic image – early photography amazed by depicting “the object isolated from its surroundings, rendering it abstract,” one of photography’s “new conventions about what was beautiful to behold” (Sontag 91) . Williams own increasingly clipped phrases gradually strip the original image of its inertness: what is initially indeterminate “stuff” and becomes, if only slightly, differentiated as beneath “dead brown leaves”. Upon closer examination, the object, now recognized as “vines,” is revealed, implicitly, not to be “dead” – proximity has differentiated the “dead brown leaves” from what *this*, these vines, are. These vines are only “leafless” – currently without leaves, but waiting *for* them.

The last two stanzas bring this movement, from close observation to verbal authority, to a climax:

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

One by one objects are defined—
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of
entrance—Still the profound change
has come upon them: rooted, they
grip down and begin to awaken

Here the passage of time is initially presented as a sort of filmic development – the emergence of the future into the present is depicted as the sharpening of spatial detail: increasing visual “clarity,” the sharpening “outline of leaf.” Williams emphasizes a camera-like ability to slow time and human perception. We enter into a moment of deep focus and close proximity, which the poem has been moving us to all along, from the “waste of broad muddy fields” to “the grass,” and, at last, to the bottoms of these “rooted” plants. We also enter a state of absolute stillness of time, at a point at which these plants only “begin to awaken.” Of course, at this vital moment we slip beyond the medium of vision, into an action that, because it hasn’t finished, cannot be seen: the beginning of “awakening.” Yet, the combination of an increasingly isolating and enlarging gaze and the near stopping of time gives Williams an authority that makes his claim of observing this unperceivable “profound change” believable: aided, if implicitly, by the machine, we understand how Williams can perceive the nearly invisible.

Photography and Poetry: Estrangement/Analysis

This machine vision of stasis and slow time recommended itself as the most relevant artistic approach to the world of Williams' industrial New Jersey. The speed, the inherent realism, and the cropping techniques of photography slow, pose, and, most importantly, analyze the blurry, ugly scenes of contemporary life.

Perhaps no poem better demonstrates these capabilities than "The Right of Way" (*CP1* 205). The poem presents itself as a poem about driving:

In passing with my mind
on nothing in the world

but the right of way
I enjoy on the road by

virtue of the law—

What about driving is the least bit photographic? In one sense, driving may be the experience that most closely approximates sitting inside a camera. When driving, as when using a camera, we look through a machine; we move at the machine's speed. Landscapes pass by, scenes emerge. When driving, we are most embodied in our eyes – our very lives depend on being able to detect possible dangers. And yet, people also drive for recreation, and living in cities sprawled out for miles, we must drive to imbibe our environment as an aesthetic experience. Thus, we experience the world as beautiful, through brief, disjoined images seen from a car seat, a form of sight closely related to the camera. The photograph teaches us how to find driving beautiful.

I saw

an elderly man who
smiled and looked away

to the north past a house—
a woman in blue

who was laughing and
leaning forward to look up

into the man's half
averted face

and a boy of eight who was
looking at the middle of

the man's belly
at a watchchain—

These lines possess an energy and an abruptness that represents the pace of looking while driving. The noun-heavy photographic glance is employed to identify forms in the real world. We move too fast to spend time describing in words what these people look like; these nouns serve, essentially, as the statement “*that, there it is, lo!*” which Barthes sees within every photograph (*Camera* 5). When Williams describes an individual as “an elderly man,” “a woman in blue,” “a boy of eight,” he implies *you know what this looks like, and I don't have time to tell you*. While we may not *picture* these people, we do sense them as individuals, as discrete masses differentiated from each other. In a blur, the most significant thing we can see, our focal point, is identified and isolated on a single line that it never shares with its corresponding verb. Isolating nouns without verbs encourages us to consider solely their relationship to their physical, existent counterparts – to visualize them.

Even human action is broken over multiple lines, just as film separates movement into tiny, static frames. Each of Williams' lines presents a part of an action that almost stands by itself: “smiled and looked away,” “leaning forward to look up.” Despite the relative severity of these breaks, Williams could end more lines even more violently: he chooses to clip after individual moments of sight, the

photographic glance – a basic noun-identification, the recognition of a physical pose – but not more severely.

Even more importantly, everyone Williams sees is looking at something else; “looking” is the most common word in this poem. Williams hints that the look is the most basic relationship in life; in the dense, fast-moving, and intensely visual sphere of the city, the mechanical (not leisurely, not necessarily human) look is “the law” and indeed the primal way of controlling not just a car but one’s life. We move through the city via car; we look at and decipher the city via the camera or, at least, the photographic glance. We move too fast, and there is too much to take in, to act otherwise.

Yet all this looking does not translate directly into words. Williams notes that

The supreme importance
of this nameless spectacle

sped me by them
without a word—

Despite the fact that “The Right of Way” is obviously composed of words, Williams suggests that this experience is not essentially verbal. Thus this poem, while made of words, is not composed by the word but by the image: Williams writes what he sees, but he does not attempt to modulate what he sees in words. He allows initially nonsensical phrases like “looking into a man’s half/ averted face.” One presumes that Williams, driving his car, glanced up from the wheel, saw a woman, saw her looking, literally, into half a man’s face - the other half is turned away, not available to sight. Williams’ glimpses, of course, are too fast to allow him to *understand* what he sees; only the surfaces register on his camera-like mind, which is prepared to observe, to record these images. The next line, “averted face,” explains away the absurdity, but

Williams, dedicated to expressing not beauty but experience itself, does not smooth out the line in composition: “writing,” he says in the prose following this poem, “is not a searching about in the daily experience for apt similes and pretty thoughts and images. ... It is not a conscious recording of the day’s experiences ‘freshly and with the appearance of reality’” (*CP1* 207). Instead, Williams “write[s] down that which happens at that time,” primarily appealing to the freezing eye of the camera, preserving visual realities measured by the length of the photographic glance, even if they translate to verbal absurdities (206). By remaining loyal to the experience of sight, Williams destabilizes both the word and the image, neither of which seem to correlate with the reality of what is rather than simply what we *see*.

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

four wheels of my car
along the wet road until

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

The poem ends on such an absurd, enjambed image, which Stephen Cushman, in his book-length study on Williams’ enjambment, calls “the straddled line” or, in specific reference to this image, “the emblem of enjambment,” the ultimate representation of sight’s inconclusive balancing between surface appearance and verbal meaning (15, 50). Williams often straddles his lines between visual and semantic sense, and this final image suggests the transgressive nature of that act. Williams, in a quick line-glance, identifies a “girl with one leg” – the sort of unbeautiful “freak” that Diane Arbus would later memorialize in her photographic work (Sontag 35, Fig. V). There is a sort of double take implicit in these ending lines. The reader, like Williams, looks

again and understands the previous glance-line: the girl simply has “one leg/ over the rail of a balcony.” Or does she? Such a misunderstanding, left in the poem, reveals the photograph’s role as more than just a recording device; it is also a provocateur which suggests the unreliability of vision.

The static view, the single significant detail, not only reports truth but can also, because of the very isolation it imposes, distort, exaggerate, lie, and estrange. “The camera,” Sontag notes, “has the power to catch so-called normal people in such a way as to make them look abnormal” (34). Arbus’s photograph *Identical Twins*, for example, is “on the surface... what it says it is: an image of identical twins” that cleverly seems to echo the mimetic relationship between photography and the world (Clarke 29, Fig. V). Yet Arbus’s spatial isolation of these twins, who float in white space, encourages us to see differences between these two “identical” girls. “One twin is ‘happy’ and one is ‘sad,’” Clarke notes (30). He proceeds to list differences we might, through the isolating eye of the camera, see: “the noses are different, the faces are different; their collars are a different shape, the folds of the dresses are different ... All, it seems is similar but equally all is different” (ibid.). The photograph simultaneously declares the obvious similarities between these two girls while encouraging us to see their differences. As an analogy for the mimetic possibilities of the photograph, Arbus indicates that the photograph encourages us to accept it as a natural sign, but the more we look at a photograph, the more aware we are that this is a single, estranged moment of time – the more we realize what has been left out – the more we seek answers that the photograph is physically limited from answering.

Williams, too, offers us an image so bizarre that it invites a second, more detailed look. But the look only tells us so much, and Williams’ phrasing remains ambiguous

– are we looking at a one-legged girl who is leaning over a rail, or a two-legged girl who hangs one leg over the rail? This is an optical illusion with no answer, and Williams celebrates the oddities that a disjunctive and purposely flat vision presents as a sign of the penetrative truth of his work. By working through the glance, rather than through conventional verbal meaning, Williams risks non-meaning; his poems too dangle over the ground. The thrill of this precarious situation arises from its danger: in almost not making sense, Williams captures an intimacy with the contemporary environment forgotten in the search for the perfect, elegant, cohesive, and perfectly meant phrase. The photograph, when inscribed by language, reveals the absurdities of sight, its accidental lies, and how those lies, because we perceive them, are as interesting as “true” reality.

In later *Spring* poems, Williams moves into a grander and more abstract appropriation of the photograph. Photography was never exactly a subject proper as much as it was an epistemology that Williams perceived the world through. Williams gradually moves toward seeing phrases and sentences themselves as objects that can be intensified, isolated, re-constructed, or turned eccentric through photographic attention and the compositional techniques Williams first experienced in Stieglitz’s photography. His famous poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” serves as a representative example of this developing style (*CP1* 224).

Of all the poems in *Spring and All*, “The Red Wheelbarrow” is most frequently recognized as being photographic. Dijkstra calls it

a perfect representation of the kind of painting or photography the Stieglitz group might have produced: it is a moment, caught at the point of its highest visual significance, in perfect straightforward, ‘realistic,’ but highly selective

detail ... The object, moreover, retains complete autonomy: it is in no way to be construed as a metaphor. (168)

Much of this description, hopefully, sounds familiar. “The Red Wheelbarrow” is not really an attempt to say anything about a wheelbarrow; Williams only communicates the fact of a wheelbarrow. He frames the poem with the nonvisual couplet, “so much depends/ upon,” and, surely, he did not pick a wheelbarrow and some chickens by accident. Williams was sympathetic to what he perceived as the mindset, especially the aesthetic mindset, of farmers and other rural inhabitants. But Williams mixed with the cosmopolitan artist community of New York and spent his adult life in a suburb of that great city; he was no advocate of Jeffersonian-style agrarian democracy. The opening couplet, which pointedly elides what specifically “depends upon” a wheelbarrow, is just an emotionally intense way of saying “*that, there it is, lo!*” and “nothing else,” the secret message of every photograph (Barthes, *Camera* 5, emphasis author’s). Like a photograph, this first couplet only serves to indicate that what is shown is important primarily because it exists.

But “The Red Wheelbarrow” is not boring, any more than looking outside or taking a picture of a wheelbarrow has to be boring. And the poem is not written as simply as it could be: one imagines that Williams could have easily written, “a red wheelbarrow/ glazed with rain water/ besides the white chickens.” Though minimalist, Williams composes the poem in his signature “field of action.” But “The Red Wheelbarrow” is more accurately a field of vision, and it is the ambiguity of both typographical and mental vision that gives the poem its imaginative energy.

So much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

The organization of the stanzas is fairly simple: first Williams indicates a wheelbarrow, then rain water, then chickens. The only adjectives are colors; the only verb, “glazed,” indicates a visual state of shine or glossiness. The poem’s nouns are so isolated and so conspicuously envisioned by Williams that we must consider them as images.

But Williams manipulates his enjambments so that what the entire poem shows is not necessarily what we picture as we move from line to line, an ambiguity of relationships that perfectly depicts the effects constituted by Williams’ “field of action.” James Breslin describes the “field of *action*” as a verbal space in which “relations are left open and therefore fluid and multiple,” versus narrative poetry’s “linear mode of organization” (103, emphasis author’s). Williams achieves this field by breaking lines in unusual places, isolating and intensifying unusual phrases, providing places of multiple emphases and at times absurd or contradictory meaning. If “The Pot of Flowers” is a written photographic collage of the possible angles from which one could see a flower pot, “The Red Wheelbarrow” is a photographic collage that visually dissects and reconstructs the very phrases that make up the poem.

For example, the first line of the second couplet isolates “a red wheel” by itself. Without the context of any punctuation (and there is none throughout the poem),

and because of the high frequency of nouns (“wheel,” “barrow,” “rain,” “water,” “white,” and “chickens” are all isolated enough to be read as nouns, though “wheel,” “rain,” and “white” may also be adjectives), we are encouraged to read each line/image as partly separate, “pulled toward isolation, independence, at the same time it is pulled back by syntax ... toward all the other lines” (Breslin 112).

Stieglitz’s tightly focused, closely zoomed photos, which, in a sense, centrally stage the minute details of some other, hypothetical photograph, echo in this sort of composition. Williams zooms in on one phrase, emphasizing both the eccentric construction of language - the absurdity of a “red wheel” is nested, like a Russian doll, inside of the phrase “the red wheelbarrow” - and the potential for beauty and interest in even the most pedestrian of expressions. Interestingly, “the red wheel” is itself another visual image, albeit one that does not semantically link to the larger phrase. Like Stieglitz’s *Dancing Trees*, “The Red Wheelbarrow” uses zoom and isolation to find new visual images within other images. He performs a similar excavation in “beside the white/ chickens,” opening with a field of color that only later becomes connected to a physical subject. Williams’ poem, then, is static in terms of subject, but presents a dynamic, active “field of vision,” in which words, dissected and analyzed by Williams’ eye as he breaks them, open up into new phrases and new pictures. “The Red Wheelbarrow” is a poem transformed into a road trip: we, the readers, travel into it. Images speed by, and the very process of trying to discern them – our construction of vision, our isolation of vision – causes them to change shape, multiple times, as we pass.

Photography and Painting

The ability to treat words and phrases materialistically, creating new, though not always valuable, phrases, obsessed Williams for the rest of his career. Williams eventually invented a triadic, step-down line that allowed him maximal line breaks without overtly ruining a poem's cohesive meaning or rhythmic flow. Such a line, Williams believed, would give poetic diction "jumps, swiftness, colors, movements" and would derive from "living, breathing stuff" (Perkins 269, 270). As these quotations suggest, Williams became increasingly interested in rhetorical, and not merely visual, speech. Much of Williams' mid-career work, interesting or not, is invested in the line break as a device not for image creation but for complicated rhythms and unusual syntaxes. We respond to these triadic-lined poems, at least initially, as we do to music – we dance.

Williams did not return to purely visual concerns until his final collection, *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962). At this point, Williams' health had suffered a serious decline: a heart attack, strokes, partial paralysis. He was to die within a year. It is not surprising that Williams, debilitated, would move away from athletics rhythms and toward a stillness and ocular-centricity that illness so often causes.

Even his final book's title announces Williams' renewed, and revisionist, interest in the visual. *Pictures from Brueghel* is a self-conscious reassertion of the value of images and, by extension, his early, image-based work. At the same time, the earlier Williams would not have attempted to treat the paintings of an artist as historical and traditional as Brueghel. Indeed, early Williams had little patience for the work of another Renaissance master, Hans Holbein, whose work was too transparent – the viewer marveled at Holbein's creation of perspective and the smoothness of his canvases, so statically posed and so elegantly rendered as to seduce the viewer from

his or her everyday life. Late Williams, “more continuous, relaxed, and pernicious,” writing in “natural and ordinary” syntax, and more assured of the final status of his own artistic legacy, would have been more comfortable allowing one of tradition’s many ghosts to inhabit his work (Perkins 273-4).

And Brueghel is perhaps the most likely Renaissance painter for Williams to appropriate. Like Williams and Stieglitz, Brueghel was interested in rough, gritty scenes. In contrast to Holbein and his formal portraiture, Brueghel created pictures of rowdy country life, filled with color and diagonal and circular uses of space. Brueghel’s work is cramped, cluttered, rowdy, maybe even a little crude, a little unbalanced. People and landscapes (Brueghel is widely considered to be the first painter to depict landscapes for their own sake, not as a backdrop to a portrait) are often colored so as to abstract them, to force them into a design. There is a slight sense of exaggeration and of flatness that reinforces his pictures’ artificiality. Brueghel, like Williams, is more interested in life and in aesthetic effects than in any “beautiful illusion”; Williams even once characterized him as “grotesque” (*Autobiography* 193). If any Renaissance painter were to have foreshadowed the photograph, it would be Brueghel.

None of this means that Williams’ take on Brueghel is anything as static or as stable as forcing words onto the painter’s most famous canvases. These poems do not compel paintings into speech. Williams is openly aggressive toward Brueghel’s images, saying of Brueghel’s *Haymaking*

The living quality of
the man’s mind
stands out

and its covert assertions

for art, art, art!
painting

that the Renaissance tried to absorb
but
it remained a wheat field (CP2 388-9)

While Williams is willing to take on a more complex role toward tradition, he remains hostile to mere illusionism, satirizing the idea of an “art, art, art!” that obscures its relationship to reality with skill. Despite the Renaissance’s attempts to “absorb” the “living quality of/ the man’s mind,” a painted “wheat field” is still only an image – it is not a real wheat field. These “pictures” derived from Brueghel emphatically remain pictures; Williams refuses to cede them the reality of the “living ... man’s mind,” nor the living quality of human language.⁷

Instead, Williams uses Brueghel’s paintings as a medium in which he can meditate upon the very differences between images and words. Specifically, I argue that these final poems interrogate the visual arts by appropriating the photographic analysis of isolation, emphasis, and estrangement that, before, Williams had focused upon the external world and, later, upon words themselves.

Photographic analysis is an artistic device that deconstructs both painting’s supposed monopoly on natural signs as it reinvigorates the word’s reign over abstraction. On one hand, the photograph is more real than even the visual vocabulary of the painting. Barthes contrasts photography from drawing by noting that drawing requires training that is equivalent to “*rule-governed* transpositions,” a sort of arbitrary code like language that determines how we transcribe reality into art

⁷ Such imaginative flatness differentiates Williams’ poems from most of his contemporaries. W.H. Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” stands out as perhaps the most famous invocation of Brueghel; he chooses, unlike Williams, to follow traditional ekphrastic practices and construct Brueghel’s “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” as a physical environment.

(*Images* 43, emphasis author's). Photography's more mimetic signs indicate the conventionally built into painting.

Williams, using the analytical photographic vision and the photographic line, analyzes and dissects the very process of envisioning the visual arts. Williams' photographic language – the objectifying noun – breaks up a painting's seemingly flat surface and carefully aligned illusion of perception by presenting even peripheral objects as immediately as the painting's foregrounded subjects. Meanwhile, his photographic line deconstructs the supposedly natural signs that express visual meaning. By reducing a photograph to unintelligible snapshots, Williams proves that language itself is necessary to sort out the signals of vision.

Williams does not do this to prove that words are better than vision, but to reinsert language into the perception of the visual arts. We cannot ask the photograph or the painting to speak. Williams' task, then, is not to speak for pictures but to reequip us to speak about them.

Williams opens *Pictures* with a supposed "Self-Portrait," actually a painting of a court jester by Jean Fouquet (*CP2* 385, 504, Fig. VI).

In a red winter hat blue
eyes smiling
just the head and shoulders

crowded on the canvas
arms folded one
big ear the right showing

the face slightly tilted
a heavy wool coat
with broad buttons

gathered at the neck reveals
a bulbous nose
but the eyes red-rimmed

from overuse he must have
driven them hard
but the delicate wrists

show him to have been a
man unused to
manual labor unshaved his

blond beard half trimmed
no time for any-
thing but his painting

The poem's startling opening does not mark the beginning of a story, or even of an argument or a rhetorical structure, but the painting's most salient visual detail: the painter's "red winter hat." As with the poems of *Spring and All*, each successive line is also a movement of the eye around the painting. For the first six lines, this movement is linear, from "Brueghel's" (Williams' usage) hat, to his eyes, head, shoulders, and arms. Again, almost all the adjectives are colors and almost all the verbs suggest physical poses: Williams means for us to see this. As the poem progresses, Williams' eyes become distracted, flit to the Brueghel's "big ear," drift right, to his face, then move down again to the "heavy wool coat." Again, Williams is pulled back to Brueghel's face, specifically his nose and eyes, then back to his wrists, and, finally, again to his face. This structure is linear in so far as Williams had to inscribe it sequentially, but its spiraling spatial pattern, always returning back to the face, rejects the straight forward progression of time or even the visual movement of the poem. This poem moves by sight, but by a sight that tears apart the syntax of Fouquet's composition.

While these lines often seem to include a number of focal points, a melding of visual data which Williams avoided in *Spring and All* and which seems to move away

from the photographic glance, these crowded lines remain true to Williams' photographic technique. Brueghel's intricately detailed, boldly colored, crowded, and visually active paintings do not allow the ocular stasis one maintains when, for example, looking at a pot of flowers. Stieglitz's static, sharply clipped photos enabled a careful meditation and a systematic progression; Brueghel's violently composed painting force the photographic glance to see more and the photographic line to include more than is comprehensible. Seeing photographically, we often see before we understand. Thus, Williams allows initially paradoxical lines like, "In a red winter hat blue," which at first suggests that the hat is both red and blue. Only in the next line do we realize that Brueghel's "eyes" are blue, that Williams, attracted to the color blue, leapt to it before he recognized exactly what he was seeing.

A lack of punctuation leads to a field of vision. Most lines stand as nearly autonomous syntactical units that flow but do not lead into each other. Williams continues his photographic mission: he takes snapshots of single moments of perception and does not gloss them together into the harmonious music of the sentence. The cumulative effect is of visions, rapidly and somewhat confusingly, jostling into each other in the reader's mind. Brueghel's painting is crowded but connected, structured. Williams explodes this organization, isolating the poem's pieces into nouns stranded on barely connected lines that present the painting to us, piecemeal, as independent words that rise into a realm of independent signification. We see "red winter hat blue," "eyes smiling," or "heavy wool coat" independent, not related to how Fouquet has composed them in the painting.

What saves this poem from being a list of body parts is its non-visual elements: its fictionalized title, "Self-Portrait," which also makes it into a comment on Williams,

and the ending sections, which seem to pass judgment on Williams and the act of sight. These non-visual pieces act like the caption of a picture, providing “anchorage” and answering “the question: *what is it*,” what is this mute image supposed to mean? (Barthes, *Image* 39). The title of the poem helps the reader “to choose the correct level of perception,” to enter into these disconnected images understanding that it somehow is a comment on Williams and the act of depiction itself (ibid.).

Williams represents himself in turn derisively and tenderly, with “eyes red-rimmed” and “delicate wrists.” He is a man “unused to/ manual labor,” a man who has spent his time “overus[ing]” his eyes. He has looked too hard, maybe, for too long. He has “no time for any-/thing but his painting,” the enjambment halfway through “anything” indicating how hasty and rushed he has felt. Williams, who in *Spring and All* wrestled with the creative implications of a world in the arts, away from the common experience, seems to concede here that he has spent his life becoming what he formerly abhorred: and artist with a capital A, a man enshrined in his very own portrait, with over-taxed eyes that have looked, but not felt.

The poem’s form, however, creates an undercurrent that chips away at this dire summation. Williams’ constructions are as severe as ever, and he still demands a poem represent the process of sight – how we actually see – rather than create a distanced, smoothed fictional world. His style remains radical, and he creates the same sharp images that seem to leap off the page, that express themselves with the transcendent realism of a photo. The poem, beneath its unflattering portrait, contradicts the very idea that looking is simplistic or easy. To record precisely how we see requires great effort.

As violent a transformation of a painting as “Self-Portrait” is, Williams’ photographic analysis can not just shatter the flatness of a painting but invigorate it with an energy that parallels and possibly transcends its own realism. Brueghel’s *Peasant Wedding* is a masterfully composed work that dazzles the reader with tricks of perspective and intricate details crammed into every corner (Fig. VII). Williams’ poem based upon the painting, however, uses photographic glances to grasp the same immediacy and the same sense of existence while fragrantly disobeying the supposedly realistic rules of perspective that are “lifelike” and give “depth, pungency” but which ultimately replicate effects we could see by looking “outside the window” (CP1 199). Williams’ photographic vision enables a work that is simultaneously “realistic” and “new”; indeed, one whose newness is a minute realism unavailable in previous generations – the focus and isolation of the camera which pulls out of reality whoever’s reality it affirms.

Williams begins “Peasant Wedding,” uncharacteristically, with an apostrophe to a bridegroom on the painting’s left side who is about to serve the wedding guests (388)

Pour the wine bridegroom
 where before you the
 bride is enthroned her hair

Such an imperative statement is unusual for Williams – we begin not simply recording but recognizing the reality of this painting. The next line’s brutal break, on “the,” is an implicit admonishment for this imaginative stance: enjambling on an article reinforces the artificiality, the construction, of the poem. The final line in this tercet returns to Williams’ usual stance as an analytical viewer: again, the line breaks on a single moment of vision “the bride” and, connected to her, “her hair,” which

registers as an identification – a noun – before the viewer exactly understands what the hair is *doing*.

loose at her temples a head
of ripe wheat is on
the wall beside her the

guests seated at long tables
the bagpipers are ready
there is a hound under

the table the bearded Mayor
is present women in their
starched headgear are

gabbing all but the bride
hands folded in her
lap is awkwardly silent simple

The next several stanzas repeat the same strategies already discussed. Lines are almost always enjambed so that we recognize an object before we know what it does or where it's located – for example, “there is a hound under/ the table the bearded Mayor/ is present women in their”. The cumulative effect is of our eyes wandering just a little before we understand what we're seeing. “A dog under what?” we ask, and we have to either move our eyes up the painting or down the poem to know.

But Williams is not simply recording this painting, he is analyzing it. Williams stays relatively faithful to the picture's content – its characters, their actions, their positions – but strays far from its perspective. The bride, a central character in the poem, is actually distant and visually peripheral in Brueghel's painting. On one hand, Williams' acute descriptions of her praise Brueghel's detailed eye – Williams could not write so specifically about her if Brueghel hadn't depicted her with such care. On the other hand, Williams' constant use of only nouns and his lines measured by a glance, rather than a studied gaze that might apportion lines based upon visual

elements like size or perspective, break up the original painting's surface. Each image of the bride comes to us as large and significant, if not more so, than the hound or the foregrounded server. Williams instills each object he writes about with a semantic significance, an estranged reality, that cracks the flat emphases of the painting.

dishes are being served
clabber and what not
from a trestle made of an

unhinged barn door by two
helpers one in a red
coat a spoon in his hatband

The poem ends on the sort of significant detail that the photographer, not the painter, would focus on: "two/ helpers one in a red/ coat a spoon in his hatband". A poem with no punctuation, loose syntax, and few outright sentences can end on almost any detail – in this case, we might conclude that Williams ends here because he has sketched almost every major figure, and the "spoon" in one of the servant's hats is just the sort of minute surprise that would break this poem's tone and signal the exhaustion of its subject. Like the "emblem of enjambment," the one-legged girl of "The Right of Way," this spoon serves as a sort of double-take, when vision surprises itself out of its trance.

But to end here seems just as much a violation of the painting as a confirmation of sight. The natural movement of painting begins with the helpers' bright red coat, moves into the painting, down the lines of the table, and then comes up the less-strictly aligned left side. Once we've completed this motion, our eyes might spin randomly around the painting, finding, perhaps, the dog under the table, the spoon in the hatband. Williams' poem never follows this motion, starting with a

bridegroom whose green coat recedes into the background, moving over the bride, scanning down the guests, then suddenly seeing the dog. Williams refuses Brueghel's suggested movement, but takes the stance of a photographer – grabbing and isolating details as he sees fit. Brueghel's painting itself becomes a field of vision, in which the parts are not integrated together but individually recognized. Williams' noun-heavy diction points to a reality beyond the painting that Brueghel's virtuoso activity only suggests – in the end, Brueghel deals with the activity of the eye, Williams, though he uses vision, works in a photographically analytical language that breaks the surface of the painting, investing these figures with their own sense of existence that relies not upon natural signs but upon the rarified language of nouns and the isolating photographic line.

Williams is strongly claiming that language can present a reality that surpasses that of painting's. Such a position becomes most authoritative in Williams' rendition of Brueghel's *The Corn Harvest*.

Williams begins “The Corn Harvest” with a basic identification, summing up all the visual data of the landscape as

Summer!
the painting is organized
about a young (389-90)

While describing the painting as simply “Summer!” seems abrupt and even inadequate, given Williams’ usual density of detail, it does, especially in contrast, reflect the great space in this painting. The short first line, which ends in an unusual exclamation point that gives an even greater pause, permits the reader’s eye to rest – not be pulled ceaselessly into the poem. We dilate in Brueghel’s expansive space.

The rest of the poem reflects this leisure. Even as the poem narrows its focus on the figures clustered in the poem's right corner, it maintains brief, uncluttered lines. The glance, still freezing figures in an isolated contextual and visual space, lingers upon them.

But, in this slowness, Williams is more aggressive in interrogating the painting's surface. The central reaper is

... enjoying his
noonday rest
completely

relaxed
from his morning labors
sprawled

in fact sleeping
unbuttoned
on his back

Each of Williams' lines plunges deeper into the semantic possibilities of the reclining figure. Initially he is "enjoying/ his noonday rest," which Williams revises to "completely/ relaxed" and then to "sprawled/ in fact sleeping/ unbuttoned". These words are not simply synonymous but describe increasingly intense states of rest. Williams sees multiple possibilities in the prone form – he occasionally appeals to specific visual details as proof of his word choice; "sprawled" and "unbuttoned" seem to indicate a state of sleep.

This type of interaction with a painting converges upon Keats' own famous approach in "Ode on a Grecian Urn." But, unlike that urn, Brueghel's painting will not end the poem with a ponderous maxim. Above all there is a central ambiguity – these natural signs, Williams implies, are not as effective as words in describing reality. Williams' ability to amplify the objectness of a painting and to consider its

significant and minor details only reveals that an image can never be more than those details.

the women
have brought him his lunch
perhaps

a spot of wine
they gather gossiping
under a tree

whose shade
carelessly
he does not share the

resting
center of
their workaday world

The next tercet replicates the confusion of natural signs. The women in the painting “have brought him his lunch,” or, “perhaps,” only “a spot of wine.” Here, lines are being shaped as much by sight as by thought – Williams moves into a stream of consciousness in which each line reflects a sensation on an image, which is more holistically considered by the whole tercet. Williams foregrounds the picture’s confusion: we see a basket, a jug. But their contents are blocked by the very surface of the painting. And certainly we cannot read something as abstract as intent into the painting – we can see the women have lunch, but painting is physically limited from a structure like the preposition. It cannot indicate *for whom* lunch was brought.

The End of Photography

The lesson of *Pictures from Brueghel* and of Diane Arbus’s photograph *Identical Twins* is that the photograph, by isolating images, threatens to destroy the very mimetic correspondence that positioned photography as the most natural of

signifiers. To isolate is to select, but selectively seeing, like understanding, begins by “*not* accepting the world as it looks” (Sontag 23, emphasis author’s).

Photography’s very goal, the slowing and isolation of vision, leads directly to the end of photography – the deconstruction of the photographic image. Williams provides us with a way to “read” the photograph – to split its flat, sleek, and supposedly realistic surface into chunks of language that suggest realities beyond the image and that foreground the image’s inability to self-reflectively move past its own surfaces, the limits of its own so-cleverly chosen details. Sontag claims that “the camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses,” and she is correct. But by training ourselves to use photographic vision – to isolate, to objectify, and to interrogate – we can become conscious of what photography is missing. We can learn to mute the photograph’s natural sign, its pronouncement of “*there it is, lo!*” and pay more attention to the point at which it stops speaking - what it leaves out.

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