

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Brian L. Gempp entitled *Somehow a word must be found: William Carlos Williams, the Legacies of Duchamp, and the Troping of the Found*. I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

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Somehow a word must be found: William Carlos Williams, the Legacies of Duchamp,
and the Troping of the Found

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Brian L. Gempp
December 2009

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Catherine and Leonard Gempp, who have long provided me with the support to indulge my interests and the conversations in the kitchen that helped to start me on this road.

I would also like to thank my Dissertation Director and friend, Allen Dunn, for supplying me with an almost unfailing sense of patience, clarity, and calm through the many difficult stages of this project. It was as a student in Allen's classes here in Knoxville that I first began to consider Williams's relation to contemporary art. Allen supported my ideas when they were still largely undeveloped and encouraged me to pursue my own interests without forcing them into a direction or form other than my own.

Thanks are also due to the other members of my committee. Dr. Alexis Boylan, Dr. Amy Elias, and Dr. Mary Papke all of whom proved integral at various stages in the dissertation's development. I am especially grateful to Drs. Boylan and Papke for their willingness to serve, well after the dissertation was already in-formation. Both added important insights on my project and a model of professorial service that I hope to emulate and build upon in the future.

Also at the University of Tennessee, I would like to thank Dr. Chuck Maland, Dr. Michael Lofaro, and the late Dr. Richard Finneran, for allowing me to work as a Research Assistant. I would be remiss without thanking Leanne Hinkle, who was an unyielding source of support at every stage of my graduate work.

A number of people played important roles during my years in Knoxville: in the beginning stages, Brandon Loper provided me with a receptive ear to improvise and develop my ideas; Shaun Morgan was a comrade-in-arms at every stage; and Michael Modarelli supplied me with the humor and savvy on how to survive what sometimes felt like inhospitable conditions. I also would like to thank Hal and Susie Flynt for their support, generosity, and care.

I am most indebted to Meredyth Sparks, who provided me, again and again, both here and there, with patience, love, and understanding. When I felt exhausted by the marriage of modern poetry and contemporary art, she was quick to suggest a perspective or angle I had never considered before. When I was looking too deeply into theory for answers, she reminded me to focus on the found.

Abstract

Somehow a Word Must be Found: William Carlos Williams, the Legacies of Duchamp, and the Troping of the Found

Since the publication of J. Hillis Miller's seminal chapter on William Carlos Williams in *Poets of Reality* (1965), there has been a uniform trend among critics to read the poet's early experiments in relation to Marcel Duchamp. Miller situates Williams's poetics within a range of avant-garde neologisms thought to challenge the autonomy of the bourgeois art object. Williams's poetry rethinks the function and form of language and it is this self-reflexivity, and Miller's deferral to the ready-made, that provides the foundation for this study. Inspired by a Dadaist-revival that reached its peak in the years leading up to the poet's death, literary critics—including Miller—have glossed over Williams's difficulties developing his own theories of art in relation to these avant-garde precedents. In the late 1960s, a new generation of artists reevaluated Duchamp, a reconsideration that corresponds to Williams's early commentary. Throughout his writing from the early 1920s, Williams emphasized a notion of the found easily confused—sometimes even by the poet himself—with the ready-made. Williams's responses to Duchamp and the expatriated avant-garde evolved over the poet's life as his and Duchamp's works were embraced by the very institutions both had initially set out to complicate.

Chapter One rethinks the ready-made's legacy as the animating innovation within modernism. The ready-made embodies a principle of negation that contrasts with Williams's far-ranging theory of the imagination. In driving a wedge between Williams's troping of the found and the ready-made, I lean on postmodern theories of art, especially the ideas of Robert Rauschenberg, the Earthworks artist, who named his childhood pediatrician, William Carlos Williams, a "proto-conceptual artist." Chapter Two examines the broken style and theory of the imagination Williams formulates in *Kora in Hell* (1920), a text written in the year following the ready-made's debut. Chapter Three analyzes the discursive interweaving of prose and poetry in *Spring and All* (1923), Williams's most fully-realized avant-garde experiment. I conclude with a consideration of the verse written prior to the introduction of the ready-made, the poet's earliest attempt to establish the local as a viable avant-garde tradition.

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Introduction

Found poetry. What is it?

- “It is the culmination of realism. So the found poem is really a piece of realistic literature, in which significance appears inherent in the object—either as extravagant absurdity or as unexpected worth. It is like driftwood, or pop art, where natural objects and utilitarian objects are seen as the focus of generative form or meaning”—Louis Dudek.

Possible distinctions.

- Found object, *objet trouvé*, ready-made: Something removed from one context and placed within an aesthetic context. An object valued more for its aesthetic than its utilitarian appeal. If a passage of prose, it must not be altered in the process.¹

*Where shall the word be found, where will the word
Resound? Not here . . .*—T.S. Eliot, “Ash Wednesday”

Over the last century, in an attempt to either escape or reinforce “continuous” poetic forms, modern and postmodern poets have reevaluated fundamental assumptions about representation, namely the relation between speech and writing, poetry and prose, the visual and the verbal, and the aesthetic potential of the everyday. Among first-generation modern poets, two branches are said to have grown out of this reevaluation. One side of the divide functions as part of a Symbolist genealogy in which poets like T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and somewhat less frequently, Ezra Pound, adhere to formal precedents, cultural traditions, and their attendant master narratives—what has been described as the “total imaginative mythologies envisioned by

¹ These quotes are taken from John Robert Colombo’s “A Found Introduction,” quoted in *The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature*, Ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1982), 304 and 309.

modernism.”² On the other side, materialist or objectivist poets like Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and again somewhat less frequently, Ezra Pound treat words as both material objects and referential signs.³ Within this materialist modernism, the represented falls under repeated threat from the real, a challenge commonly manifest in the appearance of non-aesthetic or found elements from low culture invading the poetic or pictorial space of high art, an avant-garde strategy that has had a profound impact on both twentieth-century American art and literature.

Donald Allen’s groundbreaking anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960) supplies an early indication of objectivist or materialist trends in post-war experimental poetry. The *Art of Assemblage* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (1961) similarly emphasized the influence Cubism, Dadaism and Surrealism had on late modern artistic practices, specifically Neo-Dadaism’s rupturing the integrity of the painterly frame, a technique subsequently complicated in Appropriation and Post-appropriation-based works that question distinctions between art and reality. Among these artists, representational concerns over notions of the copy, surrogacy, and

² Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry During the 1960s* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979), 20. For useful insights on the Symbolist/Materialist distinction, see Altieri’s notion of “immanentism” developed in this text, 17.

³ Over the last thirty years prominent critics, including Marjorie Perloff, have explored this materialist strain and its potential within the long twentieth century. Perloff reads recent experiments in light of this modernist materialism as “a carrying-on, in somewhat diluted form, of the avant-garde project that had been at the very heart of early modernism . . . its radical and utopian aspirations being cut off by the catastrophe, first of the Great War, and then of the series of crises produced by the two great totalitarianisms that dominated the first half of the century and culminated in World War II and the subsequent Cold War.” Perloff views the historical avant-garde as providing the “seeds of the materialist poetic which is increasingly our own—a poetic that seems much more attuned to the ready-mades, the ‘delays’ in glass and verbal enigmas of Marcel Duchamp, to the non-generic, non-representational texts of Gertrude Stein, and to the sound and visual poems, the poem-manifestos and artist’s books of Velimir Khlebnikov than to the authenticity model” she disparages as endemic to the Confessional or “laureate poetry” that dominates mainstream poetry in publications like *The New Yorker*, *New York Times Book Review* and the pages of *Poetry*. See Marjorie Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 3-4.

other critiques of authorship have become paramount to art production. William Carlos Williams's poetry and prose experiments from the 1920s provide an early American commentary on these theoretical concerns. Like later Neo-avant-garde re-workings of the techniques and strategies first introduced by the early avant-garde, Williams's writing offers a somewhat cautious qualification of those Dadaist artworks and attitudes first made popular in the years following the start of the First World War, a period of artistic and cultural tumult that coincided with Williams's maturation as a poet.⁴

This study will explore how Williams's work from the early 1920s offered not only an echo of these European avant-garde precedents but also helped to anticipate Neo-avant-garde reworkings of these innovations. Unlike important art-historical studies over the last forty years that have focused on Dadaism's *influence* on Williams, this study aims to consider the crucial ways in which his early mature work actively reconceives these techniques, anticipating many of

⁴ In interviews and essays throughout his life, Williams emphasized how his poetic maturation corresponded with the arrival of the European avant-garde to America. In part, this repetition suggests Williams's desire to shape his own reception, reminding critics that his poetic and prose experiments reflected the "restless and constrained" feeling among American artists and poets during the 1910s and 1920s; in response to this repressive cultural climate, Williams felt "closely allied with the painters. Impressionism, dadaism, surrealism applied to both painting and the poem" (A 148). As I make clear in the next chapter, however, Williams often felt marginalized from these activities and groups.

Benjamin H.D. Buchloh provides the most comprehensive definition of the Neo-avant-garde, a term used to distinguish post-war avant-garde work from its historical precedent. See Buchloh's *New-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Boston: MIT Press, 2001), xviii-xxxiii. Buchloh's study investigates how, in the middle of the last century, the ideological forces of the "culture industry and [the] spectacle massively invade the once relatively autonomous space, institutions, and practices of avant-garde culture and begin to control them" (xxii), an argument he developed in response to Bürger's Marxist-influenced study and elevation of early Dada in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, tr. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), see 58 and 61-63, hereafter referred to in the text by Bürger, followed by the page number. More recently, Dietrich Scheunemann has developed a more inclusive perspective on the Neo-avant-garde in his consideration of the relationship between the early avant-garde and works created during the second half of the twentieth-century. See "From Collage to the Multiple. On the Genealogy of Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde," in *Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde*, Ed. Dietrich Scheunemann (New York: Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam, 2005), 15-48. For a specific and particularly insightful example of the historical avant-garde's confrontation with the Neo-avant-garde, see Branden Joseph's *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 5-23, hereafter referred to in the text by Joseph, followed by the page number.

the central concerns in contemporary art. Chapters One, Two and Three investigate Williams's most explicit borrowings, and more importantly, his modulations of these early avant-garde techniques: his immediate and somewhat confused evaluations of Dada; the broken style and theory of the imagination first established in his prose experiments in *Kora in Hell* (1920); and the complex interweaving of prose and poetry in *Spring and All* (1923), a book that includes some of Williams's finest short verse written in the years after the arrival to New York of expatriated European visual artists and prior to his temporary abandonment of poetry in favor of the short story and novel during the late 1920s and early 1930s, a prose turn that explored more overtly proletarian themes during the Depression. Collectively these experimental works provide Williams's most concentrated reactions to the philosophies of art associated with the avant-garde, a response that finds parallels some forty years later among the Neo-Dadaists. In the most general terms, Williams's techniques and themes are guided not by an attitude of mockery, defiance or derision but by a provisional and passive resignation to what might be found, discovered, and experienced in one's local environment. According to this attitude, the artist approaches the material world with a certain passive sense of humility, de-centering an artist-subject's primary mediating role in the creative act and emphasizing an inter-dependent relationship between a seeing-subject and the already-present objects embedded in one's material culture.

From the 1960s through the 1980s, literary critics have relied on a handful of narratives in evaluating the early avant-garde's influence on Williams's poetic transformation. One of the most common approaches places Williams on the edge of an American—sometimes read as a *regional* or *popular* modernist—variation on Dadaism, highlighting the poet's attempt to

articulate and theorize a more hard-edged, locally-inflected verse to rival the work of those European artists included in what Peter Bürger terms the “historical avant-garde.”⁵ These inter-art studies typically look back to the monumental socio-cultural and artistic events of the 1910s, chronicling Williams’s engagement with an American (again, often read as proto-*Precisionist*) challenge to the socio-political oppositionality typically associated with the early avant-garde. Though undoubtedly influenced by the controversial Dadaist and Cubist works on display at the Armory Show in 1913 and the Society of Independents Exhibition of 1917, Williams’s importing commercial signs for soda, incidental letters and notes from his personal life, and subway advertisements directly into his verse is qualitatively and attitudinally different from the collectivist political and anti-art programs of the historical avant-garde. Where Dadaism might proffer a joke or posit art as a negation of the creative act, Williams’s Cubist-Realist incorporation of the found elevates an aesthetic value already inherent to the signs, commercial products, and machinery thought to define modern existence. Though the historical avant-garde

⁵ In accord with his Marxist sympathies, Bürger investigates how various artists included under the banner of the European avant-garde set out to challenge the institutionalized commerce of art and the “autonomy” of the bourgeois art object. For Bürger, the concept of artistic “autonomy”—and the radical aesthetics that rose up after it—is part of a dialectical continuum that began in the eighteenth century but received its most pronounced articulation in opposition to late nineteenth-century Aestheticism. In defining this oppositional critique, Bürger broadly references Marcel Duchamp’s ready-made, Breton and Aragon’s experiments with chance, and the photomontages of John Heartfield as paradigmatic instances in the avant-garde’s attack on Aestheticism.

In relation to representation, avant-garde art aims to invalidate standard cognitive approaches to artistic reception and organic views of the world, encouraging a viewer to question the governing assumptions through which art is typically understood. To that end, avant-garde art encourages the dissolution of barriers between art and life, a perspective in which “the conduct of one’s life is questionable and that it is necessary to change it . . . to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient’s life praxis” (Bürger 80). This emphasis on praxis, how art leads to new notions of political subjectivity, defines Bürger’s larger project, a position Andreas Huyssen and others would later echo. Huyssen argues avant-garde art hinges on an “iconoclastic and anti-aesthetic ethos, which [is an] attempt to break the political bondage of high culture . . . to integrate art into life.” Quoted in *After the Great Divide: Modern, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 167. In his own highly idiosyncratic terms, Williams also engages this debate about art and praxis in *Spring and All*, hinting at a poetry capable of transcending realism in favor of the real.

first raised many of the questions I will consider in this study, Williams's poetry often affirms what Dadaism set out to negate.

Tristan Tzara, Dadaism's earliest and most rigorously nihilist voice, epitomizes the oppositionality of the early European avant-garde. In his manifesto of 1918, Tzara defines Dada's targets in the broadest terms available, as

[e]very product of disgust capable of becoming a negation of the family is Dada; a protest with the fists of its whole being engaged in destructive actions . . . abolition of logic . . . every object, all objects, sentiments, obscurities, apparitions and the precise clash of parallel lines are weapons for the fight: Dada; abolition of memory: Dada; abolition of archeology: Dada; abolition of prophets: Dada; abolition of the future.⁶

Though taking the principle of negation to an absurdist extreme, this passage reflects Dada's ambition to wage war on culture and convention. For American artists untouched by the horrors of the First World War, revolution in the arts would assume a different tone and flavor, a sometimes optimistic investigation of common culture that incorporated those objects and technologies associated with industrial and technological progress. Williams's inclusion of found objects and texts in his poetry often focuses attention on minute and elemental aspects from one's experience in this new world, an attention that, in turn, inspires a self-reflexive commentary on the very medium that constitutes one's artistic response to it. In this sense, Williams's troping of the found involves a sometimes naïve faith in how "so much depends" on those materials an artist finds in his or her environment. But these discoveries frequently include another form of battle that involves the relinquishing of authorial agency to the randomness associated with the modern condition. Rather than the artist functioning as a governing—

⁶ Quoted in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 253, hereafter referred to in the text by Harrison and Wood, followed by the page number.

sometimes read as *Romantic*—ego within the creative act, Williams’s early avant-garde experiments frequently suggest a more passive mode in which a poet comes to admit that “[s]omehow a word must be found.”⁷

Since J. Hillis Miller’s seminal study *Poets of Reality* (1965), however, Marcel Duchamp and the anti-institutionalism of the ready-made have provided literary critics with the art historical-hinge in Williams’s poetic transformation.⁸ In the decades to follow, notable critics like Bram Dijkstra (1969), Dickran Tashjian (1975), Henry M. Sayre (1983), and Peter Schmidt (1988) have all responded to Miller’s lead, though their projects are generally directed toward less philosophical and more art historical ends.⁹ These studies frequently pursue a logic Dijkstra

⁷ Quoted in *Imaginations*, (New York: New Directions, 1970), pg. 165, hereafter referred to as *I* in the text, followed by the page number. Other texts will be referred to as follows: “America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry.” *William Carlos Williams Review*, 13.1, 1987, 1-4, hereafter referred to in the text by “America,” followed by the page number; *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1951), hereafter referred to in the text by *A*, followed by the page number; *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams Volume I 1909-1939*. (New York: New Directions, 2001), hereafter referred to in the text by *CP1*, followed by the page number; *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams Volume II 1939-1962* (New York: New Directions, 2001), hereafter referred to in the text by *CP2*, followed by the page number; *The Embodiment of Knowledge*. Ed. Ron Loewinsohn. (New York: New Directions, 1974), hereafter referred to in the text by *EoK*, followed by the page number; *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*. Ed. Edith Heal (New York: New Directions, 1977), hereafter referred to in the text by *IWtWaP*, followed by the page number; *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1956), hereafter referred to in the text by *ItAG*, followed by the page number; *A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists*. Ed. Bram Dijkstra (New York: New Directions, 1978), hereafter referred to in the text by *ARI*, followed by the page number; *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1954), hereafter referred to in the text by *SE*, followed by the page number; *Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*. Ed. John C. Thirwall (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957), hereafter referred to in the text by *SL*, followed by the page number; *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1958), hereafter referred to in the text by *P*, followed by the page number.

⁸ J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), hereafter referred to in the text as *PoR*, followed by the page number. Also, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), hereafter referred to in the text by *LM*, followed by the page number.

⁹ While Dijkstra and Tashjian both provide insightful background on Williams’s and other New York artists’ relation to the European avant-garde, Schmidt’s book is usefully framed around what he describes as an inter-art pluralism that situates Williams *between* avant-garde movements, both at home and abroad, and *between* a respect for literary tradition and a need to resist it. My reading owes much to Schmidt’s reading, and to a lesser degree, what Dijkstra and Tashjian each develop in their studies. Though too early to benefit from the Neo-avant-garde, Tashjian and Dijkstra both hint at an early avant-garde alternative in America, those artists who base their work

around the generative possibilities rooted in a conflict between art and anti-art (see *Skyscraper Primitives*, 3-14, 71-142). Henry M. Sayre directly confronts Miller's legacy in his reading, arguing Williams

constantly resisted the 'leap into things' of which Miller speaks—his faith in things was far from invincible. Conversely, he resisted equally the kind of leap into the mind or ego which a purely abstract art represents. Williams knew himself to be, for better or worse, an almost constantly "artistically creating subject." While he believed in the sun as sun, he also believed in the power of the human mind to metamorphose the sun. (5)

Sayre continues,

Rather than giving up the dualism of subject and object which is so central to Western thought, Williams embraced it. His aesthetic was based on an unresolvable dialectical opposition: on the one hand was the mind, the imagination, and its potential to create order and form; on the other was the world, fragmented and chaotic. By the end of his career Williams had realized the futility of trying to achieve any synthesis of the two. He had become the perfect anti-Hegelian, giving thesis and antithesis more or less equal time but choosing neither. Not only would closing the argument between self and world resolve the interchange central to Western philosophy and literature, but the implication of his poetic effort is that without the interchange, and the ambiguity and tension upon which it rests, philosophy and literature would simply cease to be. (5-6)

In terms of European influences, Cecelia Tichi's *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* (Chapel Hill: University of Chapel Hill Press, 1987) provides an insightful critique of Italian Futurism and the influence of technology and machine art on Williams's poetics. Other important contributions to the inter-art field, include James Guimond's *The Art of William Carlos Williams: A Discovery and Possession of America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968); James E. Breslin's *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Jerome Mazzaro's *William Carlos Williams, the Later Poems* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); and Rod Townley's *The Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).

For a more recent consideration of the ready-made and the found object's influence on Williams in particular, see Peter Halter's excellent study *The Revolution in the Visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Halter, like many critics before and after him, conflates the ready-made and the *objet trouvé* throughout his analysis. All of these works will hereafter be referred to in the text by the author's last name, followed by the page number.

Other recent criticism, most notably Thaddeus Michael Ziolkowski's unpublished dissertation, *The Poetics of the Found in the Early Work of William Carlos Williams* (Yale University, 1994), has proven invaluable in the development of my argument, especially the important task of distinguishing the ready-made from the frequently conflated *objet trouvé*, and pulling Williams's innovation away from Duchamp's precedent. Quoting Edward Said, Ziolkowski argues Williams's use of found materials suggests a new epistemology of art "peculiar to beginnings . . . as well as to that aspect of his poetics I will call the poetics of the 'found,' a term I borrow from the realm of the visual arts, specifically Duchamp's readymade and its offspring, Surrealism's *objet trouvé*." But Ziolkowski neglects to explain how this alternative varies in relation to the ready-made and never addresses how the Surrealists, in the instance quoted here, conceived of the found object in relation to the conventional art object. Ziolkowski never explicitly considers how the *objet trouvé* has developed within twentieth-century American art and poetry or why another term, besides Duchamp's, might shed new light on Williams's poetry. What Ziolkowski does indicate, and this distinction is essential in rethinking prior readings of the poet's "ready-made aesthetic," is how, unlike the ready-made, Williams's poetry frequently emphasizes the "relationship between the poet and the already-present materials he takes up for the making of poems: *ex nihilo nihil fit* . . . the *differences* produced by the interplay between these two fundamental elements of poesis (poet and world) are always, from poet to poet and poem to poem, precisely different." My emphasis on difference in Williams's troping of the found builds on Ziolkowski's important reading and I acknowledge how his work has provided me with important groundwork for my own study.

describes, in broad inter-art terms, as Williams's ambition to "most literally . . . *transpose* the properties of the new forms of painting to poetry."¹⁰ Successive readings operate according to a comparable logic, identifying how various (primarily European) avant-garde experiments influence and/or function within Williams's poetry, retro-fitting his work according to a (and one can fill in the blank here) "Cubist," "Dadaist," "Futurist" or "Surrealist" frame.

This deferral to Duchamp continues despite the fact that Miller's preliminary association of Williams and the ready-made conflates two important terms that function in very distinct capacities within contemporary art, the found object and the ready-made. I aim to untangle this conflation, distinguishing historical uses of found elements from later Neo-Dadaist and Neo-avant-garde methods, a clarification I contend holds important potential in understanding Williams's writing and his ambiguous relationship to Duchamp. Beyond this clarification of Miller, the found object's displacement of the ready-made in the terminology of contemporary art signals a broad democratizing impulse at the center of twentieth-century art and poetry, a more egalitarian and inclusive aesthetic model than that which is typically associated with Duchamp. This democratic impulse qualifies the elitism and expertise often associated with early modernism and in this shift away from the ready-made in the direction of the found, the artist-poet cedes agency to a world thought to contain a beauty and aesthetic value prior to its being imported into an aesthetic work.

Positioning Williams's poetics within the broader avant-garde use of found elements focuses attention on his unique desire for poetry to escape from under the influence of Europe

¹⁰ Bram Dijkstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 5, emphasis mine, hereafter referred to in the text as Dijkstra, followed by the page number.

and the anti-art trends arriving in America with the start of the First World War. This anxiety of influence reaches its culmination among visual artists during the 1960s. I will discuss the ramifications of this re-evaluation of Duchamp as it pertains to Williams more fully below. For our present purposes, however, I would like to acknowledge that distinguishing Williams's poetry from the ready-made is not intended as a denial of Duchamp's immeasurable influence on twentieth-century art. Instead, I recognize that Duchamp has eclipsed Picasso as the central figure in narratives of modern (and post-modern) art because of the way his work continues to articulate many of the theoretical and self-reflexive concerns at the center of twentieth-century critical discourse. Regardless (and as his detractors point out) Duchamp remains committed to a form of Romantic subjectivity that many, including Williams, see as highly problematic. This notion of artistic subjectivity is most clearly evident in the ready-made's re-establishment of a Cartesian sense of control over the world. Thus, my study begins with a consideration of the sometimes slippery vocabulary Miller uses in his initial association of Williams and Duchamp, a precarious start for subsequent inter-art studies that signals the difficulty critics continue to have in reading Williams's poetry as a verbal variation on the ready-made.

* *

J. Hillis Miller's seminal chapter on Williams contends that, like Duchamp's ready-made, Williams's poetry offers a post-Cartesian model of artistic subjectivity, plumbing the ontological edge of representation where words function as objects rather than as transparent signifiers.¹¹

¹¹ When I speak of Cartesian subjectivity, I refer to a broad dualism that conceives of human consciousness as distinct from the material world. According to Descartes' self-reflecting *cogito*, one is only certain of the content of one's private subjective experience. For a post-Cartesian subject, however, the artist is no longer the exclusive

According to Miller, Williams's poetic language conceives of words as concrete material forms on the page without any standard communicative or representational value. Within *Poets of Reality* and Miller's larger argument about modernism, Williams is named as the poet who most radically challenges the legacy of realism and the avant-garde innovations the critic cites to illustrate this point function as a unified philosophical pretext to an anti-representational and materialist view of language. To fully understand Williams's writing in light of this anti-mimetic challenge, Miller claims, requires the abandonment of Romantic notions of the artist as a governing ego in the creative act, as well as letting go of the standard figuration used in conventional verse. In the place of symbol and metaphor, Miller argues, Williams presents

words as things . . . Sometimes words are taken as *objet trouvés*. A modern painter makes his collage of bits of newspaper or cigarette packages. Picasso creates a bull's head out of a bicycle seat and handle bars. Marcel Duchamp sets up a urinal as a 'ready-made.' In the same way Williams makes poetry out of a list of kinds of ice cream, with prices . . . or out of street signs . . . or out of a fashionable grocery list. (*PoR* 293)

The metonymic potential of these early avant-garde innovations allows Miller to make a larger point about semiotic reference, that "meaning is always incarnated, never purely spiritual" (*PoR* 293) or directed beyond those material elements that formally constitute an aesthetic work.

Thus, Miller's Heideggerian sensitivity to the materiality of these works underscores the primary philosophical claim about modern poetry in *Poets of Reality*, that "Nonverbal things cannot be put into poetry, since poems are after all made of words, but words also are ready-made and may be taken out of their contexts and put into a poem just as they are found" (*PoR* 293). Miller's association of language's "ready-made" condition—where words become reified through

mediator of aesthetic experience, and artistic agency is conceived as something other than volitional. Miller's reading is indebted to both Heidegger and Husserl, the latter of whom called for a return to "the things themselves," realigning subject and object, an intertwining lost in dualist philosophies.

convention and use—with the art innovations popularized within the early avant-garde underscores *Poets of Reality*'s assertion that the concrete carries within it an immanence that acts to unite subject and object.

In light of this immanence, Williams is placed at one end of a modernist continuum that calls into question the Romantic artistic ego's governing position in a creative work, toppling authorial will in favor of an intensified sensitivity to both the world and the word. In relation to Miller's early Georges Poulet-inspired criticism, Williams's poetry might be said to prevent a reader from seeing *through* an author's consciousness. Consequently, Williams's poetic language unites *subject* and *object* in the word, providing the poet—and by extension, the reader—with a temporary possession of that distant reality towards which a Symbolist-line of poetry is often directed.

Miller's critics have responded that this notion of the artist as a passive vehicle or medium, rather than as an active creator of a work, acts to obliterate agency, what Charles Altieri has described as a non-volitional condition in which the word languishes in a state of perpetually "naïve and useless immanence."¹² Many of Miller's detractors often follow his example, incorrectly I think, failing to consider how each innovation referenced in his initial survey of early avant-garde art involves varying degrees of the artist-subject's presence. Attention to these variations indicates how Williams's poetics appear at odds with Duchamp's theory of the ready-made. In this sense, each of the early modern art innovations Miller cites should be measured according to the manner in which the presence of found materials is modified in an artwork's overall presentation. Moreover, the artist's mediating role varies radically in the examples

¹² Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 225.

Miller provides—from Duchamp’s ready-made, to Surrealist and Dadaist found art, and finally, in Picasso’s sculptural innovations. Each uniquely negotiates the divide between the represented and the real, what Williams characterizes in *Spring and All* as a subjectivity defined according to the “inevitable flux of the seeing eye toward measuring itself by the world it inhabits” (I 105). Within this interchange, *selfhood* is always established in relation to the *other*, and each avant-garde innovation exposes various assumptions and ideologies that inform the purported autonomy of the modern art object and the legacy of mimetic representation. Thus, separating Williams from Duchamp repositions his early experimental poetry in what might be conceived as a long avant-garde that continues, even today, to re-evaluate art’s appropriation of the everyday.

Finally, considering the poet within the context of late modern responses to the early avant-garde will provide a useful reminder of the difficulty critics encounter in trying to classify Williams’s relationship to twentieth-century visual art. For instance, one need only search Williams’s critical writing and autobiography for words like *Dadaism* or *Duchamp* to get a sense of his tenuous identification with the émigré culture in New York. Moreover, Williams’s half-century of writing spans many avant-garde iterations, an historical breadth that should not be delimited to its earliest Euro-centric models. Having first published in 1909, years prior to the issuing of any avant-garde communiqués from Europe, and continuing to write actively until his death in 1963, Williams witnessed multiple reformulations of the avant-garde and responded in his writing to modern art ranging from the Ashcan School to Abstract Expressionism. Exclusively applying the oppositionality of the historical avant-garde to the themes and content of Williams’s poetry neglects the poet’s desire to create a radically new American poetry bent on upsetting the stultifying effects of tradition (as embodied in religion, philosophy, science, and

most pernicious of all, art history). Against these forces, Williams celebrates those figures he sees as physically embodying a creative freedom that functions outside orthodoxy. With the exception of Duchamp, during the late 1910s and early 1920s, many of the figures Williams names as exemplary of this creative mode of being (Whitman, Poe, Daniel Boone, and the poet's own mother) are associated not with Europe but with a peculiarly American spirit, culture, and the experience it engenders, an invocation of the new as an already present, though sometimes repressed (and corrupted), element within one's environment. Williams characterizes this mode of being in *In the American Grain* as an autochthonic "expression of a 'good' spirit" as "the desire to have 'culture' for America by '*finding*' it, full blown—somewhere" (emphasis mine, *ItAG* 224). This discovery of an aesthetic object in the world contradicts or betrays the conceptual approach inherent to the ready-made. Again, *In the American Grain* offers a response to those who continue to look to Europe and the historical avant-garde for their critical models. Williams writes, "What has been morally, aesthetically worthwhile in America has rested upon peculiar and discoverable ground. But they think they get it out of the air" (109). In the 1920s, the pull of this "peculiar and discoverable ground" returned the focus of Williams's poetry to the particularities of the industrialized, working-class, and semi-rural landscape of northern New Jersey. Developing a poetry out of what might be "discoverable," rather than designated, anticipates practices in Neo-avant-garde and Conceptual art of the second half of the twentieth century, in which the boundaries distinguishing aesthetic from non-aesthetic objects (and the created from the found) became of interest to both artists and art critics alike.

* * *

The dissolution of distinctions between high and low culture, aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects, has helped to liberate the scope of artistic production after modernism. Arthur Danto has termed this trend—in relation to Andy Warhol, but with nods to Duchamp—the “transfiguration of the commonplace,” whereby prosaic materials found in nature and mass culture suddenly appear suitable as art objects. Extending practices first developed in the historical avant-garde, a new generation of Neo-avant-garde artists and thinkers, including Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, John Cage, and Robert Morris, beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s, re-conceived of Duchamp’s methodology, incorporating found objects and prefabricated materials as central components in their work. Examining the attitudes of these artists in adopting Duchamp’s methods helps clarify aspects of the relatively undefined avant-garde neologisms Miller cites in relation to Williams, terms that would become more clearly demarcated as Duchamp was assuming his own place within the culture of the museum.

Neo-avant-garde artists frequently refer to what might be found in the world, the found object or *objet trouvé*, in reference to their work. This shift in vocabulary is subtle but significant, so much so that today the ready-made is almost exclusively associated with Duchamp’s specific innovation and a precise controversy at the center of early modernism. In a broader sense, however, this terminological distinction sheds light on a Neo-avant-garde attitude toward everyday objects presented within an “aesthetic” field. Where Duchamp’s Dadaism confronts the standards of taste that inform aesthetic judgment, a confrontation frequently viewed in opposition to Rationalism and post-Enlightenment aesthetics, Neo-avant-garde artists champion a rethinking of art’s relation to the everyday, an attitude Stephen Johnstone frames as

politically charged, a negation of Duchamp's negation. For the Neo-avant-garde, the everyday becomes both a measure of authenticity and a sign of art's democratization, an affirmative

commitment to the quotidian [that] has a profoundly political tenor: accessed through the use in art of ordinary found materials, the everyday might be the common ground of experience that allows museum visitors to "understand the effects of history on the private lives of those who were usually overlooked." [But] Commitment to the everyday can also indicate the desire to give a voice to those [artworks and people] silenced by dominant discourses and ideologies—a commitment coupled with the responsibility to engage with the everyday's transformative potential; for in this dialogue to notice the taken-for-granted conversation of others is the first step in irrevocably changing everyday life.¹³

If the Dadaists rose-up against a rationalist ideology that culminated in the technological barbarism of the First World War, the Neo-avant-garde might be viewed as emerging from the silence of the post-war era. How to conceptualize of the everyday within this silence transformed approaches to art making and the realist tradition, a taking notice of the "taken-for-granted" that functioned as "the first step in irrevocably changing everyday life." The Neo-avant-garde's "commitment to the quotidian" is best evidenced in the mute presentation of everyday objects alongside more conventional "artistic" materials, what Williams would refer to as art's "co-existence" with nature and which Robert Rauschenberg famously termed a "combine," an art that pulls together aesthetic and non-aesthetic materials into a single field. In a painting like *Bed* [Figure 1], Rauschenberg draws attention to the aesthetic and non-aesthetic surface of things, a leveling of differences that has an effect both similar to and distinguished from what Miller sees operating in Williams's poetry, where one word functions like another, self fuses with world, and the poet and anti-poetic collapse in upon the other.¹⁴ As Alan

¹³ Stephen Johnstone (Ed. and introduction), *The Everyday: Documents of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 13, hereafter referred to in the text by Johnstone, followed by the page number.

¹⁴ All Figures cited within the text are located in the Appendix.

Solomon indicates in writing on Rauschenberg's first retrospective at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1963:

The apparently negative attitude of the Dada group toward art and society actually grew out of a deep sense of esthetic and political frustration. The new artists [like Rauschenberg and Johns] operate, by contrast, in complete esthetic freedom, and politically they have disengaged themselves totally. By way of explanation one might say that both the art battles and the historical battles have been fought for them by their predecessors [the Dadaists], but whatever the explanation, the result seems to be that this new generation is wholly engaged in life and the process of art, in a direct, intense and optimistic way, without commitment to any of the familiar existing institutions. (quoted in Joseph 9)

Rauschenberg's combines famously reformulate distinctions between high and low, positioning the artist in a space *between* the created and the already extant. Rauschenberg states, "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither is made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)."¹⁵ In terms of formal innovation, the combines reflect this desire to complicate overly rigid barriers that separate painting from sculpture and high from low culture.¹⁶ But in terms of Duchamp and the avant-garde tradition Rauschenberg inherited, the combines also express a sensitivity to the randomness of experience and the return, after its absence during Abstract Expressionism, of the everyday object to the representational field.

¹⁵ Quoted in Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 16, hereafter referred to in the text by Foster, followed by the page number. Within the Neo-avant-garde, John Cage made comments similar to Rauschenberg's affirmative pronouncements: "I do not discriminate between intention and non-intention, the splits, subject-object, art-life, etc. disappear," quoted in *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 14.

¹⁶ A few years later, Conceptual artist Douglas Huebler would push to erase distinctions between art and non-art, challenging culture's necessity for a definition of the art object in the first place. If Rauschenberg positions the artist in a gap between stable categories of "art" and "life," Huebler eliminates the gap altogether, arguing, "[t]he World is full of objects, more or less interesting; I don't wish to add any more. I prefer, simply, to state the existence of things in terms of time and place." Huebler's modest artworks reflect an openness to process, whereby art hinges upon an act rather than a product-based conception of the art object. At its most extreme, Huebler reduces art to an ethnographic form of documentation (photographs, recordings, texts, etc.) or pure idea (textual instructions)—circumventing the material or constructed object of art in favor of a mere recording of the world. Quoted in *Art Povera* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 43.

In writing about Williams's contemporary, Walter Benjamin, Susan Buck-Morss has characterized early avant-garde collage as operating within a similar gap, pushing back and forth between "art" and "non-art." Collage achieves its effect through an "oscillation between the intrusion of objective 'reality' into the artwork and the subjective control over the meanings of these real objects that . . . the technique allows . . . and this becomes the source of an epistemological—rather than cultural—instability" that a viewer must confront in making sense of an artwork.¹⁷ For Rauschenberg's combines, this gap produces an instability that famously asks—should one approach the bed as an artwork or try to get into it and go to sleep? If someone did try to use the bed according to its functional purpose, it would no longer exist as art—its utility would supersede its mimetic and aesthetic potential. In Williams's poetry, this tension between functional value and representational value also helps to produce meaning, undermining what the poet considered to be the conservatism inherent to those French (Zola, Flaubert, etc.) and American-based (Dreisser, Howells, etc.) Realisms he set out to upend. In *Spring and All*, Williams expressed his interest in "new works of art [that] cannot be left in this category of France's 'lie,' they must be real, not 'realism,' but reality itself" (I 117). Thus, Williams's call for new works consisting of "reality itself" rather than the *isms* of the early avant-garde anticipates those debates among artists in the early 1960s that aimed to reconsider the ready-made's relevance as a methodology and perspective on both the art object and the world.

For many American Neo-avant-garde artists, and in particular, Earthworks artist Robert Smithson, the art prescriptions initially associated with the ready-made supplied both an

¹⁷ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 227.

inspiration and an obstacle that needed to be overcome, especially in rethinking art's relation to the "real." I examine these responses to the ready-made more fully in the pages that follow, but need to first establish the broad context and parameters surrounding the legacy of the ready-made, and more importantly, the art world's initial reaction to it, as a possible alternative to the dominant trend among literary critics to read Williams's poetics exclusively through the lens of the historical avant-garde. In 1972 Smithson named his childhood pediatrician, William Carlos Williams, a "proto-conceptual" progenitor for the Neo-avant-garde attitudes and art that rose up after Abstract Expressionism.¹⁸ It is with this genealogical turnabout in mind that I will consider a variety of responses to Duchamp from the 1960s, evaluations that echo many of Williams's own early reactions to Dada as expressed in the late 1910s and early 1920s.

* * * *

Duchamp's critical ascent might be said to have officially begun with Walter and Louise Arensberg's donation of their sizable collection of modern art to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This donation corresponds to an important tipping point in Dadaism's anti-art program. After almost a decade of false starts and frustrated negotiations with other institutions, the Arensberg collection opened to the public in 1954 and included forty-three of Duchamp's works, establishing itself as the primary center for the artist's work in the world.¹⁹ A substantial portion

¹⁸ In poetry, Allen Ginsberg and the Beats also famously claimed Williams as their poetic father, and a diverse array of post-war poets—from Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath to Ron Silliman and Charles Bernstein—have cited him as an early modern forbearer to their respective attempts at overthrowing the hegemony of New Criticism.

¹⁹ The Arensbergs had been actively collecting modern and non-Western art since 1913. By the early 1940s, the Arensbergs began looking for an institution to which to donate their collection. Initially the couple decided on the University of California, Los Angeles, but the university was slow in responding to the Arensberg's stipulations that the collection have a building constructed on campus that would be used exclusively for the exhibition of the works. After protracted discussions with UCLA, by the late 1940s the couple decided to donate the collection to the

of Arensberg's Duchamp collection was placed on loan in 1963 for the artist's first major retrospective, "By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rrose Sélavy," at the Pasadena Art Museum. The first major European retrospective followed three years later at London's Tate Gallery. This revival of interest in Dada transformed Duchamp from an art historical figure—who had supposedly given up art making in the early 1920s—into a cultural celebrity of sorts, as evidenced in his inclusion in Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests* (1964-1966), a series of short film portraits that also feature Bob Dylan, Donovan and Dennis Hopper, to name just a few.

From a more scholarly perspective, the Arensbergs' search for a permanent home for their collection coincided with the 1959 publication, in both French and English, of Robert Lebel's volume *Sur Marcel Duchamp*, a text that helped reintroduce a new generation of artists and critics to Duchamp's work and thinking. In part, Williams's praise of Duchamp in his autobiography—written in the years leading up to the Philadelphia Museum of Art's acquisition and the publication of Lebel's volume—underscores the broad cultural and critical appeal Duchamp experienced at mid-century.

In less identifiable ways, however, many artists in the 1960s sought to disguise their indebtedness to Duchamp and the ready-made, publicly criticizing his attitude and politics, a critique subtly manifest in the vocabulary many artists used to mask their borrowings from innovations he first popularized. Artists like Smithson and Carl Andre praised Duchamp for pushing art outside the frame and beyond the walls of a gallery space, while denouncing him as an embodiment of a privileged nineteenth-century sensibility that the historical avant-garde

Philadelphia Museum of Art, presenting over 1000 artworks to the museum on December 27, 1950. Walter and Louise Arensberg died in 1953 and early 1954, respectively, just prior to the public opening of the collection on October 19, 1954.

initially had set out to destroy. In re-evaluating the ontological distinctions between art and the everyday, reality and representation, these artists developed strategies and techniques that purportedly involved the artist (and later, the viewer) spontaneously *finding*—rather than *making*—a work, a perspective on the world in which material reality and one’s exchanges within it might generate aesthetic value.

Smithson criticizes Duchamp’s attitude in relation to the world, claiming *Fountain* fails to offer a clean break with the pictorial and illusionist tradition that the innovation is often considered to have overturned.²⁰ For Smithson, the issue of choice, the artist’s selecting a ready-made acts to amplify aspects of art making that inform both Renaissance perspectivalism and late nineteenth-century French bourgeois culture—art systems governed by patronage and privilege that separate art from life and the everyday from the aesthetic.²¹ While Smithson would agree with Duchamp that paint and canvas no longer function as adequate homologues for one’s experience after modernism, he cautions against the ready-made’s conception of the artist as an exclusive mediator within the creative act, an agency reified in the artist’s touch, what A.N. Whitehead has termed a “Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness.”²² Smithson’s use of found and fabricated materials in his own work self-reflexively acknowledges that art is not “natural,” while continuing to engage the natural world, suggesting an artwork can never contain, depict, or realize entirely what it sets out to represent.

²⁰ On the ready-made’s relation to pictorialism, see Thierry de Duve’s argument in *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

²¹ For an opposing and comprehensive consideration of the historical avant-garde’s calling into question the ocular-centrism of Western culture, see Martin Jay’s *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 149-262.

²² Whitehead’s thinking had a profound impact on Williams, who read *Science and the Modern World* (1925) in the late summer and early fall of 1927, calling it “A milestone surely in my career” that caused him to ask, “should I have the force and imagination to go on with my work” (quoted in Weaver 48).

Where standard and more reverential treatments of Duchamp praise the ready-made for calling into doubt modernist notions of genius and conventional conceptions of art's autonomy, Smithson reads *Fountain* as reframing, in quasi-religious terms, the standard idealist and metaphysical foundations that underwrite so much of Western art. As an alternative to these foundations, Smithson reformulates, in scientific language that emphasizes art's materiality, Rauschenberg's situating the aesthetic within an unstable gap that exists between art and life. To that end, Smithson's work engages the presuppositions and limits of the museum and other frames used to evaluate and judge art. More specifically, Smithson developed a theory of *sites* and *non-sites* that focuses particular attention on the materiality of a work in relation to the natural world. Unlike the precedent established in Dada, Smithson never claims the aesthetic should be shattered altogether. Instead, Smithson situates his work outside in the natural world, in rock quarries endemic to northern New Jersey and the Pine Barrens found to its south. These sites suggest that aesthetic and non-aesthetic materials exist within a single dialectical continuum.²³ Most famously realized in his large *Spiral Jetty* earthwork in the Great Salt Lake, these sites function as interventions in the natural world. Smithson's non-sites function as parallel representations in a gallery, utilizing photography, maps, elements from nature (rock,

²³ For background on Smithson's notion of the site and non-site, see Gary Shapiro's philosophical essay *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), especially 1-3, 56-57 and 69-96. Shapiro describes the relationship between Smithson's site/non-sites as dialectical, quoting Smithson as saying, "I have come to see their [his artwork's] relationship to the outside world, and finally when I started making the nonsites, the dialectic became very strong. Shapiro contends Smithson "is caught between the inside and outside . . . [and] It is necessary, then to interrogate the relation of site and nonsite more carefully, and in general to see how such a 'dialectic' is rooted in the ground or the earth that became Smithson's medium and object" (57), a turn to the ground that parallels Williams's own interest in making contact with the industrial waste, geological, and topographic histories of New Jersey.

For analysis of Smithson's view on the dialectic, also see Ann Reynolds's comprehensive study *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), especially 130-133, 159-160 and 197-198, hereafter referred to as Reynolds in the text, followed by the page number.

sand, and dirt) and textual accounts. Gary Shapiro contends that the relation between sites and non-sites challenges ancient transformative assumptions inherent to both art and philosophy, those idealist ideologies that claim “one is ‘outside’ or ‘beyond’” the world but really only indicate a belief or acceptance of “the horizon established by those from which one flees. To insist that one is outside is to be limited by the inside/outside parameters that reinforce and establish the institutions for which alternatives are sought.”²⁴ Smithson believes the earth can never be fully rationalized within the representational systems of either art or science, a position Williams shared.

Understanding the ready-made requires a viewer accept the very dualisms the innovation set out to subvert, especially those sovereign notions of artistic subjectivity that later found art would attempt to complicate.²⁵ For instance, Smithson’s sites/non-sites oscillate between inside and outside, subjectivity and objectivity, a generative instability apparent in Smithson’s praise for the Substratum section of Williams’s *Paterson* [Figure 2]. The Substratum section is one of many found documents Williams inserts into *Paterson*, texts that include historical and civic documents, newspaper articles, personal letters, and snippets of overheard conversations. These found texts often fuse the fictional and the factual, past and present, the elemental and the textual. In this case, Williams incorporates an historical document detailing an 1879 artesian well dig, a tabular record of the elements encountered when boring a hole into the terrain around Passaic. As an itemized listing of the elements embedded at various intervals in the earth, the

²⁴ Shapiro, 49.

²⁵ For an insightful argument that takes an opposing view of the ready-made and artistic subjectivity, see Helen Anne Molesworth’s 1988 dissertation, *At Home with Duchamp: The Readymade and Domesticity*. Molesworth argues that with the ready-made “Duchamp attempted to rid himself of subjectivity, to abandon the very notion of identity through strategies of laziness and non-production,” 34.

text appears to move the reader through the material world. In so doing, Williams constructs a textual substratum, a kind of topographic lineation, framed by a prose passage that indicates “the rock salt of England, and some of the other salt mines of Europe, is found in rocks of the same age as this [artesian well in Passaic, New Jersey],” which “raises the question of whether it may not also be found here” (*P* 139). Like Smithson’s sites and non-sites, the Substratum section suggests an excavated sampling of the earth, an example of Paterson, the city, placed directly within the pages of *Paterson*, the text. In terms of Williams’s anxiety in relation to Anglo-European poetic and artistic standards, this listing suggests that an alternative for American poetry already exists in the landscape itself and this oscillation between the *textual* and the *actual* highlights Smithson’s call for art to underscore its own dialectical relationship to the “real.”

Smithson’s cartographic, photographic, text-based and two or three-dimensional non-sites (small sculptural forms consisting of sand, dirt or rock, etc.) all underline this relationship. These works foreground the play between the signifier and the signified, claiming that the natural fit between matter and form is no longer adequate after modernism. It is from this tension that Smithson’s non-sites [Figure 3] admit art’s limitations, suggesting, in critic Ann Reynolds’ terminology, a signifier can never return

to some original referent; like the planar projection’s transformation into a spherical projection or globe, they defer such a return by displacing one abstract representation on to another much like [how] metaphors linguistically displace the sense of one world on to another. In fact, both cartographers and Smithson frequently refer to maps and diagrams as two-dimensional analogies or metaphors for the things they stand for. (Reynolds 131)

Paterson’s Substratum section functions similarly to remind the reader that a text references matter that can never be fully integrated or contained within an artistic system, a self-reflexive

mapping that comments upon both the world and the limits of the word. Reynolds describes the impossibility of an abstract or artificial signifier, like a map, of ever adequately representing the physical conditions of the material world. Reynolds uses language that echoes what Williams's would argue in *Spring and All*: "Illusionism never enters into the mapping process because maps begin and end with their integrating frameworks, the longitudinal and latitudinal lines that comprise the mapnet and that are capable of endlessly contracting or expanding into flat projection maps or spherical globes" (131). These limitations also speak to Williams's own shift from a poetics of metaphor, in his early poetry, to a poetics of metonymy, in his mature work.

In interviews given just prior to his untimely death in 1973, Smithson reflected on how the current generation of artists sought to actively continue and qualify the principles Duchamp first popularized, a response that Williams might be said to anticipate. Among this new generation, Allan Kaprow provides an extreme instant in the affirmation of the everyday that the ready-made, which Breton described in 1938 as "an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist," rejects. Where Duchamp designates an object a ready-made through choice alone, Kaprow argues that Jackson Pollock helped to signal a kind of resignation to the world, inviting artists to move beyond conventional representational concerns to

become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are material for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists . . . unheard of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies; seen in store windows and on the streets; and sensed in dreams

and horrible accidents. An odor of crushed strawberries, a letter from a friend, or a billboard selling Drano.²⁶

For Kaprow and many others in Smithson's generation, the ready-made's institutional challenge had become an integral part of the narrative of modern art history, assuming its rightful place among other early modern experiments like Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, etc.; within this lineage, Smithson suggests that Duchamp now functions as an avant-garde creation myth of sorts, which

comes down to us from the Armory Show . . . There is a whole lineage of artists coming out of the Armory Show. And the notion of art history itself is so animated by Duchamp. [By contrast,] Hard-core modernism is Picasso and Matisse and T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Then, in the postwar period, we get Duchamp coming on very strong. [But] Duchamp is really more in line with post-modernism insofar as he is very knowledgeable about the modernist traditions but disdains them. So, I think there is a kind of false view of art history, an attempt to set up a lineage. And I would like to step outside that situation. There has been a kind of Duchampitis recently, beginning with Duchamp's being rediscovered in Jasper Johns. But Johns is less French and more ratty, you might say. Johns has taken the aristocratic stance and given it a more sordid edge.²⁷

Though a highly selective reading of modern art, Smithson's comments are useful in understanding Duchamp's impact on those visual artists who suffered from the "Duchampitis" that fueled critical thinking throughout the 1960s. For Smithson—and for Williams too—Duchamp's anti-art agenda operates according to a covert form of religion that places the artist in the role of a mystic, one who "disdains" convention, but only in so far as replacing one standard with its opposite. Like Kaprow, Smithson also distinguishes more recent Neo-Dadaist iterations of the ready-made method—especially Jasper Johns's inclusion of "more ratty" found elements

²⁶ Allen Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Edited by Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 7-9.

²⁷ Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*, Edited by Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 310. Unless indicated otherwise, all quotes from Smithson are taken from this edition, hereafter referred to in the text as Flam, followed by the page number.

appropriated from mass culture in his paintings—from Duchamp’s early anti-institutional model. In utilizing the ready-made act as a new method of art making, Johns and other Neo-avant-garde artists aimed to establish a more egalitarian commentary than “the aristocratic stance” Duchamp assumes.

Smithson highlights how his own art is dependent on a similar self-reflexive principle commonly associated with the ready-made. Smithson qualifies this self-reflexivity, however, arguing he “never thought of isolating my objects in any particular way. Gradually, more and more, I have come to see their [the artwork’s] relationship to the outside world” as an affirmation of difference that, in many ways, echoes Williams’s objectivist attitude toward language. For Williams, a poet must oppose abstraction at all cost, the desire to “translate” the sensuality of one’s material reality into figuration or metaphor. The poet must deal directly with the objective world, including the vulgar or “more ratty” elements from one’s environment. Distinguishing this inclusiveness from the ready-made’s privileged form of isolation, Smithson characterizes Duchamp as assuming a priestly attitude towards his materials, whereby he approaches everyday objects as “relics, relics of the saints or something like that. It seems that he [Duchamp] was into some kind of spiritual pursuit that involved the commonplace. He was a spiritualist of Woolworth” (Flam 310). Duchamp’s ready-made neglects the social realities that inform an object’s cultural and aesthetic value. Consequently, as Smithson argues,

there is no viable dialectic in Duchamp because he is only trading on the alienated object and bestowing on this object a kind of mystification. Duchamp is involved with the notion of manufacture of objects so that he can have his little valise full of souvenirs. I am not really interested in that kind of model making: the reiteration of the Readymades. What I am saying is that Duchamp offers a sanctification for alienated objects . . . It is a complete denial of the work process and it is very mechanical . . . Duchamp is trying to transcend production itself in

the Readymades when he takes an object out of the manufacturing process and then isolates it. He has a certain contempt for . . . process and here I think he is sort of playing the aristocrat. (Flam 310)

Critical of this aristocratic form of privileging, Smithson argues *Fountain* neglects to redress the specific historical conditions and alienation inspired by modern mass-production. Instead, the ready-made operates according to a covert and class-based mysticism that, however playfully, intimates the forwarding of a critique, but only through the reinforcement of a “mechanistic view” in which the artist stands *outside* the world, and through gesture alone, is able to offer commentary.

In response to this mechanistic view, Smithson’s critique of Duchamp exposes the timeless dilemma associated with any philosophical system, the impossibility of ever “satisfactorily getting the real into the readymade garments of our readymade concepts” (Reynolds 80). In light of this impossibility, Smithson views Neo-avant-garde art as faring no better than the early avant-garde when it comes to re-conceiving art’s “transcendental” powers. Cautioning against the tendency among artists to view art outside the context of time and place, Smithson considers more recent examples that echo Duchamp, what he calls the

transcending in the Readymades. In a sense, [James] Rosenquist is transcending billboards, Warhol is transcending canned goods, and Jim Dine is transcending tools that you buy in hardware stores . . . Duchamp is trying to transcend production itself in the Readymades when he takes an object out of the manufacturing process and then isolates it. (Flam 310)

In exposing the delusion Smithson associates with this transcendence (and satirizing the founding statement of modern philosophy, where a Cartesian *cogito* discovers and confirms the certainty of its own subjectivity), art must critique the very logic upon which this creative principle operates. Duchamp appears “Cartesian in that respect, and I think he [Duchamp] once

mentioned in an offhand way that he was. Duchamp seems involved in that tradition and in all the problems of that tradition” (Flam 311). These Cartesian problems form an essential component of J. Hillis Miller’s larger argument in *Poets of Reality*, which suggests Williams’s materialist view of language somehow resolves the impulse to transcendentalize. “Romantic literature presupposes a double bifurcation,” Miller writes, a model of existence that can be “divided into two realms, heaven and earth, supernatural and natural, the ‘real’ world and the derived world” (*PoR* 1). Miller warns against this bifurcation, however, the artistic temptation offered in Cartesian subjectivity, the “Cogito ergo sum . . . the absolute certainty about the self reached by Descartes’ hyperbolic doubt [that] leads to the assumption that things exist . . . only because I think them” (*PoR* 3) into existence. The Cartesian tradition envisions the artist as a prime mover capable of acting upon matter or thinking things into being. An exaggeration of this hyperbolic doubt leads to a kind of philosophical solipsism that things exist solely because the artist ordains it so. Smithson’s reading of the ready-made emphasizes the danger associated with this idealist divide—between mind and body, subject and object, inside and outside, etc.—those foundational distinctions that allow objects to be removed at will from one environment and placed in a seeing-subject’s dandified “valise of souvenirs.”

Though Duchamp’s approach to art is often read in opposition to this idealism, the split between mind and body remains irreconcilable within the ready-made. Whatever the artist chooses as ready-made purports to occupy a space outside the everyday—as cultural critique, commentary on mass production, or as an analysis of representation itself. In separating an object from its cultural context, its relation to labor, and the processes involved in its manufacture, the artist functions as a charlatan, “transubstantiating” some objects as “aesthetic,”

while leaving others unaltered. Where Duchamp *claims* these objects as ready-made, literary critics like Charles Altieri, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Albert Gelpi identify immanence as the central animating force within Williams's materialist poetics. Where Smithson's "Hardcore modernists" rely on master narratives and stable formalism to frame their observations on the world, Williams's materialist modernism seeks out the unexpected worth in the everyday, referencing the quotidian as a Dadaist provocation against established order. This acknowledgment of the everyday destabilizes the central mediating role of the artist-subject, presenting a found object in the place of a created aesthetic object. To that end, Pearce argues, Williams's poetry depends on the material world, a humble form of reliance that "impute[s] to each man and each thing . . . a vital sense of its own existence, a fateful self-consciousness; and in turn he [the artist/poet] is astonished, beyond the very words which have been his means to the imputation, with what he has discovered."²⁸ The inherent humility of this verbal astonishment complicates Duchamp's designation of a ready-made. More specifically, the "fateful astonishment" places the poet in a double bind, acknowledging how an authentic respect for difference always carries with it an awareness of the limits of one's medium to adequately replicate that uniqueness in art. Williams comes close to mapping out this difference in those cases where he merely transcribes the "poetic" qualities of found texts, even a fashionable grocery list:

2 partridges
2 Mallard ducks
a Dungeness crab
24 hours out
of the Pacific

²⁸ Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 10 and 33, hereafter referred to in the text by Pearce, followed by the page number.

and 2 live-frozen
trout
from Denmark²⁹

The poem's careful lineation and rhythm imbue the list with a certain "poetic" quality, but generally speaking one is hard-pressed to defend these lines as poetry, at least in any traditional sense. The poem's lines supply a concrete patterning to the page, implying that advertising copy, the commercial goods to which they refer, and other ambient texts that exist all around us already contain an aesthetic value. In fact, shorn of conventional figuration and even complete sentences, this listing provides what Williams would later describe as "a sample of the American idiom" (*P* 222), wherein each word or object positioned in a row is thought to contain an aesthetic value. Duchamp appears largely uninterested in the singularity or *otherness* of the objects he appropriates. In fact, Duchamp's method suggests that one shovel functions as well as any other and all that separates the ready-made from other industrial products is the artist's arbitrary application of a title and signature.³⁰

Smithson's friend, Minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, characterizes this interchangeability as the primary "fault of the Duchamp[ian] readymade," its idealization of "an industrial product," an idealization that ultimately helps to "sever[] it from its origins in working class craft," its roots in local culture, and "claiming it [instead] as a trophy of capitalist cunning." This form of claiming underlines the "utter gentility" of Duchamp's methodology, a technique best suited "for giggling ladies on the Upper East Side . . . it's salon art." In language that continues

²⁹ *CP2*, 208-209.

³⁰ Duchamp's application of titles to a ready-made presents a signifying crisis Thierry de Duve describes in which "words . . . 'forget' that they have referents, that they give birth to concepts, that they are made up of a phonic substance, so that the dictionary, linguistics, phonology, and aesthetics can all be abolished" (127). Consequently, *Fountain* and *In advance of a broken arm* function as a form of verbal play, an endless deferral or open-ended provocation that helps produce the subject as a subject of desire, always anticipating—though never realizing—closure.

to resonate with regard to the appeal of institutional critique within contemporary art, Andre argues the ready-made acts only to re-inscribe the very social and class-based hierarchies that the “low” culture of *Fountain* aimed to overturn, taking an “ordinary article of life” and placing “it so that its useful significance disappeared.”³¹ For Andre, these claims underscore the intractability of Duchamp’s conceptualism, the ready-made’s refusal to ever separate itself from the dualisms (aesthetic/everyday, art/industry, low culture/high culture, etc.) it intends to undermine. In contrast to this static conceptualism, Andre’s serial sculptures rely on a uniform repetition of parts that suggest a work’s distinct “presence” depends on its materiality or, more precisely, in relation to form alone. The presence one associates with this formalism contrasts with Duchamp’s view of the interchangeability of the commercial product within the multiple. To that end, Andre criticizes the ready-made because it suggests “the replication of itself rather than the thesis for the emergence in dialectical production of a new and different art object.” Rather than a dialectical movement between thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis, the ready-made re-designates the use value of an everyday object by highlighting a standard, conventional use within one system in *contradistinction* to another, a conceptual slight of hand Andre characterizes as ineffectual and peculiarly Dada-esque, not so much as “an outrager [sic] of decayed values[,] but [as] a conserver [of them].”³² Andre’s final point, that the ready-made preserves the very decaying cultural values Dadaism intended to obliterate, has particular significance in relation to Williams’s unique contribution to the avant-garde. Williams’s experiments in the early 1920s attempt to recuperate what both Dadaism, and later, Eliot (who

³¹ *The Blind Man*, May 1917, no. 2, 5.

³² Carl Andre’s comments on Duchamp are found in *Cuts*, Ed by James Meyer (Boston: MIT Press, 2004), 91-92 and 177.

re-ensconced American poetry back within the halls of the academy) chose to eliminate from the aesthetic: affirming the signs and signifiers of one's local culture, observations Williams often associated with desire, the force that animates so much of his poetry from the 1920s.

* * * * *

Published in 1930, "The Attic Which is Desire" illustrates Williams's primary conceptual concerns from the previous decade, especially those representational issues he would take up in the wake of Duchamp's ready-made controversy. In "The Attic Which is Desire," the negotiation between world and word is most clearly telegraphed in a vertical column of asterisks used to signify the "running lights" of a commercial sign for soda Williams viewed from his office window, a concrete poetic technique bookended between the Imagist two-line stanza units used throughout the poem. But unlike later concrete poetic techniques that exploit the graphic aspect of writing as it appears on the page, Williams's poem follows a more empirical pursuit, tracing the poet's incidental gaze, a continuous perspective underscored through the use of a dash and the poem's overall lack of standard punctuation.

Beginning with the title, which also functions as the poem's first line, "The Attic Which is Desire" details the poet's view from his office, a room atop his home at 9 Ridge Road that Williams reserved exclusively for writing. Paul Mariani has characterized the studio as cramped but sufficiently removed from the burdens of his work-a-day life two stories below. Mariani describes how,

From the east window of his retreat, he [Williams] could see the sun rising over the meadows, flooding the attic with the yellow light of promise. From the west window, he could see the Presbyterian church across Ridge Road, and then—at an

angle—the stores running down Park Avenue. One of them was the local candy store, with its sign surrounded by lights reading SODA. That too could be made to yield a Cubist design. (298-299)

The poem's quick, clipped lineation, enacts this Cubist freedom:

The Attic Which is Desire:

the unused tent
of

bare beams
beyond which

directly wait
the night

and day—
Here

from the street
by

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

ringed with
running lights

the darkened
pane

exactly
down the center

is
transfixed

(*CPI* 325)

Passing through the structured “bare beams” of the poet’s office, the poem’s focus moves outward into a space “beyond” the confines of the house. Though critics are correct in labeling the poem a Cubist ode to the modern urban landscape, this progression outside into the world suggests a more complicated representational negotiation. Representative of this Cubist approach, Peter Schmidt suggests the poem revamps Romantic and Pastoral traditions, redesignating commercial culture as the focus of sexual desire (38-39). According to this reading, the advertising sign for soda functions as a stand-in for traditional objects of desire and the ubiquity of commercial culture forms a new Dadaist folklore. In this sense, these lines enact Williams’s call for the poem “to lift an environment to expression” (*SL* 286), a landscape he conceives as already artistic, a relational aesthetic that posits the seeing-subject’s sense of self entirely in relation to the otherness of the world.

But, Williams’s use of this typographical innovation also calls important attention to the poem’s textuality, what might more accurately be termed the intrusion of the actual into the textual. This intrusion is explicitly expressed in the poem’s progression through the pitched bare beams of the office, out into the street, and finally back again to the sign’s reflection in the “darkened / pane // exactly down the center.” This trajectory—from inside to outside and from a physical space to a representational or textual space—suggests that the flatness of the page parallels the flatness of the advertising sign appearing (and disappearing) in the darkened windowpane. According to this textual layering, the visible sign for soda is aligned with the reflected sign for soda in the darkened pane, an elusive presence the poet associates with longing and desire. In this sense, “signs” appear framed within the white of the page, a *mise-en-abyme*

that collapses distinctions between inside and outside, signifier and signified. Within this collapse, Williams suggests a recuperative potential exists for poetry, for little beyond the sign's scale and luminosity is lost in its transfer to the page.

The poem's movement out into the world becomes more complex than merely an inside/outside progression, concluding with a reflection of a sign or, more precisely with regard to my study, a sign of a sign. It is my contention that in collapsing these binaries (re: an electric sign into a textual reflection of an electric sign that is doubled for the reader in the darkened windowpane), Williams's poem stands "transfixed," as he describes it, by the hyper-mediated levels of signification endemic to representation. In this sense, a quality of astonishment underscores the poem's attempt to encompass a material form alongside a meta-commentary on representation itself, subtly acknowledging the distance that separates the reader from the real.

This emphasis on language's power to reflect and recreate a scene complicates Duchamp's ready-made conceptualism, which (beyond its puns and play with language) largely ignores questions of the semiotic in favor of how an object or signifier operates within a conceptual system (of art, commerce, utility, etc.). Where Duchamp supplies a conceptual commentary on the external objects he appropriates, Williams's troping of the found highlights the subjective resonance or desire that already exists within the external world, independent of the artist. This empathetic identification with the world functions as the guiding principle in my reading of Williams and the Neo-avant-garde aesthetic that his work might be said to anticipate. As Hal Foster suggests in his analysis of Rauschenberg's belief that the artist operates in the gap between painting and the real—comments equally relevant to "The Attic Which is Desire"—this subjective resonance depends on art/poetry's ability to *sustain*, rather than collapse, difference,

especially distinctions between art and life. Williams's acknowledging both the material sign and the textual sign requires a reader to identify the gap or barrier that *Spring and All* repeatedly addresses in its conception of an art not opposed to nature but *apposed* to it. Where Dadaism's negative aesthetic calls for the obliteration of art, Williams desires an aesthetic that might co-exist, rather than supplant, what already exists in the world. The poem's internal divisions, the arc of its movement in presenting one image and perspective after another, details the poet's provisional perspective from within the gap of what might be created and what is already found in the world.³³

Williams's most famous instancing of this mediating form of contact is, of course, "The Red Wheelbarrow," and though it is typically read as another example of Duchamp's sweeping influence, the poet's inclusion of common elements does more than merely disrupt institutional standards. Where Duchamp famously denied the objects he selected contained any aesthetic value, Williams anticipates a Neo-avant-garde avowal of the aesthetic potential of common forms and everyday objects—the red wheelbarrow, the young sycamore, even the bits of broken glass and cinders embedded in the modern industrial landscape. Though both Duchamp and Williams aimed to separate art and poetry from academic debates about style and craft—a somnambulant formalism that drains the aesthetic of its vital energies and applicability to life—their unique attitudes toward these everyday objects helps distinguish one aesthetic from the other. For Williams, poetry should aim to make contact with elements in one's local culture through an instant of intense visual perception. This visual identification provides the key to Williams's larger theory of the imagination, a "seeing the thing itself without forethought or

³³ I am indebted here to Mark C. Long's argument in "'no confusion—only difficulties': William Carlos Williams's Poetics of Apposition," *William Carlos Williams Review*, 23. 2 (Fall 1997), 1-26.

afterthought” that emphasizes the present moment shaped by conditions of chance (over volition) and authenticity *within* experience rather than an abstract idealism or institutional authority imported from *beyond*. Williams first began to reconsider these issues in the months after the Society of Independents Exhibition, and it is his writing and reflections immediately following Duchamp’s introduction of the ready-made, especially as he turned his attention to *Kora in Hell*, that we need to consider next.

Chapter I: *The Great Marcel: Duchamp, the Independents, and the Triumph of Sense*

The amusing controversy between Arensberg and Duchamp on one side, and the rest of the hanging committee on the other as to whether the porcelain urinal was to be admitted to the Palace Exhibition of 1917 as a representative piece of American sculpture, should not be allowed to slide into oblivion.—“Prologue” to Kora in Hell

As we turn to consider Williams’s various responses to the ready-made following its introduction (and almost immediate disappearance) in April 1917 at the Society of Independents Exhibition, it should first be acknowledged that the poet’s relationship to Duchamp has already been well-rehearsed among critics, especially in terms of the innovation itself, an advance Lucy Lippard presciently declared in 1972 as having “*ALREADYMADESOMUCHOF*” in both art and critical theory.³⁴ Far from sliding into oblivion as Williams had forewarned, critics today must approach, somewhat cautiously, what has become *de rigueur* in literary criticism: an over-reliance on the ready-made as the avant-garde standard in assessing the poet’s experiments from the early 1920s, what Dickran Tashjian and others broadly characterize as *Fountain*’s thematic and formal parallel to the *contact* idea that underscores Williams’s larger theory of the imagination.³⁵

In some sense, these critics are only dutifully following Williams’s own, somewhat duplicitous, lead. Duchamp and the expatriated avant-garde figure predominately in the poet’s propensity for self-invention as detailed in his autobiographical reflections from the 1940s and 1950s, when Williams rewrote his personal history, immersing his own development as a poet in the deep flood of European innovations streaming into America with the start of the First World

³⁴ Quoted in Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant Garde and other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 199.

³⁵ See *William Carlos Williams and the American scene, 1920-1940* (New York: The Whitney Museum, 1978), 59.

War. In his *Autobiography*, Williams's comments—like the critical appraisal that would follow—appear in bold, self-assured language, suggesting he not only worked in concert with Dadaist figures like Duchamp and Picabia but developed an early avant-garde variation that was entirely his own.³⁶ “I didn’t originate Dadaism but I had it in my soul to write about it,” Williams provocatively asserts (*IWtWaP* 48), a comment that invites closer scrutiny in light of his simultaneous call for an indigenous American poetry and his slightly elliptical—and somewhat confused—commentary on the expatriated figures and works he began encountering in New York in the late 1910s.³⁷ As I indicate in the pages that follow, though Williams acknowledges he did not *create* Dadaism—at least as he understood it in his lifetime—he believed its spirit existed at the core of his identity. Careful attention to the evolution of the poet’s critical writing, however, indicates that what precisely Dadaism and Duchamp signified to Williams changed through time, especially as the narrative of modern art history began to assume a more canonical form. Specifically, in the late 1910s and early 1920s Williams approached “Duchamp, the great Marcel” (*A* 135) with guarded defensiveness, a position that took on a more nostalgic sheen over the years as the personal volatility of the period began to fade from memory and Williams’s influence on American poetry became officially recognized within the academy.³⁸ These developments influenced Williams’s receptivity to the liberating

³⁶ Tashjian’s *Skyscraper Primitives* and Schmidt’s *William Carlos Williams, the Arts, and Literary Tradition* remain the most comprehensive studies of Williams’s interest in and associations with early Dada.

³⁷ In his conversation with Pierre Cabanne published in 1967, Duchamp expressed a similar desire late in his career to acknowledge his association with Dadaism and to distance himself from the movement: “It [Dada] was parallel, if you wish . . . It [my own work] wasn’t Dada, but it was in the same spirit, without, however, being in the Zurich spirit” (56). Like Williams, Duchamp’s comment might be his attempt, many years after the fact, to obscure his own affinities with the early avant-garde, and to dislodge his work from an exclusive early modernist association.

³⁸ John Lowney provides the most thorough account of Williams’s influence on post-World War II poets. Williams’s late comments on the early avant-garde correspond with a larger shift that took place in critical thinking at the middle of the century. As Lowney describes it, “the decline of the modernist avant-garde coincided with its

potential of certain highly polemical, avant-garde artworks, while never relinquishing entirely his obstinate belief in poetry and painting's formal purposiveness. During these early years, Williams aimed to a "new measure or a new way of measuring . . . commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living" (*SE* 283).

In accord with the spirit of Dadaism, Williams frequently called for the destruction of old and irrelevant poetic models. "It is impossible to write modern poetry in the old form," Williams comments in 1919, because poets must constantly modify the content and form of their work to accurately reflect the age. Traditional technique and poetic form—for instance, the sonnet, regular rhyme and meter—answer to authorities that Williams considers no longer to hold sway. But as his life and professional obligations indicate, Williams was no cultural iconoclast and his early responses to Dada reflect a desire to affirm and respect, rather than to negate, the new technologies and social realities within which he lived and worked. Though Williams playfully calls for the end of an old world order in *Spring and All*, his writing from the early 1920s might more accurately be said to reflect language's struggle to reconcile world and word, what the "Prologue" to *Kora in Hell* characterizes as poetry's "attenuated power" to draw "perhaps many broken things into a dance giving them thus a full being" (*SE* 14). In developing his larger theory of the imagination, Williams borrows many techniques from the early avant-garde in verbally rendering this negotiation, especially evident in his use of spontaneous observation, brief streams of consciousness, found texts, and automatic writing, innovations that helped to infuse his poetry with a radical subversiveness. These techniques distinguish Williams's poetry

academic institutionalization as a tradition, especially in the New Critical canon" (15), a formalist turn that dovetailed with critics who began recognizing Williams's influence on post-war poets. See *The American Avant-garde Tradition: William Carlos Williams, Postmodern Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1997), especially Chapter 1, 13-24.

from the 1920s from the transitional poetry of the previous decade and the more epic and art historical ambitions that dominated so much of his late work. More importantly, these techniques help to distinguish Williams's troping of the found from the ready-made's anti-institutionalism. Thus, in this section I approach the ready-made and the poet's guarded early reflections on both it and the Dadaist art culture from which it arose only insofar as it provides a means of analyzing Williams and Duchamp's shared (and conflicted) desire to reconcile art and life; authenticity and a cynical commentary on originality; bourgeois culture and a radical art intent on its destruction. For Williams, New Jersey and its semi-industrial backdrop provide the context necessary for his early avant-garde experiments, opening poetry to the aesthetic potential of prosaic source material that contrasts with the antiquated and stultified content associated with Anglo-European poetry at the turn of the century.

* *

The Society of Independents Exhibition—where the ready-made and Dada made its scandalous American debut—was the most radically conceived art exhibition of its day, and in significant ways it embodies Williams's struggle to establish a new and inclusive American poetics. As the only European on the Independents' Board of Directors, Duchamp and his colleagues set out to establish a new democratized space for art independent of European modernism, promoting an open admission policy and an intention, however compromised in its execution, to eliminate censorship of all kinds and to disregard the traditional aesthetic standards associated with academic, juried exhibitions.

Duchamp's *Fountain* is often presented as the most radical example of the Independents' challenge to academic models of art. In the pages that follow, however, I contrast the Independents' egalitarian mission with Duchamp's conceptualization of the ready-made act, a distinction that I contend will help drive a wedge between Williams's theory of the imagination and the ongoing legacy and influence of Duchamp's anti-institutionalism within contemporary art.³⁹ Where the ready-made is popularly heralded for opening art to the aesthetic potential in the everyday, Duchamp's comments on the innovation indicate a more aristocratic sense of privilege, especially with regard to the rarified notion of the *objet d'art* the historical avant-garde is frequently thought to have opposed. Revisiting this 1917 debate throws light on what I conceive to be the subjective relationship Duchamp's innovation assumes in relation to the everyday, an attitude very much at odds with Williams's call for contact.⁴⁰

Though the Society of Independents' "Certificate of Incorporation" supplied the context necessary for the ready-made's introduction into modern art, in many ways, Duchamp's

³⁹ Over the last thirty years, aestheticians have read the ready-made in relation to a series of inter-related issues surrounding questions of authorship, representation, and power. These lines of critique are evident in the major studies that focus on the art world's elevation of appropriated objects (Danto); the impact of the institution on found materials (Bürger); and the manner in which history shapes aesthetic perception (Wolheim). Within the socio-historical context of the 1910s, however, when modern urbanization and industrialization were heralded by both artist and critic alike, Duchamp's ready-made (and for that matter, Williams's improvisations) might be seen as complicating conventional notions of the creative act—rethinking Longinian and Aristotlian inspiration and those conventional models of art production that continue to inform contemporary, and in vitally different language, ancient conceptions of art making.

⁴⁰ For a more far-reaching reading of Duchamp's "subjective omnipotence" and its impact on late modern artistic practice, see John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (New York: Verso, 2007), 144-161, hereafter referred to in the text by Roberts, followed by the page number. Though Roberts raises many important points, I disagree with his view of the ready-made's relation to artistic subjectivity. Roberts contends the ready-made's primary contribution to the "deskilling" of artistic production is in its displacement of "authorship [on] to the social division of labour outside of the studio" whereby "the studio is neither a place where assistants are taught in the style of the master, nor the primary place where the subjectivity of the artist is performed in a confrontation with his materials. Rather, it is place where plans are executed, research pursued, conversations conducted, decisions and connections made, and materials sorted and assembled" (146-147). As I will make clear in the pages that follow, the practices Roberts describes relate more to the Neo-avant-garde and the Conceptual practices that developed after Duchamp's death in 1968 than to the ready-made itself.

innovation challenged the principles upon which the Independents were founded, beliefs central to the avant-garde dialogue in New York and in the pages of the “little magazines” to which Williams was just beginning to contribute. As stated in the Independents’ certificate, the exhibition aimed to include unconventional works typically considered unsuitable for display, “afford[ing] American and foreign artists an opportunity to exhibit their work independent of a jury.”⁴¹ In meeting this goal, the Independents displayed the work of any artist who agreed to pay the five-dollar annual dues and one-dollar submission fee (Naumann II 50), a sum that—though not accessible to everyone—certainly opened the exhibition’s doors to artists who had previously been excluded. Unlike the Armory Show’s encyclopedic overview of recent advances in art—a survey disproportionately weighted towards the salons of Europe—the Independents aimed to supply a broad consideration of both high and low art in America. Opening six days after the U.S. declared war on Germany, as President Wilson phrased it, to “make the world safe for democracy,” the exhibition’s egalitarianism provides a useful means of contrasting a European avant-garde, which largely aimed to challenge nineteenth-century realism and bourgeois attitudes toward art, to its nascent American counterpart. In opening the doors to artists typically excluded from the exhibition space, and women in particular, the Independents set out to examine the social, cultural, and gender-based ideologies that structure modern subjectivity.

⁴¹ My primary source for historical background on the First Exhibition of the Society of Independents is Francis Naumann, whose two articles in *Artforum* (1979) continue to supply much-needed context on the events surrounding the development of the Independents in America. The articles are “The Big Show: The First Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists: The Critical Response, Part II,” *Artforum*, xviii, May 1979, hereafter referred to in the text by Naumann II, followed by the page number, and “The Big Show: The First Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, Part I,” hereafter referred to in the text by Naumann I, followed by the page number. A broader survey was later reworked in Naumann’s *New York Dada: 1915-1923* (New York: Abrams, 1994), hereafter referred to in the text by *New York Dada* followed by a page number; this initial quote comes from this text, 176.

The first exhibition opened at Grand Central Palace on April 10, 1917, to almost immediate public controversy. The initial debate stemmed, in large part, from the Independents' mission statement (displayed on the title page of every subsequent catalog—excepting 1941—published in conjunction with the exhibition through 1944), a non-hierarchical policy of “No jury, No prizes.” Walter Pach, who served on the board, praised the Independents' admission policy in a letter to the lawyer and art collector John Quinn: “[W]e are going to have a good many of the known men and I believe some worth while stuff from the unknown [in the exhibit]. That is what I am interested in.”⁴² Within two weeks of the Independents' opening, Pach's enthusiasm was reflected in the Society's growth, which had expanded to six hundred members. Just prior to the exhibition's debut, the Independents' membership had doubled to include artists from thirty-eight states (as well as Europe and Asia). Twice the size of the Armory Show, the Independents displayed 2125 works by 1300 artists in a two-mile-long installation, presenting artwork from floor to ceiling in the style of the salon.⁴³ Rather than arranging the work according to color, style, or subject, Duchamp suggested pieces be presented in alphabetical order according to the artist's last name, randomly selecting the letter “R” to begin the inaugural show. In furthering the spirit of Dadaism, even the hierarchy of the English alphabet needed subverting, de-centering the privileged position of both artist and curator alike.

Beyond these well-rehearsed facts, the Independents' challenge to hierarchy was most radically evidenced in the exhibition's programming, which included lectures, readings, film screenings, and roundtable discussions on aesthetic, social, and political issues. One noteworthy

⁴² Quoted in Clark S. Marlor, *The Society of Independent Artists: The Exhibition Record 1917-1944* (Park Ridge, New Jersey: Noyes Press, 1984), 4.

⁴³ By comparison, the Armory Show featured only 1270 pieces.

event included a forum for inmates from Sing Sing held in the Palace's Tea Garden, where prisoners spoke of their experiences behind bars. Given only passing consideration by most critics, with Mina Loy, Williams contributed two poems to a reading held, we can infer from the program's promotional materials, in the "lecture hall on the mezzanine floor" of the exhibition space. One possible explanation why so little attention has been paid to Williams's participation in the Independents Exhibition might be that, beginning with Williams's wife, there has been considerable debate as to whether Williams witnessed, first-hand, either the Armory Show or the Society of Independents Exhibition. Late in life, Williams's wife would contend that "Bill did not attend the first Armory Show, though he always insisted that he did. He went to the second one where he read along with Mina Loy and others. He wasn't himself when he swore he'd been to the first one so I gave up trying to convince him."⁴⁴ Whether the poet actually viewed the artwork on display at the Society of Independents Exhibition itself—what Mrs. Williams here refers to as the "second Armory Show"—remains open to debate. The scant details he provides with regard to the Independents and Duchamp's innovation suggest he may have only tracked the controversy from a distance, though Paul Mariani has persuasively chronicled Williams did participate in a reading with Loy, as part of the exhibition's evening programming.

Though Williams confuses the names of the two major modern art exhibitions of the decade ("Somewhere in there—was it at the first Armory Show or another similar show?"), late in life he distinctly recalled how "Mina, to my surprise, pronounced me the best of those on the program" (A 136). At this reading, Williams read his Futurist-inspired poem "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" (a work he intended to include in *Kora in Hell*, which he began in the

⁴⁴ Quoted in the *William Carlos Williams Newsletter* 2:2 (Fall 1976), 11.

late summer and early fall) and the dramatic monologue “Portrait of a Woman in Bed,” one of his most scathing critiques of the American class system and stereotyped attitudes toward both women and the poor. These poems indicate the influence of both a European and an emerging American avant-garde on Williams’s development, examining the rise of industry, the speed of modern life, and the changing role of women and the poor in relation to art. Consideration and analysis of these poems will help underline the mission of the Independents and Williams’s developing interest in opening the poem to voices and objects rarely given attention, even among those regionalist and populist poets gaining popularity within the “little magazines” then popular in America.

“Overture to a Dance of Locomotives” focuses on the power and vitality of the urban rail system, those industrial and technological advances championed by many within the avant-garde. Free from simile and metaphor, the poem as it appears on the page suggests movement; in taking the locomotive as its subject, the poem transforms the rail station, the train, its “colored cooks,” and whistle sounds into a dynamic aesthetic object. The poem’s momentum culminates in an image of the locomotive as a perpetual, unchanging, though constantly moving, variable in the city, its “wheels repeating / the same gesture remain relatively / stationary: rails forever parallel / return on themselves infinitely.” The poem’s rapid lineation mimics this kinetic power, an energy Williams’s language struggles to contain. As James Guimond suggests in his early reading, the poem’s innovation broadly recalls Duchamp’s ready-made technique, where “[d]ull routine is shattered by unexpected glimpses of beauty and rapid visual and auditory rhythms” (47). But while Duchamp described *Bicycle Wheel*, for instance, as “just a distraction” within his

studio, the movement and mundanity depicted in “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives” suggest these forces contain an inherent aesthetic potential already located in the world (Cabanne 47).

“Portrait of a Woman in Bed” provides a human foil to the machine-age art celebrated in “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives” and anticipates Williams’s interest in a fiercely anti-intellectual alternative to the Eliotic model within modern poetry. Like Picabia’s 1915 object-portraits, which include bits of newspaper advertisements and mail order catalogues, Williams’s “Portrait of a Woman in Bed” relies exclusively on the local idiom of its titular character in analyzing class and gender-based convention. The poem’s speaker, Robitza, is a poor and sick woman, but hardly incapacitated, a personality Thomas R. Whitaker characterizes according to her “despair and defiance” as “one who fights against her isolation and also half-comprehendingly increases it.”⁴⁵ Robitza’s alienation, in many ways, inflects her defensive sense of self-worth and the poem begins with her presentation of the squalid conditions of her material existence. Robitza points to her “things / drying in the corner: / that blue skirt / joined to the grey shirt—“ and this unapologetic description of her material existence forms an integral part of her character. Robitza is disdainful of middle class pretensions, as embodied in the “country physician” (Williams?) who pays her a visit. She confronts him directly, “Lift the covers / if you want me / and you’ll see / the rest of my clothes— / though it would be cold / lying with nothing on!” In this sense, Robitza’s body, her physical presence in the room (one might recall here how *stanza*, in Latin, also translates as room), serves as the sole source of value and meaning in the poem: “But I’ve my two eyes / and a smooth face / and here’s this! look! / it’s high!” Finally, without corset, Robitza is an unconventional feminist heroine, manipulating

⁴⁵ William Carlos Williams, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), 45.

social mores to her advantage (“Oh, I won’t starve / while there’s the Bible / to make them feed me”) and resigning herself to the limitations of class when her situation becomes more than she can bear (“or / let them go to the gutter— / that ends trouble.”).

These two poems underscore important themes in the Exhibition’s mission. The Independents emerged from a dialogue that began among American artists with Robert Henri and a group of painters known as the Eight. The Eight, which also included Arthur B. Davies, were influenced by the social philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Emile Zola, and Henry David Thoreau. These thinkers helped to shape both the politics and aesthetic view of the Eight, who engaged the plight of the urban poor in their art, pushing art beyond the studio and academy out into the street. In addition to issues of class, gender also assumed a prominent role within the Independents Exhibition. Unlike the Armory Show, which included no women on its twenty-five member board, women played a central part in both the Independents administration and its featured artists. The Independents’ board included, among others, Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt, Mrs. Charles C. Rumsey, Miss Katherine S. Dreier, Mrs. Rockwell Kent, and Mrs. Archer Huntington. It is not surprising that in the same period when American women were first given recognition in the political arena, many of the most radical contributions to the exhibition came from female artists. One frequently cited example in early reviews was Dorothy Rice’s *Claire Twins*, now lost, which featured two overweight middle-aged women dressed in their finest clothes. The painting was stretched on a canvas that measured 5 by 6 feet, and like Williams’s “Portrait of a Woman in Bed,” offered an unapologetic look at social and class-based conventions typically used to evaluate gender. Beyond Rice’s painting, the exhibition also featured a variety of avant-garde nudes, the most noteworthy of which was Beatrice Wood’s *Un*

peut d'eau dans du savon [1917], a headless female nude with a commercial bar of soap in the place of the traditional fig leaf. The addition of a bar of soap to the oil painting challenges the almost sacred monumentality of the female nude within art history and signals the exhibition's inclusion of the commercial within a space typically reserved exclusively for the aesthetic.

Though America might appear perfectly suited for this avant-garde break with tradition, within the press the Independents and its ancillary programs were poorly received, especially among those who expressed difficulty understanding the logic of the hanging and the program's larger social mission. Leila Mechlin, editor of *American Magazine of Art*, provides a representative example of this confusion, complaining that the exhibition's curatorial approach repelled the very audience it intended to attract: "The public is not as yet sufficiently interested in art to seek out flowers in the midst of such a wilderness of weeds." Others warned against the facile egalitarianism of the alphabetical ordering, what W.H. De B. Nelson characterizes, in *International Studio*, as a seemingly random excursion into darkness without compass or guide: "The Goodship Independent was wrecked upon the Scylla of No Jury and the Charybdis of Alphabetical Hanging" (Naumann II 54).⁴⁶

By contrast, Williams's early mention of the "Palace Exhibition of 1917" in his "Prologue" to *Kora in Hell* intimates towards the liberating potential the Independents offered for American art. In the "Prologue," Williams uses the Independents as a larger meta-narrative for his own improvisations, which the poet would begin in the summer of 1917 while the exhibition was still being contested in the popular press. Williams's support for the exhibition focuses primarily on formal, rather than political or conceptual, concerns. In particular,

⁴⁶ For one notable and praiseworthy exception, see Henry McBride's article in *The Sun*, April 15, 1917, reprinted in *The Flow of Art* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1975), 121-125.

Williams praises the Independents for including unconventional artworks that resist the dogmatic aesthetic or political agendas commonly associated with the European avant-garde. In these years, as Williams struggled to develop his own unique variation on the avant-garde, he expressed caution with regard to aesthetic conventions. Where Cubism or Fauvism might be seen as presenting the hardening of an aesthetic into formal convention, Williams praises the Independents for resisting any single stylistic classification or ideology.

Still writing in relative obscurity in 1917, Williams also expressed enthusiasm for the Independents' non-hierarchical approach, suggesting those expatriated artists in Arensberg's coterie might benefit from the aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects he viewed each day while making his daily rounds. In so doing, the "Prologue" begins with praise for Walter Arensberg's willingness to include artists and works typically overlooked in more academic, juried exhibitions. In his forty-year medical practice attending to the poor, immigrant culture of Rutherford, Williams studied the popular art on display in domestic spaces, and more pointedly, attempted to highlight the aesthetic potential within the homes that more cosmopolitan artists might fail to notice. Consequently, Williams maintains hope that

Arensberg had my opportunity for prying into jaded households where the paintings of Mama's and Papa's flowertime still hang on the walls. I propose that Arensberg be commissioned by the Independent Artists to scour the country for the abortive paintings of those men and women who without master or method have evolved perhaps two or three unusual creations in their early years. I would start the collection with a painting I have by a little English-woman, A.E. Kerr, 1906, that in its unearthly gaiety of flowers and sobriety of design possesses exactly that strange freshness of a spring day approaches without attaining, an expansion of April, a thing this poor woman found too costly for her possession—she could not swallow it as the Negroes do diamonds in the mines. Carefully selected, these queer products might be housed to good effect in some unpretentious exhibition chamber across the city from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (19)

For Williams, the “unpretentious exhibition chamber” supplies an alternative to the authorities and traditions one associates with the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Because A.E. Kerr’s popular art fails to adhere to any fixed aesthetic principle beyond a soberness of design, a representational form Williams argues “approaches without attaining” what it sets out to depict, her work merely gestures towards—rather than mimetically *reproduces*—an immediacy Williams associates with spring’s uncontained vitalism, “that strange freshness of a spring day” he conceives as “an expansion of April.”

Williams’s somewhat patronizing praise for this unknown female artist (whose gender and anonymity pose little threat to him) suggests artistic representation should never become too fixed in its technique, too proficient in its execution, or too comprehensive in its scope. Kerr is able to replicate nature’s generative potential through her refusal to reduce her observations to secondary systems of vague (what Williams elsewhere in *Spring and All* calls “vegetable”) resemblances bereft of those active forces that inhere mind and matter. In Williams’s worldview, the artist/poet never invents a world *ex nihilo fit*, but rather utilizes a medium to enact nature’s potential. “By the Road to the Contagious Hospital” famously emphasizes this emergent aesthetic potential as a world coming into focus:

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

(I 96)

Nature's vital return comes in the form of throwaway or discarded objects, "abortive" artworks like Kerr's that Williams hopes Arensberg might adopt as a new standard for art. Art must exist in a constant and perpetual state of becoming, rather than as a timeless monument on view in a museum, and Williams offers this unknown woman as an oppositional figure who might counter established convention. As a woman whose work is unaccomplished and unrefined, Kerr embodies a primitive potential that remains open and receptive to change.

Elsewhere in the "Prologue," Williams associates this aesthetic potential for art not with the avant-garde but with anonymous unaccomplished or primitive works (primitivism was, of course, very much in fashion among modern and avant-garde artists, as evidenced in the work of Picasso and Gauguin, as well as the inaugural party the Independents held to celebrate the opening of the show, which was said to have taken place at the "Ultra Bohemian Pre-Historic, Post Alcoholic Webster Hall" on East 11th Street). In his enthusiasm for the primitive, Williams cites

photographs of prehistoric rock paintings and etchings on horn: galloping bisons and stags, the hind feet of which have been caught by the artist in such a position that from that time until the invention of the camera obscura, a matter of six thousand years or more, no one on earth had again depicted that most delicate expressive posture running. (19)

The "delicate and expressive posture" Williams praises in these "*photographs* of prehistoric rock paintings" (another wry reminder of representation's mediating distance from the real) suggests that modern art can never fully capture the spontaneity and kinetic energy of these scenes. In Williams's experiments, as evident in his "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives," language struggles to depict an elusive potential, and these pre-historic rock paintings recall "the most

delicate expressive posture of running” commonly associated with the kineticism of Cubism and Futurism.

Focusing on these representational limits, Williams underscores art’s referential nature, a quality he elsewhere celebrates in the mass-produced “cheap prints” on view in the “many poor and sentimental households” he visits on his daily rounds. Here again, Williams considers how these “infirm” depictions emphasize a “broken style” he associates with the very structure of the “Prologue” itself, a style that refuses to adhere to a single perspective or remain fixed on a larger thematic purpose. In mimetic terms, representation must remain off-balance rather than fixed, challenging the imperialist, subjective control of the artist in favor of a broken, de-centered perspective. To that end, Williams suggests poetry should acknowledge (rather than fully realize) a “delicate accuracy” that exists “between these [cheap] prints and the environment which breeds them” (176). This active negotiation between art and environment is compromised when representation or theme become overly rigid in ambition, style or message, what the pediatrician-poet characterizes as the “child birth [that] follows” art’s initial exploration *of*—and consubstantiality *with*—the world. The cheap prints said to decorate the homes of the poor provide a more accurate form of artistic reflection because there is no discrepancy between a “real” and an “ideal” image. Rather than a fully realized representation of reality, Williams suggests art functions as a mode of discovery that resists closure, an improvisational method most explicitly invoked in the cover for *Kora in Hell* [Figure 4].

Williams describes the design for *Kora in Hell* in language that emblemizes this immediacy, wherein a beginning and/or discovery remains unstable rather than consummate, always slipping just outside any fully reified form. Where Kerr’s work might be characterized

by an amateurishness, Williams's cover conceives of the creative process as always in formation, an open-ended actualization of potentiality that never finds closure. With this in mind, the illustration, a circular form consisting of spermatozoa closing in on a single egg, captures the immediacy Williams associates with the spirit of his own avant-garde experiment. As Williams describes it,

the ovum in the act of being impregnated, surrounded by spermatozoa, all trying to get in but only one successful. I myself improvised the idea, seeing, symbolically, a design using sperms of various breeds, various races let's say, and directed the artist to vary the shadings of the drawing from white to gray to black. The cell accepts one sperm—that is the beginning of life. I was feeling fresh and I thought it was a beautiful thing. (*IWtWaP* 28-29)

According to Williams, inception, as an illustration of the creative process, appears entirely random and unstable. In highly gendered terms, Williams conceives of the creative process as mediated by a feminine power, an egg that “accepts one sperm” in its mediation of a hyper-masculine struggle for contact in art. Representation finds itself in a double-bind similar to the paradox of beginnings Williams establishes here, searching for a realization or presence out in the world that, once discovered or found, immediately loses its vitality and luster. Just as Williams praises Kerr's painting for its “strange presence of a spring day [that] approaches without attaining,” representation must remain in a constant state of development.

In her influential reading of the avant-garde's relation to modern and mid-century poetry, Marjorie Perloff characterizes this representational condition as a gap that exists between symbolic and material registers, an indeterminacy that provides a useful gloss on the “delicate accuracy” Williams champions in relation to the Independents. Perloff argues that Cubism and Dadaism functioned primarily as an attack on semiotic stability in which the “symbolic

evocations generated by words on the page . . . no longer [appear] grounded in a coherent discourse, so that it becomes impossible to describe which of these associations (symbol or material forms) are relevant and which are not. This is the ‘undecidability’ of the text.”⁴⁷ James Breslin views this instability as central to both the content and form of Williams’s early avant-garde experiments, works like *Kora in Hell* and *Spring and All* that reject “All the conventional moral categories, artistic neatness and finish” whereby all “purposive activity of any kind must be repudiated to release bodily energy” (57). As Breslin notes, “one effect of this breakdown [in morality and formal purposiveness] is to free man from the experience of time as a fixed cause and effect” (57). In breaking with temporal and causal order, Williams’s view of the aesthetic might be said to lack teleological determination, and in this light, what Kerr’s work “possesses exactly” is an open-endedness that contrasts with more stable representational forms, what the poet terms a mimetic accuracy “too costly for . . . possession,” though some have attempted to “smuggle” it out in their work, “as the Negroes do diamonds in the mines.”

Beyond this commentary on the limits of representation, Williams praises Arensberg and the Independents for opening a space for radical innovations that exist outside then current centers for art, locating American artists who remain in intimate contact with their culture and landscape. This praise for the outsider artist, again, gives some indication of Williams’s insecurity with regard to his own relation to the New York avant-garde. Williams describes one occasion in which Arensberg discovered “an old Boston hermit who paints cigar-box-cover-like nudes upon whose fingers he pressed actual rings” (I 9). Most likely, Williams here references an artist forgotten today, even among critics of the historical avant-garde, the painter George

⁴⁷ Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 17.

Lothrop. Lothrop's residing in Boston rather than New York, as well as the unorthodox materials he incorporates in his paintings, resonates with Williams's belief that art must remain in constant contact with one's material and cultural reality. Lothrop's contribution (now lost) to the Independents Exhibition, *Nude* [Figure 5], is described as having included actual pieces of jewelry that appeared to be attached to the fingers of the painted figure (Naumann I 51). This violation of painterly illusion, interweaving the actual and the represented, pushes at the limits of painting as a medium, what Williams would later term his aim to shatter "the tyranny of the image" (*CP II* 298) in the poem's immersion in the real. Like Picasso's application of the caning of a chair or newspaper clippings directly to his Cubist paintings, Lothrop challenges conventional figuration, which operates according to what Williams describes as "an easy lateral sliding."

Lothrop's incorporation of actual jewelry on the painted fingers and hair of his *Nude* short-circuits standard reference, what Charles S. Peirce might designate the undermining of iconicity. For Peirce, icons represent material objects only insofar as they resemble them in themselves, and Lothrop's application of the actual throws this referentiality back on itself, a gesture that in many ways embodies the Society of Independents' platform and mission, to take up those images and forms that exist all around us. This acknowledgment of the actual is most radically realized in Duchamp's famous contribution to the Independents.⁴⁸

The *Prologue* cites Duchamp's *Fountain* [Figure 6] as a more extreme example of the representational challenge and integrative technique Lothrop is said to offer. Where Lothrop's innovation incorporates both aesthetic and non-aesthetic materials, the real and the

⁴⁸ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Charles Sanders Peirce: Selected Writings*, Philip P. Wiener, ed. (New York: Dover, reprint 1966), 368, 391-396 and 403-416.

representative, Duchamp's ready-made destabilizes artistic subjectivity altogether in its appropriation of the everyday through, what from the 1960s to the 1980s has been cited within theory as, a "critique of authorship." More specifically, traditional notions of authorship (re: the artist as a self-contained expressive subject) appear to be dismantled in the ready-made act, along with more conventional realist ambitions. The ready-made questions officially sanctioned standards of taste, especially those associated with realism. For thinkers like Roland Barthes, mimesis produces a feeling of repulsion and disgust, endlessly recycling a glut of already extant signs as "new" works of art. Duchamp's innovation immobilizes both the viewer and the artist and the real becomes an impasse the viewer must confront in acknowledging *Fountain's* meaning. Williams's reaction to the ready-made, at least as it is expressed in the "Prologue," provides an opportunity to explore these suggestions more fully, an account that contrasts with Duchamp's comments on the innovation and the negative aesthetic commonly associated with early Dadaism.

In the "Prologue," Williams describes the mediating issue at the center of the ready-made as pivoting on the position of the seeing-subject within the world. One need only passively encounter an already extant object to "create" a work of art, challenging the subjective control of the artist evidenced in early modern notions of visuality (one might think here of Leon Battista Alberti's *On Painting* [1435]), which conceives of the visual field as structured like the base of a pyramid with the viewer's eye positioned at its apex. Williams's account reverses this hierarchy, describing the ready-made act this way: "One day Duchamp decided that his composition for that day would be *the first thing that struck his eye* in the first hardware store he should enter. It turned out to be a pickax which he bought and set up in his studio. That was his composition"

(emphasis mine, *I* 10). This brief description is typically read as an indication of Williams's unambiguous endorsement of Duchamp's innovation. What is most interesting to me about Williams's description is that, though amused and invigorated by the ready-made's inversion of high and low culture, the everyday appears to be somehow already aestheticized, an animist force that *seeks out* or "strikes" the subject (and not the other way around). Rather than the occasion of an artist's turning his or her attention to an object for aesthetic contemplation, Williams contends, all the objects on view in a hardware store contain an equal aesthetic potential and the seeing-subject merely needs to open him or herself to the randomness of this democratic leveling.

This shifting of agency away from the subject on to the observed object anticipates the language Williams would later use to characterize what he terms poetry's "objective method." Williams's vocabulary here is indebted to his involvement with and mentoring of the Objectivist poets, a group that included Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, and Carl Rakosi. Though these "Objectivists" repeatedly denied the assertion that their poetry adhered to any single aesthetic manifesto, collectively their writing rejects what Kenneth Burke describes as rarified notions of the art "object . . . chosen for treatment because of its symbolic or subjective reference"; rather, Objectivist poets acknowledge that "once it [the selected object or image] has been chosen it is to be studied in its own right."⁴⁹ This shift from subject to object helps distinguish Duchamp's ready-made method from Williams's troping of the found. In de-centering notions of the artist as creator, Williams argues "all art is sensual and poetry particularly so. It is directly, that is, of the senses, and since the senses do not exist without an

⁴⁹ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 486.

object for their employment[,] all art is necessarily objective. It doesn't declaim or explain; it presents."⁵⁰ Here Williams abandons art as an expressive declamation of one's subjectivity in favor of a perceptual or presentational mode in which no one object or thing takes priority over another. Exclamation or declamation suggest too active a presence on the poet/subject's part, and Williams contends art and sensory perception only exist in response to already extant stimuli in the objective world.

Williams's description of the ready-made utilizes language that would later be expanded in Louis Zukofsky's early defense of the Objectivist-issue of *Poetry*. The sixth movement of Zukofsky's epic poem *A* describes the creative act as a process in which the seeing-subject engages numinous objects that radiate rays of light outward toward the poet/artist who merely pulls the world into focus. This notion of viscosity reverses ancient theories of extramission—where the eye emits light out on to a perceived object—and provides a challenge to the egocentric grids and veils that structure the modern subject's scopic field, an artistic subjectivity that remains central to Duchamp's notion of the ready-made. According to the Objectivist notion of the aesthetic, an interplay exists between subject and object that disrupts the seeing-subject's control over a scene. Like Williams, Zukofsky views poetry as entirely reliant on the world. Zukofsky argues poetry has:

An objective—rays of the object brought to focus,
An objective—nature as creator—desire for what is objectively
perfect,
Inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary
particulars.⁵¹

⁵⁰ *The Oxford Anthology of American Literature, Volume II*, Eds William Rose Benet and Norman Holmes Pearson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), 1313.

⁵¹ Quotes from Louis Zukofsky's "An Objective," see *Prepositions +: The Collected Critical Essays* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 14.

Though Zukofsky is more extreme in his reversal of extramission, in Williams's account of the ready-made, the encountered object also appears to "strike" the artist, conceptualizing of agency as a transaction within the material world that challenges Duchamp's Cartesian model of artistic subjectivity. Thus, in Williams's proto-Objectivist account, the eye is no longer unidirectional and instead functions as a conduit in a two-way exchange between inside and outside, subject and object, the material form and the immaterial imagination. Zukofsky would revisit this Objectivist notion of "nature as creator" late in his career, in his 1964 chapbook entitled *Found Objects*, which defines the poetic act—not as a metaphoric transaction or flash of insight—but as a notion of dependency between the concrete materiality of words and the world to which they refer.

It also should not go unnoticed that Williams's early description of Duchamp's ready-made mistakes one appropriated object for another, citing a pickax, presumably, for the shovel used in *In Advance of a Broken Arm* [1915]. In promoting the peculiarly "representative piece of American sculpture" he associates with the ready-made technique, Williams describes, "a pickax which he bought and set up in his studio" (I 10). Here the poet replaces one appropriated object for another, foregrounding the interchangeability the ready-made assumes in relation to the world. But this confusion provides further evidence of Williams's distance from the ready-made controversy, a slip that also (and unintentionally) provides a means for the poet to highlight Duchamp's general disregard (if not, his disdain) for the singularity of the prosaic objects he appropriates in the ready-made act.⁵² Williams's confusion suggests that Duchamp's privilege and sense of entitlement is central to the ready-made from its very inception, an attitude the poet

⁵² Ziolkowski and others have raised this point.

would attempt to redress in his poetry—the *so much depends* that so famously governs the seeing-subject’s reliance on the world.

Williams’s poetic variation on the ready-made act might be characterized as an emphatic form of identification with an object, a perspective Martin Jay contrasts with the “conceptual thought” and critical distance many art historians associate with Duchamp. Thus, in Williams’s early comments on the ready-made, a pick-ax carries the very same conceptual potential as a shovel, an interchangeability Jay considers indicative of a hostility endemic to conceptual thought. In his description of mimesis, Jay offers a commentary on the distinction I hope to draw between Williams’s troping of the found and Duchamp’s ready-made. Jay argues,

Conceptual thought can be understood as an act of aggression perpetrated by a dominating subject on a world assumed to be external to it; it [conceptual thought] subsumes particulars under universals, violently reducing their uniqueness to typifications or exemplars of a general essential principle. Mimesis, in contrast, involves a more sympathetic, compassionate, and noncoercive relationship of affinity between nonidentical particulars, which do not then become reified into two poles of a subject/object dualism. Rather than producing hierarchical subsumption under a subjectively generated category, it [mimesis] preserves the rough equality of the object and subject involved.⁵³

Where Duchamp claims any prosaic object that suits his conceptual end in his “creation” of a ready-made, Williams depicts an ungoverned world that, quite literally, reaches out to the artist, a cultural field characterized by an *otherness*, filled with “nonidentical particulars” that refuse to be reified in representation.

Beyond his reading of the ready-made act as reliant upon these non-hierarchical particularities, Williams relates avant-garde innovation to a potential he associates specifically with America. For Williams, the “porcelain urinal” is uniquely “representative” of “American

⁵³ Martin Jay, “Mimesis and Mimetology: Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe” in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, edited by Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervart (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 32.

sculpture” (*I* 10), indicative of the rise of mass-produced objects and the cultural changes these commercial and industrial forms signify, a shift that had a significant impact on artistic production throughout the century. For the emerging American avant-garde, this turn to the everyday would provide an important challenge to the European avant-garde, specifically and to art history, more generally. In the late 1910s and early 1920s, Alfred Stieglitz and the artists associated with Gallery 291 focused on the aesthetic value of mass-produced objects, what critic Matthew Josephson describes in *Broom* (1922) as “America’s indigenous art-form,” commercial and mass-produced objects said to “contain . . . the fables of her people.” For Josephson, billboards and advertisements, in particular, supply an autochthonic art emblematic of a post-Cartesian artistic subjectivity whereby plumbing, newspaper headlines, and road signs contain an aesthetic potential prior to the artist’s incorporation of these materials in their work. According to Josephson, those in the early American avant-garde, like Williams, must approach the everyday as a means of challenging European notions of art history. Josephson writes, “America will never enjoy an indigenous art, led by its intellectuals, [if] it adopts approved European methods of living or painting or writing . . . It is time to examine our home products sympathetically.”⁵⁴ Williams’s characterization of the ready-made as an autotelic piece of “American sculpture” that leaps forth to find the seeing-subject arises from the non-coercive sympathies both Jay and Josephson describe, a perspective that considers one’s local landscape as already charged with an aesthetic potential.

Wanda M. Corn argues the ready-made signals an important moment in the development of Duchamp’s thinking about art, a view that dovetails with the emergence of an American

⁵⁴ Matthew Josephson, “The Great American Billposter,” *Broom* (November 1922), 300-304.

aesthetic during the late 1910s and early 1920s. Duchamp's earliest experiments with what would—upon his arrival in New York—later be coined the “ready-made” began in 1913, when he began taking ordinary objects and casually installing them in his studio. But, Corn suggests these experiments with ready-made prototypes in France only

became conviction in New York: the most singular quality of his age was not motion, simultaneity, and dynamism, as his [Duchamp's] Puteaux circle of friends had once proposed, but the total transformation of culture by technology and industry. In such a world, Duchamp mused, artists could do no better than to make their art mirror, in the most literal sense possible, the strange new artifacts of their time . . . the unrelenting and unmediated modernity and “Americanness” of the consumer goods he found all around him in Manhattan. It was in New York that he became comfortable and sure enough about found objects to name them, talk about them, and exhibit them in art galleries.⁵⁵

According to Corn, America provides the context necessary for a monumental shift in Duchamp's thinking, which progressed from amusement to a more rigorous conceptual and anti-art agenda.

Williams's first published piece of criticism in *Poetry* from November 1917, “America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry,” provides oblique references to Duchamp's conceptual program. This essay assumes a more defensive tone, however, than the statements he would issue a year later in the “Prologue.” The essay presents the thirty-four-year-old poet-doctor struggling to assess the new techniques and attitudes he had begun to encounter on his trips into Manhattan to visit galleries and attend parties, especially with regard to how these strategies might supply modern American poets with a new path forward distinctly their own. Though “America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry” never cites *Fountain* explicitly, Williams's references to Duchamp's *Chocolate Grinder* and to Robert Carlton Brown's poetry suggest a

⁵⁵ *The Great American thing: Modern art and national identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1999), 69.

more general awareness of the controversy, as documented in *The Blind Man; Chocolate Grinder* appeared on the cover of the second issue of *The Blind Man*, which was dedicated almost exclusively to the ready-made controversy, while Brown's "Eyes / My God / What eyes" and "A Resolution made at Bronx Park" appeared on page three of the journal.

"America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry" opens with a discussion of how tradition and conventional poetic forms mediate one's understanding of the aesthetic. If Europe and Eliot provide the backdrop against which Williams worked throughout his early mature work, this essay argues Walt Whitman supplies the horizon toward which Williams and his American contemporaries must move, and eventually, move beyond. To that end, in looking to Whitman Williams suggests that without progress and innovation in the arts, American poets are destined to endlessly repeat and mimic foreign and antiquated models. Thus, Williams and his generation must aim to establish their own tradition independent of Europe. Williams writes, just as "Whitman created the art in America" through a radically inclusive redefining of the aesthetic, he and his contemporaries must acknowledge that "Nothing comes out of the air, nor do we know whence anything comes but we do know that all we have receives its value from that which has gone before" ("Whitman" 1). Williams's invocation of Whitman is somewhat ambiguous. As a challenge to the British tradition, in Stephen Tapscott's estimation, Whitman stood as America's

first . . . thematic giant, but his second significant contribution to modern letters, according to Williams and others, is his ability to stay at home—or at least to make himself at home wherever he might wander. The poet of the particular, the local, and the slangy, Whitman pays attention to the specificities of his place, and that fidelity translates . . . into an unapologetic attention to the specific local details of other places.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ *American beauty: William Carlos Williams and the modernist Whitman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 66.

According to the ahistorical view of Whitman that Williams develops in his essay, the past no longer necessarily leads sequentially to the present, which inspires American poets to realize “there is no way for me to talk of Whitman but in terms of my own generation—if haply such a thing may be” (“Whitman” 1). Within this genealogical rupture, Williams argues American poets must operate more freely, realizing that “There is no poetry save by grace of other poetry. So Dante to me can only be another way of saying Whitman” (“Whitman” 1). Thus, modern American poets should not aim to copy Whitman—that would belie what Whitman signifies, obfuscating the hierarchies typically associated with tradition and the burden American artists felt in relation to European culture. Whitman supplies a means of answering the modernist call to *make it new*, offering simultaneous links to the past, present, and future. To begin, then, American poets must acknowledge their indebtedness to their own time and their own place: “if I cannot speak of that which exists here where I can know it, it stands to reason that I cannot speak of the art anywhere” (“Whitman” 1). This somewhat banal manifesto suggests art’s most basic obligation is to remain in touch with the here and now, what creative writing workshops today reductively peddle as “write what you know” but which Williams conceptualizes in his somewhat elusive call for contact.

Whitman functioned as a metonym for, among other things, an indigenous American culture and idiom, utilizing signifiers such as slang and the specificities of place to establish an American poetics. With this context in mind, Williams’s early mature work might be said to begin with his movement beyond his youthful iterations of Keats, a challenge he is said to have first articulated in the “Whitmanesque ‘thoughts’” that filled his early notebooks and which

supplied him with “a sort of purgation . . . to clear my head and my thoughts of [my] turgid obsessions” (4 53). Williams associated the ready-made and the Independents with a similar form of cleansing and “America, Whitman and the Art of Poetry” concludes with the suggestion that recent avant-garde debates provide America with a “very useful, very ‘purgative,’ very nice decoration, even [a] very true” example of how art might be loosened from traditional aesthetic foundations, if only superficially.

Stopping short of an outright endorsement of Duchamp and the expatriated avant-garde, this essay situates the Independents controversy within the context of contemporaneous, primarily *American* advances in art and poetry that Williams contends help extend what Whitman started. More precisely, Williams suggests *The Blind Man* helps to

[s]ponsor[] an art rather glad to be in a state of decay. It is rather naïve, I think. It prefers not to know when it is imitating the Chinese or the late French. It likes to reach out of the cabinet and grab whatever it touches and to imagine it has hit upon a new thing. In the dark all is transition. It must be, for when nothing exists all must be changing from one thing to another. What else can there be? Oh, Chaos! Oh yes, but chaos is somewhat overdone. Du Champs’ ‘chocolate grinder’ is good stuff for a print. Brown has cleverly likened cocotte’s eyes to oysters. Demuth likes to walk down corridors, peeping into other people’s rooms but—ici il n’y a pas grand chose. (“Whitman” 3)

Here Williams cautions against the then-current popularity of the European avant-garde among American artists, suggesting these innovations only extend the decorative qualities associated with turn of the century art, empty repetition of those polite and established forms that render art and poetry’s potential largely irrelevant. Williams used similar rhetoric in a letter to Harriet Monroe from July 17, 1917, written in the months following the Independents Exhibition. At the end of his letter, Williams praises Carl Sandburg’s “In the Cool Tombs,” which Monroe had recently published in *Poetry*, for its formal innovation. Williams claims, “if I am not mistaken,

[Sandburg is] really studying his form. Few men are making any progress in their art. They are adding new decorations or repeating old stuff, but Sandburg is really thinking like an artist” (*SL* 41). Thus, in the context of the early avant-garde, Williams pits mere “decoration” against the hard formal innovation he associates with aesthetic progress.

Thus, where the early avant-garde only repackages empty decorative qualities the poet associates with turn of the century verse, Williams champions a gritty new phenomenology he associates with Whitman’s poetry. Though finding novelty in the already familiar was common among the twentieth century avant-garde, Williams maintains that Whitman’s poetry offers a unique model, seamlessly blending disparate materials from his environment to create “some semblance of [formal] unity” within his verse. With this model in mind, Williams encourages poets to realize that “American verse of today must have a certain quality of freedom, must be ‘free verse’ in a sense. It must be new verse, in a new conscious form.” For Williams, this “new conscious form” must “include all temperaments, all phases of our environment, physical as well as spiritual, mental and moral. *It must be truly democratic*” (emphasis mine, “Whitman” 2). This democratic inclusiveness recalls the Independents’ mission, a “freedom” that contrasts with Duchamp’s sophisticated, somewhat guarded conceptualism. Though Williams recognizes the necessity of the ready-made’s anti-institutional challenge to art, commenting that there are “few institutional works of good significance,” he ultimately encourages American poets to explore “our intuitional [*sic*] background. It has been the proper turn for us to take” (“Whitman” 1). For Williams, this somewhat vaguely defined “intuitional background” governs the artist-subject’s movement in the world, a realization that “all around us, materials” exist that help us to re-establish a new formalism in art, what he calls the “democratic groundwork of all forms,” those

“basic elements that can be comprehended and used with new force.”

This avant-garde sense of discovery and defamiliarization, of course, recalls Duchamp’s ready-made method, wherein the seeing-subject takes “an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.” But where Duchamp’s “new thought” involves a literal and figurative inversion of a urinal or bicycle tire, re-channeling its use-value through the application of a title and artist’s signature, Whitman—and by extension, Williams—remains focused on more “basic elements,” the negotiation of new aesthetic form and content inherent to the avant-garde’s re-evaluation of the everyday. In contrast to “America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry” and its qualification of those innovations that purport to be capable of “changing from one thing to another,” *The Blind Man* argues the ready-made depends entirely on a seeing-subject’s volitional choice and a notion of aesthetic indifference, factors Duchamp claims that act to modify an object’s meaning. Duchamp’s championing of choice and indifference as his primary challenge to art history in many ways pushes against the grain of the Society of Independents and Williams’s commentary in the “Prologue,” both of which encourage a leveling of all hierarchies and an opening up to the everyday rather than its re-instantiation in the field of art. In short, Williams and the Independents aim to reorient the aesthetic, while Duchamp sets out to destroy it. Finally, and this is the direction we will turn to next, Williams’s defensiveness with regard to the ready-made has its roots in less theoretical musings, in the more personally charged terrain of the poet’s limited early dealings with Duchamp.

* * * *

Williams's somewhat oblique engagement with expatriates living in Manhattan from 1915-1921 has been characterized in spatial terms, whereby the poet-doctor's daily routine caring for his patients, and when he could find a moment, darting into the city to view art or meet with fellow artists and poets forms what David Frail describes as an "asymptote . . . line to which one loop of a hyperbolic curve draws infinitely closer but never quite touches" the revolutionary activities then occurring in Gotham.⁵⁷ Williams conceived of American poetry and visual art from the period in similarly spatialized terms, arguing, "the American contour is not particularly dadaesque and that's the gist of it" (*ARI* 66). This qualification of Dada in relation to American visual art and poetry reflects Williams's life-long aversion to artistic and political collectives of any sort, complicating the European avant-garde's cooperative ambition, as Bürger defines it, to destroy both bourgeois autonomy and the bourgeois art object. In this sense, Williams's early avant-garde experiments might be said to function as a series of forward and recursive loops that reference Duchamp and/or Dada but return again and again to New Jersey and to the everyday as the site for poetry. When Williams writes "we should be able to profit by this French orchid but only on condition that we have the local terms" (*ARI* 66), he encourages American artists and poets to return to the familiar as an anti-academic form of recuperation in which one's local idiom and individual experience take precedent over the counter-cultural aims of the European artist-elite.

Williams first encountered Duchamp in 1915 through mutual friends and acquaintances Walter Arensberg, and most especially, Alfred Kreymborg and the *Others* group—an art

⁵⁷ *The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1987), 61.

collective that began meeting that summer in Grantwood, New Jersey. Though both Williams and Duchamp were members of the *Others* group, the artist makes no substantial mention of it—or even a passing reference to the poet—in his writings or interviews. Williams, on the other hand, claims the group helped rescue him at a critical moment in his development, describing the collective and its “magazine [as that] which had saved my life as a writer” (*A* 135). Williams had one infamous meeting with Duchamp at Arensberg’s home, an encounter that upset the poet for the remainder of his life. Many years after the fact, Williams would recall the general atmosphere and tenor of Arensberg’s gatherings, parties that drew a constellation of avant-garde writers and artists to his duplex at 33 West 67th Street. Williams expresses anxiety in these settings, admitting Arensberg and his coterie both “disturbed and fascinated me. I confess I was slow to come up with answers” (*A* 136). Self-identifying as an outsider, Williams presents himself as a country-doctor unable to “carry . . . on a witty conversation in French with the latest Parisian arrivals” (*A* 137). There is little doubt Williams exaggerates his inadequacies here. Having been raised by non-native speakers, where “Spanish and French . . . were languages spoken at home” (*SE* unpaginated page 2) in addition to English, Williams’s insecurity reflects his feeling he was only a marginal witness to the avant-garde provocations then occurring in New York.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ In the late 1910s especially, Williams’s professional, familial, and community-based responsibilities turned him into, as William Marling suggests, a “man of limited time”; whatever exposure he might have had to the avant-garde in New York during those years appears to have been limited at best. The avant-garde ideologies and techniques Williams happened upon in his trips to the city or at home in Rutherford through the “little magazines” he read were received in relative isolation, which might help explain the idiosyncratic form these poetic methods often assumed in his work (1-2).

This defensiveness undoubtedly informed an oft-cited exchange that took place in Arensberg's studio after Williams attempted to compliment Duchamp on his painting *The Sisters*.⁵⁹ Williams writes,

I wanted to say something to him about it. He had been drinking. I was sober. I finally came face to face with him as we walked about the room and I said, "I like your picture," pointing to the one I have mentioned.

He looked at me and said, "Do you?"

That was all.

He had me beat all right, if that was the objective. I could have sunk through the floor, ground my teeth, turned my back and spat. (A137)

Williams's earnest appreciation of Duchamp's painting is met with cool irony. Though this slight reinforced Williams's sense of alienation, it also helped to shape his ideas about work, an ethic he would later use to distinguish himself. In the paragraph immediately following this encounter, Williams describes his decision that

then and there that there wasn't a possibility of my ever saying anything to anyone in that gang from that moment to eternity—but that one of them, by God, would come to me and give me the same chance one day and that I should not fail then to lay him cold, if I could. Watch and wait. Meanwhile, work. (A 137)

Williams's revenge would assume the form of a slow and arduous labor divided with "equal interest" between "medicine and the poem . . . They amount for me to nearly the same thing" (A 286). In framing his humiliation in labor-based terms, Williams positions himself against the anti-art challenge of the ready-made—what John Roberts terms Duchamp's "deskilling" of art—opting instead for a productive form of artistic labor the poet associates throughout his life with his primary vocation as a doctor.

Williams would eventually measure his greatest artistic achievement according to the

⁵⁹ Paul Mariani describes this encounter. See 125-126. For an account of Williams's general feelings toward Duchamp, see Chapter 4 of MacGowan. MacGowan treats Duchamp within a larger consideration of Williams's relationship with other artists and thinkers, including Stuart Davis, Wassily Kandinsky, and Charles Demuth.

independence he was able to maintain, a freedom that, ironically, resulted from the stability his medical practice provided. Though medicine was the primary factor he often blamed for limiting his ability to write full-time, it granted him access to people and places that art and poetry alone could not. In a casualty list of modern artists and writers who had either burned out, succumbed to physical or mental illness, became dependent on others, or fell sway to crass commercialism, Williams details the consequences of not being able to remain self-sufficient and independent.

In recounting this casualty list, Williams begins with his friend and nemesis:

Pound confined to a hospital for the insane in Washington; Bob McAlmon working for his brothers in El Paso; Hemingway a popular novelist; Joyce dead; Gertrude Stein dead; Picasso doing ceramics; Soupault married to a wealthy American (?); Skip Cannell—who after divorcing Kitty married a French woman, *disparu!*; Nancy Cunard still alive, thin as paper as she is; Bill and Sally Bird, unable to stand the Paris weather any longer, removed to Tangier; Sylvia Beach, who had been cleaned out by the Germans, living upstairs from her famous Twelve rue de l'Odeon. Clotilde Vail dead; Brancusi too old to work; Stieglitz dead; Hart Crane dead; Juan Gris—at one time my favorite painter—long since dead; Charles Demuth dead; Marsden Hartley dead; Marcel Duchamp idling in a telephoneless Fourteenth Street garret in New York; the Baroness dead; Jane Heap dead; Margaret Anderson, I don't know where. (A 318)

Within this list of dead and inactive artists whose productivity was challenged by circumstances beyond their control, Duchamp is described as idle, ineffectual, and disconnected from the world. For Williams, Duchamp's lapse in art making is characteristic of the cynical posturing of the French *flaneur*, one who exists simultaneously as part *of* and apart *from* the culture on which his art relies. Pitting his own work against this notion of the artist as detached observer inspires Williams to challenge any "one of them, by God" to his isolated struggle to survive (personally, professionally, artistically) outside Manhattan, within a local environment hardly receptive to his

radical poetic experiments.⁶⁰

In this sense, Duchamp's notorious retirement from art provides the poet with a convenient means of revenge, as well as a rationalization for his own borrowings from Dada. Stephen Fredman suggests Williams came to understand the historical avant-garde primarily on these highly personal terms that allowed him to shield his fragile ego from a more honest assessment or admission of Dada and Duchamp's influence:

Williams continually felt slighted or humiliated by artists, writers, and society people he admired; his revenge took the form of a disdainful hauteur that allowed him to adapt the technical innovations or theories that excited him without feeling he was copying.⁶¹

In the case of the ready-made, then, Williams is able to make a copy of Duchamp's copy without feeling obligated to acknowledge his borrowings. Williams's encounter with Duchamp becomes "indented on my skull, something that filled me with humiliation so that I can never forget it."

In other words, this meeting allows him, in the early 1920s, to reframe Dada on his own terms and in accord with his own solitary labors outside the artistic milieu of New York. Equating

⁶⁰ David Frail also convincingly argues that Williams's alienation from urban and cosmopolitan artistic communities indicates a "late-Victorian, middle class conception of the individual . . . constituted by his own inner 'nature' and gifts, rather than by any social force from 'outside' him" (5). This conception of the individual transcending race, class, region, etc., informs Williams's larger notion of the imagination (and shares something in common with Duchamp's Cartesian sensibility). While other early modernists, like Yeats, turned to folklore and cultural nationalism, Frail describes Williams as

[d]espairing about the possibility of changing the world, or even of saving the small-scale world of concrete experience in which he had grown up, he [Williams] fell back on the concept of art as a refuge—or rather, a scatter of hard-shelled 'seeds' from which someday a better world might flower. He never gave up the hope that art would break down the barrier separating it from ordinary life . . . The content of many of the early poems is plain enough: Williams defended the liberty of individuals, though most often not in conventional political terms. Rather, he spoke as a member of a small community about ethics and morals, urging his fellows to speak honestly and "nakedly" to each other and damning them for their pretensions to being better than anyone else in the small town. This ethical discourse on concrete human relations remained the terms in which he spoke of politics for the rest of his life. (8)

⁶¹ *Poet's Prose: the crisis in American verse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 44.

labor with aesthetic value also provided Williams with the means of calling Duchamp's larger influence on modern art into question, especially following Duchamp's "retirement" from art making in 1923. Anticipating Smithson's criticism of Duchamp, Williams views the artist's early retirement as a solipsistic act far removed from the necessities of his own work a day life and proof of the European artist's outmoded sense of privilege. In the June 1923 issue of *Contact*, Williams expressed his critique of Duchamp's attitude this way:

If the object of writing be to celebrate the triumph of sense, and if Marcel Duchamp be the apex of the modern sense, and if he continue in New York, silent . . .
We say only in view of Marcel's intelligent and devastating silence, etc., etc., Budapest, Argentina, Sinaloa, Siberia, West Coast of Africa—if, if, if,—etc., that

there is no comment on pictures, but pictures, on music but music, poems but poetry:
if you do, you do
if you don't, you don't

and that's all there is to that.⁶²

Within the din of Duchamp's "intelligent and devastating silence," which Williams here characterizes as a disorienting reverberation that echoes around the globe, the poet proffers his own resounding belief in the artist's responsibility to work, an ethos that explodes in a staccato declaration "—if, if, if,—etc." that culminates in the poet's affirmation: "if you do, you do / if you don't, you don't." Williams cautions against artworks that rely too heavily on a self-reflexive meta-commentary for their meaning; though this line of critique is "intelligent," in Williams's estimation of early avant-garde precedents, it leaves much to be accounted for.

Thirty years later, many Fluxus artists read Duchamp's alleged retirement similarly as an abandonment of responsibility. Beyond an Oedipal challenge to his artistic father, Joseph Beuys's performance-based actions offer a call to action akin to Williams's early commentary in

⁶² *Contact* V, June, 1923, n.p.

Contact, satirizing Duchamp's detachment and irony as compromising art's revolutionary potential. Within his own work, Beuys defines art's value primarily in relation to both the community and the individual and his 1964 *The Silence of Marcel Duchamp is Overrated* calls for an awakening of public consciousness. In this piece, Beuys condemns Duchamp for failing to engage art as a social force, cautioning against the ready-made's re-instantiation of an artist-elite, a logic he views as endemic to *Fountain*, which "has become the territory of a few intellectuals, far [removed] from the life of people." In opposition to this elitism, Beuys renounces Duchamp's anti-institutionalism as counter to art's primarily populist purpose, which, unlike Dadaist provocation, seeks to recuperate value through one's engagement with art's transactional power. Twenty years after his 1964 action, Beuys continued to express his disappointment with regard to Duchamp's retirement:

I critique [Duchamp] because at the very moment when he could have developed a theory on the basis of the work he had accomplished, he kept silent . . . He entered this object [the urinal] into the museum and noticed that its transformation from one place to another made it into art. But he failed to draw the clear and simple conclusion that every man is an artist. (deDuve [1999], 285)

According to this view, the ready-made elides a more radical transformation of the everyday and fails to expand to narrowly drawn conceptions of the artist and society. Williams's early avant-garde experiments—like the social activism Beuys forwards—challenge notions of the artist as an exclusive, privileged mediator within the creative act. In beginning what Beuys and conceptual art would carry to more theoretically rigorous extremes, Williams infused *Kora in Hell*, the text I turn to next, with an immediacy he associates with the avant-garde experiments on view at the Independents exhibition, and earlier, at the Armory Show of 1913, a freedom that at times carries with it a potential for self-sabotage in terms of clarity and expression.

Chapter II: My self was being slaughtered: Kora in Hell and the Paradoxes of Choice

*“A dada-ist is one who finds no one thing more important than any other one thing, and so I turn from my place in the scheme from expressionist to dada-ist . . .”*⁶³ Marsden Hartley

Expressionism is to express skillfully the seething reactions of contemporary European consciousness. Cornucopia. In at the small end, and—blui! Kandinsky.

But it's a fine thing. It is THE thing for the moment—in Europe. The same sort of thing, reversed, in America has a water attachment to be released with a button. That is art. Everyone agrees that that is art. Just as one uses a handkerchief. (I 173)

In the months immediately following the Society of Independents Exhibition, during the late spring and summer of 1917, Williams began work on his most radical experiment to date, an exercise aimed at establishing the “Dadaist” perspective American painter Marsden Hartley characterizes in “The Importance of Being Dada” as an aesthetic in which “no one thing [appears] more important than any other thing.” Though commonly read as echoing Wassily Kandinsky’s influential Expressionist essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which called for new representational forms thought to be the outward manifestation of some inner need, *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920) begins to express the idea that art and poetry should take observations and thoughts from everyday life as its primary subject matter.⁶⁴ This focus on the everyday levels the hierarchies associated with taste and tradition, origin and copy, and more radically, the ontological divide separating subject from object. In so doing, *Kora in Hell* signals an important break from Williams’s early Imagist poetics and marks his first extended

⁶³ Marsden Hartley, *Adventures in the Arts*, (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1972; reprint of Boni and Liveright, Inc, NY, 1921), 59. *Adventures in the Arts* arrived within a year of *Kora*’s publication and shares many thematic concerns, most notably a resistance to any overarching ideology and a belief that movements, like Dadaism, be reconceived as resistant to fixed ideological systems.

⁶⁴ Portions of Kandinsky’s essay had been published in *Camera Work* (April 1912) and *Blast* (June 1914).

meditation on the relation of the aesthetic to the everyday. In these improvisations, a Dadaist interest in the everyday functions as a counterpoint to Expressionist subjectivity, a legacy Williams would later characterize as “THE thing for the moment—in Europe” but which is no longer suitable for American artists intent on articulating their own national and cultural-artistic identity.

This progression from Expressionism to Dadaism signals an important shift within avant-garde thinking about the art object, a movement away from a conception of art thought to express an artist’s subjectivity to a more hard-edged focus on “objective” reality. Tracing this objectivist turn in the improvisations might appear counter-intuitive in light of those important studies (most significantly, those by Mike Weaver, and more recently, Peter Halter) that situate *Kora in Hell* as a transitional text in Williams’s progression toward a figurative and verbal economy, the *no ideas but in things* with which his mature poetry is most often associated. But as I will argue in this section, the improvisations supply an important, if only temporary, challenge to the privileged position of the poet-subject that helped to clear space for subsequent objectivist innovations. In so doing, the improvisations ask a series of related questions: What constitutes an aesthetic object? How can verbal representation adequately engage material reality, especially after the rise of mechanical reproduction? What is the poet-subject’s relation to the art object and to material reality, and how does this relationship alter poetic agency? Finally, how are the roles of writer and reader altered in lieu of the rethinking of authorship Roland Barthes and later post-structuralists advance, in which texts like the improvisations are no longer conceived as the expression of an autonomous writer-subject and instead reflect a

complex discursive field of already extant voices, a “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash”⁶⁵

These questions inspired twentieth century poets and artists to rethink the utilitarian and commonplace in relation to the aesthetic, a re-evaluation Williams describes as similar to Expressionism but “reversed”; where Expressionism sometimes distorts reality in the rendering of an emotional affect, artists in the U.S., especially those in the Stieglitz circle that included Hartley, Arthur Dove, John Marin, Alfred Maurer, Edward Steichen, Abraham Walkowitz, looked to “objective” reality in the hope of depicting the singularity of material and cultural forms as distinct from European and art-historical precedents. Williams and others who witnessed the controversy *Fountain* inspired began to consider how the everyday might express this challenge—suggesting even that which “has a water attachment to be released with a button. That is art. Everyone agrees that that is art.” Williams’s *Kora in Hell* insists that empirical discoveries out in the world contain an ontological fullness prior to their appropriation in an “aesthetic” work. More than any other technique Williams would utilize in his career, the automatic writing associated with this volume upends the conceptual precedent Duchamp established in the ready-made.

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Though Williams suggests that a general consensus existed in America with regard to the aesthetic potential of the everyday, during the summer and fall of 1917, he continued to develop

⁶⁵ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image—Music—Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146. The full quote reads, “*We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.*”

his theory of the imagination in relative isolation. During these years, Williams experienced ongoing frustration over his failure to attract the attention of a major publishing house.⁶⁶ No longer a young man, Williams had been married for more than five years and was now the father of two young sons. Though he had established a reputable medical practice in Rutherford, he remained largely unknown as a writer, a neglect that instilled in him a nagging insecurity no doubt intensified by the sensational arrival of the European avant-garde to Manhattan.

While the ready-made and the Independents controversy dominated the press, Williams's medical practice absorbed an unprecedented amount of his time and attention. A national shortage of doctors followed America's entrance into the First World War in April 1917 (an event that occurred within days of the opening of the Independents), a stress quickly compounded by "the potent poison that was sweeping the world" (*A* 159) in the form of the influenza epidemic. In his autobiography, Williams describes these crises as reinforcing his feelings of inadequacy and his limitations as a poet were now echoed by the limitations of modern medicine, as sickness made its way into Williams's own home, infecting twelve people in his immediate family, including his wife and children.

After their long engagement, Williams's marriage had fallen into routine, especially with regard to the domestic and professional responsibilities both he and Flossie now assumed, issues exasperated by crises their parents were experiencing. In response to America's slow engagement in the military conflict abroad, a group of local patriots had labeled Williams's

⁶⁶ Williams's lack of presence within the art and literary culture of New York is clear in his decision to work with the Four Seas Company of Boston, who published *Kora in Hell* but only with some financial help from the poet, who paid "something in the neighborhood of two hundred and fifty dollars"; looking back close to thirty-five years later, Williams would contend "What a marvelous thing it was to me" (*A* 158-159).

outspoken German father-in-law a “disloyal citizen” (*A* 154); Williams’s own father was dying from colon cancer, an event the poet would later use to mark the beginning of his maturation as a writer. Williams attributed his early interest in literature to his father, and William George Williams proved a critical, if sometimes overbearing, editor of his first three books of poetry. William George would die in December 1918, just two months after the improvisations were completed, and Williams characterized this period as a time of illness, repression, and decline. In fact, Williams would link the instability of the improvisational form to these insecurities: “My own spillings. What else did I have [under these conditions]? Nothing but a wife, two sons, a father dying of cancer, a mother who was, unquestionably, a foreigner to me” (*A* 159).

The war and the influenza epidemic, in particular, provided a collective trauma Williams would use to explain the destruction of those artistic and poetic seeds that were just starting to take root in America. Williams expressed his bitter resentment over

The stupidity, the calculated viciousness of a money-grubbing society such as I knew and violently wrote against; everything I wanted to see live and thrive was being deliberately murdered in the name of church and state.

It was Persephone gone into Hades, into hell. Kora was the springtime of the year; my year, my self was being slaughtered. What was the use of denying it? (*A* 158)

The improvisations provide Williams with a potential form of release from the social and cultural forces that he felt were repressing him. Aligning himself with Persephone, Williams began to write without plan or thought, a relinquishment of his ego that allowed him to obfuscate the limitations in scope and focus associated with his Imagist experiments of the late 1910s. More expressly, this improvisational exercise offered a temporary release from his professional and familial obligations, conditions that caused him to feel as if “my self” was under threat or being

“slaughtered.” Within these contexts, the improvisations imply that writing—a medium defined by temporality—might remain open to a contingency, spontaneity and chance that the poet-doctor’s professional and personal life denied him.

It is somewhat paradoxical, therefore, that the improvisations emerged from a regimented form of automatic writing that recalls the ready-made method Duchamp had recently popularized. Williams explains his own experiments with canned chance this way:

I would write something everyday, without missing one day, for a year. I’d write nothing planned but take up a pencil, put the paper before me, and write anything that came into my head. Be it nine in the evening or three in the morning, returning from some delivery on Guinea Hill, I’d write it down.

I did just that, day after day, without missing one day for a year. Not a word was to be changed. I didn’t change any, but I did tear up some of the stuff.
(A 158)

Though Williams eventually edited these pieces—only eighty-six of the three hundred-and-sixty-five entries remain, divided into twenty-seven chapters—more than any other of his books, *Kora in Hell* reflects the poet’s most concentrated attempt to renounce poetic and authorial precedent.⁶⁷ Prior to giving his book its peculiarly modernist title, Williams referred to it simply as *Improvisations*, implying that this experimental form functioned as the primary conceptual guide throughout the book’s evolution. Linking this writing exercise to Kora’s struggle for freedom supplies a mythic framework that helps to stabilize the improvisation’s challenge to authorship. Invoking myth also provides a means of articulating a value obscured from conventional perspective. Rather than utilizing the power of presentation—as montage and collage had in recent innovations in the visual arts where the actual performs the primary work of

⁶⁷ Jerome Mazzaro and others divide *Kora in Hell*’s twenty-seven sections, consisting mostly of three improvisations each, along a loose thematic pattern of descent (through Section IX), ascent (through Section XXVII) and the manifestation and/or growth of a “waking baby” (through Section XXVII).

representation itself—*Kora in Hell* uses this mythic narrative in much the same way James Joyce does in *Ulysses*, grounding the volume's non-linear, peripatetic musings within a larger conceptual frame.

Some background on the Kora myth will help to shed necessary light on the appeal the narrative held for Williams. In one version of the myth, Kora/Persephone/Eurydice strays from the protection of her mother, Demeter, and becomes engrossed by the beauty of the narcissus flower, a flower that mirrors her own virginal beauty. While Kora is absorbed in the flower, Hades appears from a break in the ground and seizes her, carrying her into the underworld. Demeter grieves her daughter's disappearance, and consequently, the earth becomes barren. Because of Zeus's appeals on Demeter's behalf, Kora is granted temporary freedom during the spring of each year, a liberation used to explain the cycles of the seasons. As we will see in the pages that follow, these themes of death and repression speak to the hectic pace and stress of Williams's life, when he "existed through the tough winter months of my profession as a physician only for that [writing]. So that scribbling in the dark, leaving behind on my desk, often past midnight, the sheets to be filed away later" (I 29).

But the themes of liberation and repression also speak to Williams's interest in the improvisational form, whereby the poet-subject disappears as the guiding presence within a work, an absence that returns attention to *Kora in Hell*'s textuality. The challenge for the reader is to make contact with what Williams conceives as the objective world through the indeterminacy of the word and the new and highly experimental improvisational form, wherein one cannot predict or depend on any larger theme, imagery, or even referential stability in understanding a work. Stephen Fredman views the collapse of reference in the improvisations as

a recuperative form of return that focuses attention to the printed page. Fredman contrasts this objectivist turn in Williams's work with the erudition and "depth" associated with other contemporaneous examples from the modernist cannon, texts that benefit from "the clarification of allusions and intentions beneath the surface [that] has materially aided our reading of *The Wasteland*, *The Cantos*, and *Ulysses*." But, he argues, "*Kora in Hell* asks for a reading that pays particular attention to its transitory surface, to the way words and things appear and are linked in the moment of its writing" (17). In terms of Williams's larger troping of the found, the "transitory surface" of the improvisations suggests a notion of contact that unites a random list of anecdotes, elliptical and aphoristic lines that compromise the arc of conventional narrative and the portentous weight of the myth invoked in the work's title. In this sense, myth provides a stable meta-narrative that might help to adequately explain what Williams could not do through the irregularity of the improvisational line itself.

The "Prologue" calls into question those writers who rely on obscurity and allusion, especially in relation to those native and homegrown aspects of culture Williams aimed to foreground in *Kora in Hell*. Condemning Pound, Eliot, and to a lesser degree, H.D., for modeling their poetry around the "subtle conformity" of historic, foreign, and formally remote models, Williams criticizes their expatriated ambitions as empty capitulation, a "rehash, repetition in another way of Verlaine, Baudelaire, Maeterlinck . . . paraphrases from Yeats and . . . cribbing from the Renaissance, Provence and modern French: Men content with the connotations of their masters" (124). In opposition to this self-satisfied contentment, Williams defends the non-expatriated avant-garde, including Marianne Moore, Maxwell Bodenheim, and Robert Brown, for their self-conscious pursuit of originality and novelty centered—not on

foreign or antiquated sources—but on an elusive vitality rooted in the quotidian. Thus, Williams invokes the spirit of modernism—“Nothing is good save the new” (I 23)—but he cautiously adds a more practical directive aimed at expatriates like Pound and Eliot. Rather than looking beyond one’s personal experience, the “Prologue” praises “those who have the wit and courage, and the conventionality to go direct toward their vision of perfection in an objective world where the signposts are clearly marked” (I 27).

This pursuit of the objective world refuses planning or volitional intent and instead operates according to a form of intuition that relinquishes agency, what *Spring and All* describes as having “had recourse to the expedient of letting life go completely in order to live in the world of my choice.” Williams’s theory of the imagination pivots on this paradoxical notion of choice in which one concedes agency to gain access to a new aesthetic potential in the already familiar. Thus, relief emerges from this contradiction, a liberation that occurs after one submits to those empirical truths already said to exist. Though Williams would later admit the “fault” of the improvisations as their glorification of chaos, a “dislocation of sense” he attributes to the biographical and historical circumstances I have already touched upon, *Kora in Hell* calls for the destruction of authorial agency through an investigation of elements that threaten the integrity of selfhood. Though these miscellaneous observations fail to express meaning beyond their own sometimes hermetic irregularity, the improvisations upset poetic precedent in such a way that conventional notions of originality, intentionality, and formal design are all thrown into doubt.

The benefits associated with this doubt are evident in the barely controlled chaos of the improvisations, an open form defined entirely according to process. At their most impenetrable,

these random bits of writing reflect the confusion and exhaustion of their extemporaneous creation, which in Gerald L. Bruns' estimation has

a provision built into their originating motive: he who experiments may fail, but in unprecedented ways apt to be more savored than scorned. Experiments resemble improvisations insofar as one cannot know how they will turn out: they may successfully disclose only what we cannot hope to achieve. To disclose a saving motive the improvisator takes recourse to self-exegesis, which since ancient times has been a primary form of authorizing discourse, especially when the 'unschooled' or vernacular writer desired to free his lines from the trammels of Latin.⁶⁸

As an experiment into what might be found, *Kora in Hell* functions as both a formal and conceptual point of departure into the unknown. Through adopting the improvisational mode, Williams frees himself from formal precedent. Refusing to plan in advance a direction for his project, allows Williams to include observations and materials that other genres would exclude in pursuit of clarity and focus.

Thus, the poet's "recourse to self-exegesis," his desire to make his work accessible to no one but himself, provides an important point of contrast to the ready-made. In the ready-made act, Duchamp remains in complete control—from its conceptual beginnings through to its final installation. More importantly, the anti-institutionalism of the ready-made requires a viewer for its provocation to be complete. Rather than supplying clear indication of any larger conceptual aim, the improvisational process resists control, operating instead according to the incidental thoughts and observations Williams recounts at the end of each day that, he later admits, might mean very little to anyone besides himself.

As we have already explored, this openness to chance and commitment to innovation comes at a price, evident in an article Williams published in the December 1918 issue of *The*

⁶⁸ Gerald L. Bruns, *Inventions: Writing, Textuality, and Understanding in Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 157, hereafter referred to in the text by Bruns, followed by the page number.

Little Review—the same magazine that, one year prior, published the first three improvisations Williams would eventually use to open *Kora in Hell*. “The Ideal Quarrel” is a peculiar essay that ostensibly addresses Williams’s marital difficulties, but it also shares many of *Kora in Hell*’s primary themes, as well as its charged and combative tone. In terms of poetry, “The Ideal Quarrel” suggests language must transgress the limits associated with one’s medium in pursuit of the “real,” a transgression that remains fundamental to Williams’s larger theory of the imagination.⁶⁹

In elaborating on the nature of marriage, “The Ideal Quarrel” describes conflict bordering on violence as a necessary prerequisite to strengthening and maintaining relationships. This conflict is useful in understanding the improvisations’ antagonistic tone, a tension that stems from what Williams considers the ultimate irreconcilability of subject and object, a divide that, in the end, highlights language’s failure to adequately mediate or make contact with the world. Hence, both marriage and the poem must push “through a mush of lumpy stuff—mouldy words, lie-clots” Williams associates with stagnant or desiccated artistic and literary forms that prevent one from accessing more vital representational forms. The essay characterizes inter-personal relationships as a constant struggle, a labor that must be engaged in conquering isolation. But with the avant-garde experiments of the Independents Exhibition still fresh in his mind, Williams qualifies the impulse to rebel for rebellion’s sake alone and instead designates the purpose of art and human relations as a notion of perpetual renewal, the re-forging of lost connections—

⁶⁹ For the role of transgression in marriage, also see “Romance Moderne” (1919), which similarly explores gender oppositionality and provides insight on Williams’s theory of the imagination and its subversive aims. Published in *Others* in 1919, this poem depicts a speaker flirting with a woman in the back seat of a car, as his wife and the woman’s husband ride in the front. Evidencing in somewhat of an exaggerated form the strain of Williams’s marriage, the strength and health of a relationship involves one’s ability to face confrontation and anger as a means of purifying bonds.

between man and woman, between world and word, and between art and the everyday. Williams writes,

For to break and begin a new alignment is recapitulation but to recement an old and dissolving union is without precedent, a totally new thing. The old union in this case is a part of the new and being directly a part needs no counterpart, the recemented union being ready at birth to go forward. (39)

This “recemented union” provides an alternative to Pound’s modernist call to *make it new*. Vital relationships and aesthetic forms—that which exist both in language and between people—must constantly struggle to reconnect, moving beyond the deadening effect of convention and habit. These reconnections do not aim to subvert past models. Instead, Williams’s self-reflexive pragmatism claims progress (especially, as I indicate in the pages that follow, that which involves language) must always defer, in kind, to the extant, inviting the artist/poet to reach out and touch an aesthetic already available in the everyday. To discover an aesthetic in that which already exists re-conceives of the artist as one who re-creates what, paradoxically, is already available all around.

As in musical improvisation, these connections suggest a spontaneous vernacular-based form involving three inter-related motifs: imitation, assimilation, and innovation. In improvisation, a musician takes up available themes and plays according to a cultivated innocence in which each instant within a work is conceived as its own point of origin, a singular discourse that cannot be repeated or reproduced, even by the musician who “writes” it. According to Bruns, the appeal of improvisation hinges on this notion of paradox, an atemporal “teleology [that] is entirely in the present. It [improvisation] is discourse whose beginning is what matters, because to improvise is to begin without a second thought” (145). This

paradoxical notion of beginning again constitutes a major aspect of Williams's larger theory of the imagination, where a poet might, for instance, take up fragments from Sappho (which are themselves only a series of fragments), letters from Pound, Stevens, and H.D., a grocery list, and even an interview Mike Wallace conducted with the poet for CBS about the very definition of the poem, all in the democratization of both the content and form of a "new" poem. The appropriation of these fragments shifts attention away from the writer's central mediating position out onto its frame, highlighting what Craig Owens describes in relation to "postmodern art" as the "*location* in which the work of art is encountered," a place of discovery or troping of the found that self-reflexively draws attention to "the *social* nature of artistic production and reception" that prohibits "distinguishing a text from its context."⁷⁰ Improvisation's shifting back and forth between the center and the frame, the represented and the real, disturbed many of Williams's earliest critics, including Wallace Stevens, who considered the abrupt shifts in perspective an unnecessary fidgeting that "leads always to new beginnings and incessant new beginnings lead to sterility" (*I* 15).

Marianne Moore defended these unruly shifts in point of view and perspective in Williams's short verse as the primary epistemological struggle and driving force of his poetry. Loosening attention and the need for causal logic evidences a confidence and freedom to follow those momentary impulses that improvisation marks as a potential revelation. For Moore, these momentary shifts in focus are the "breathless budding of thought from thought . . . one of the

⁷⁰ Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 126.

results and charms of the pressure configured” in Williams’s poetry.⁷¹ Where Symbolist or Expressionist works slowly evoke an object to help convey a mood, Williams’s perspectival shifts are sudden and without context, a technique that withholds all vestiges of what Moore describes as a “tawdriness of unnecessary explanation.” This verbal and syntactical economy renders Williams’s verse, in Moore’s estimation, “insultingly specific,” though it also liberates poetry from the burdens of both narrative and an overarching metaphysics. According to Moore, this poetic specificity reflects a reckless “abandon born of inner security” on Williams’s part. Thus, Williams’s poetry—and the improvisations, in particular—relinquishes authorial agency in favor of a poetic drift, unburdened by reason and moving along “chains of incontrovertibly logical apparent non sequiturs” (325). In *Kora in Hell* this poetic drift expresses both existential and stylistic courage, a profound vulnerability and concomitant sense of agency that emerge after suspending one’s consciousness or ego in favor of the concrete solidity of the word.

Williams’s response to Moore suggests this “breathless budding” was borne out of an angst he first experienced around the age of twenty in which the enigmatic facticity of the world helped to overthrow his sense of security. This resignation inspired despair in Williams that came about after he acknowledged the irreconcilable otherness of the world. Ceding self to the objectivity of the world anticipates the poet’s nightly improvisation, a crisis evident in his desire to write even though he often had nothing in particularly “poetic” to say. For Williams, this “sudden resignation to existence” carries with it an ambiguous

despair—if you wish to call it that, but a despair which made everything unite and at the same time a part of myself. I suppose it might be called a sort of nameless religious experience. I resigned, I gave up. I decided there was nothing else in

⁷¹ Quoted in *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, Ed. Patricia C. Willis, (New York: Viking Press, 1986), 325, hereafter referred to in the text by Moore, followed by the page number.

life for me but to work . . . Things have no names for me and places have no significance. As a reward for this anonymity I feel as much a part of things as trees and stones. Heaven seems frankly impossible. I am damned as I succeed. (SL 147)

If there is a touchstone moment in Williams's artistic development as it relates to his experiments in *Kora in Hell*, it is this instant of desperation that shapes his understanding of the poet/artist's relation to the world. The unnameability of the world—the incongruence between signifier and signified—de-centers the control typically associated with the Cartesian ego's privileged position within the creative act. This resignation to existence makes hope for transcendent truth (humanist or otherwise) impossible; rather than resolving the multiple schisms of the world, this despair makes it impossible to identify self except in relation to other objects, the mysterious *thisness* of one's environment that cannot be quantified in abstractions like metaphor, science, or religion. We are situated within the world, rather than positioned outside of it and even language's removal from this material existence helps to underline the irreconcilability of the divide between subject and object, a realization that supplies "a sort of nameless religious experience" for the poet-subject. Williams feels a part of things, but only after admitting we are forever separated (or apart) from reality.

But this concession opens self (and the poetic object) to the world, what Williams describes in *Spring and All* in primarily visual terms as a fertile exchange through which "the inevitable flux of the seeing eye" comes to measure "itself by the world it inhabits [which] can only result in . . . crushing humiliation unless the individual raise to some approximate co-extension with the universe. This is possible by aid of the imagination" (I 105). Williams's imagination, the main source of agency in the ultimately doomed recovery project that begins in

Kora in Hell, suggests a heightened sensitivity to the here and now that foregrounds poetry's limits, the imagination's ultimate inability, as he explains it to Moore, to "save, to repair, to rescue, to complete" the world (*SL* 174). Joseph N. Riddel views this failure of imagination as a Copernican shift in which "Williams' world flattens out into a *chaosmos* of random but related particulars" (emphasis mine, 13), a non-hierarchical space that allows the reader to re-consider even the most mundane and trivial details as somehow interconnected. Here I lean on Riddel's appropriation of Deleuze's terminology to understand the disorder and disarray of *Kora in Hell*'s twenty-seven improvisations, a chaos Williams attempts to offset, after the fact, with his invocation of the titular myth.

But, associating the chaos of the improvisations with the authority of this mythic frame is complicated by Williams's selective utilization of the myth itself. The improvisations describe, somewhat ironically, how "The ground lifts and out sally the heroes of Sophocles, of Aeschylus," but more often than not Williams refracts these mythic elements through a peculiarly local lens in which "Herakles [appears] rowing boats on Berry's creek" (*I* 60) and Hercules is presented "in Hacketstown doing farm labor" (*I* 46). This uneasy marriage of the mythic and the modern implies these ancient forces have been altered. Where Eliot laments the diminishment of myth in the modern age, *Kora in Hell* considers the ennobling—if slightly fractured and deformed—effect these narratives provide within contemporary life. Thus, as is so often the case in Williams's larger theory of the imagination, one must guard against viewing the mythic in opposition to the everyday. When the improvisations do make direct allusions to classical figures, these references frequently suggest a perversion that exists within modern culture. For instance, though he makes no direct mention of Kora in the improvisations,

Persephone is mentioned, as is Pluto/Hades, all of whom are said to be the same as they always were, though somehow fallen in today's world. These mythic figures appear as "Giants in the dirt" and "The gods, the Greek gods" despoiled, "smothered in filth and ignorance" (*I* 60).

Williams contends these mythic seeds are "scattered" throughout the modern industrial landscape and their full potential fails to take root. One can only "Find it you've the genius" (*I* 60). Though clearly identifiable mythic elements have disappeared, the ground for this potential remains. Those who focus on what already exists, instead of deferring to books, have the potential to see contemporary variations on the mythic. Later in this sequence, Williams conceptualizes of this found potential in contrast to scholarship: "Reading shows, you say. Yes, reading shows reading" and exists only as a documentation of the past, a mirroring of the historical record. Williams argues that this kind of backward-looking knowledge is akin to blindness. By contrast, the improvisational mode is equated with a form of exploration in which the poet's mind and hand exist entirely in the present moment, rather than iterating past forms of knowledge (*I* 61).

In Improvisation XVI, these mythic forms appear in the most unexpected incarnations. For instance, "Zeus" is described as "a country doctor without a taste for coin jingling." Where Zeus normally functions as the central ordering principle in Greek myth (and in Kora's recovery), the country doctor (Williams?) lives in a market-driven world in which narrow self-interest prevails. In this light, the repressed desire so central to the Kora myth itself—her unruly passion and absorption in the Narcissus flower—emerges from the ground but, like so much desire in Williams's work, falls into disuse because culture is unable to understand or properly reciprocate it. Thus, Williams depicts Venus as a fallen and broken woman pushing dangerously

and without comprehension against convention, law, and moral code, but only in the most base manner available to her. In fact, Williams depicts culture as entirely incapable of understanding or reciprocating the desire Venus embodies. Consequently, mythic figures like Venus

go seeping down into our hearts, they rain upon us and in the bog they sink again down through the white roots, down—to a saloon back of the rail-road switch where they have that girl, you know, the one that should have been Venus by the lust that's in her. They've got her down there among the railroad men. A crusade couldn't rescue her. Up to jail—or call it down to Limbo—the chief of police our Pluto. It's all of the gods, there's nothing else worth writing of. They are the same men they always were—but fallen. Do they dance now, they that dance beside Helicon? They dance much as they did then, only, few have an eye for it, through the dirt and fumes. (*I* 60-61)

This improvisation suggests that within the modern industrial landscape, mythic power is either repressed, exploited, or brutally manifest—“they’ve got her down there among the railroad men”—releasing Venus’s desire, but only in an obscured and defiled form. Consequently, Venus’s desire refuses to be prescribed by the local judge or the police. Sleeping with railroad men and frequenting a saloon behind the rail yard, she is met with sexual violence, and later in this improvisational sequence, bears its illegitimate offspring. In this sense, the mythic might be said to “dance,” the central metaphor Williams uses to depict the imagination’s engagement with the world, but in a manner that fails to be understood within conventional law or morality. The other classical figures in this improvisation are also said to move “with the greatest difficulty” and with little “success” (*I* 61). Within this industrial landscape, these figures appear separated from their fullest potential, without stable links to the past. These mythic elements suggest the timelessness of the present and the appearance of the universal in the local, while also giving some indication of the chaotic field in which this beauty and significance might emerge, if one remains on the lookout for it.

* * *

Though many critics continue to attribute the collapsing of high and low culture within Williams's work to Duchamp's influence, the "Prologue" positions art/poetry's attempt to harness the mythic in the everyday, the world in the word, with a feminine sensibility much closer to home. Williams looks to his mother as a figure capable of transgressing those conventions that delimit art from the everyday. In contrast to the ready-made's highly conceptual tautology, Elena Hoeb Williams, in many ways, embodies an expansive and unpredictable creative principle, which her poet-son considered the generative source for all art. As early as 1914, Williams had characterized the creative process as a masculine/feminine symbiosis, citing "It is the woman in us / That makes us write."⁷² Thus, the marriage of male and female, creation and destruction, ascent and descent within Williams's theory of the imagination provides an elusive mimetic goal, a call for language to make contact with a material world that always slips just outside representation. If *Kora in Hell* exists as the poet's most radical renunciation of the lofty, Keatsian rhetoric and locutions of his early poetry, his mother embodies the imagination's desire to surmount perceptual, spatial, and temporal barriers. To that end, producing a highly idiosyncratic work like the improvisations, which refuse to adhere to any larger inscription of the Father (the Law), becomes a distinctly feminist gesture, especially as a counterpoint to the perspective I associate with Duchamp's masculine ego.

⁷² Many critical studies have highlighted the role gender plays in Williams's theory of the imagination. See Charles Nash's "Women and the Female Principle in the Works of William Carlos Williams," *Publications of the Missouri Philological Association*, 3, 1978. Other studies include: Audrey T. Rodgers' "The Female Presence: Women in the poetry of William Carlos Williams, 1910-1950," 3:2 (1986); and most significantly, Kerry Driscoll's *William Carlos Williams and the Maternal Muse* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987).

Elena's epistemology of art contrasts with Duchamp's notion of the ready-made, an attitude best explained through comparing the early avant-garde to later Neo-avant-garde attitudes toward the everyday. Elena's perspective on the world, at least as recounted in the "Prologue" to *Kora in Hell*, shares much in common with these late approaches to art production. For instance, in a letter to Hans Richter dated November 19, 1962, Duchamp identifies how his own early Dadaist provocations differed from later Neo-Dadaist iterations, identifying distinctions that depend largely on how the everyday is perceived and treated within an aesthetic work. Duchamp criticizes Neo-Dada for re-instantiating standards of beauty he argues Dada set out to destroy, ridiculing the artistic impulse to aestheticize the everyday, contending this only replaces one foundation (beauty) with its opposite. He writes,

Neo-Dada, which they call New Realism, Pop Art, Assemblage, etc., is an easy way out, and lives on what Dada did. When I *discovered* ready-mades I thought to discourage aesthetics. In Neo-Dada they have taken my ready-mades and *found* aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottlerack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.⁷³

Here Duchamp conceives of the everyday as a polemic against fixed and dominant conventions, a "discovery" aimed at denying the aesthetic value of an appropriated object. According to this view, the everyday remains a prop used against prevailing aesthetic standards.

Avant-garde art in the years following Abstract Expressionism adopted these Dadaist methods, but broadened this self-reflexive dimension, finding beauty in what was intended as an act of pure negation. Stephen Johnstone details the widespread re-thinking of the everyday among artists from Neo-Dadaism up through to the present, identifying those who sought

to bring . . . uneventful and overlooked aspects of lived experience into [greater] visibility.

⁷³ Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-art*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965), 207-208, emphasis mine.

For some, this turn to the ordinary leads to a recognition of the dignity of ordinary behaviour, or the act of stating simply, “here is value”. For others, it may result in an unveiling of the “accidentally miraculous”, or the desire to make art with the unassuming ease of the amateur photographer. For others still, an art that focuses on the everyday might construct “a vaguely ethnographic aesthetic”, or be nothing more than the record of simply venturing out and happening across something interesting. Elsewhere, the everyday sparks a distrust of the heroic and the spectacular; its oppositional and dissident connotations are foregrounded as it is deployed in a confrontation with “the bureaucracy of controlled consumption”. From another position, interest in the everyday signals a loss of guilt from popular culture and its pleasures, while elsewhere again, the investigation of everydayness asks us to consider the deceptively simple question: What happens when nothing happens? (12-13)

In their distrust of the heroic and the spectacular, these post-Duchampians actively modify Dadaist negation to new and more recuperative ends. What is the purpose of art if it remains exclusively an autonomous and rarified domain without connection to the practicalities of one’s life? More expressly, what will come of art if it remains solely aimed toward destroying precedents?

Redirecting the anti-institutional impulse that motivates Dadaism sheds light on Elena’s role as a guiding spirit within the improvisations. Depictions of Elena’s behavior in the “Prologue” enact the Neo-Dadaist impulse to discover the “accidentally miraculous” events and objects one encounters in the everyday. In this sense, Williams links Elena’s imaginative ability to see “the thing itself” independent of its associations with her sensitivities to difference, especially as it might relate to

her ordeal as a woman and as a foreigner in this country. I’ve always held her as a mythical figure, remote from me, detached, looking down on an area in which I happened to live, a fantastic world where she was moving as a more or less pathetic figure. Remote, not only because of her Puerto Rican background, but also because of her bewilderment at life in a small town in New Jersey after her years in Paris where she had been an art student. Her interest in art became my interest in art . . . She seemed an heroic figure, a poetic ideal. (*IWtWaP* 16)

Elena's confusion, criticism, and curiosity about Rutherford, especially the provincialism associated with its suburban culture, and the sense of wonder she expressed in relation to these local customs, assumed an almost clinical form of appreciation and this sensitivity to difference might be said to have begun early in life, in her bicultural and bilingual struggles, and her ultimate refusal to ever acclimate fully to life in New Jersey or the nascent nationalism that characterized American culture at the turn of the century. This notion of difference provides an important means of understanding the improvisation's opacity and its opposition to more homogenous and fixed cultural-aesthetic standards. To illustrate this point, I would like to consider Improvisation XXIII, which comes toward the end of *Kora in Hell* and highlights, again, the resignation of the poet-subject's central mediating position during intense moments of perception. First, some background with regard to Elena's character, biographical associations that help to throw a necessary light on the larger theory of the imagination promoted in the "Prologue."

Elena took great pride in her upbringing, especially her Basque heritage, her early formative years in Puerto Rico, and her short, but intense, time in Paris as an art student. As a young girl, Elena experienced a wide-range of lifestyles, benefiting from affluence and exposure to culture as well as the threat of poverty and loss. Her father died when she was eight and her mother passed away when she was only sixteen, leaving Elena's brother, Carlos, who was ten years older, with the responsibility of her care. In November 1882, Elena married William George Williams, her brother's acquaintance, and as Paul Mariani describes it, suddenly

found herself living in a suburban sprawl called Rutherford. It was all so strange to her, even the language, that she kept pretty much to herself or else had her friends come up

from the islands to stay with her for extended visits. She had been loosely raised a Catholic in the Caribbean tradition, but she soon saw that there was little sympathy for that sort of thing in a predominately Protestant community . . . In the privacy of her own home she practiced her island spiritualism and séances, though she later embraced Unitarianism with her husband. Spanish was the language she used at home, and of course she practiced her beloved French whenever she could find someone who could speak that “civilized” tongue. But for practical reasons it became necessary, living in New Jersey, to learn some English. (Mariani 17)

Throughout her life, Elena’s strange hybrid of Spanish, French, and English served as a reminder of her status as an outsider. For Williams, Elena’s character, as embodied in her speech, resists assimilation, a peculiar singularity that echoes the impenetrability of the improvisations themselves, where pure sound functions on a syntactical—rather than transparent—level.

Improvisation XXIII begins, “Baaaa! Ba-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Bebe esa purga. It is the goats of Santo Domingo talking. Bebe esa purga! Bebeesa-purga.” This phonetic utterance—where the goats of Santo Domingo express a largely incomprehensible discourse—self-reflexively encourages the reader to “drink this purge,” freeing the improvisations from poetic and literary precedent. Refusing the transparency of words in favor of language’s concrete materiality, the goat’s “speech” functions as a kind of non-language in opposition to an informational model in which the spoken or written word acts as a vehicle to convey meaning. Thus, the “Baaaa!” and its staccato echo suggest that the sound (and on the page, the typography) of language is now, somehow, “poetic,” refusing to signify anything beyond itself. Within Williams’s larger troping of the found, the concrete and phonetic discovery of these words urges the reader to resist the impulse to decode or interpret an image or text. Like Kurt Schwitters’ *Ursonate*, the material and phonemic presence of the word assumes precedent over what might be transparently represented, a shift that opens Williams’s poetry to the possibility that the poem

(and the word) might be governed, not by a willed or expressive form of volition, but by what Blanchot describes as a “relation of inaccessibility,” an opacity that, in fact, “sets up, and nonetheless [necessitates] the inaccessible presence of the other” on the page.⁷⁴ Following Blanchot, sound purifies the page of representational expectations, referencing nothing beyond itself, allowing the reader to consider the “word” independent of the expectations one associates with signification.

Elena’s attraction to random details and elements in culture is also associated in this improvisation with language’s sheer otherness, its inability to maintain a one-to-one relation with the material world. As the goats’ speech indicates, this point of contrast involves both Elena’s character and the improvisational mode itself, both of which relinquish agency and push logic and reason to an extreme, causing a crisis of perspective that is also an opening of sorts. Where *Fountain* reinforces the distance the ready-made assumes in relation to the solemnity of the traditional art object (an irony critics like Jeffrey Weiss claim, in many ways, defines the avant-garde as a promotional machine bent on manufacturing “subversion” and “novelty” against the art institution upon which it relies), Williams’s improvisations offer what the poet-son associates with his mother as a more unstable and heterogeneous kind of threat.

Unlike any other figure in Williams’s poetry or prose, Elena is able to transgress those barriers that separate art from life. Where the ready-made method operates according to a stable oppositional logic in which the artist functions as the “Générateur-Arbitre” (a “planner” or referee, one who broadens the category of the artist to include consultant, designer, and

⁷⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The infinite conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 74.

impresario), Williams's mother is unpredictable, moving according to a capricious desire that responds entirely to the particulars of her environment. Elena's curiosity cannot be contained or directed, even with regard to the most trivial details, a characteristic that allows her to make contact with those incidental and ephemeral elements from everyday life others assume to be bereft of aesthetic value. During her time in Rome, to cite the most well-known instant in the "Prologue," Elena becomes so engrossed by incidental details that she loses all frame of reference, despite having taken up residence in a

Place [that] had been chosen by my brother as one notably easy access, being in a quarter free from confusion of traffic, on a street close to the park, and furthermore the tram to the American Academy passed at the corner. Yet never did my mother go out but she was in fear of being lost. By turning to the left when she should have turned right, actually she did once manage to go so far astray that it was nearly an hour before she extricated herself from the strangeness of every new vista and found a landmark. (*I* 6)

Elena's ability to get lost illustrates one of the most redemptive aspects of her character and functions like the improvisational mode itself. Though Williams's brother attempts to place her in a secure residence, with easy access to the tram and other conveniences important for travel, Elena refuses to be directed. Temporarily fixing on each passing object or thought, Elena enacts the improvisation's primary structural principles: discovering something novel or valuable by deviating from convention. Where Duchamp, to borrow Arthur Danto's famous terminology, transfigures the everyday through the short-circuiting of convention, Elena's perspective encourages a new epistemology of art open to a variety of contingent possibilities, interpretations, and meanings.

Elena's de-centered perspective pivots on more threatening implications that remain, even for her son, somewhat of a mystery, "some dark turn at the end [and] she raises her story

out of the commonplace” (I 7). Thus, Elena’s fluid and adaptive interactions with her environment implies the consequences that follow the failure (or death) of essentialist standards, whereby each observation carries a radically new value without reference or precedent. As a result of the radical otherness of each experience, Elena finds herself “given over to frequent periods of great depression being as I believe by nature the most light-hearted thing in the world. But there comes a grotesque turn to her talk, a macabre anecdote . . . a passionate statement about death which elevates her mood without marring it” (I 7). Because of these visual/verbal threats—the ability to see the thing itself that inspires “a grotesque turn to her talk”—Elena exists as “a despoiled, molted castaway but by this power she still breaks life between her fingers” (I 8). Here Williams supplies a central metaphor for his new aesthetic sensibility. Rather than invoking low culture to topple aesthetic hierarchies, Elena constantly recalibrates her identity in relation to her environment. This always shifting focus alienates Elena, threatening her subjectivity, a confusion most dramatically realized in her status as an outsider whose sensitivity and ethnicity prevent her from acclimating entirely to a more homogenized perspective. Because of this sense of otherness Elena is also able to rediscover the novel within the familiar. Consequently, both the observer and the observed *molt* (from Old English *-mtian* [in *bemtian*, *to exchange for*], from Latin *mutare*, *to change*) from one form or condition to another, a passive and open perspective that undermines Elena’s own lofty, nineteenth-century view of art as the noble and ethereal expression of all that is good. In the “Prologue,” Elena deviates from this antiquated model of art and Williams positions her receptivity to change as central to the creative/destructive principle that underscores the Dadaist leveling of difference between aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects, as well as the paradox of composing new art forms

from preexisting material. Yes, Williams sees her as embodying the spirit of the improvisations, but the consequences for Elena are profound, whereby every object encountered appears capable of an affective potential.

Williams aligns this precarious sensitivity with the artist, and to that end, Elena appears both a creator and a destroyer, one able to recuperate the new in the already familiar while also destroying precedent. Like the improvisational mode, which offers isolated and aphoristic lines buried within its fractured syntax, elliptical gaps, and random shifts in perspective, Elena's engagement with the world sometimes renders her passive and entirely dependent on forces outside her volition. If Dada (and later Surrealism) aimed to shatter the illusions of art as a mirror-to-nature (or as a stable reflection of rationality) and to qualify the control of the artist-subject, Williams's mother sidesteps this dialectic altogether, taking her place within a perceptual field that shapes and informs her.

This unorthodox instability is especially evidenced in the relationships Elena forms with an assorted cast of characters. Williams writes, "There has always been a disreputable man of picturesque personality associated with this lady" (*I* 6), including a "former sailor in Admiral Dewey's fleet" and "Tom O'Rourke who has come to her to do odd jobs and to be cared for more or less when drunk or ill." These figures are attracted to Elena, and she, in turn, finds great pleasure in their foibles: "William would fall from the grape arbor much to my mother's amusement and delight and to his blustering discomfiture . . . nearly unconscious from bad whiskey" (*I* 6). Elena accepts these characters without precondition and with little concern for their reputations, a receptivity that resists prejudice. Elena finds joy and pleasure in these associations, relationships that push beyond social propriety. This receptivity runs counter to

Duchamp's more abstract engagement with the world, an attitude that has variously been described as a highly conceptual "beauty of indifference," an "irony of indifference," and a "liberty of indifference" (see Paz 48, Schwarz 39 and Jannis 36). As this language suggests, Duchamp's conceptual play maintains a stable and calculated distance from the immediacy of his encounters.

Elena's perspective requires that she remain constantly off-balance, however, a receptivity that resists systematization. This instability is most explicitly evidenced in the way in which Elena's vision appears constantly refreshed, opening on to a perceptual field so abundant that she finds herself "incapable of learning from benefit or disaster. If a man cheat her she will remember that man with a violence I have seldom seen equaled, but so far as that could have an influence on her judgment . . . she might be living in Eden" (*I* 7). Elena's judgment operates without foundation and open to difference that has very real and immediate consequences in terms of her safety and well-being. She is described as a "ravished Eden," a violated ideal that makes her susceptible to "disreputable" men "of picturesque personality," but which also allows her to find value in relationships others characterize as "the most rollicking spirit of comradeship."

This camaraderie can be tested against the Society of Independents' clearly demarcated targets—namely academicism, the culture of the salon, and the rise of the art institution—through a consideration of Improvisation XXI, a portion of *Kora in Hell* that focuses ostensibly, at least, on a domestic object similar to Duchamp's urinal, in this case a bathtub. This improvisation implicitly considers the poem's relation to those "water vessels of many and curious sorts" that "all houses today include." (*I* 71) For Williams, all a poem can do in relation

to these everyday objects is approach what he describes as the “Herculean task” of understanding the singularity and otherness of these forms, rather than using them merely as props through which to engage in an institutional debate about art. This task, which again emphasizes the facticity of an object as it exists outside of the poem, underlines the opacity of the improvisational mode itself. For instance, Improvisation XXI’s initial declaration, “There’s the bathtub,” is followed by ten fast moving sentences that fail to cohere or provide any clear indication of the bathtub’s value. Williams writes,

Look at it, caustically rejecting its smug proposal. Ponder removedly the Herculean task of a bath. There’s much camaraderie in filth but it’s no’ that. And change is lightsome but it’s not that either. Fresh linen with a dab here, there of the wet paw serves me better. Take a stripling stroking chin-fuzz, match his heart against that of grandpa watching his silver wane. When these two are compatible I’ll plunge in. But where’s the edge lifted between sunlight and moonlight. Where does lamplight cease to nick it? Here’s hot water. (*I* 70-71)

In keeping with Dadaist interest in the banal and overlooked, the bathtub can be seen as an explicit meditation on *Fountain*. But, Williams modifies the ontological questions about what defines an art object and the improvisation instead chooses to reflect on whether the material world can ever be understood fully in relation to one’s own subjectivity. The emphasis remains on the thing itself, the bathtub, aims to debunk what its commentary describes as the “popular superstition that a house is somehow the *possession* of the man who lives in it . . . a house has no relation to anything but itself” (emphasis mine, *I* 72). Williams flatly rejects the claim that a material form—whether a house, urinal, or bathtub—might be related to anything beyond itself or beyond its own singularity in the world. Thus, the “Herculean task” Williams references questions how one can begin to engage the specificity of the bathtub/urinal in any context

beyond its own material essence. Even the bathtub is described as “caustically rejecting its own smug proposal” for cleanliness.

In this sense, the improvisation refuses simple explication as to the larger meaning or relevance of the bathtub, say, to *come clean* on its significance. In the one instance where this improvisation approaches a firm position—“When these two [youth and age] are compatible I’ll plunge in”—the “oppositions” remain utterly irreconcilable. This failure to supply any synthesis—the very structural logic upon which Duchamp’s innovation operates—evidences the appeal an open form, like the improvisation, has for Williams. Refusing to provide any structural or thematic clues as to the meaning behind these passing thoughts on the bathtub, the improvisation requires readers take a leap of faith that provides little explanation as to the significance of the materials and observations referenced. When offering one position, “There’s much camaraderie in filth,” Williams quickly counters, no, “it’s no’ that.” Unlike the ready-made, no either/or proposition proves helpful in evaluating the greater “significance in a burst of water striking up from the base of a fountain” (I 71).

Williams would later frame this resignation to the facticity and sheer otherness of the world as fundamental to a mode of artistic discovery that, in a series of works from the 1920s, he relates to Poe. In an essay on Marianne Moore, in *In the American Grain* and in *Spring and All*, Williams suggests how even though Poe’s subject matter is too mystical and arcane to engage the everyday in a manner adequate for his own budding interest in avant-garde art, his simple, declarative sentences supply an important example for future writing. *In the American Grain*, in particular, explores the qualities and features necessary for establishing an American literature, independent of European standards. Williams writes, “On him [Poe] is FOUNDED A

LITERATURE—typical; an anger to sweep out the unoriginal, that became ill-tempered, a monomaniacal driving to destroy, to annihilate the copied, the slavish, the FALSE literature about him” (*ItAG* 223). Rather than building an unrelated copy of a copy, say in the tradition of Longfellow, who was the “apotheosis of all that had preceded him in America,” Poe expressed the “desire to have ‘culture’ for America by ‘finding’ it, full blown somewhere” (*ItAG* 224). Conceiving of culture as already formed prior to art, rather than as a slavish copy of a copy, Williams suggests a creative work can be *found* in the New World.

Williams’s Improvisation XXI disregards the either/or binary that structures institutional debates, failing to provide any clear heuristic guideposts for the reader. Like Poe’s work, the improvisation implies “there need be no stilled and archaic heaven, no ducking under religiosities to have poetry and to have it stand in its place beyond ‘nature.’ Poems have a separate existence uncompelled by nature or the supernatural” (*SE* 125). Following Poe, searching for a greater significance in the water striking the “base of a fountain” proves fruitless. Instead, the reader follows lines that more often than not ultimately lead nowhere. The meaning of a text lies in neither the mind of the writer (i.e. the Symbolist-poet as genius) nor that of the reader (i.e. Reader-response or Reception theory). Williams’s reading of Moore’s work, especially in relation to Poe’s example, is a fitting final commentary on art’s relation to the world, a text that invokes myth but only to qualify it, or references the avant-garde but only to remind the reader America has yet to develop a subversive art form all its own. Williams praises Moore’s work for its refusal to look beyond or modify what is immediately and empirically available to her: “To Miss Moore an apple remains an apple whether it be in Eden or the fruit bowl where it curls” (*SE* 125).

In Williams's estimation, Marianne Moore approaches both the language and the content of her poetry in such a way as to free it from past associations, "a break through all preconceptions of poetic form and mood and pace, a flaw, a crack in the bowl. It is this that one means when he says that destruction and creation are simultaneous" (I 308-309). Against Eliot, who was beginning his critical ascent as *Kora in Hell* neared completion, Williams looked to "ground" American poetry in a self-reflexive call for language to make contact with the real, albeit through a crack or gap in poetic form. In response to Eliotic certitude, Williams returned verse to more idiomatic forms of expression, to the immediacy of the line, syllable, and breath. John Lowney argues, "[r]ather than the ascent from the local to the transcendent category of the aesthetic, Williams stresses the descent from the realm of the aesthetic to the reformulation of the local conditions that give rise to such imaginative work." Contrasting this notion of descent, its meta-commentary on how an imaginative work is created in the first place, to both an Eliotic model and more subversive European avant-garde attitudes, Lowney suggests that "[w]hat distinguishes his [Williams's] project from both Duchamp's anti-aesthetics and Eliot's high modernism is his insistence on a 'localist' avant-gardism, which correlates indigenous diction and forms with the rejection of European aesthetic models" (18). In the "Prologue," Williams advocates on behalf of an indigenous American poetry and projects his mounting antipathy toward Eliot on to Edgar Jepson, whose article Pound recommended (and many speculate, ghost-wrote) for the September 1918 edition of *The Little Review*.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Pound's defense of the article in the very same issue of *The Little Review* strikes a characteristically contrarian pose: "only a barbarous or religious nation will try to suppress expression of views different from those of its ruling or paying majorities. The minimum of possible liberty contracted for in our Declaration of Independence must include a right to hold mental divergences from one's neighbor, and while such liberty is denied by every religious organization we can still point out (perhaps uselessly) that the Church and State in America have as yet no formal

As a polemic, Jepson's "The Western School" supplies a foil to the erratic and roving perspective Elena embodies in the "Prologue" and to Williams's decision to remain in the United States while so many of his peers moved abroad. In fact, Williams conceives of the "Prologue" as his attempt to "set down my 'Vortex' after the fashion of London, 1913, stating how little it means to me whether I live here, there, or elsewhere so long as I can keep my mind free from the trammels of literature" (I 16). Jepson's concerns for modern poetry are primarily formal, however, supplying an early premonition of the cultural elitism with which Eliot and Pound are sometimes associated and which Williams links to "Britons [who] make the best policemen the world ever witnessed" (I 21). In his essay, Jepson assumes the role of both judge and jury: "Art is in the handling . . . in the expression and presentation" and not in its subject matter (6). Criticizing recent experiments in American verse, especially those by Regionalist poets who incorporate speech patterns and idiomatic expressions considered beneath poetic discourse, Jepson singles out Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and Robert Frost as suffering from a "lack of sense of the beauty in words" in their preoccupation with "the language of the United States"; echoing Pound, Jepson describes American speech as a "monotonous drone, generally nasal . . . [a] monotonous nasal whine" (8) and cites Lindsay's ambition "to become the mouthpiece of the United States blacks" as misguided, while Frost's incorporation of common conversation into his poetry provides a "maundering dribble" that ultimately "has shirked the labour of hammering out his idea into its right form" (6-7).⁷⁶

legal connection, however, much religious taboos may have impinged upon special legislation. There is perhaps no intolerance like that of a 'great public,' but one should do one's best to prevent mass tyranny from clutching and penetrating the subjective processes of the individual."

⁷⁶ In the "Prologue," Williams's first specific reference to modern American poetry provides a retort to Jepson. Williams cites the work of Carl Sandburg, who "sings a Negro cotton picker's song of the boll weevil. Verse after

Jepson cites Eliot's "La Figlia Che Piange" as a singularly American poem that provides an example of what many recent American prizewinners lack. In his praise for Eliot's poem, which "is new in form as all genuine poetry is new in form" (9), Jepson rhetorically asks where the Regionalist example might lead American poetry: "what is this call to the poet to follow the people and obey the people's needs? What has the fat-headed ruck of the United States or any other country to do with poetry?" (8). Regionalist verse mistakes the idiosyncrasies of place with what Jepson describes as the transcendent beauty that is poetry's real focus. Jepson writes, "To the human spirit steel rails, moving pictures, world's fairs, and journalism are irrelevant. They are mere trade's appurtenances; and with trade it [poetry] has nothing to do" (8).

Jepson's criticism must have wrangled Williams, who had only recently read his own tribute to the rail system at the Independents Exhibition and who believed that modern technological and industrial advancements held important aesthetic value for an emerging American avant-garde. More expressly, holding up Eliot for praise signaled what Williams dramatically describes as the "great catastrophe" that would befall American poetry, its retreat back into the library, the triumph of a Puritan, Anglo-American standard at odds with the avant-garde populism he hoped to promote. For Jepson, the populist trend offers only a distraction, "fakements [*sic*] . . . not securely rooted in their native soil" that operate "[w]holly of the surface" and "are rooted in nothing" (8). By contrast, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "La Figlia Che Piange" supply a rarified ideal, "the very fine flower of the finest spirit of the United States," expressing the existential depths of the "shrinking of the modern spirit of life . . . with . . . exquisiteness, fullness, and truth." Italian love poets of Provence may have disappeared

verse tells what they would do to the insect. They propose to place it in the sand, in hot ashes, in the river, and other unlikely places but the boll weevil's refrain is always: 'That'll be ma HOME! That'll be ma HOOME!'" (17).

from the modern landscape, but in the case of “La Figlia Che Piange,” Jepson argues, Eliot’s rendering of two grieving lovers provides a modern variation on this timeless theme.

Though Williams admits Eliot’s verse is worthy of praise, rendering masterful portraits of men “just below the summit,” he criticizes his over-reliance on a “type [that] is universal,” a convention that impresses primarily because “IT CONFORMS”; more specifically, Eliot’s reliance on symbol and myth function as “a highly refined distillation” of cultural, historical, and poetic traditions. Moreover, Eliot’s straining after rhyme clouds a poem’s overall impression, concealing what Williams hints to be “a sinister token” that threatens to wipe out those voices that fail to assimilate to literary convention. Williams concludes, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” offers “a wailing testament of that soul with its cruel clarity of sophisticated vision,” but it depends too much on a “thin, sophisticated appreciation of a beauty . . . it cannot dare to make its own” (*I* 24).

Williams’s improvisations, on the other hand, refuse to defer to any “fullness” or “truth” beyond the page, especially those remote historical or artistic monuments so predominately displayed in Eliot’s highly cultivated field of “conscious simplicity” (*I* 24-25). Williams characterizes the improvisations as incidental writing, “my day-to-day notations, off the cuff, thoughts put down like a diary in a year of my life” (*IWtWaP* 27). In a letter to Kenneth Burke written in 1921 that expounds upon his emerging theory of contact, Williams argues one’s everyday “environment gets into the writing every time” and “criticism must [similarly] originate in the environment that it is intended for” (*SL* 48). The “Prologue” argues that one’s relation to place trumps the idiosyncrasies (what Jepson might term the “fakements”) one associates with a “native soil.” Again, Elena’s relationship to her environment stands as a model capable of

closing the gap between art and non-art, the reputable and disreputable, a static “American” sensibility and a more heterogeneous and fluid sense of self. Complicating the Romantic (and in Eliot’s case, Symbolist) dilemma that positions art against the everyday, Elena approaches difference without negating it or placing it into another, larger conceptual system. Though this might prove impossible as a value system or means of building an ethics, as an avant-garde perceptual mode, it leaves no corner of culture unappreciated. If Eliot embodies what Jepson describes as the “summit of United States achievement,” then Elena goes subterranean, a descent that allows random observations, encounters, and miscellaneous objects to exist on their own. In contrast to those like Jepson, who lean on absolute aesthetic formulations, Elena appears open to the incidental and ephemeral. This openness to corruption is rooted in what Pound praises as the “Spanish blood” that clouds Williams’s poetry and ethnic make-up, helping to “muddy up your mind, and [which] prevent[s] the current American ideation from going through it like a blighted colander” (*I* 11). Williams’s characterizes Eliot’s over-reliance on tradition as watering down his verse, a highly cultivated aesthetic that includes “just the right amount of everything drained through” it. Williams describes Eliot’s verse as an anemic and parasitic form, a pretentious “nibbler at sophistication” (*I* 25). In place of the Frazer/Eliot-line of anthropological modernism which has its roots in myth, religion, and ritual, Williams’s improvisations imply an anti-monumentalism, a more ephemeral notion of beauty that can be found “escaping, spinning up over the heads, blown out at overtaxed vents by the electric fans” (*I* 76). In many ways, this ephemeral quality parallels one of the primary themes of the improvisations involving language’s elusive referential power.

Language's failure—the word's inability to make contact with the world—is announced in the first improvisation, which begins with a qualification on both the power of the word and on beginnings. This announcement returns us to Dadaism's attack on romantic conceptions of the artist's genius. Counter to conventional notions of the artist's presence within a work, this opening improvisation invokes the Dadaist and proto-Surrealist contention that foolishness might provide a useful challenge to the monumentality of art. To that end, the early avant-garde set out to complicate how a word, image, or object is received, invoking chaos, chance, and play in complicating stable interpretation. But, as I make clear below, Williams qualifies this avant-garde oppositionality by recognizing art's limitations, especially the limits of language. Robert Smithson would explain his creation of a non-site, in distinction to his earthworks, as predicated on an admission that "all legitimate art deals with limits. Fraudulent art feels that it has no limits. The trick is to locate those elusive limits. You are always running against those limits, but somehow they never show themselves."⁷⁷ The problems one encounters in trying to understand the improvisations lie in how they constantly push against these limits, especially in the abandonment of symbolism and figuration that literature typically provides.

* * * *

Kora in Hell begins with a short, somewhat puzzling declaration that self-reflexively challenges basic assumptions about representation and the agency of the artist-subject. Like the majority of the improvisations, this declaration is indirect, questioning conventional notions of

⁷⁷ Quoted in "Robert Smithson, Fragments of an interview with P.A. Norrvell, April, 1969," in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 90.

beginnings in art (and in life), especially those associated with creative or biological reproduction. *Kora in Hell*'s first sentence begins thus:

Fools Have big wombs.

This inaugural statement qualifies certain biological and creative givens, especially the “logic” that supports both reproduction and representation. Williams suggests that those who believe biological, and by extension, literary reproduction, is capable of providing a fully developed rendering of the world are fooling themselves. Implicit to this claim is the assumption that non-fools are those without “big” wombs, those who refuse to reproduce irresponsibly, to carry something to term, or to merely assume that a newly made creative work is warranted (or welcome) in a world already imbued with aesthetic potential.

From the perspective of Williams's biography, this condemnation of reproduction speaks to the “ward cases” the young doctor encountered as an inexperienced (and sexually immature) obstetrician working among the marginalized, poor, and immigrant cultures in New York's Hell's Kitchen.⁷⁸ Williams's understanding of the complexities of these situations is most explicitly, and ironically, expressed by “Fatty the head nurse,” who describes the unplanned pregnancies of the urban poor in language suited to advertising copy, declaring babies born “fresh every hour, one hundred percent illegitimate” (*YMW* 15). In his autobiography, Williams depicts these women as suffering from a desperation or madness he elsewhere associates with the sexually liberated attitudes of more avant-garde figures like the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, a woman who deeply troubled him, and many figures in the nascent New York avant-garde. These women (“A colored gal from the Bahamas,” “a fifteen-year old white girl,”

⁷⁸ For more on Williams's beliefs about sexuality and reproduction, especially his problematic views on issues surrounding gender and class, see his *Autobiography*, 99-101.

“a morphine addict,” etc.) carry their pregnancies to term at great cost to themselves and in an environment entirely unsympathetic. In one desperate case, a woman delivers her baby in the hospital’s bathroom, while “keeping the water running until it [the water] came out under the toilet door onto the tiles until the whole room was flooded. When we broke in, took her off the seat and cut the child’s cord, it [the baby] turned out to be as good as ever.” Though Williams and the staff attempt to do what they can for the woman, “the infant was [later] found . . . wrapped in newspaper under a bench in Prospect Park.” In recounting this event, Williams points to the dangers associated with uncontrolled reproduction, trying to create something new in a world already pregnant with potential.

Improvisation XXIII expands on the misguided notion that one might deliver something original within this cultural landscape. This improvisation returns to Williams’s interest in popular art, which he here positions in opposition to what he describes as “true value” in art. Like A.E. Kerr’s imperfect executions in the “Prologue,” Williams examines the cheap prints the poor use to decorate their homes, mass-produced prints that frequently include romantic words pertaining to love, sentimental slogans that accompany a scene. As in “The Ideal Quarrel,” Williams considers art’s link to human relations as pushing beyond these empty aphorisms, language appropriate only early on in a relationship, “when the bed is new and the young couple spend the long winter nights there in delightful seclusion.” (*I* 76) Again, one might think here of Williams’s relatively new personal responsibilities, his medical practice, and the two young sons that put burdens on his freedom. Thus, the proclamations of young love quickly loses value and relevance as a relationship matures, after childbirth, or when the novelty of young love subsides and falls into more domesticated routine. In this sense, the lovers’ talk functions as empty

signifiers that run counter to Williams's imagination, which only remains vital through its ability to exist in an agitated state of perpetual unrest that pushes beyond convention, arriving at a place Williams suggests is accessible only "after the most thorough destruction or harvesting of that which has come before" (*I* 22).

Williams follows the opening statement on reproduction with a rhetorical question that further complicates these more romantic conceptions of inspiration and creativity. Williams considers what, if anything, might replace the artistic/poetic urge to pro-create, especially in light of the realization that the world already carries an aesthetic potential: "For the rest?—here is a penny royal if one knows how to use it." Beyond those fools, who cling to the false hope of "delivering" something authentically new and original, the rest, presumably the wise, take an abortifacient herb the poet-doctor prescribes to eliminate chances for more mindless reproduction. In place of procreation, the improvisation encourages one to discover what already exists unnoticed all around, to "go along the wall a little further," and to make do with what one discovers there. Out of this exploratory mode one realizes that "if blackberries prove bitter there'll be mushrooms, fairy-ring mushrooms, in the grass, sweetest of all fungi" (*I* 31). Here Williams suggests if one form of sustenance is no longer palatable, alternatives are available. Mushrooms absorb nutrients from living or decaying plants, waste, animals, or other fungi, and from an ecological perspective, this vegetation depends on a form of breakdown, leveling distinctions between the living and the dead, between waste and what might be deemed essential for future growth. In the place of a cultivated garden, Williams suggests the New World already contains vegetation capable of sustaining life, and more indirectly, the poem.

According to this radical rethinking of the creative process, *Kora in Hell*'s first veritable found object comes in the form of a somewhat grotesque discovery, a body found lying in the weeds near a cemetery. This *objet trouvé* underlines another professional obligation the already overworked poet-doctor assumed when he became the medical examiner for the Rutherford Police Department.⁷⁹ Tending to the incarcerated and examining the bodies held in police custody provided another instance of Williams's unusually intimate contact with local culture, though at this stage of the poet's career he still felt the need to frame for the reader how his discovery measures against convention. Thus, the discovery is bracketed in a Duchampian frame that asks "For what it's worth," an aside that stands as a challenge to poetic convention. Regardless of this and other subjective commentaries Williams supplies in his poetry ("This is just to say," "No one / will believe this / of vast import to the nation," etc.), the description following this disclaimer provides insight into Williams's larger troping of the found, something more nuanced than the mute offering of mere fact. After *Kora in Hell*, especially in *Spring and All* and in *The Descent of Winter*, Williams would modify, and in many cases, eliminate this subjective frame altogether, but in this transitional text he still feels compelled to highlight the neglected value of this disreputable discovery for the reader.

Drawing attention to a value at odds with mainstream taste and convention, the first improvisation presents the body of a poor transient. The man's status as an outsider is announced almost immediately in his proper name, which evokes the "Carlos" at the center of Williams's nom de plum. The improvisation describes

Jacob Louslinger, white haired, stinking, dirty bearded, cross eyed, stammer
tongued, broken voiced, bent backed, ball kneed, cave bellied, mucous faced—

⁷⁹ See Frail, 73.

deathling—found lying in the weeds “up there by the cemetery.” “Looks to me as if he’d been bumming around the meadows for a couple of weeks.” Shoes twisted into incredible lilies: out at the toes, heels, tops, sides, soles. Meadow flower! ha, Mallow! at last I have you. (Rot dead marigolds—an acre at a time! Gold, are you?) (*I* 31)

Though there is no clear identification of who the speakers might be within this improvisation, the long dependent clause and list of adjectives that make up most of its content is delivered in what we assume to be a local dialect Williams encountered while making his medical rounds. When stripped of these modifiers, the sentence-fragment reads like the kind of reports Williams might have encountered in the police department: “Jacob Louslinger . . . found lying in the weeds.” The adjectives that fill this fragment, however, emphasize the townspeople’s view of the man and the obdurate otherness associated with his body, details that determine his social identity. He is “white haired, stinking, dirty bearded, cross eyed, stammer tongued, broken voiced, bent backed, ball kneed, cave bellied, mucous faced,” a cavalcade of adjectives that, in its almost absurd excess, stretches beyond the terms spelled out here. In reading the line-and-a-half long description following the proper noun, it becomes clear that these adjectives code Louslinger’s identity, indicating the sense of disgust and repulsion he inspires within the community.

But, the vagrant’s presence within the improvisation also exemplifies a tendency in post-romantic literature to utilize images pregnant with an unnamed potential or significance that refuses to be contained, like Jacob’s body itself. One might think here of Kafka’s mysterious authority figures in *The Castle*, T.S. Eliot’s “hollow men,” the angels of H.D.’s *Trilogy* as other instances of imagery that escape simple reduction. Though the discovery of Jacob Louslinger is in no way comparable to the defamiliarizing of the commonplace we now associate with the

Surrealist found object or Duchamp's ready-made, the mute offering of this body remains faithful to these techniques in two primary ways: the disreputable is re-considered as somehow aesthetic, and authorship is displaced on to multiple, anonymous voices, a heteroglossia that helps to establish a tension between Williams's view of Louslinger and a more hegemonic authority. This tension is particularly evident in the one instance where Louslinger appears to speak in the improvisation, lines that celebrate the drifter's refusal to conform. This portion of the improvisation also resonates with an irony in light of Jacob's description, answering the "For what it's worth" that opens the sequence. In contrast to his objectification by the townspeople, Jacob is unapologetic with regard to his existence, claiming he prefers homelessness to a "closet full of clothes and good shoes and my-thirty-year's-master's-daughter's two cows for me to care for and a winter room with a fire in it." In fact, Jacob contends, "I would rather feed pigs in Moonachie and chew calamus root and break crab's claws at an open fire" (*I* 31) than be tied to a domestic space (a rootedness amplified here in this string of possessives). As Williams's larger troping of the found suggests, where art/poetry need only reach out to touch aesthetic forms already extant in the world, Jacob has the last word on his own post-mortem. His "bumming" is answered with this powerful rejoinder, celebrating freedom, breaking "crab's claws at an open fire"; though he can imagine the comforts of "a closet full of clothes and good shoes," he revels in more simple, earth-bound pleasures.

In this sense, the body of Williams's first avant-garde experiment emerges from the decay of Jacob's own body. Rather than the ready-made's concentration on a milk rack or inverted urinal, Williams's hobo-flower, with his "shoes twisted into incredible lilies," expands rhizomatically, helping "Rot dead marigolds an acre at a time." This transgression of the pastoral

mode exists in a simultaneous state of decay and regeneration. Lilies grow from his shoes, coming “out at the toes, heels, tops, sides, soles. Meadow flower! ha, mallow! at last I have you” (I 31), providing the most faithful enactment of the improvisation’s prescription that “*A poem can be made of anything. This is a portrait of a disreputable farm hand made out of the stuff of his environment*” (I 70). Jacob Louslinger is, quite literally, “made out of the stuff of his environment,” an instancing of life-from-death that renders him (and the improvisations) something *other* than the prescribed limits of his socially-determined identity.

To illustrate this shift in perspective, where a non-aesthetic form becomes aesthetic, Jacob’s shoes function as a synecdoche for *Kora in Hell*’s larger troping of the found. Like the red wheelbarrow, these shoes provide the transient with a form of equipment that transports him from place to place and helps to prevent injury. Considering the utilitarian and practical value of his shoes speaks to Jacob’s lifestyle, providing him with mobility, and in the townspeople’s view, marking his social alienation. But within the context of *Kora in Hell*, Jacob’s shoes vibrate with a generative life that exceeds simple figurative reduction. Rather than offering a monolithic symbol of the Romantic wanderer, Jacob Louslinger’s shoes exist somewhere between the human and the natural, between life and death, between his identity as an alienated drifter and a very real (and rooted) earthiness. In refusing to be contained or categorized, Louslinger’s shoes complicate Imagism’s direct treatment of the thing, slipping outside its physical limits and refusing to be contained in a larger system of meaning.

This resistance to interpretation supplies a useful means of reading *Kora in Hell*’s larger innovation. Like the mushrooms mentioned earlier in the improvisation, Jacob’s shoes, quite literally, spring with life, recalling how in the imagination creation and destruction function as

two elements emitted from a single source. Where postmodern pastiche, in Frederic Jameson's evaluation, "cannibalize(s) the museum and wear(s) the masks of extinct mannerisms (*Signatures* 83), Williams's focus on Jacob's shoes and voice—as well as the voices of the townspeople—roots the referent to the real, a notion of the found that expands within the fertile soil of the improvisations, pushing the prose poem as far as it might go in relation to the reality principle Duchamp and the Society of Independents helped initiate. This improvisation also suggests the representational object contains an energy that slips outside containment, a vital force that cannot be fully understood or explained. Williams's next major volume of poetry, *Spring and All*, includes similar examples of poetry that resist paraphrase or reduction. The prose sequence that opens this book rethinks some of the basic claims language makes as a representational form, issues that we will turn to consider next.

Chapter III: *A Perfect Plagiarism: Spring and All*, Illusionism, and the Undeceived Imagination

A world detached from the necessity of recording it, sufficient to itself, removed from him (as it most certainly is) with which he has bitter and delicious relations and from which he is independent—moving at will from one thing to another—as he pleases, unbound—complete (I 121)

Spring and All (1923) stands as Williams's most complex and coherent early avant-garde experiment, a far-ranging amalgamation of poetry and prose that aims to close off the distance separating the aesthetic from the everyday. The book opens with an attack on conventional representation as the primary barrier between the represented and the real. Williams aspires to move American poetry in the direction of a pre-transfigured world of *things* that exists just outside of traditional representation, following a path that many within early modernism traveled when writers like Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein sought to push language—to very different ends—as far as it might go in the direction of a substantive “reality” outside of a text, waiting to be discovered and recorded therein.⁸⁰ *Spring and All* proffers Cubism as modern art's point of departure in this pursuit, where the structure of pictorial space takes precedent over the mere recording of “objective” fact. The book's poems, however, often seek to identify an aesthetic potential already inherent to the material world prior to Cubism's rendering of multiple and simultaneous perspectives in the pictorial plane. The attack Williams wages on conventional realism, those stable representational forms purporting to be a “mirror to nature” or a “beautiful illusion,” informs *Spring and All*'s notion that the poem might make contact with a potential discovered in the already extant, a “separate existence” more substantive than a mere “matter of ‘representation’” (I 117).

⁸⁰ For an analysis of Williams's work in relation to the writings of Stein and Hemingway, see Christopher J. Knight's *The Patient Particulars* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1995).

This chapter examines how Williams's materialist conception of both the *world* and the *word* informs the call for contact he viewed as primary to the re-purposing of American poetry in the early 1920s. Williams considers America's lack of a homegrown avant-garde as directly related to its Puritanism, a narrow-mindedness that prohibits appreciation of modern art. *Spring and All*'s solution to these prohibitions, ironically, involves a resignation, to the point of inebriation, to an otherness the poet associates with the familiar and domestic, extending the notion of self-surrender Williams first introduced in *Kora in Hell*. Where *Spring and All*'s prose passages function as extended meditations on the limits of authorship and conventional representation, the poems employ a short stanzaic form that evinces a restorative notion of contact with the everyday, a potential that would later be expanded in the objectivist poetics that Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and George Oppen developed in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Though hardly a cohesive movement, these "Objectivist" poets share an interest in the expressive limits of language, a belief that type on the page contains an immanent presence analogous to objects discovered in the material world. This preoccupation with language's mediating role would remain a central theme throughout Williams's mature work, and the prose passages in *Spring and All* evidence his first and most concentrated re-examination of the fundamental questions inherent to any verbal-based medium, the sometimes self-defeating representational ambitions that underscore (and undermine) language's relation to the objective world.⁸¹ Thus, situating his poetry in the sometimes confused context and self-reflexive doubt of

⁸¹ The first part of this chapter is dedicated to *Spring and All*'s attempt to move beyond conventional mimesis. My reading of Williams's struggle to find a representational form that might supplant Duchamp and the early avant-garde is informed by postmodern and post-structuralist responses to classical mimesis, philosophies Martin Jay characterizes as "animadversions against naïve referentiality." Thus, *Spring and All*'s criticism of realism attempts (though never adequately realizes) to render a "world detached from the necessity of recording it" (I 121), a

the prose passages transforms the passive reader into an active participant in the situations of discovery that occur within many of the poems. In this sense, Williams's troping of the found places subject and object in a dynamic interchange through which the world and the word appear both unpredictable and foreign. This creates an unstable dynamism that distinguishes Williams's troping of the found from the more static conceptualism of the ready-made. The ready-made famously pushes artistic practice outside the confines of the studio, but as a methodology it never entirely relinquishes the artist's guiding hand in its engagement with the world. Williams's poetry, on the other hand, suggests a kind of drift, a stumbling across objects and language out in the world. In this sense, I argue that though Duchamp opened art to the aesthetic potential in the everyday, encouraging a post-studio practice that challenges conventional art making, Williams's theory of the imagination suggests an aesthetic governed by chance that supplies a more radical qualification of conventional notions of authorship.

Written simultaneously with *Spring and All*, *The Great American Novel* provides important insight on the poet's evolving view of language and representation in light of the ready-made's challenge. Specifically, Williams depicts a cultural and environmental landscape already aesthetically full prior to its reflection in art. Like *Spring and All*, *The Great American*

deference to the "real" analogous to a position often held among post-structuralist thinkers who view language as inseparable from, but never united, with the material world. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes describes mimesis as inspiring in him a vertiginous feeling of nausea in the wake of its endless reproduction of already existing signs. For Barthes, any imitation of the external world, any depiction based on stable reference and repetition, rather than the free play of signs, is inherently flawed. Deleuze and Guattari view mimesis as a "radically false" representational proposition symptomatic of the paranoid order and spatial stasis associated with the culture of copy. Consequently, they place mimesis in opposition to the liberated and nomadic cartographies of the "map." In relation to the meta-narratives he associates with modernism, Lyotard associates mimesis with the "masters' law" and cites Diogenes' "cynical body" as an important instancing of defiance and disorder. Finally, Paul de Man condemns mimesis as just one representational trope among many. He considers mimesis problematic because it suggests a naturalness in relation to stable reflection, an ideology that confuses a "linguistic [reality] with [a] natural reality, of reference with phenomenality" (all quotes taken from Martin Jay's "Mimesis and Mimetology: Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe," 31 and 29).

Novel offers a new epistemology of art that transposes images and language encountered in everyday life directly into the novel form, including ad copy from both Standard Motor Gasoline and a furniture catalog, the headline from a review of a production at the San Carlo Opera Company, a letter from A.N. Turner, as well as the newspaper articles and stock reports Williams read each day. This kind of textual appropriation was also central to Joyce's technique in the "Aeolus" section of *Ulysses*. A decade later, John Dos Passos would weave ambient cultural elements in his *U.S.A.* trilogy. This reliance on the found would become one of the primary features of Williams's later work, most especially in *Paterson*. What distinguishes Williams's utilization of these found elements from other modernists, however, is how his work suggests the modern writer's primary responsibility is to assume a more passive relationship to the world, a less uni-directional conception of artist as an active creator of aesthetic forms. In this sense, the incorporation of the found challenges the will-to-power inherent to both Cartesian rationalism and Romantic subjectivity, suggesting instead that "Everything exists from the beginning" (*I* 158), "Somehow a word must be found" (*I* 165), and that aesthetic beauty might be redefined as a "purity" that exists entirely independent of the artist, who goes in pursuit of a "discovery, a race on the ground" (*I* 171) that one follows rather than creates *ex nihilo*.⁸²

⁸² On the Cartesian notion of the artistic subjectivity, see George Steiner's *Heidegger* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1978), 36: "For Descartes, truth is determined and validated by certainty. Certainty, in turn, is located in the *ego*. The self becomes the hub of reality and relates to the world outside itself in an exploratory, necessarily exploitative way. As knower and user, the ego is predator." For more recent writings on the post-Cartesianism that has taken hold of postmodern art, see John Roberts's *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in art after the readymade* (London: Verso Books, 2007).

On the synthesizing potential of the Romantic imagination, see Gelpi 75:

The Romantic imagination, therefore, assumed a crucial unitive function in order to compensate for the accelerating declension of shared philosophical, religious, and more assumptions in the West since the Renaissance. The individual became the inspired locus for an intuitive perception of the spiritual forms and energies which invested the otherwise fragmented, phenomenal world with an exalted coherence, a significance at once immediate and ultimate. For Wordsworth and Coleridge, Blake and Shelley, Emerson

This deference to what already exists in the world problematizes Romantic notions of artistic agency, often assumed as a given, whereby poetry expresses an exacting or synthesizing clarity of concept, feeling, or scene. In opposition to conventional mechanistic illusionism, this uneasy but generative negotiation of the literal (or found) and the figurative (or created) is key to understanding language's function within *Spring and All*. In its rebuke of figurative and metaphoric conventions, *Spring and All* conceives of the imagination as "transfused with the same forces which transfuse the earth" (I 121), a vitalism that contains its own "values" (a word that appears with great frequency in *Spring and All*) and which the poem attempts to capture or "record at the moment when . . . consciousness is enlarged by the sympathies and . . . unity of understanding" (I 120). With regard to the artist-subject, nature and the imagination function as discrete agents in the world, an often conflicted symbiosis characterized by *otherness*. The word, in turn, helps to unleash an elemental desire that both transmits information and assumes an objective presence in the world.

The distinction Williams draws between imitation and mimetic copy best articulates the imagination's generative potential. Williams argues that "To copy nature is a spineless activity; it gives us a sense of our mere existence but hardly more than that. But to imitate nature involves the verb: we then ourselves become nature, and so invent an object which is an

and Whitman, therefore the imagination was elevated from the image-making talent of the Neoclassicist into the sublime human faculty through which the perceiving subject penetrated to the essential reality and transcendental interrelatedness of the objects of experience.

The Romantic synthesis was an ideal unstable from the outset, precariously conceived and sporadically achieved. Because everything depended on the metamorphic, mutually completing encounter between subject and object, the Romantic ideology made the highest claims for, and put the highest demands upon, individual vision outside the traditional religious and social institutions. When under the stress of such an extreme and ultimate test the individual failed to achieve or to sustain the visionary moment, the basis for meaning in personal and social life was shaken; consciousness felt itself severed from self and world. So Romanticism contained in its vaunting claims of synthesis the seeds of its own dissolution.

extension of the process” (SL 297) of its own creation. Thus, imitation’s challenge to mimetic copy pivots on what might be described as a verbal vitalism in which the presence of the word extends nature’s progress and growth, an “invention” Williams argues that adds to those materialist forms that already exist all around us.

In relation to his later poetics, *Spring and All*’s theory of the imagination provides an early intimation of Williams’s objectivist notion of the poem, composed or verbally recreated forms conceived as objects in their own right. In this context, the surrendering of the poet-subject is not so much an obliteration of the ego, as I have argued in relation to *Kora in Hell*; rather, the suppression of the ego functions as a dispersion within an environment that both the reader and writer might be said to experience in relation to the word. This qualification of agency is best understood in how Williams modifies Duchamp’s innovation, his troping of the found as an open-ended discovery that suggests the action of a verb rather than the substance of a noun, what might be termed a predicative potential as opposed to the nominative word. In this sense, the *objet trouvé* becomes an object *to be* found and just as the word “spring” functions as both a noun and a verb, the act of finding provides an integral part of the dynamic unpredictability of *Spring and All*’s prose and poetry. In this sense, the volume’s typographical experimentation and Dadaist sense of disorder supply a formal equivalent to its unconventional poetic content, the indeterminate randomness of the “all” referenced in the book’s title. It is the evasive presence *to be* that is at stake in Williams’s troping of the found, an absence or yearning for a center or desire for contact that always slips out from under the signifying potential of the word.

As I have previously suggested, this sensitivity to signification and the otherness of the world has precedent in the democratization (and polarized notions) of the aesthetic associated with the innovations of Whitman and Duchamp. *Spring and All* narrows the Whitmanesque imperative to open the poem to the immense magnitude and diversity of the world, while qualifying Duchamp's controlling egotism and ironic distance.⁸³ Though Williams appreciated Whitman's democratic opening of the poem to new indigenous forms associated with the American experience, he remained wary of the formal expansiveness of his lines and belief in the artist's imminent presence in the world. The ready-made supplied Williams with the most salient early avant-garde appropriation of the everyday, but here to Williams was quick to caution against where this anti-art directive would invariably lead. In his earliest documented response to the innovation, Williams criticizes what he considers the cavalier de-skilling of art that allows almost anything to be considered worthy of aesthetic praise. In relation to these precedents, Williams's desire to open the poem to landscape and material heretofore unacknowledged in poetry requires a delicate balancing act: how does one make room for an aesthetic of the everyday without minimizing the vital role of the poet, a belief in artistic responsibility that—regardless of his radical experiments with authorship in the improvisations—Williams would maintain throughout his life. Indeed, Williams disapproves of Duchamp's willful indifference, which neglects the singularity and uniqueness of the very forms upon which the imagination might be said to rely.

⁸³ Though Duchamp and Whitman appear to assume diametrically opposed attitudes regarding the relation of art and world, the poet's insistence on an inclusiveness able to collapse time and space also imply a controlling ego at the center of the creative act.

Questioning illusionism provides Williams with a means of theorizing beyond the negation associated with the ready-made, establishing a notion of the imagination that functions as an accommodation *of*, rather than an imposition *on*, the material plentitude that exists in the world. In particular, *Spring and All* characterizes the artistic imagination as existing in a constant state of flux, engaging a series of representational questions that can never be fully answered or resolved. In fact, adequately explaining representation's relation to the material world betrays the spirit of Williams's undeceived imagination, which repeatedly calls into question the role experience plays in shaping the aesthetic. How are content and form renegotiated after one comes to view aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects as equally valuable within the space of a poem? Similarly, how are the social, aesthetic, and political ideologies that inform representation redefined in light of this leveling?

"Chapter I" of *Spring and All* emphatically responds—with rhetorical questions, exclamations, and nationalist jingoism—to many of these questions, confronting the "TRADITIONALISTS OF PLAGIARISM," those conformists Williams admonishes for ignoring the difficult task at hand of seeing the world without the guiding force of cultural and aesthetic precedent (*I* 97). Against these traditionalists, this chapter announces that "The fight is on: These men who have had the governing of the mob through all the repetitious years resent the new order" that Williams advocates for in *Spring and All* (*I* 98). Williams cites Cubist and Cubist-Realist painters like Charles Demuth (to whom the book is dedicated) as embodying an alternative to this mindless reproduction, while praising Juan Gris' *Roses* (1914) for "marking more clearly than any I have ever seen what the modern trend is: the attempt . . . to separate things of the imagination from life" (*I* 107). But this notion of separation—what *Spring and All*

elsewhere associates with *between-ness* or *cleavage*—refuses to dispense with the primacy of a substantive reality in favor of an imaginative, Platonic ideal. Instead, Demuth and Gris offer ways of understanding the dynamic interplay of an artwork and the objective world that it engages. According to Williams, Gris and Demuth anchor their representational innovations around the laws of perception and the nature of empirical reality. In this sense, Cubist depictions of the commonplace provide a sense of relief from subjectivist and realist traditions, painting “[t]hings with which he [Gris] is familiar, simple things—at the same time to detach them from ordinary experience to the imagination” (I 110). Williams welcomes these new modes of representation, especially those “coming after the impressionists, the expressionists, Cézanne—and dealing severe strokes as well to the expressionists as to the impressionists group,” art that “points forward to what will prove the greatest painting yet produced,” a work in which “the illusion once dispensed with” might allow art and poetry “to replace not the forms but the reality of experience with its own.” The viewer’s experience with these representational forms provides a “revivification of values” that Williams associates with an artwork’s ability to assume a reality in and of itself, rather than maintaining its status as a mere copy of a copy (I 117).⁸⁴ How Williams defines “reality,” however, is largely left unanswered. In replacing *representation* with *experience*, Williams appears to argue that American poetry must move beyond the static ideologies and *isms* that shape so much of the rhetoric of the historical avant-garde, as well as the *logos* of “verisimilitude” that has been dominant in Western representation since antiquity.

⁸⁴ Albert Gelpi offers important insights on American artists’ commitment to the phenomena of experience, as opposed to European abstraction, aiming to graphically detail material forms in a three-dimensional space. Gelpi argues, “It is no accident, therefore, that Gris, the most representational of the Cubists, became Williams’ favorite, but he [Williams] was conceptually and technically even closer to the Cubist Realism of Demuth and the Precisionism of Sheeler” (336).

Spring and All's hostility with regard to realism underlines Williams's belief that nature always escapes out from under the control of the artist-subject. Where *Spring and All* remains primarily interested in the dynamic interplay between the world and the word, more conventional and naïve realism aims to reinforce an ideology Williams associates with "acquisitive understanding" and "religious dogmatism," a blind faith that only acts to

return [us] to the proven truths of tradition, even to the twice proven, the substantiality which is known. Demuth and a few others do their best to point out the error, telling us that design is a function of the IMAGINATION, describing its movements, its colors—but it is a hard battle. I myself seek to enter the list [Demuth and others have initiated] with these few notes jotted down in the midst of the action, under distracting circumstances—to remind myself . . . of the truth. (*I* 98)

Here Williams equates his automatic writings with Demuth's Cubist-Realist "designs," contending that the randomness of his own extemporaneous experiments crafted under the most "distracting circumstances" function, cumulatively, like a form of collage or the "admirable simplicity" (*I* 111) he associates with Cubist still life. *Kora in Hell* first introduces the random juxtaposition of scenes, where one observation is placed alongside another, an immediacy of "design" that mimics the imagination's "hard battle" importing the material world into a textual field. Cubism, automatic writing, Dadaist derision and proto-Surrealist "dislocation of sense" (*I* 117) are all techniques or tools *Spring and All* uses to suggest the imagination's dynamism. The relief Williams expresses in response to these avant-garde techniques and representational innovations directly relates to the repression and prohibition he associates with American culture.

Consequently, *Spring and All*'s most radical claims about art and poetry suggest true aesthetic innovation can only be fully realized after one becomes "intoxicated by [the]

prohibitions” that culture, one’s ego, and conventional aesthetics provide. This paradox, in which a liberating inebriation emerges in response to repression, uses the limitations and constraints of culture against itself, what might be more precisely described as an inhibition that inspires the opposite of sobriety. It is only through this Dionysian assertion of the imagination against these repressive systems that aesthetic liberation can occur. For instance, these prohibitions prevent one from seeing the aesthetic potential of an industrial or commercial landscape, an environment or scene that results from the excesses one associates with progress. Consequently, *Spring and All* encourages one to see beauty in this blight, a “Stinking River where a magnolia tree, without leaves, before what was once a farm house, now a ramshackle home for millworkers, raises its straggling branches” (I 90-91). Following Whitman, the poet’s primary goal is to create, or more precisely, to *discover* in these overlooked scenes a new aesthetic form concomitant with the diversity and degradation of industrialized America, including a variety of social and cultural histories (in poems like “Shoot it Jimmy,” “To Elsie,” and “Rapid Transit”) never before documented in verse. Yes, the bourgeois art object and traditional conceptions of artistic genius must be usurped, but *Spring and All* explores the practices that might function in its stead, looking to images, people, and scenes that offer relief from the pressures Williams associates with the legacy and dominance of European models of art and poetry, and the repressive attitudes of American culture.

* *

If American culture offers only repressive limits and provincial restraints, Williams argues American verse must aim to upset these ideologies. The spontaneity of sensuous

experience offers one form of resistance, and *Spring and All* counters America's repressive blindness through a hypersensitivity to mundane everyday objects Williams suggests are capable of supplying relief. Thus, a red wheelbarrow, a paper box hinged with cloth, a movie house, a series of random road signs, or even an incidental ray of light cast on the floor as in "At the Faucet of June," offer subtle forms of release, a deliverance capable of challenging the mythic gods of the underworld.

"At the Faucet of June" focuses on an ephemeral ray of "sunlight" as it suddenly appears within a domestic space, "a / yellow plaque upon the / varnished floor." Though the yellow plaque is described as contiguous to a mythic landscape, "Persephone's cow pasture—" (*I* 109), the poem associates the ray of light with a common household faucet, "full of a song / inflated to / fifty pounds pressure." Thus, Kora is referenced here but is largely displaced in favor of the commonplace and familiar. Rather than returning to the mythic as a synecdoche for repression, as Williams had in *Kora in Hell*, the simple ray of light unleashes a power the poem associates with the domestic. Ironically, the light is described as an obstinate presence that refuses to be contained, having a solid shape (a "yellow plaque") and sound (that "is full of a song") that suggest the sublime moment of release remains rooted in the material conditions of the day.

This emphasis on the commonplace is best seen in the poem's elevation of the everyday in contrast to figures of power, like J.P. Morgan, who reside in skyscrapers far removed from the simple, unadorned, and domesticated beauty detailed in the poem. Isolated from this landscape, Morgan's wealth allows him to exploit whatever advantages are available to him, a colonizing violence that Thomas Whitaker associates with "the rape and maiming of [the poetic] song by the market mentality" (61-62). Morgan's privileged life and financial ambition acts to obscure

his perspective. By contrast, Juan Gris is praised in the prose passages that surround the poem for focusing on those simple things that exist all around us but frequently go unnoticed, engaging “the forms common to experience so as not to frighten the onlooker but to invite him” (*I* 107). Morgan’s wealth and power cloud his perception and Williams frames his blindness in distinctly canonical/institutional terms. Williams describes the affluent as moving among “the steel rocks” of the city, offering a distinct kind of threat as one

who enjoyed
extraordinary privileges
among virginity

to solve the core
of whirling flywheels
by cutting

the Gordian knot
with a Veronese or
perhaps a Rubens—

(*I* 109-110)

Morgan’s fortune allows him to indulge in the finest art, “a Veronese or / perhaps a Rubens,” those works that culture and history ratify as its singular monuments. But, this association with the past also marks Morgan’s isolation from the aesthetic potential in the present and future. Consequently, Williams describes Morgan as a kind of perpetual son, an inheritor of his father’s fortunes, rather than an active creator or progenitor for the future. Thus, Morgan’s power points him backwards in the direction of the past, cutting him off from the aesthetic potential of both the present and future. Morgan’s ability to purchase automobiles that are “the finest on / the market today—“ turn him into “the son / leaving off the g.” Like the dead forms of repetition

Williams associates with mimesis and evolution, Morgan's ability to (re)produce his fortune (a wealth that begets more wealth) emphasizes his distance and remove from what might be found in the present—in Williams's terms, Morgan is a *Pater* without connection to his artistic *son(g)*.

The sunlight that functions as the central image in the poem is animated with a life that—again, like kora—is never entirely new at all. This light provides a peculiarly modern invocation of the wind associated with traditional inspiration and the muses, which Williams here describes as “fifty pounds [of] pressure / at the faucet of / June.” As the poem's primary imagery indicates, however, Williams believes that the inspirational “making” of a poem involves not an idea or observation, followed by words that help to express it, but a form of discovery in which language and images already contain an aesthetic value. For the poet-doctor, these discoveries come in a variety of inspirational forms, like an “inarticulate patient [who] struggles to lay himself bare for you . . . he reveals some secret twist of a whole community's pathetic way of thought.” These patients unintentionally expose an obscured value through their ability to “speak of the underground stream which for a moment has come up just under the surface. It is just a glimpse, an intimation of all that which the daily print misses or deliberately hides.” Within these accidental encounters Williams locates a poetics of the found in which “inarticulate patients” assume the agency typically associated with the poet-subject. Where Morgan is depicted as an aggressor, Williams describes himself in passive terms, struggling to capture a scene or spoken word. And, through the ceding of agency,

We catch a glimpse of something, from time to time, which shows us that a presence has just brushed past us, some rare thing—just when the smiling little Italian woman has left us. For a moment we are dazzled. What was that? We can't name it: we know it never gets into any recognizable avenue of expression; men will be long dead before they can have so much as ever approached it.

Whole lives are spent in the tremendous affairs of daily events without even approaching the great sights I see every day . . . But there is no need for us to be such strangers to each other, saving alone laziness, indifference and age-old besotted ignorance. (*A* 359-360)

In combating indifference, poetic language functions as a found discourse, like the surrealist *objet trouvé* entirely self-generated and independent of the poet-subject. Thus, a poem, already embedded within the everyday, functions as a form of discovery that “we catch a glimpse of . . . from time to time, which shows us that a presence has just brushed past us, some rare thing,” available if we only open ourselves to it. There is no need for us to be such strangers, Williams implores, a call for contact formally explored through the dynamic interplay of *Spring and All*’s poetry and prose, an exchange I will consider next as integral to the book’s larger troping of the found.

* * *

Spring and All’s prose passages suggest that the immediacy and presence the poet-doctor encounters in the world can never be accessed or articulated fully, a representational struggle that might explain, in part, why Williams eventually allowed these passages to be eliminated from his *Collected Poems 1921-1931*. This editorial decision has encouraged formalist readings of *Spring and All*’s poetry as self-contained and easily anthologized. Doing away with these prose sections allows the poems to be read, erroneously I think, as stand-alone pieces—independent of those sometimes conflicted passages concentrating on the failures and limits of illusionist representation. Thus, another burden of this chapter is to explore the inter-relatedness of the poetry and prose passages, a discursive mode Williams came to view as his most elaborate

aesthetic manifesto (*IWtWaP* 37), especially in its realignment of language alongside the objective forms one discovers out in the world.

In 1948, Williams cited the prose-poem as offering him a unique entry into the debates about high and low culture that rose up after Dadaism, as well as providing him with an early retort to Eliot's intention to fortify generic distinctions. In defending the prose passages included in *Paterson*—and I would extend this observation to *Spring and All*, *The Descent of Winter*, and “Della Primavera Transportata al morale,” among other prose poems—Williams expresses opposition to the Eliotic impulse to isolate the essence of a genre. Williams sees these genres, not as isolated or pure, but inextricably bound up in a confusion, corruption, and degradation. In this sense, Williams conceives of the prose poem as able to “thrive in a matrix of confusion (balance)” (*ARI* 73), and *Spring and All* should be understood as striking just such equipoise. In a letter to Parker Tyler, Williams argues these prose poems should not be conceived in opposition to either poetry or prose, or as

an antipoetic device, the repeating of which piece of miscalculation makes me want to puke. It *is* that prose and verse are both *writing*, both a matter of the words and an interrelation between words for the purpose of exposition, or other better defined purpose of *the art*. Please do not stress other “meanings.” I want to say that prose and verse are to me the same thing . . . Poetry does not *have* to be kept away from prose as Mr. Eliot might insist, it goes *along with* prose and, companionably, by itself, without aid or excuse or need for separation or bolstering, shows itself by *itself* for what it is. *It belongs* there, in the gutter. Not anywhere else or wherever it is, it is the same: the poem. (*SL* 263)

This leveling of distinctions between poetry and prose parallels the upsetting of high and low culture that characterized the early avant-garde. For Williams, this leveling begins with the self-reflexive admission that poetry and prose both consist of words and that one genre should not be elevated over the other. In fact, both belong “in the gutter.” Understanding Williams's view of

language more fully warrants a brief return to J. Hillis Miller's groundbreaking analysis of Williams, especially a consideration of how the critic's reading evolved through time.

In relation to my earlier use of Miller's work, which considered the conflation of the ready-made and the *objet trouvé* as an unstable beginning for subsequent inter-art readings of Williams's poetry, I would like to examine the critic's progression from *Poets of Reality* (1965) to *The Linguistic Moment* (1985). These two books mark a subtle change in Miller's thinking about Williams, progressing from a notion of consciousness thought to permeate the world, in his early reading, to a conception of words as concrete forms on the page that help to underline the limits of language, as argued in the latter book. Miller defines the *linguistic moment* as those "moments of suspension within . . . texts . . . not usually at their beginnings or ends, moments when they reflect or comment on their own medium" (*LM* xiv). This self-reflexivity is essential to understanding *Spring and All*, where language's concrete materiality supplies what Miller characterizes as an "affirmation of the supreme value of presence and of the present, and . . . a repudiation of all that is derived, repetitive and copied" (*LM* 368). In this sense, Miller's early reading of Williams's collapsing of consciousness into things is modified twenty years later to an investigation of language's efficacy and reach, a limit that, in turn, transforms the role of the word from one of expressivity to a self-reflexive commentary on the plagiarist impulse that *Spring and All* associates with traditional mimesis.

As Williams's praise for Marianne Moore's poetry indicates, a poem cleans and sharpens the distinct singularity of words which, for Miller, suggests an almost existential condition that compromises any claims to a larger metaphysics, meaning, or signifying potential beyond the page. The concrete presence of the word on the page contains the

power to say something [that] does not seem to be invested in the word by its speaker or writer, or by a personified transcendental power, ‘God,’ or by its referent, since this power [in Williams’s work] belongs as much to articles, to prepositions, to those anonymous ‘shifters,’ the pronouns, and to auxiliaries or parts of the verb *to be* as to adjectives, adverbs, or nouns. (*LM* 352)

The poem—as Williams phrases it—“belongs there, in the gutter,” accepting all language (modifiers, conjunctions, and prepositions) and all subject matter (high and low) as potentially aesthetic. Articles and prepositions are given equal value and agency as are nouns and verbs, reminding the reader of the radical otherness of the word that Miller conceives as central to the *linguistic moment*.

If a theme unites Miller’s early reading and this later argument, it revolves around language’s challenge to authorial agency, especially his conceptualizing of the word as somehow independent of the poet-subject’s volitional intent. In this sense, Miller provides a conception of artistic agency different than that of Duchamp, whose ready-made depends entirely on the deliberative choice of the artist. Pausing here to reflect on Miller’s sometimes perplexing understanding of language’s self-sufficiency is useful in developing an ontology of art that undermines the Cartesian subjectivity I view as central to the ready-made. Miller’s linguistic moment suggests language provides both reader and writer with equal access to a potential present-ness thought to exist in the word itself, for a reader responds “to something nameless that comes at the call” issued within a poem. This elusive presence directly shapes the function of language itself, which

allow[s] the words to write themselves through the poet . . . like glossolalia, a speaking in tongues, or it is like one of those strange and terrible linguistic disorders half physical, half psychological, breaking down the borders between the two in which some other self within the self uses the vocal chords . . . against all efforts at propriety, something beyond the volition of the speaker. (*LM* 353)

Rather than transmitting information, according to Miller's conception, language is "half physical, half psychological" and never entirely one's own. We do not so much speak through language as language appears to speak through us. In this context, Miller suggests a path between the Scylla and Charybdis of a unified egotistic subjectivity and the dispersal of a deracinated subjectivity, a poetic form of ventriloquism that speaks independent of the poet-subject.

In this sense, the troping of the found functions at the level of language itself as a critique of artistic agency that would remain constant in Williams's mature poetry. Though well beyond the narrow historical frame I am focusing upon in analyzing Williams's response to the early avant-garde, the late poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" describes the poetic word as a highly elusive and slippery signifier. In Williams's movement beyond the "tyranny of the image" that one might associate with his early Imagist verse, "Asphodel" conceives of poetry as a kind of verbal glitch outside the colonizing reach of language's signifying and expressive potential. As a commentary on the creative act, Williams writes,

There is something
 something urgent
I have to say to you
 and you alone
 but it must wait
While I drink in
 the joy of your approach,
 perhaps for the last time.
And so
 with fear in my heart
 I drag it out
and keep on talking
 for I dare not stop.
 Listen while I talk on

against time.
 It will not be
 For long.
I have forgot .

(PB 154)

In these triadic verse paragraphs, the poem suggests a postponement of death's imminence through a *talking against time*. This postponement is bound up in a paradoxical moment of revelation and forgetfulness, however, a self-reflexive commentary on the power of the word to exist—in opposition to death and disconnected from the poet-subject—as an independent power, even when the writer loses focus of his or her original intention. In this sense, poetic expression functions as a form of discovery accessed only after one relinquishes self-hood to the power of the word. Transparency is called into doubt, and the word is no longer associated exclusively with the poet-subject. *Spring and All*'s commentary on the imagination's recuperative potential similarly attempts to rethink inspiration, representation, and authenticity, issues that assumed urgency in art production after Duchamp when artists sought to problematize the distinction between the original and the reproduced, what Williams describes as “imitation” rather than the legacy of mimetic copy.

Postmodern critic Rosalind Krauss explores this post-Duchampian turn in art in an essay from the early 1980s, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” that focuses on a new group of artists now known as the Pictures Generation. These artists took the ready-made's critique of representation into new and ontologically unstable directions, appropriating images from commercial culture, the mass media, and art history in “creating” a new work of art. In this sense, their work only qualifies as *new* in how it rethinks what Krauss terms the phallogentric

“originality of the avant-garde.” The Pictures Generation’s work might more accurately be termed *used*, in the sense of re-use or what today is referred to as *appropriation*, relying entirely on prior images and objects for its content. For instance, Sherrie Levine photographed photographs—from magazines to, a few years later, the work of modernist icons like Edward Weston and Walker Evans. Jack Goldstein spliced together the MGM lion roaring over and over again as a reflection of its own reflection. Robert Longo borrowed film stills from Rainer Werner Fassbinder depicting a man being struck by a bullet. Between the years 1977-80, Cindy Sherman produced her *Untitled Film Stills* series, in which she stars as the sole actor in a collection of cinematic portraits that underscore media’s role in shaping identity. Troy Brauntuch’s paintings focus on Fascist rallies as a means of emphasizing the politically charged components of seeing and being seen. For these artists, there is no innocent eye, and the proliferation of media provides a variety of new source material and approaches to making art.

In echoing Williams’s argument in *Spring and All*, Levine’s work, in particular, suggests all forms of artistic representation exist as a kind of plagiarism. Rather than positioning the original and the copy as at odds—the ontological split that remains central to the ready-made’s thesis—Levine’s work underscores the dialogic nature inherent to all representation, especially as it pertains to realist preoccupations with the copy. In her re-photography, Levine collapses the distinction between the represented and the real, skill and deskilling, nature and art, appropriating certain canonical works from twentieth-century art as a feminist form of reclaiming. The originality of the early avant-garde, from this perspective, now appears as a somewhat naïve ambition she counters with the copy, restoring a productive drift to an image

through its re-inscription as a transformative and enunciative act, the “something urgent” that Williams forgets in “Asphodel.”

For Williams, conventional realism functions as the copying of selected surfaces from standard or hegemonic points of view. *Spring and All* hopes to discard these stable depictions in pursuit of pure difference, what he associates with a valuing of “experience and the objects of experience that would satisfy my sense of inclusiveness without redundancy—completeness,” and in relation to the ready-made, what might be termed a “lack of frustration with the liberty of choice” (I 116). This opening of the aesthetic begins in *Spring and All* with the re-evaluation of the categories of reader and writer. Redefining the relationship between writer and reader as dynamic and unpredictable, Williams writes, “Whenever I say, ‘I’ I mean also, ‘you.’ And so, together, as one, we shall begin” (I 89). This Bakhtinian dialogism upsets hierarchical and conventional distinctions between writer and reader, the represented and the real, self and other, and finally, in a more post-modern fashion, the original and its copy. Acknowledging that which has been excluded from conventional poetry (the *word*, the *everyday*, the *American*, now the *reader*) moves the poem and the world into closer proximity.

For Levine and many in the Pictures generation, representation involves a similar self-reflexive acknowledgment, suggesting any form of representation always already involves the colonization of one image or voice in the presentation of another. To that end, Levine’s re-photography exposes the voices simultaneously at work (and simultaneously suppressed) within a representational field. Her ideas on this dynamic articulate many of the plagiarist issues Williams associates with outmoded realist forms of representation. Levine argues that in art,

We can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. Succeeding the painter, the plagiarist no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense encyclopedia from which he draws. The viewer is the tablet on which all the quotations that make up a painting are inscribed without any of them being lost. A painting's meaning lies not in its origin, but in its destination. The birth of the viewer must be at the cost of the painter. (Harrison and Wood 1067)

In her Barthes-inspired rhetoric, Levine argues that an image or object is never the exclusive domain of either an artist or the culture upon which a work might be said to rely. In this sense, Levine's commentary functions as a response to Carl Andre's (highly-gendered) validation of artistic agency in his Althusserian distinction between art and culture, whereby "art is what we do, culture is what is done to us." Levine qualifies this claim, conceiving of representation as an interactive exchange between artist and culture, an engagement that obliterates differences between art and non-art, the high and low. Levine contends,

I don't think it's useful to see dominant culture as monolithic. I'd rather see it as Polyphonic, with unconscious voices which may be at odds with one another. If I am attentive to these voices, then maybe I can collaborate with some of them to create something almost new.⁸⁵

Thus, in a work like *Fountain (after Marcel Duchamp)*, Levine's recasting of Duchamp's *Fountain* in bronze satirizes the masculine avant-garde's elevation of subversion through her "creation" of an "almost new" work of art, a collaborative transaction between her appropriative practice, Duchamp's historical precedent, and the viewer's self-reflexive awareness of the artist's position within art history. This self-reflexive commentary on art functions as the primary mode of art production within the commercial (and institutional) market today. Modernism's search for the *new* has been supplanted by a postmodern qualification and commentary on the avant-garde impulse to destroy convention.

⁸⁵ Quoted in "Sherrie Levine: Paula Cooper Gallery," by Johanna Burton, *Artforum*, Summer 2006, 351.

Williams's poetics exist within a similar matrix. Williams argues, "always in a work of the imagination, leave a large part of the thing to the imagination of the spectator . . . to have the beholder take part in it thus completely. Thus and thus only to complete it" (quoted in Halter 119). *Spring and All* conceives of the poem as a dialectical interaction between subject and object that disrupts the "perfect plagiarism" (I 93) evolution and conventional mimetic representation view as foundational logic. The imagination exists within a transactional form of interaction with an image or object (say, a red wheelbarrow) that places the reader in a tensive relation with regard to a poem's framing, indexing, and reconstruction of a material object in language. "Thank you, I know well that I am plagiarizing" (I 92), Williams admits, and his ambition here is to move the poem beyond those who claim otherwise. In this sense, Williams's undeceived imagination *re-represents* an irreducible object from out in the world through its re-contextualization in language. Rather than a mimetic goal of "'veracity' 'actuality' 'real' 'natural' [and] 'sincere'" (I 93) forms of representation, *Spring and All* anticipates Levine's post-modern commentary, conceding all representation functions on some level as a form of theft. Admitting the poet's primary responsibility is to admit everything in realist forms of representation "has been duplicated, every step exactly paralleling the one that preceded in the dead ages gone by. A perfect plagiarism results" and Williams argues that within this chain of reproduction, "Only the imagination is undeceived" (I 93).

According to this self-reflexivity, *Spring and All* redefines the relationship between art and nature, world and word, to suggest an otherness exists entirely independent of the seeing-subject. This perspective on nature distinguishes Williams's poetic practice from the "copyist tendency among us." For Williams, nature provides a "hint to composition not because it is

familiar to us . . . but because it possesses the quality of independent existence, of reality which we feel in ourselves. It [nature or the material world] is not opposed to art but apposed to it” (*I* 121). This notion of *apposition* (which, in looking back to my argument in Chapter One, can be positioned against avant-garde *opposition*) indicates, again, the depths of the existential despair that began for Williams, as recounted to Marianne Moore, when he resigned selfhood—and here we can extend this principle to representation—to what can be found out in the world. This resignation offers a critique of authorship that *Spring and All* broadens to the degree that art and non-art, the created and the found, exist within a single continuum that stretches beyond mere representation into experience itself. To that end, *Spring and All* deplores “crude symbolism,” the impulse to

associate emotions with natural phenomena such as anger with lightning, flowers with love and associates certain textures with (*I* 100)

Williams ends this thought mid-sentence to emphasize the dramatic failings of conventional figuration, how metaphor, symbol, and even the Imagist “direct treatment of the thing” only reinforce an ideology that alienates the reader from the real. Once these mimetic or realist “illusions” are “dispensed with,” the poet-subject can begin “to replace not the forms (of this illusion) but the reality of experience with its own” (*I* 117), an invocation of experience over representation that suggests the displacement of the artist-subject in favor of new possibilities for producing meaning.

The stark dignity of entrance: Representation, Relationality, and Contagion

Following the prose sequences that open the book and challenge the mimetic principles that ground Western literature and art, conventions that prevent readers from making full contact with the world, *Spring and All*'s first poem documents a series of spatialized discoveries. Unlike Cubism's formalist innovation, however, this poem's interest in space and time is more experiential in scope, an adjustment due, in part, to Williams's reflections on the success and failings of *Kora in Hell*. In *Spring and All*, Williams expresses regret with regard to the canned chance he had used as his primary method in drafting his improvisations, especially in how it confused the reader, moving "chaotically about refusing or rejecting most things, seldom accepting values or acknowledging anything" (*I* 115). In this sense, the improvisations mimicked a peculiarly fashionable, and one might venture to guess, a peculiarly French interest in chaos and chance.⁸⁶ In response to this chaos, *Spring and All*'s first poem carefully deliberates on the appearance of material forms in nature.

I refer to the poem's less conventional title, "By the road to the contagious hospital," to emphasize how the details presented appear to infect or spread across a scopic field, a contagion at odds with the homogenized authority of the institution to which the title also refers. The prose passages that follow the poem further this contagion motif, characterizing spring as a "terrific confusion" that "stares us once more in the face? Whither? To what end? . . . At any rate, now at last spring is here" (*I* 96-97). Set outside a hospital, the poem focuses on an infectious field of metastasized growth that releases a *kore* that has been inchoate during winter. Though nature's rebirth is suggested in the poem, it might more accurately be said to document what Albert Gelpi

⁸⁶ In 1928, Williams attempted to further his own innovations from the precedent established by the French avant-garde: "Do not talk of Parisian pose. It is the Ph.D. of stupidity to do so, puritanical and cross-eyed" (*ARI* 73).

describes as the “balked stasis” of a landscape following winter. The first half of the poem (lines 1-15) exists without an active verb, an absence underlined in the opening three stanzas’ syntactical reliance on participles. These participles suggest an anticipatory kind of action, a frustrated growth that is further emphasized through the displacement of the subject in favor of an elaborate network of prepositional phrases. The poem reads,

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

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, unfamiliar wind—

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

(I 95-96)

In the poem's second, third and fourth stanzas, a series of participles (*standing*, *scattering* and *upstanding*) imply a tentative form of action that, in its adjectival form, is never fully realized. Instead, patches of water and clumps of weeds are exhausted and laid bare, while the field itself is described as large and desolate, a loose "scattering of tall trees" randomly positioned about. The repetition of these participles, along with the iteration of the hard dental consonants in the "scattering" and "standing," suggests a halted energy limited—to borrow from "To Elsie"—to "isolate flecks."

Critic Richard Frye has insightfully suggested that these connecting verbal phrases offer a subtle parody of Eliot's opening lines in *The Waste Land* (published in late 1922 when Williams was already at work on *Spring and All*).⁸⁷ Where Williams's participles imply an isolated struggle for life, Eliot's lines are typically read as emphasizing sterility and desiccation, a world cut off from the vitality of the past. Eliot's poem nostalgically invokes the *reverdie* tradition—literally the "re-greening" of an organic, unified hierarchy within the natural order, a medieval lyrical mode that celebrates the return of spring. "The Wasteland" famously begins,

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in a forgetful snow, feeding

⁸⁷ "Seeing the Signs: Objectivist Premonitions in Williams' *Spring and All*." *Sagetrieb* 8.3 (Winter 1989).

A little life with dried tubers.⁸⁸

Placing the participles at the end of the regularly capitalized line suggests that just as a life (and an action word) appears, it quickly is cut off, failing to make connection with the potential offered in the next image/line. In this formal sense, Eliot's lineation refuses consummation—the desire stirring in roots, flowers breeding in the desolate earth, and memories mixing but never cohering into a fully realized image or form. Thus, in “The Wasteland,” landscape, consciousness, and culture all appear entombed, clouded over in what the poem describes as “a forgetful snow” syntactically rendered on the page.

“By the road to the contagious hospital” characterizes the emergence of life in more cautious, but also potentially more generative, language. The uncertainty of life in the poem challenges both Eliot's despair and Pound's ideogrammatic technique, conceptions of the poem that purport to synthesize “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” Though Eliot advocated for impersonality as a means of overthrowing the hegemony of the Romantic “I,” his ideas on the artist's imagination emphasize order and concentration as a means of challenging the subjectivist impulse in art. Eliot's imagination functions as a structural device, imbricating disparate historical and cultural details into a coherent whole that distinguishes the artist/poet's relation to the world from that of the ordinary man, whom he claims “falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking.” The “mind of the poet,” in Eliot's estimation, is “always forming new wholes,” composite forms Williams might be said to counter in the isolated, unnamed, and variegated “stuff” detailed in the second half of “By the road to the

⁸⁸ T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland and Other Poems* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 53.

contagious hospital.”⁸⁹ Thus, if Eliot famously shores the fragments of foreign and historically-remote cultural monuments within his poetry, Williams’s troping of the found details an ungoverned landscape that resists containment. In this context, rather than a celebration of rebirth, which only provides another copy of a copy, “By the road to the contagious hospital” documents a world consisting of discrete particulars in which each detail might be said to function—not as a clear expression of the natural world—but as a self-reflexive commentary on the creative process.

What makes this opening poem particularly radical is how it both *records* and *enacts* the reader’s experience with the text on top of the particularities “By the road to the contagious hospital” sets out to depict. From the context of art history, this relational aesthetic challenges a fixed Renaissance perspectivism, the illusion that one can attain a remote God’s-eye view of the world.⁹⁰ This challenge to a stable worldview is particularly evident in the absence of any fixed

⁸⁹ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, c.1960), 287.

⁹⁰ Though aestheticians from Aristotle to Arthur Danto have explored the triadic-relationship between artist, audience, and environment, modern and post-modern theory has focused particular attention on the role of mediation within the creative act and on how the variables of environment, chance and experience all help to inflect the artistic act, what Nicolas Bourriaud—borrowing from Marx and Althusser—has recently termed *relational aesthetics*. According to Bourriaud, relational aesthetics emphasize the contingencies that help to shape the experience of an artwork. Bourriaud argues that within a post-modern culture defined by the seemingly limitless expansion of industry, technology, and the infiltration of the mass media in all aspects of one’s life, art must function as a recovery project, especially in light of

the separation that affects relational channels, [which] represents the final stage in the transformation of the ‘Society of the Spectacle’ as described by Guy Debord . . . Herein lies the most burning issue to do with art today: is it still possible to generate relationships with the world, in a practical field . . . traditionally earmarked for their ‘representation’? Contrary to what Debord thought, for all he saw in the art world was a reservoir of examples of what had to be tangibly ‘achieved’ in day-to-day life, artistic praxis appears these days to be a rich loam for social experiments, like a space partly protected from the uniformity of behavioural patterns.” (9)

Though Bourriaud draws his examples from the installation art of the 1990s, his call for a new art praxis that emphasizes social relationships and contact with the real, beyond representation, echoes John Dewey’s notion of the aesthetic and Williams’s *no ideas but in things*. From the perspective of mediation, Williams’s work from the 1920s frequently encourages one to make contact with “—the other world—,” shattering the surface of a painting, poem

point of view within the poem and a reliance on prepositions that suggests a shifting field of relations between objects. Though these variations in perspective bring the diversity of the field into a more acute focus, the overall effect reflects what *Spring and All* elsewhere characterizes as the artist's primary burden, to depict the "multiformity" (*I* 101) of modern existence. Homer and the ancients had no need to render this multiformity, living at a time when the world was, seemingly, more unified and whole. Calling illusionism and mimesis into doubt was unnecessary when religious and cultural hierarchies still held sway, periods in which

the subject of art was not 'reality' but related to the 'gods'—by force or otherwise. There was no need of the 'illusion' in such a case since there was none possible where a picture or a work represented simply the imaginative reality which existed in the mind of the onlooker. (*I* 111)

Thus, ancient and traditional forms of representation depend upon a stable world-view in which good and evil, part and whole, remain constant and fixed. Within the medieval Great Chain of Being, gods exist at the apex, and a hierarchy of spirits, humans, animals and plant life are structured below.

Within modernity, however, faith in these ordering systems has disappeared, and the subject feels alienated from the larger social, cultural, or religious beliefs that draw people together. *Spring and All* suggests existence is now marked, not by unity, but a kind of "separation," a "cleavage" that acts to remind the subject of his or her alienation in relation to larger systems of power. In Baroque art, to cite just one example that utilizes an almost absurd excess in its dramatization of hierarchical order, "No special effort was necessary *to cleave* where the cleavage already existed" (emphasis mine *I* 111). With regard to both senses of the

or, in many cases, a car "windshield[,] a blunt barrier" (*CEP I* 147) that prohibits the fluid interplay of person and world.

word, *cleavage* suggests subjects are both *cut-off from* and *adhering to* these larger systems of power, an ambiguity underlined in Baroque art where the hierarchical structures of earthly institutions—starting from the top with divinely ordained representatives in both the political and religious spheres—mirror a larger, eternal order. In this sense, the pauper might be said to appear in relation to the king and the saint is positioned in proximity to the sinner. In addition to these conventional definitions, Susan McCabe suggests *cleavage* also implies an organicism or growth, the cell division or segmentation of the ovum following fertilization, a meaning of which Dr. Williams (especially in light of his cover for *Kora in Hell*) was no doubt well aware. The creative act, as self-reflexively rendered in *Spring and All*'s first poem, simultaneously involves both a unification of disparate materials and a reminder of humanity's isolation from nature.

In this sense, from the perspective of both the cell and the poetic unit, representation suggests a separation from the “real” to which art constantly defers. This distance is central to the random and assorted growth in “By the road to the contagious hospital.” The poem's shifting perspective and point of view highlights what Williams praises in select artists and writers—Juan Gris, Cezanne, and Edgar Allan Poe—those who “re-invent in order to retain that which the older generations had without that effort.” These more radical forms of representation make a break with stable realist depictions, for “It is only thus that the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes a creation” (*I* 112) in and of itself. Subsequent representation must aim to “ESCAPE ILLUSION and stand between man and nature as saints once stood between man and the sky,” a self-reflexive and mediating jostling of the signifier and signified that dynamizes the word. Within the early avant-garde, modern poets and artists utilized a variety of techniques and strategies, including interior monologue, stream of consciousness, defamiliarisation, montage,

collage, etc., to modify, if not overturn, monologic modes of representation. In this spirit, “By the road to the contagious hospital” disperses perspective within a field of sudden and random growth and Williams’s use of prepositions underlines this leveling of single point perspective, giving equal attention to those positions on view “*By the road to the contagious hospital / under the surge of the blue / mottled clouds,*” that which can be seen out “*Beyond the / waste of broad, muddy fields.*” Using thirteen prepositions in a twenty-seven-line poem, as well as passive sentence structure throughout, evokes the unstable and ungovernable forces that animate spring.

Spring finally arrives in the sixth stanza in the form of an unnamed “they” that comes without clear referent or antecedent. The poem’s lineation further suggests an elusive arrival that cannot be contained, even in language, a “stark dignity of / entrance” that emphasizes nature’s isolation. In stanza eight, spring amounts to little more than a minor intimation of change, an unexpected rumbling: “It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf,” but the reader remains unsure whether the pronoun references plant-life, visual perception, or some intermingling of the two. Moreover, the “mottled” clouds that dot the skyline add only a variegated color to the scene. Where a conventional poem selects an image and specific details from the world to express a larger symbolic or metaphoric value, “By the road to the contagious hospital” offers what Frye has characterized in semiotic terms as an indeterminate

thrust . . . away from individual signifiers . . . toward the immutable structure of relations by which all the elements in a given poem are patterned . . . Williams apparently decided that if he could simulate in poetry the process of incipient growth which experience had taught him. . . it would stand as a linguistic graph of the mind’s perceptual process. (90)

Williams’s poem suggests a graphing of relations between subject and object, anticipating theories of art commonly used to understand minimalism, and more recently, landscape and

installation art, those sculptural innovations that set out to challenge the self-contained formalism of high modernism. I will briefly examine this vocabulary, and more specifically, the critic Michael Fried's struggle to understand these innovations in the early 1960s, especially minimalism's reliance on the beholder, which offers a means of shedding light on the kinds of subjectivity generated within "By the road to the contagious hospital."

In response to the rise of minimalism and conceptual art in the 1960s, Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood," published in *Artforum* in 1967, cautions against recent innovations that manipulate the presence of the viewer as the central component in establishing a work's meaning.⁹¹ Fried focuses on two key terms to explain what is at stake in minimalism. One term highlights what Fried considers essential to art, while the other identifies factors that detract from the generic specificity he hoped to stabilize in his criticism. *Absorption* speaks to an art object's ability to maintain the viewer's attention and interest on its own formalist terms. Fried associates minimalism's manipulation of space and scale, however, with *theatricality*, in which an audience is required to complete a work, challenging the self-contained aesthetic limits he and his mentor, Clement Greenberg, celebrate in late modernist painting. In fact, minimalism's mistake, according to these critics, is that it turns every viewer into a kind of Duchamp, transforming the most mundane materials into an art object through context and the drama of encounter alone.

Fried's commentary supports the primarily formalist interest in maintaining a medium's integrity, cautioning against a degeneration that occurs when art approaches the conditions of theatre. Fried aimed to fortify the aesthetic against these manipulations, arguing art is only meaningful in how it underlines the transcendent specificity of its medium, those self-contained

⁹¹ Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), hereafter referred to in the text by Fried, followed by the page number.

limits associated with painting and sculpture. In particular, Fried aimed to close off painting from those sculptural elements and contingencies that act to destabilize the particularities of the aesthetic. In the 1960s, happenings and performance art supplied the most extreme examples of how context shapes reception, but both Fried and Greenberg identified minimalism's manipulation of scale and over-reliance on a kind of transaction with the audience, in particular, as compromising the formal standards Abstract Expressionism had recently helped to establish.⁹² When art relies too heavily on the viewer or scale, it threatens the formal and self-contained immediacy Fried views as integral to art.

Fried's essay cites Tony Smith's six-foot cube entitled *Die* (1962) and Robert Morris's *Untitled (Ring with Light)* [1965-1966] as emblematic of this kind of theatrical manipulation. These works colonize a gallery, turning the artwork into a kind of prop that manipulates the viewer as a passive audience. Fried contends that in minimalism, "for something to be perceived at all is for it to be perceived as part of that situation [between audience and prop. Consequently,] Everything counts—not as part of the [art] object—but as part of the situation in which objecthood is established and on which that objecthood partly depends" (155). In opposition to this relational or situational aesthetic, Abstract Expressionism suggests an internal and self-contained formalism that Fried associates with a "present-ness" inherent to a compositional (and one can infer, spiritual) unity through which each part and in "every

⁹² Again, it should not go unnoticed that Greenberg traces Minimalism's manipulation of the viewer to Duchamp and the ready-made, an innovation that transformed any object and/or situation in the world into something that carries an aesthetic value. Greenberg claims that after the introduction of the ready-made, and one can assume the resurgence of interest in Duchamp's techniques among the Neo-avant-garde, even "minimal works are readable as art, as almost anything is today—including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper" (Quoted in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art* [New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968], 183). Fried expands upon Greenberg's concerns over the broadening of the aesthetic, offering a defense of painting that helped introduce the vocabulary needed to discuss the very work he wanted to fortify art against.

moment[,] the work itself is wholly manifest.” This unity is at odds with the situational contingencies and emergent materialism of “By the road to the contagious hospital,” where “the stark dignity / of entrance” is characterized by disparate growth within a field of difference. In Williams’s poem, spring is never “wholly manifest,” as Fried would have it. The poet-subject imposes no unifying or abstract design on the scene or materials, and consequently, the reader is left to discover and piece together the significance of the “twiggy / stuff of bushes and small trees” and the largely undefined “profound change” documented within Williams’s poem.

Abstract Expressionism suggests a formalist ideal in which, as Fried indicates, “what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it]”; on the other hand, “the experience of literalist [what Fried calls Minimalist] art,” like Williams’s poem, depends upon the contingencies of a “situation—one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder” (153). These interactive situations throw the seeing-subject off-balance, a disruption that Fried argues “*distances* the beholder . . . It is, one might say, precisely this distancing that *makes* the beholder a subject and the piece in question . . . an object” (emphasis mine, 154). For Fried, this spatialized distance—a phenomenological factor central to the scene depicted in “By the road to the contagious hospital”—pushes agency away from a perceived or represented object, undermining the self-contained integrity of the image or objects presented. Consequently, the perceived object becomes the generative source of subjectivity, a reversal of agency that Williams’s poem, with its shifting perspective, attention to unrelated specific forms within the landscape, and overall absence of any controlling symbol or image, also emphasizes. Williams’s poem stresses competing perceptual models in which no single perspective, image, or symbol is allowed to take precedent.

Indeed, Minimalist monumentalism turns into a kind of anti-monumentality in the poem's focus on minute particulars. This anti-monumentalism is primarily evident in the poem's refusal to isolate a single object or image, changing perspective and point of view multiple times. In so doing, the poem transforms the reader into a kind of participant in the construction of the scene itself. Rather than existing outside of the poem as a dispassionate observer, the reader engages with the text, underlining what Brian A. Bremen describes as a "context of discovery and renewal that avoids definition and recreation in any essential way." Refusing to commit to any single perspective pulls the viewer into the field of creation, suggesting what is meaningful and of value depends on one's relationship to random growth. In other words, the poem's meaning arises from the relations it establishes, a contingency Fried describes in which a "beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended—and unexacting—relation as subject to the impassive object" presented. This creation of subjectivity depends on a notion of words as both referential and self-referential. Calling upon the reader to participate in a situation, "By the road to the contagious hospital" challenges the stability of the seeing-subject, a strategy central to the poems I will turn to next. I introduce Fried's criticism of minimalist theatricality as a means of redefining the "objecthood" associated with Williams's poetics from the late 1920s and early 1930s. To borrow from Fried, the distance that separates subject from object problematizes the divide between the everyday and the aesthetic, the signifier and the signified. Moreover, far from collapsing these binaries, as Miller's early monism contends, the metaphysical and ontological gaps between subject and object appear magnified. Roy Harvey Pearce's work is representative of a trend among critics who view poems like "By the Road to the contagious hospital" as negotiating a "dividing line between what he [the poet] sees and what he knows,

between perception and cognition” (338), a generative gap that suggests a world of pure difference, comprised of discrete units of particularities that can never be adequately formulated in representation.

In passing with my mind: Poetry in the Expanded Field

Where “By the road to the contagious hospital” documents nature’s slow and fractured emergence following the desolation of winter, Poem XI (“The Right of Way”) details a rapid series of discontinuous images woven together through a seeing-subject’s experiential movement through a landscape. The automobile functions as a new form of writing technology that transforms the active writer into a passive passenger-viewer. This shift in agency is registered in both the line length and the poem’s pacing. Where the structure of a poem typically imposes order, the syntax and quick lineation in “The Right of Way” suggest the random observations documented within the poem continue after the poem’s last line, as the car advances through the landscape.

Williams was the first major American poet whose poetics appear to have been shaped by the automobile. His medical practice began in late 1910, a professional life that depended foremost on mobility—first in the form of a bicycle, then “a little mare, Astrid” (A 127), and finally an automobile that he would famously anthropomorphosize as the hero in *The Great American Novel*. The car offered Williams exposure to a variety of sights and sounds in solitary moments of contemplation between jobs. This transit time also provided Williams with opportunities to write, and his subsequent poetry, especially as evidenced in *Spring and All*, is frequently characterized by quick, jagged lines and shifts in perspective that suggest passing

scenes, including images that poets—a mere ten years before him—might have considered impossible.

Williams purchased his first car during the winter of 1911-1912. Late in life Williams continued to identify the profound impact the car had on his writing life. Detailing the sometimes feverish pace of his professional responsibilities, Williams conceptualized inspiration and movement as inextricably linked: “When the phrasing of a passage suddenly hits me,” Williams explains, “how quickly such things are lost, [so] I find myself at the side of the road frantically searching in my medical bag for a prescription pad.”⁹³ More than any other poem in *Spring and All*, “The Right of Way” captures the imaginative instant just prior to pulling over:

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—
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

⁹³ It is interesting to note that, among other poems, “By the road to the contagious hospital” was, in fact, written on the back of a prescription pad (see Miki article 113).

the man's belly
at a watchchain—

The supreme importance
of this nameless spectacle

sped me by them
without a word—

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

(*I* 119-120)

The poem's syntax—its lack of punctuation and end stops, the recurrence of the dash in four of the poem's twenty-eight lines—suggests the unbroken arc of the car's progress. Where a Symbolist poetics conceives of the poet as a conductor, directing themes, images and allusions into a unified form, the seeing-subject in "The Right of Way" appears open to any image that strikes the eye, a series of discontinuous images unfolding in a single continuous motion. This openness or receptivity suggests a new epistemology of art wherein mind and machine go "spinning on the // four wheels of my car / along the wet road." This passive form of reception is acknowledged in the poem's initial lines, which detail an almost ego-less kind of empiricism, a "passing with my mind / on nothing in the world." This opening couplet emphasizes the poet-subject's lack of control, a passive receptivity that, three decades later, William S. Burroughs and the Beat Generation would extend in taking up the commonplace, the road, and elements from

commercial culture as central components within their work. In *Naked Lunch* (1959), Burroughs self-reflexively characterizes his prose as operating without the constraints typically attributed to narrative, plot, or theme. Burroughs writes, “there is only one thing a writer can write about: what is in front of his senses at the moment of writing . . . I am a recording instrument . . . I do not presume to impose ‘story’ ‘plot’ ‘continuity.’” Williams’s writing functions as a form of continuous “passing” without editorial restraint, removing the subject from the mediating position within the poem and reversing the epistemological and cognitive theory of extramission that critics like Thomas Whitaker characterize as a form of “self-indulgence” whereby “the speaker [exists] as *possessor of this vision*” (emphasis mine, 63). Instead of light rays emanating from the eye out onto the material world, as ancient theories of perception would have it, “The Right of Way” details a landscape entirely in flux, where observations appear to invade the mind of the poet-subject.

More recently Jon Chatlos has framed this scopophilia in highly gendered terms as the “mobile gaze of a male motorist in the early days of the motorcar” (140). I contend, however, that the seeing-subject’s movement in the poem challenges phallo-centric notions of spectatorship. The seeing-subject appears disconnected from the scene presented and the poem functions primarily as a kind of social mapping between figures actively engaged in the act of looking. The poet-subject, on the other hand, remains a detached and passive observer throughout. Moreover, rather than the seeing-subject controlling the scene, the *auto-mobile* functions as the administrator of images. In this sense, driving dictates seeing, what can be

found, a form of poetic pleasure (“the right of way / I *enjoy* on the road by / virtue of the law”) governed by its own rules and regulations.⁹⁴

Though the poem defers to the authority and virtue of the law, chance guides the random observations themselves. Though the seeing-subject initiates the chain of images, the “I saw” of line six, the details the poem chronicles push the writer’s presence from the poem. In its wake, individuals appear to be engaged in seeing one another, “an elderly man,” “A woman in blue,” “a boy of eight who was / looking at the middle of // the man’s belly / at a watchchain.” These observations are evaluated in relation to the power and efficacy of language, what Williams terms the “supreme importance” of a “nameless spectacle” that passes by “without a word.” The spectacle remains nameless because it must escape verbalization and Williams describes the “word” as un-rooted, like the car, refusing to adhere to any fixed or stable meaning, suggesting mind and machine go “spinning on the // four wheels of my car / along the wet road.”⁹⁵ This un-rooted and peripatetic vision is best realized in the poem’s concluding image of a disembodied body part, the Surrealist appearance of “a girl with one leg / over the rail of a balcony.” This image implies part of a larger scene or movement, challenging reason to suggest the previous observations (an elderly man smiling, a woman in blue laughing, a boy looking at a watchchain)

⁹⁴ This notion of the automobile rendering the artist-subject passive and dependent on the world opposes Chatlos’ reading, which contends “[t]he motorist is active, seeing, and speaking . . . The male motorist is like a cinematic spectator: he is seated, he views screen images, his gaze is mobile, his pleasure is visual, and the sights that he sees are imaginatively edited,” what he later compares to one’s experience at the movies, a kind of “embodied spectatorship” (141-142). See Jon Chatlos, “*Automobility and Lyric Poetry: The Mobile Gaze in William Carlos Williams’ ‘The Right of Way’*” *Journal of Modern Literature*, 30.1 (Fall 2006), 140-154. The issue of how active vision is in the poem, however, remains open to debate. I argue the poem’s final image threatens the integrity of the embodied spectatorship Chatlos describes.

⁹⁵ Near the end of *Spring and All*, Williams writes, “In description, words adhere to certain objects and have the effect on the sense of oysters or barnacles . . . But the imagination . . . is rightly understood . . . as a dance over the body,” when “the author and reader are liberated to pirouette with words which have sprung from the old facts of history, reunited in present passion.” In terms of poetry and prose, “To understand the words as so liberated is to understand poetry. That they move independently when set free is the mark of their value” (149).

function as disconnected signifiers the seeing-subject fails to fully access or understand in its entirety.

In this sense, the poem “passes” as something that it is not. Though the seeing-subject is a motorist, he more accurately exists as a poet-passenger whose mind is wiped clean, a kinetic *tabula rasa* able to pass “on nothing in the world.” Beyond this passing, the automobile acts to physically separate the viewer from the outside world and the windshield functions as a tactile reminder of the subject’s distance from the “real.” Delimiting (or editing) the range of the poet’s somatic view, this seeing-in-motion suggests a fleeting (or slippery) perspective in which sights and scenes move away from the fixed abstraction of “the law” (line 5) to an unmoored “spinning on the / four wheels of my car” (lines 24-25). Though this auto-gaze is more engaged than the passive prescriptions supplied in the movie-house, the seeing-subject is never granted access to the world beyond the windshield, an environment that the poem depicts as incomplete and largely unknowable. To that end, the poem’s montage effect underlines the subject’s decentralized position, again emphasized in the twenty-nine prepositions that syntactically structure the poem and challenge the centrality of the poet-subject.

The montage effect utilized in “The Right of Way” is extended in Poem XXV, a poem that again evidences how Williams’s theorizing of the *objet trouvé* might be distinguished from the epistemology of art inherent to Duchamp’s ready-made. Following a prose passage that distinguishes the nature of poetry from that of prose (the former “feeds the imagination,” while the latter mechanically invokes sentiment), Williams inserts a poem composed entirely of found

texts culled from road signs and advertisements.⁹⁶ Like early avant-garde experiments with concrete poetry, which I will later use as a point of contrast, this poem details an aesthetic field unfettered by either a controlling poetic imagination or the transparency of language. The poem reads,

Somebody dies every four minutes
in New York State—

To hell with you and your poetry—
You will rot and be blown

through the next solar system
with the rest of the gasses—

What the hell do you know about it?

AXIOMS

Do not get killed

Careful Crossing Campaign
Careful Crossings Cautiously

THE HORSES	black
	&
PRANCED	white

What's the use of sweating over
this sort of thing, Carl; here
it is all set up—

Outings in New York City

Ho for the open country

Don't stay shut up in hot rooms
Go to one of the Great Parks

⁹⁶ For the sign's impact on early twentieth-century America, see John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *Signs in America's Auto Age: Signatures of Landscape and Place* (American Land and Life Series.) (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004).

Pelham Bay for example

It's on Long Island Sound
with bathing, boating
tennis, baseball, golf, etc.

Acres and acres of green grass
wonderful shade trees, rippling brooks

Take the Pelham Bay Park Branch
of the Lexington Ave. (East Side)
Line and you are there in a few
minutes

Interborough Rapid Transit Co.

(I 146-147)

In its juxtaposition of various signs, the poem provides an example of what Williams praises in the work of Marianne Moore, a poetry in which syntax and lineation wipe words clean of their conventional connotations, claiming “a word” appears most fully “a word . . . when it is separated out by science, treated with acid to remove the smudges, washed, dried and placed side up on a clean surface” (I 318). According to this view, the page and the line strip language of its conventional and informational meanings. In this sense, the page functions as a surface upon which these “signs” can appear independent of their standard usage. Williams praises Moore for her ability to allow “words [to] remain separate, each unwilling to group with others except as they move in the one direction” (I 146). Like “The Right of Way,” the found texts that comprise this poem appear to move *in a single direction*, a radical reworking of Stendhal’s notion of the realist novel as a mirror moving down the road. Moving down the center of the page these signs appear without the hindrances of plot or context to slow things down. Where *metaphor* deprives a word of its particularity and presence (evidenced in metaphor’s Greek etymology, meaning *to*

carry from one place to another) in describing something in terms typically applied to something else, this poem maintains its status as pure text, refusing figuration and defining, in the extreme, the literalist mode *Spring and All* advances.

The poem's incorporation of signs also highlights *Spring and All*'s interest in the aesthetic value of modern technology.⁹⁷ Though Williams selects this ambient language from his cultural landscape, the poem's syntax and lineation suggest artistic facture has fallen sway to the found, texts that function, *axiomatically* as the poem might express it, as signs pulled directly from the world onto the page. Cumulatively these textual relationships complement the randomness of the moving visual field in "The Right of Way." Christopher MacGowan reads the poem as an account of this movement, absorbing the particularities of "modern life by *ignoring* . . . [the] cautionary message" the signs promote, a throwing caution to the wind that "allows their [the words'] alliterative admonitions to 'cross' into the world of the imagination" (100-101). In crossing the actual and the textual, the poem approaches the very edge of what constitutes a poem, a creative form that *begins* with already available texts and scenes. Though the author remains the primary arbiter of meaning, the poem pushes writing as far as it might go—while still adhering to the agreed upon rules of grammar—in suggesting a verse form already found in the world.

In its use of found texts, this poem offers a counter-weight to the Russian formalists who set out to establish a functional differentiation between everyday language and poetic discourse. Williams rejects these clean classifications and the Russian formalists, in particular, towards the end of *Spring and All*. In so doing, this proto-concrete poem is, above all, a revolt against the

⁹⁷ For a comprehensive examination of Williams's relation to science and technology, see Lisa M. Steinman's *Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

impulse to cordon-off the everyday from the aesthetic, attacking those cultural forms thought to stabilize the aesthetic. The challenge associated with Williams's troping of the found becomes especially pronounced when comparing the typographical experiments in Poem XXV with early avant-garde poems, including Russian Futurist poet Alexei Kruchenykh's "Heights" (1913). These poems share certain things in common. Both works are anti-mimetic, obstructing the reader from seeing through words out on to the world, though Williams's content is derived directly from the particularities of the local landscape. "Heights," on the other hand, posits the opacity of the word (or letter) as a kind of universal or lost aboriginal language, a primitive discourse unpolluted by intellectualism or the subjective ego. Rather than transmitting information, Kruchenykh's poem suggests a purity of *form* as a kind of universal *content*. The poem reads,

HEIGHTS
(universal language)
e u yu
i a o
o a
o a e e i e ya
o a
e u i e i
i e e
i i y i e i i y⁹⁸

This is poetry as a kind of non-language in which meaning exists only as it typographically appears on the page. The concrete poem forces the reader to see the text alone, rather than *seeing through* the word out into the world. In this sense, the concrete poem functions as pure formalism, challenging the poet's mediating role between a reader and some primary reality outside of a text. Focusing upon the sound and shape of letters, which in this example suggests

⁹⁸ Quoted in *Modern Russian Poetry: an anthology with verse translations* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 361
168

the undulations of sound as sense, the concrete poem reconfigures content as a phonemic or structural purity.

In minimizing the disparity between a found text in the world and the concrete word as it appears on the page, Williams's theory of the imagination suggests the poet-subject merely accepts what has already been written or made as potentially aesthetic. This passive resignation has been noted by critics as far back as Kenneth Burke, who described the agency of the poet as dependent entirely on certain visual cues. In another early review, Babette Deutsch describes Williams's "reliance on the eye, the singling out of the brief moment, however intense" as qualifying or placing a "limitation upon his words," and I will next consider how these limits help to establish a possible value in the most famous refusal of the expressivist poetic paradigm included in *Spring and All*.⁹⁹ This example will make evident how the visual components of Williams's poetry always carry with it the reader's awareness that they are not seeing an object but reading a text, what Williams describes as a self-reflexivity that, "like every other form of art, [the poem] is an object, an object that in itself formally presents its case and its meaning by the very form it assumes" (A 267).

* * *

"The Red Wheelbarrow" (Poem XXII) is frequently cited as both an early example of the challenge modern poets would offer to the Symbolist legacy and a proto-Objectivist instancing of verbal apposition. The poem stands as Williams's most anthologized work, a factor again due, in part, to the poet's willingness to have it removed from its original, highly theoretical

⁹⁹ Quoted in *William Carlos Williams, The Critical Heritage*, Charles Doyle (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 290.

contexts amidst *Spring and All*'s prose passages.¹⁰⁰ This decision to isolate the poem from the prose has had a profound impact on its reception, undermining much of the commentary the book supplies on the imagination and representation. The two most standard approaches to the poem consider it either a paradigmatic instancing of purely formalist innovation or a peculiarly American variation on a Dadaist anti-art program.

In further building on Williams's anxiety of influence with regard to Duchamp and the ready-made, the poet's late reflections on Poem XXII, as it was originally titled in *Spring and All*, provide a useful point of contrast to the power of selection emblematic of the ready-made act. Williams's recollections are at odds with the ready-made's highly conceptual methodology, which disregards both the context of the wheelbarrow's discovery itself and the potential aesthetic value of the appropriated object. In attempting to separate the poem from Duchamp's precedent, it proves useful to consider the circumstances surrounding the poem's origins, a context that illustrates Williams's thinking about the nature and aesthetic-value of the everyday object.

In a human-interest piece published in the November 1954 issue of *Holiday*, Williams explains the poem's beginnings. The article itself deals primarily with Williams's reflections on Rutherford and his life-long residency in the suburbs, as opposed to avant-garde capitals like Manhattan or Paris.¹⁰¹ In so doing, Williams again argues his life as a doctor afforded him certain advantages as a poet. On the other hand, it was on his frequent and quick trips into the

¹⁰⁰ For a thorough account of Williams's highly selective reflections on the poem and its composition, see Sergio Rizzo's "Remembering Race: Extra-poetical Contexts and the Racial Other in 'The Red Wheelbarrow.'" *Journal of Modern Literature*, 29.1 (Fall 2005), 34-54, hereafter referred to in the text by Rizzo, followed by the page number.

¹⁰¹ "Seventy years Deep" was published in *Holiday*, November 1954, Vol. 16, No. 5, 54-55, 78. The magazine, which was part of the *Saturday Evening Post*, ran from 1945 through 1977.

city that he encountered figures like “Gertrude Stein, one of the great individualists (who also studied medicine), Marcel Duchamp and Kay Boyle. They provided something I needed when I played hooky from my patients” (55). Though Duchamp is again mentioned within a long list of notables (that includes Malcolm Cowley, Maxwell Bodenheim, Marsden Hartley, Marianne Moore, and many of the other usual suspects he cites as signifying the artistic and cultural fervor of the times), Williams’s reference to Stein and her medical training indicates his belief that “to be a successful artist one must remain in touch with common people.” Williams continues, “to be a proper man, he [the artist] should be a well-rounded one . . . if I wanted to be a good writer that meant I had to work at the job [of medicine],” which later led him to establish “one rule about my writing—a rule that has never been broken: No matter what I was writing, my practice always came first” (55).

In these contexts, Poem XXII supplies an important example of how poetry emerges from practice—specifically, the observations Williams made while on his medical rounds—so that, as he explains it in the article, “together the doctor and the poet formed a whole.” Medicine becomes “food for my muse” (55) in poetry, and in the case of “Poem XXII,” Williams recalls a particularly meaningful visit with one of his favorite patients. He describes the poem as having

sprang from affection for an old Negro named Marshall. He had been a fisherman, caught porgies off Gloucester. He used to tell me how he had to work in the hold in freezing weather, standing ankle deep in cracked ice packing down the fish. He said he didn’t feel the cold. He never felt cold in his life until just recently. I liked that man, and his son Milton almost as much. In his back yard I saw the red wheelbarrow surrounded by the white chickens. I suppose my affection for the old man somehow got into the writing. (78)

Here Williams frames his inspiration for the poem within the context of his affection for Marshall, who worked under conditions that bordered on the extreme. Immersing himself in the

lives of his patients, Williams explains, helped “move me to sympathy as they have moved me to anger at the hard luck they have had to face, or laughter over how they have met it.” Williams concludes his commentary with a statement that suggests an empathy at odds with Duchamp’s cool indifference: “Medicine is an opportunity to see life in unpredictable ways [and] that is meat to the writer” (78). With this in mind, Williams describes how this unpredictability offered him access to

the most important, the most integral [scene] that it had ever been my pleasure to gaze upon. And the meter [of Poem XXII] though no more than a fragment succeeds in portraying this pleasure flawlessly, even it succeeds in denoting a certain unquenchable exaltation—in fact I find the poem quite perfect.¹⁰²

Thus, the poem’s perfection is intimately connected to the incidental occasion of the wheelbarrow’s discovery, Williams’s gazing out a window while discussing with Marshall the harsh circumstances of his working life. Though, like the ready-made, the red wheelbarrow underlines what Sayre describes as a “radical split between the world of art and the world of barnyards, between a world which crystallizes the imagination and a world which is a mere exposition of facts,” (66) the similarities in their respective methodologies might be said to end there. Rather than an invocation of anti-art, Williams equates the poem’s formalism with an “unquenchable exaltation” he links to the incidental glimpse, an affirmative celebration of an everyday, utilitarian object framed in the context of affectionate sympathy.

Duchamp’s innovation, by contrast, supplies a purely conceptual challenge to aesthetic convention and is, in John Roberts’ estimation, “disaffirmative and disruptive of prevailing notions of craft” (72). Though a more wide-ranging argument than I have the space to consider

¹⁰² Quoted in *Fifty Poets, An American Auto-Anthology*, Ed. William Rose Benet (NY: Duffield and Green, 1933), 60.

here, in relation to Williams's affection for Marshall, Roberts' view of the ready-made situates the innovation within "the historical tendency in [art] production towards the general lowering of all-round craft skills" that occurred in the twentieth century, a trend that reaches "its defining moment of self-reflection in Duchamp's readymades" (87). Within the arc of this lowering of craft, the ready-made exists as an inert and absurd anti-art object that Roberts argues provides a kind of "automaton-comedic-effect" (73). Conflating the ready-made and the red wheelbarrow obscures Williams's affection for Marshall and the context of its original discovery, all of which the poet argued helped to shape the formal precision of the poem itself.

In its untitled presentation, Poem XXII references the commonplace, "a red wheelbarrow" upon which so much is said to depend, positioning the observation about the everyday within a larger debate about innovations in content and form that *Spring and All* promotes. In its anthologized form, however, the titling of the poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" assists in what the original presentation of the poem must accomplish on its own, dynamizing a red wheelbarrow from everyday life into *the* red wheelbarrow in verse form.¹⁰³ In its original placement within *Spring and All*, this dynamization only occurs through the poem's lineation, a sentence broken into eight discrete lines that help to underline the everyday's migration from Marshall's yard into the field of the poem:

so much depends
upon

¹⁰³ Rizzo argues Williams's renaming the poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" in subsequent collected editions suggests a modification of how Williams may have initially conceived of the poem in the context of *Spring and All*'s prose poem. The "title's definite article indicates . . . Williams' ownership or authority, stating in effect: here is *the* red wheelbarrow I discovered and turned into "a red wheel / barrow." As Williams removes the poem from *Spring and All* and finds new contexts for it, he seeks to establish both his authority to speak for it, and more importantly, its authority to speak for him" (40).

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

(I 138)

Dividing the line at integral points splits compound words like *wheelbarrow* and *rainwater*, disrupting the sentence, while also mimicking the shape of the wheelbarrow on the page. In this sense, a tension exists between lineation and syntax, emphasizing the effect of the imagination on the material world. Though *Spring and All* was written, as Williams would recall, “when all the world was going crazy about typographical form . . . Chapter headings are printed upside down on purpose, the chapters are numbered all out of order, sometimes with a Roman numeral, sometimes with an Arabic, anything that came in handy,” the structure and form of the book’s best known poem appear anything but random, suggesting an interdependency and balance amidst the chaos of the prose passages (*IWtWaP* 37). To that end, the poem’s line breaks shatter continuities, while simultaneously approximating the apposition Williams views as emblematic of art in relation to the natural world. Disrupting the temporal stability inherent to the very act of reading, the poem provides one of the primary examples of the imagination’s power, what the prose passage following the poem characterizes as a rift or “cleavage [that runs] through everything by a force that does not exist in the mass and therefore can never be discovered by its anatomization” (I 139) alone. Breaking up the regularity of the line enacts the imagination’s power to render “the same thing” one finds in the world, “but in a different condition when

energized by the imagination” (I 138). The words Williams uses are generic (red, rain, white), but when linked to subsequent words in neighboring lines they assume their singular meaning within the poem. In much the same way, the first stanza provides a subjective abstraction as an introductory frame, followed by three stanzas of detail. This negotiation of abstraction and particularity creates a tension in the mind of the reader, who cannot resolve the mundanity of the materials found in the poem in the same way as they would if encountered in prose. All things in the poem (red, wheel, barrow, rain, water, chickens) are equal to one another. Democratizing the word then, is akin to democratizing the visual field, liberating the aesthetic space from external frames of reference. These details render the world new again and though intimately familiar, they suggest the everyday assumes a new value that transgresses traditional systems of hierarchy and meaning.

The central point here in distinguishing Williams’s troping of the found from Duchamp’s ready-made pivots on this notion of *change without difference*, a belief that any form of symbolic or figurative transformation in art elevates reality at the expense of artistic representation. Poem XXII suggests a poetic image might maintain fidelity to the world without elevating either the everyday or the aesthetic. Where metaphor deprives a word of its particularities, Poem XXII considers how each word possesses what he elsewhere describes as its own “inimitable particles of dissimilarity.” To that end, the wheelbarrow’s placement on the page emphasizes its composite parts—the *wheel* and its *barrow*, the *rain* and the *water* that glazes the scene. Though *Spring and All*’s prose passages never identify what the “different condition . . . energized by the imagination” might look like exactly, the poem’s minimalist rendering distinguishes Williams’s phenomenological notion of the local (and its concomitant call for contact) from the more

widespread regionalism then popular in America. Instead of focusing on provincial or indigenous details, the austere and almost monumental banality of Poem XXII encourages a relational effect through its typographical layout on the page.

As Williams's late recollections of the poem suggest, however, important details are suppressed in this concentrated focus, including all remnants of Marshall, the "old negro" who owned the red wheelbarrow,¹⁰⁴ a conspicuous absence in light of the contained order of the poem. In the wake of this absence, the poem mirrors the wheelbarrow's form on the page and disrupts the reader's ability to see beyond the text to the complex issues of race and class Williams appears, as very much a man of his times, ill-equipped to address. The otherness today associated with identity politics is displaced and in its place, the particularities of the present moment are filled with an austere aesthetic value. Williams does situate a tacit radicalism within the poem's formal innovation. Specifically, the poem's focus on specific details illustrates the imagination's power, which *Spring and All* associates with a revolutionary impulse to violently upend social and class-based hierarchies. The imagination strips away excess and artifice, heightening our sensitivity to a need Williams associates with the poor (though clearly not a low-income minority laborer) whose lack makes them more perceptually aware than the affluent. The rich are too deluded by their creature comforts to experience fully the immediacy of the present moment. To illustrate this heightened sense of awareness, Williams considers the case of Pio Baroja, a Spanish doctor-poet who gives up the cosmopolitan lifestyle his medical practice afforded him to open a bakery in Madrid, a change in perspective that allows him to partake in a

¹⁰⁴ This is Sergio Rizzo's argument.

“food [that] may be richer,” a sustenance Williams describes in formal terms as “the intricacies of the design patterned by . . . social class.”

In his description of Pio Baroja, Williams describes a more simple lifestyle that he characterizes as a kind of contented silence. The poor exist “without the power of expression,” and Williams views this lack as a paradoxical indication of their contact with the world. Like Homer and the ancients, the poor remain unified with the world and consequently, they are able to maintain the necessary “imaginative values” to lift the commonplace to a new aesthetic dimension (*I* 134).¹⁰⁵ Though a highly dubious form of rationalization for class-based inequities, Williams suggests desire and need remain perpetually unconsummated, a lack that heightens one’s appreciation of what already exists all around.

What interests me here, beyond the obvious parallels between Williams and Baroja’s careers as poet/artisans and doctors, is the aesthetic sensibility Williams associates with deprivation. Like A.E. Kerr’s “sobriety of design,” an unschooled or naive formalism that refuses to adhere to any established stylistic standard, Baroja’s life as a doctor-turned-baker gives him an appreciation of the world outside the hierarchies of convention. Baroja remains connected to the “everyday exercises of the most primitive types,” a perspective that allows him to indulge in more sensuous pleasures. This receptivity to pleasure and physical need aligns Baroja to a “PROGRESSIVE force” Williams associates with political insurrection, the very same social and labor-based movements that inspired the recent Russian Revolution, an

¹⁰⁵ Yeats similarly criticizes the stultifying effects of middle class or bourgeois sensibilities in relation to art, where the merchant or business class appear unable to see beyond their own petty self-interest as they “fumble in a greasy till / And add the halfpence to the pence.” Artistic genius and physical labor are guided by a similar sense of necessity. Rather than mere self-interest, genius is reframed as a form of dependency or need that allows one to experience the world more directly.

“ebullient” spirit that established a “relationship between genius [and] hand labor,” a sensibility generally lacking in the “feeling between artists and the middle class type.” Unlike the merchant-class or the cultural elite, whom Williams characterizes as “hibernating, unmagnetized,” the “social” and working classes recognize what is truly at hand and move freely between the world of “fact and the imaginative reality” Williams argues sustains art and poetry.

To illustrate this revolutionary potential, Williams frames the heightened sense of immediacy around the physical sensuality of the erotic. The potential Williams associates with the erotic is essential to Poem XIX, which describes the bravado of “boys fifteen and seventeen” who “wear two horned lilac blossoms / in their caps—or over one ear” and are unrestrained and direct in expressing their physical need. Those “drivers for grocers or taxi-cab drivers / white and colored” make unapologetic contact with the world in ways that an isolated artist (Duchamp?) or academic (Eliot?) cannot. These ruffians, who “let their hair grow long / in a curve over one eye—“ function as “dirty satyrs,” unabashedly aroused embodiments of the poet who, as a burlesque “vulgarity,” loiters in doorways “on the business streets” with “a sneer / on their faces” (*I* 136). These street toughs break apart bushes in pursuit of blossoms to affix to their caps or tuck behind their ears, a liberated attitude that allows them to give “dark kisses” to “rough faces” (*I* 136).

Like the “Black eyed Susan” Williams uses to close the book, these figures remain “rich in savagery” through an elemental form of desire intimately bound up in a physical need that always resists containment. Thus, according to the undeceived imagination, figures like the “Black eyed Susan” exist as both an ethnic or gender-based other—an “Arab / Indian / dark

woman”—and a common garden flower.¹⁰⁶ The poem maintains a radical space of both likeness and opposition. The concluding poem in *Spring and All* reads:

Black eyed susan
rich orange
round the purple core

the white daisy
is not
enough

Crowds are white
as farmers
who live poorly

But you
are rich
in savagery—

Arab
Indian
dark woman

(I 151)

Black eyed susan’s ambiguity allows subject and object to exist in a space between identity and pure difference. Without “overwhelming the object in an agonistic act of romantic identification” (Bremen 60), this image approximates a difference that cannot be fully contained or assimilated. The focus of praise, the “you” who “are rich / in savagery,” resists reduction, a quality central to *Spring and All*’s artist-farmer who stands apart, “composing / —antagonistic” in relation to the world, maintaining the subject-object split that functions at the very center of the troping of the found. This gap encourages a liminal freedom, conceiving of a “world detached from the necessity of recording it” that the poet has “bitter and delicious relations with”

¹⁰⁶ This is Brian A. Bremen’s point. See 60.

(I 121). The world exists outside the transfigurative potential of art, redefining the creative act as a notion of “change without difference, because any difference between reality and the imagination’s presentation of reality would automatically mark the latter as an inferior copy.”¹⁰⁷ The most direct way of avoiding this degradation is found in the found, a resistance to artifice that makes no claims of expressing anything beyond itself.

This passive resignation to the found is expressed in another stand-in Williams uses for the artist, the jazz musician whose improvisations are constantly evolving and subject to change. Improvisational discovery exists entirely in the present moment, and for Williams, the jazz musician works between convention and inspiration, rigorously reworking extant themes in the extemporaneousness of his playing. Consequently, the jazz musician deplores those who rely on precedent, the “sheet stuff” of prior musical compositions. Utilizing slang associated with the culture of jazz, the poem describes those who adhere to convention as “a lot a cheese”; by contrast, the imagination operates outside of these limits, seeking out “the key // and lemme lose— / I make ‘em crazy // with my harmonies.” This freedom to discover what might be found in the creative act indicates the poet-subject is liberated from representational precedents, for its “Nobody / Nobody else // but me— / They can’t copy it” (I 130-131). Williams’s reliance on the found suggests something similar, where the black eyed susan and the red wheelbarrow are nothing, nothing beyond what they appear to be, resisting being copied on the page. It is this resistance that generates value within the *objet trouvé*.

¹⁰⁷ Allen Dunn, “Williams’ Liberating Need,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 16.1 (Summer 1989), 55.

Conclusion: *Photographing a photograph*: Williams, Smithson, and a New Jersey Alternative

Many of the poems Williams completed in 1917 prior to *Fountain*'s scandalous debut assume the form of didactic speeches to his "townspeople," portraits of the working-class, ethnic minorities, or depictions of modern, corrupted landscapes, a cultural field James Clifford equates with the very condition of modernity, finding oneself "off center among scattered traditions . . . since the condition of rootlessness and mobility he [Williams] confronts is an increasingly common fate."¹⁰⁸ In looking back on *Al Que Quiere!* Williams describes the poem as a form of discovery within these unstable environments, a distinctly American alternative to both European tradition, and as I have already argued, the egotism of the ready-made. For Williams, this aesthetics of the everyday begins with a consideration of the common objects and local landscapes that others fail to recognize as worthy of value. This beginning insists on an ontological continuum between poetry and nature that throws into doubt the mediating role of the poet.

In justifying the foreign titles and traditional poetic forms he continued to rely upon in *Al Que Quiere!*—especially the Latin title in the opening poem, "Sub Terra"—Williams acknowledged a lingering insecurity in his desire to establish a distinctly American aesthetic. During this period Williams describes his ambition to unearth the poet (and the poem?) he considered already embedded in the American landscape, percolating with a potential waiting to be exposed:

¹⁰⁸ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 3.

I thought I was contemptuous of Latin but I suppose I wanted to appear as a Latin scholar which I was not. The idea of the poem ["Sub Terra"] is this. I thought of myself as being under the earth, buried in other words, but as any plant is buried, retaining the power to come again. The poem is Spring, the earth giving birth to a new crop of poets, showing that I thought I would some day take my place among them, telling them I was coming pretty soon. (*IWtWaP* 21)

Many of the poems in *Al Que Quiere!* center on this instant of revelation in which common observations and encounters assume a new and meaningful value at odds with convention.

These poems also suggest an aesthetic already exists buried or embedded in the landscape. To illustrate this point, Williams describes the period leading up to the book's publication as one of intense struggle to find a suitable form for this inchoate poetics, admitting how at this stage of his career he was still too dependent on poetic precedent for his voice. This lingering dependence on tradition is most clearly evident in the "Pastoral" poems. In referencing the pastoral tradition, Williams recognized his own sense of difference in relation to precedent, having

read translations of *The Odes of Theocritus* and felt myself very much attracted by the pastoral mode. But my feeling for the country was not as sophisticated as the pastorals with their picturesque shepherdesses. I was always a country boy. To me the countryside was a real world but nonetheless a poetic world. I have always had a feeling of identity with nature, but not assertive; I have always believed in keeping myself out of the picture. (*IWtWaP* 21)

Williams's desire to make contact with his local landscape is framed around an ambiguity he conceives as endemic to his own unique relationship to place, and the region around Rutherford, which is described as problematizing the binaries that structure so much avant-garde art. This is a terrain that is simultaneously "real" and "poetic," a simultaneity made evident throughout Williams's mature work, in his attempt to interweave Paterson, the place, into *Paterson* the poem. In writing this late work, Williams conceives of the poet as a kind of reporter who merely

relays the news of the day. Williams describes his research and writing this way: “I started to make trips to the area. I walked around the streets; I went on Sundays in summer when the people were using the park, and I listened to their conversation as much as I could. I saw whatever they did, and made it part of the poem.”¹⁰⁹

This complex matrix of the real and the poetic explains Williams’s appeal within twentieth-century poetry, his reputation as both an “academic” and an “avant-garde” poet, a popular and high modernist, as well as his historicization as both a modernist and a proto-post-modernist. On the one hand, the poet aims to identify objects from the natural world that strike in him a deep and sympathetic chord, material that would help galvanize an emerging literary nationalism during the 1920s. On the other, this sympathy for the objective world must never go so far as to colonize or reify an image or object within a poem. The poet-subject must maintain a non-assertive distance from the objective field. Williams’s refusal to fully integrate the objective and the subjective is realized in the “pastoral” poems. These poems provide an early (and ultimately unsuccessful) example of the poet’s attempt to absent his subjectivity from a depicted scene in favor of the found. These poems also develop a uniquely American variation on the picturesque, an alternative that would be more radically articulated some fifty years later in a series of excursions Robert Smithson made into New Jersey, as he, too, explored the landscape of his native state, including Rutherford, the home of his childhood pediatrician, William Carlos Williams.

For Smithson, these excursions provided a potential alternative to the culture of the

¹⁰⁹ For background on this strategy as it relates to *Paterson*, see Margaret Lloyd Bollard’s “The ‘Newspaper Landscape’ of Williams’ *Paterson*,” *Contemporary Literature*, 16.3 (Summer 1975), 317-327.

gallery and museum dominant in Manhattan, a means of counteracting what he viewed as the “Hardcore modernism” of Picasso and Matisse, as well as the “antidemocratic intelligentsia” he associates with Wyndham Lewis, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and T.E. Hulme (Flam 161). Williams plays an integral role in Smithson’s establishment of this alternative, while also offering a recuperative alternative to early Dadaism, which Smithson claims destroyed art only to quickly re-establish in its place its own mystical (anti-)aesthetic order. From their aesthetic negation, these Dadaists founded

their own religion, thinking that everything was corrupted by commercialism, industry, and bourgeois attitudes. I think it is time that we realized that there is no point in trying to transcend those realms. Industry, commercialism, and the bourgeoisie are very much with us. And this whole notion of trying to form a cult that transcends all this strikes me as a kind of religion in drag. (Flam 312)

In counteracting this mystification of art, Smithson returns to a place he considers uncorrupted by prevailing intellectual and artistic conventions. In so doing, he names Williams as integral to his investigation of place:

I guess the Paterson area is where I had a lot of my contact with the quarries and I think that is somewhat embedded in my psyche. As a kid I used to go and prowl around all those quarries. And of course, they figured strongly in *Paterson*. When I read the poems I was interested in that, especially this one part of *Paterson* where it showed all the strata levels under Paterson . . . Later on I wrote an article for *Artforum* on Passaic which is a city on the Passaic River south of Paterson. (Flam 285)

Smithson, like Williams before him, argues this kind of wandering through the landscape, provided him with a perspective outside prevailing notions of the aesthetic. In December 1967, Smithson’s “Monuments of Passaic” was published in *Artforum* and documents, in writing and photographs, a random tour of Passaic’s industrial landscape, an environment he terms “anti-romantic,” full of “memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures” (Flam 72). In the essay, New

Jersey's archaeology and geology are described as containing premonitions of a future aesthetic alternative the artist-subject identifies in his self-led tour of the region.

Smithson opens his essay by recounting some of the stories and headlines he scans while looking over that day's *New York Times* on a bus bound from Port Authority to Passaic. In doing so, he develops a form of travel in which he constantly situates himself and the aesthetic against an idealized standard or absolute. In perusing a newspaper (inside of a travel essay) as his bus makes its way through the landscape of New Jersey, passages from his reading inform his narrative and help to mark his progress, including announcements for upcoming art shows and a column on "Themes and the Usual Variations," by John Canaday, an excerpt of which is included in Smithson's essay in the form of a poor newsprint reproduction of Samuel F. B. Morse's "Allegorical Landscape." From the start of the essay, the relationship between the picturesque and the allegorical is foregrounded, and Smithson characterizes his own experience traveling as contrary to "allegorical representatives of the arts, science and [the] high ideals that universities foster" (Flam 69).¹¹⁰ Against the backdrop of aesthetic tradition, Smithson describes how

My eyes stumbled over the newsprint, over such headlines as 'Seasonal Upswing,' 'A Shuttle Service,' and 'Moving a 1,000 Pound Sculpture Can Be a Fine Work of Art, Too.' Other gems of Canaday's dazzled my mind as I passed through Secaucus. (Flam 69)

The combination of Smithson's movement on the bus and his movement through his reading materials supplies another example of poetic drift that approximates the diversions of Williams's

¹¹⁰ On Smithson and the picturesque, see Ron Graziani's "Robert Smithson's Picturable Situation: Blasted Landscapes from the 1960s," *Critical Inquiry*, 21.3 (Spring 1994), 419-451, which aims to locate the success of Smithson's art through reattaching it to the classic aesthetic categories of the picturesque-sublime. Granziani's argument attempts to separate Smithson's work from the critics associated with *October*, which from its inception, has used his work to establish and illustrate their theoretical concerns.

indeterminate strolls or drives through Rutherford, happening upon scenes and snapshots of events already said to contain an aesthetic value, whether monumental or mundane, prior to their discovery.

As Smithson's bus turns off of the highway and into Rutherford, he glances at another purchase he made while at Port Authority, a science fiction novel by Brian W. Aldiss: "I read the blurbs and skimmed through [Aldiss'] *Earthworks*. The first sentence read, 'The dead man drifted along in the breeze.'" *Earthworks*, Smithson explains, is a dystopian novel that focuses on the manufacture of artificial soil, a necessary new industry that is crucial to the survival of the planet after an environmental crisis has laid waste to the earth. As Smithson glances out the bus window, the rhetoric of science fiction informs his observations. Smithson notes, "The sky over Rutherford was a clear cobalt blue, a perfect Indian summer day, but the sky in *Earthworks* was a 'great black and brown shield on which moisture gleamed'" (69). This slippage between the textual and the actual is central to Smithson's perspective on New Jersey. Shifting from the landscape found in the printed texts to scenes unfolding outside the windows of the bus ("...a Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge flew by—a symphony in orange and blue") establishes a dynamic interplay between two corresponding realities that can never be completely reconciled.

The first scene that Smithson encounters upon departing the bus on his walking tour is described as already a work of art. At the corner of Union Avenue and River Drive, Smithson encounters a "cinema-ized" or "over-exposed *picture*" in the form of a bridge spanning the Passaic River (just a few miles downstream from the waterfalls that open *Paterson*), which he documents with his Instamatic 400, as if "photographing a photograph." What are we to make of this leveling of the two realms—between nature and its representation? For Smithson and for

Williams, the boundary between objects in life and objects in print appears unstable, porous, and slippery.¹¹¹ The “over-exposed *picture*,” the first monument Smithson passes, is a rotating bridge, and as he watches and snaps photographs, a barge approaches that appears “fixed to the surface of the water.” Because of its limited movement on a central axis that rotates North to South, then East to West, the bridge is described as a “Monument of Dislocated Directions” that suggests an “outmoded world” that echoes the future and fallen landscape Aldiss invokes in his novel. The significance of this monument for Smithson’s work is its materialization of the process of entropy, whereby a closed and rational system breaks apart to reveal the impossibility of maintaining order or a stable perspective from which to *look* or *move* backwards. As a commentary on the past and on art history, entropy offers Smithson a construct through which to approach the predicament facing all art objects. But this monument also speaks to an interest both Smithson and Williams had in how the everyday and overlooked might help excavate a future aesthetic borne out of the disintegration or crystallization of energy channeled into common sights and everyday forms. For Smithson, entropy would be most dramatically realized in the crystal formations and experiments with asphalt and glue he would pour down the side of a hill, while Williams’s interest in the everyday focuses attention on the broken miscellany and contiguous forms encountered within the local landscape around Rutherford.

¹¹¹ This is Clark Lunberry’s argument in “*So much depends*: Printer Matter, Dying Words, and the Entropic Poem,” *Critical Inquiry*, 30.3 (Spring 2004), 627-653. In his analysis of William’s influence on Smithson, Lunberry focuses almost exclusively on *Paterson* to argue “Williams speaks of language itself as a slippery medium or untrustworthy tool, addressing directly the dilemma of applying words to ideas, thought to things. At first, he appears to partially acknowledge the difficulty of his own stated task of ‘locating’ and knowing the city, as he makes specific reference to the limits of language and just what carefully crafted words and sentences might finally (or not) be able to convey. He speaks again and again of language’s intractability, its resistance to retention . . . But looked at more closely . . . the restraints and limits spoken of and described are almost always directed towards ‘they’ and ‘them,’ *others* for whom the language is scattered and unavailing” (630).

In 1973, two months before his untimely death, Smithson granted an interview to Alison Sky in which he attempts to describe entropy's relevance for art, a value that helps establish a peculiarly American aesthetic in opposition to the timeless monuments of the museum.

Smithson offers the following commentary to illustrate what he champions as entropy's power, rather than a more idealist conception of the gesture in art evident in Action painting:

O.K. we'll begin with entropy. That's a subject that's preoccupied me for some time. On the whole I would say entropy contradicts the usual notion of a mechanistic world view. In other words it's a condition that's irreversible, it's a condition that's moving towards a gradual equilibrium and it's suggested in many ways. Perhaps a nice succinct definition of entropy would be Humpty Dumpty. Like Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty back together again. There is a tendency to treat closed systems in such a way. One might even say that the current Watergate situation is an example of entropy. You have a closed system which eventually deteriorates and starts to break apart and there's no way that you can really piece it back together again. Another example might be the shattering of Marcel Duchamp's Glass, and his attempt to put all the pieces back together again attempting to overcome entropy. (Flam 301-302)

Williams describes the early avant-garde as predicated on a similar kind of egotism, a desire to overcome or transcend the limits of convention. In the "Prologue," Williams describes how Arensberg and Duchamp championed novelty as the primary criteria in defining innovation, whereby anything that assumes an unusual or shocking presentation carries within it some kind of aesthetic value. According to Williams, Duchamp and Arensberg viewed art as capable of transcending the entropic limitations of the natural world, elevating the human hand and mind over the transfer and decay of energy. When he was almost seventy, Duchamp would articulate this position directly, claiming that art "is the only form of activity in which man shows himself to be a true individual" and it is only through these creative acts that "he [is] capable of going beyond the animal state . . . toward regions which are not ruled by space and time" (quoted in

Tomkins 12). In the “Prologue,” Williams recounts Arensberg expressing precisely this point: “the only way man differed from every other creature was in his ability to improvise novelty” (I 8). Williams continues, “according to Duchamp, who was Arensberg’s champion at the time, a stained-glass window that had fallen out and lay more or less together on the ground was of far greater interest than the thing conventionally composed *in situ*” (I 8).¹¹² For both Williams and Smithson, Duchamp’s *Large Glass* suggests the bravado and egotism inherent in early avant-garde innovation.

In opposition to this idealism, both looked to the products and effects of industrialization as manifestations of an entropic force associated with an ideology of progress, as well as an anticipation of the inevitability of decay that might be uniquely viewed as an American alternative to the European avant-garde. Though Williams was responding to the beginning of a century that would be defined by its industrial advancements and Smithson was, in many ways, addressing its aftermath, both considered this landscape a democratizing force to open their respective media to a new aesthetic potential.

Smithson describes bulldozing machines that sit inert alongside the road as “prehistoric creatures trapped in the mud, or, better, extinct machines” that embody the ambiguity in creating something “new” that already contains within it the entropic seeds of its eventual disintegration. Smithson conceives of this simultaneity in the very real, unreal, almost hyper-real scenes associated with photography and film. To this point, Smithson describes New Jersey as capable of producing and manufacturing an autotelic art:

¹¹² Though Duchamp was at work on *The Large Glass* from 1915-1923, it was not shattered until 1926, while in transit from its exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, well after Williams had made this comment.

Actually, the landscape was no landscape, but ‘a particular kind of heliotypy’ (Nabokov), a kind of self-destroying postcard world of failed immortality and oppressive grandeur. I had been wandering in a moving picture that I couldn’t quite picture... (Flam 72)

Depicting the landscape unfolding in front of him as scenes captured in a heliotype,¹¹³ Smithson is able to situate the aesthetic in the space between real and artistic objects, while never allowing either reality to subsume its “other.” In another instance, Smithson describes a series of industrial pipes gushing water into the Passaic River. He compares this “Fountain Monument” to a “monstrous sexual organ” captured in the moment of orgasm, but then doubles back on his metaphor, stating, “I will not draw such a crass anthropomorphic conclusion. I will merely say, ‘It was there’” (Flam 71). Countering traditional views of Duchamp’s *Fountain*, which many in the early avant-garde (including some of Duchamp’s closest friends) praised for its evocative and anthropomorphic connotations, Smithson refuses to let his “Fountain Monument” bend in the direction of the Surreal, psychological or figurative.¹¹⁴ To that end, Smithson’s declaration, “It was there,” qualifies the transfigurative power of art.

Although Smithson names the industrial structures he encounters “monuments,” it is more accurate to think of them as “anti-monuments” or “new monuments,” as he referred to them in the essay “Entropy and the New Monuments,” written in 1966. On the subject of Smithson’s use of the term monument, Thomas Crow writes:

“Entropy and the New Monuments” signaled the direction Smithson’s own work would take as it moved not just off the pedestal but eventually out of the gallery altogether. Given his fascination with entropy and its implications, it seems ironic that the monument was another concept he continued to investigate in various forms; however, the traditional monument merely provided a point of departure for Smithson to explore his

¹¹³ A heliotype is a photomechanically produced plate for pictures or type made by exposing a gelatin film under a negative, hardening it with chrome alum, and printing directly from it.

¹¹⁴ On *Fountain*’s early reception, see *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*, by Rudolf E. Kuenzli, Francis M. Naumann (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 86.

fascination with time on a scale that surpassed the human and encompassed the geological past and science-fiction future.¹¹⁵

These anti-monuments, parts and pieces of the industrialized landscape of New Jersey, stand as uniquely American forms in contradistinction to the celebrated European monuments positioned inside of the museum. Where museum monuments accrue value through the mere passing of time, Smithson's anti-monuments challenge art history, as seen in a sign he spots along the highway in Passaic that announces "YOUR HIGHWAY TAXES 21 AT WORK," followed by the amount of money invested in the New Jersey highway system, an accumulation of funds he suggests "seemed to contain *ruins in reverse*." That is, the *sign* makes tangible in monetary terms (which are themselves semiotic abstractions) the new construction New Jersey intends to build, the rhetoric of "progress" politicians and urban planners reference that will eventually fall into decay. Describing this conflation of past and future in detailing Passaic's present, Smithson details how these signifiers of progress mark "the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin before they are built" (72). Ultimately, these *ruins in reverse* have no past upon which to project a romantic ideal, making them obsolete even before their realization. It is this notion of an anticipated obsolescence that makes the monuments of the Passaic so intriguing as a model for Smithson's artistic practice. This self-reflexive acknowledgment of art's limits and nature's entropy provides a useful perspective through which to return to Williams's early and ambiguous attempt to position American poetry in relation to literary and artistic precedent.

¹¹⁵ Robert Smithson, with texts by Eugenie Tsai, Robert Smithson, Cornelia H. Butler, Thomas E. Crow and Alexander Alberro (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), 21.

* *

The first “Pastoral” poem (“When I was younger”) anticipates the challenge Smithson’s monuments offer to traditional art and the value of entropy in understanding art’s relation to the natural world. In this poem, Williams juxtaposes one perspective, “When I was younger,” with a more experienced view that comes with being “Older now.” Within this temporal frame, an ordering technique that posits a new urban pastoral mode against tradition, Williams establishes the beginning of what would become a life-long commentary on the everyday. Focusing on banal details that others refuse to recognize or “believe” to be “of vast import to the nation,” this poem’s rhetoric of discovery anticipates the limitations subsequent artists would attempt to place on Duchamp’s ready-made method. Where conventional pastoral works eulogize a pre-lapsarian existence in which humanity and the environment appear unified, an elegiac evocation of a lost order, Williams’s poems are unequivocal celebrations of a fallen, industrialized present. In relation to Duchamp, these “Pastoral” poems emphasize the poet-subject’s lack of control and passive resignation to the world, identifying a beauty that Williams describes as available to the artist, only “If I am fortunate,” in the highly idiosyncratic and elusive details of a scene.

Like “The Right of Way,” the first “Pastoral” poem details an aimless walk through the “back streets” of “makeshift” slums of the urban poor, settings Jacob Riis famously chronicled in his photojournalism. Instead of a shepherd longing for a lost object of love, in Williams’s variation on the pastoral, a seeing-subject, whom we can presume from his commentary in the poem is familiar (though clearly not intimate) with this environment, contemplates the aesthetic value within the urban slum:

admiring the houses
of the very poor:
roof out of line with sides
the yards cluttered
with old chicken wire, ashes,
furniture gone wrong;
the fences and outhouses
built of barrel-staves
and parts of boxes, all,
if I am fortunate,
smeared a bluish green
that properly weathered
pleases me best of all colors.

(*CPI* 64)

In this passage, details and objects emerge, one by one, like a photograph coming into focus. Rather than a pattern of stresses or metric regularity, an accretion of details creates a rhythmic movement within the poem, reflecting the randomness of the walk itself and the disorder of the structures described. This is an environment “gone wrong,” that has undergone change through time and neglect. Williams’s listing of a misaligned roof, cluttered yards, chicken wire, broken furniture, etc., re-enact a seeing-subject’s movements, observations that exist entirely on a literal, rather than a metaphoric, level. This world coming into focus surrenders the poem to a reality wider and more expansive than the narrator’s ability to express it, what might be understood as the threat of the eye overwhelming the expressive capacity of the subjective “I.” This qualification on the adequacy of poetic expression is important to both “Pastoral” poems. Broadening the pastoral to include this entropic field implies poetic language has fallen sway to the found. Thus, the poem tries to indicate, rather than illuminate, its subject matter, arguing that one can demand order and simplicity from imagery and symbolism, but not from reality.

As a suburban doctor working in the early twentieth century, Williams's relationship to the pastoral suggests the poem's material can never entirely be the poet's own. This is most dramatically evident in the makeshift structures that have acquired their beauty through variables that remain outside one's control. The poem focuses particular attention on a "bluish green" paint that Williams feels "fortunate" in discovering, a color only "properly" realized through time and environmental factors. These contingencies are formally emphasized through the poem's enjambment, where each successive line relies on the next for its semantic fulfillment and syntactic closure. Thus, locating an "aesthetic" value within discarded objects "gone wrong" suggests the troping of the found is entirely dependent on a natural, fallen, and organic beauty that can not be reproduced.

Where an actual image or object is typically given authority or prestige over its representation, this poem is structured around a disorder that resists containment. With this tension in mind, the poem concludes,

No one
will believe this
of vast import to the nation.

(CPI 65)

Early critics like James Breslin and Rod Townley suggest that including this tag at the end of the poem indicates Williams had not yet figured out how to let readers discover, on their own, the beauty inherent to the found. Consequently, the poem relies on a subjective frame that his later work—most radically realized in the disjunctive, paratactic techniques of *Spring and All* and *The Descent of Winter*—would attempt to withhold altogether. In short, this "Pastoral" poem appears unable to cede the guiding force of the poet's subjective presence.

The second “Pastoral” poem (“The little sparrows”) also utilizes this subjective frame in its investigation of the everyday. Where the first poem utilizes time as a means of developing perspective, this poem ironically positions “wiser” and esteemed figures from culture against an elusive beauty that exists all around us. This poem presents a man who “goes about / gathering dog-lime” in opposition to “the Episcopal minister / approaching the pulpit / of a Sunday.”

Where the minister’s purposeful approach remains fixed on literal and metaphysical ends (a telos Williams emphasizes syntactically through the period and end-stop that concludes the poem’s first verse paragraph), the old man’s search for dog-lime corresponds with the indecipherable and ambient sound of the little sparrows.¹¹⁶ In this sense, the wandering man upsets stable foundations (embodied in the Episcopal minister) through the randomness and banality of his pursuit.

As is the case in the previous “Pastoral” poem, Williams stops short of explicitly naming this autochthonic value, declaring instead “These *things* / astonish me beyond words” (emphasis mine). These vaguely defined “things”(the sparrows? the man?) underscore a negative urgency evident in much of Williams’s poetry from this period, an instability syntactically rendered in the final couplet’s primary verbal form, “astonish,” a word that suggests understanding is always already outside the exacting specificity of language. Yes, “These things / astonish me beyond words,” but the poem never names *what* or *why* that is, a neglect that returns the reader’s attention to the seemingly random details presented earlier in the poem. Again, this urgency is evident in the sounds of the “little sparrows” that “hop *ingeniously* / about the pavement”

¹¹⁶ Townley provides useful insights on how the poem was transformed through multiple drafts to emphasize the distinction between religious authorities and the prosaic activities recounted throughout. See 78-81.

(emphasis mine), an artlessness that suggests nature offers an “aesthetic” that cannot be contained in formal artifice, refusing to be anthropomorphized or fully understood.

In terms of the alternative for art Smithson aimed to establish in identifying the monuments of Passaic, the “Pastoral” poems problematize simple reductive understandings of the very tradition Williams invokes in his title. With regard to this challenge, Williams’s “Pastoral” poems provide a useful example of those counter-histories Deleuze and Guattari identify as deviating from officially sanctioned standardized languages, literatures, and sciences they associate with institutional power. Deleuze and Guattari label these deviations as “minor” literature. “Major” languages, literature, and science maintain hegemony, whereby subjectivity is positioned beneath a monarchical system of power. The minoritarian is not so much inferior to this power as it is marked by radical difference. A minor literature is political, collective, revolutionary and spatially indeterminate—deterritorializing one terrain as it maps out another. Williams’s view of America as a post-industrial shanty-town splits open the majoritarian pastoral mode, a deviation I extend to his larger troping of the found in which any object within an assemblage carries its own agency and power. No centralized subject governs a minor literature. Instead, collective assemblages of enunciation help to establish what Deleuze and Guattari consider a revolutionary force or potential condition. They cite Kafka as a primary example, a writer who “deliberately kills all metaphors, all symbolism, all signification.” Against Foucault’s “historian’s history,” Deleuze and Guattari argue that minor histories, like Williams’s “Pastoral” poems, siphon off the major, following a trajectory “between points in a different direction that [now] renders them indiscernible”; in other words, though Williams’s “Pastoral” poems borrow from the pastoral tradition, they offer an important “variation . . . an amplitude

that continually oversteps the representative threshold of the majoritarian standard, by excess or default.”¹¹⁷ Operating on the margins of a major movement, genre, or style, minor histories open categories to significant heterologies of difference. In the context of the “Pastoral” poems, this amplitude is most clearly evident in the materialist and non-figurative excess of “the yards cluttered,” the “outhouses / built of barrel-staves / and parts of boxes,” those makeshift forms that constitute the landscape of the urban poor. Opening the pastoral to the corruption of this entropic decay suggests the by-products of the industrialized world are potentially aesthetic, a force that Deleuze and Guattari contend “runs between points in a different direction that renders them discernible.”

This notion of a historical presence as a historical remainder counters the dualist thinking that limits inquiry, the either/or, institutional/anti-institutional, high/low binaries that render Duchamp’s ready-made meaningful. Situating the pastoral within this ever-shifting matrix suggests that an aesthetic can be located in a “continuous variation” that exists outside the art/non-art binary. These slums, what might be seen as the by-products of American progress, function as anti-monuments both culture and conventional aesthetics fail to recognize, tributes to northern New Jersey Smithson would celebrate as the entropic landscape of art’s future. For Smithson this landscape reworks conceptions of the “natural” world that complicate those who see the modern or technological as an oppositional or antagonistic force in relation to the pastoral or picturesque. In a late essay entitled “Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape” (1973), Smithson explores how the nineteenth-century landscape architect re-evaluated nature’s

¹¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 106. On the “minor,” see Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 16-27; Deleuze and Guattari, “Control and Becoming,” in *Negotiations, 1972-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 173-174; and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 100-110, 291-298, 362-374.

relationship to the urban environment, acknowledging the city park as part of nature—as a constantly evolving reflection of change. Thus, Smithson views pollution and decay as bound up in this new pastoralism:

Modern day ecologists with a metaphysical turn of the mind still see the operations of industry as Satan's work. The image of the lost paradise garden leaves one without a solid dialectic, and causes one to suffer an ecological despair. Nature, like a person, is not one-sided.

Central Park in the 1970s provides Smithson with an instancing of how degradation functions as an essential part of nature, which the artist views as “a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region” (Flam 160). Here Smithson echoes Williams, expressing a desire to accommodate and acknowledge change within the natural world. In opposition to the conservationists, Smithson finds an aesthetic value in how

the Ramble [in Central Park] has grown up into an urban jungle, and lurking in its thickets are “hoods, hobos, hustlers, and homosexuals,” and other estranged creatures of the city.... Walking east, I passed graffiti on boulders... On the base of the Obelisk along with the hieroglyphs there are also graffiti. ...In the spillway that pours out of the Wollman Memorial Ice Rink, I noticed a metal grocery cart and a trash basket half-submerged in the water. Further down, the spillway becomes a brook choked with mud and tin cans. The mud then spews under the Gapstow Bridge to become a muddy slough that inundates a good part of The Pond, leaving the rest of The Pond aswirl with oil slicks, sludge, and Dixie cups. (Flam 169-170)

While Smithson does not push so far as to find “beauty” in the park's degradation, he does see it as evidence of a continuous transformation of relationships between the artist and the natural world, a position Williams also considers central to his rethinking of poetic agency.

* * *

In his “Introduction” to *The Wedge*, a lecture the poet gave at the New York Public Library on October 26, 1943, Williams supplies a useful counterpoint to the oppositional ambitions of the early avant-garde. Williams expresses hope that future poetry might discover a way around the binaries and oppositions that structure art and thought through the obfuscation of the poet-subject’s mediating position within a creative act. In so doing, the poem as a series of glances, evident in his work from the 1910s and 1920s, now becomes the poem conceived as a machine made of words.

Williams begins his lecture with an admission that, during a time of war, art and poetry must first acknowledge its overall inadequacy in relation to historical reality. Both Williams’s sons were serving in the South Pacific, and war had become for the poet, and his audience, the “first and only thing in the world today.” Some twenty-five years after Dadaism’s sensational proclamations, Williams concedes that poets and artists must, above all else, not forward an aesthetic of pure negation but acknowledge the difficulty in producing any work at all in the wake of these horrors. With this reality in mind, Williams contends poetry must not deny these difficult social realities, but offer a “different sector of the [same] field.” In light of these representational ambitions, language must function as a wedge capable of opening consciousness and *disabling* habitual ways of seeing—a view evident in the poet’s original intention to title the book *The (lang)wedge*. According to this idea, language stimulates the reader’s awareness, unsettles those conventions that close off art and poetry from the everyday. Though he does revert, in part, to more conventional avant-garde military metaphors in which, as Paul Mariani suggests, “his poems form[] the advance columns moving against the reactionary and entrenched

powers of the establishment” (483), the essay’s primary focus is on the power and relevance of poetry to make contact with the world. This struggle shares in the intensity but not the intention, or aim, of military conflict.

In re-channeling the militancy of the early European avant-garde, Williams conceives of an artist/poet guided by forces that remain largely outside his or her control. Rather than pushing culture forward, challenging the bourgeois art object and the ideologies that help to sustain it, the artist must remain embedded within culture, attuned to its aberrations and imperfections.

Williams warns against those who separate themselves from common culture, whether through the reactionary politics of his friend Ezra Pound (there were then rumors that Pound would be hung for treason once the war was over) or the hermetic silence of Duchamp. Echoing the Futurist’s enthusiasm for the machine, Williams details a passive form of artistic subjectivity, contending

All that an artist or a Sperry can do is to drive toward his purpose, in the nature of his materials; not to take gold where Babbitt metal is called for; to make: make clear the complexity of his perceptions in the medium given to him by inheritance, chance, accident or whatever it may be to work with according to his talents and the will that drives them.” (SE 256-257)

Yes, the artist—like the Sperry car—operates in front of other rail cars, as a mobile wedge clearing the path, locating obstructions, weakened or cracked rail lines, in advance of a commuter or freight train. Associating the artist with this defensive form of exploration suggests the aesthetic remains attuned to the defects and abnormalities inherent to life in the language that is available, to “make clear the complexity” of one’s “perceptions in the medium given to him by *inheritance, chance, accident*” (emphasis mine). Artists exist at the forefront of culture but only insofar as that position allows them to fully engage the mainstream, taking up “Babbitt metal”

instead of a more idealized form, confirming what is verified through experience, rather than imported from beyond it. Williams hated the elitism he considered, rightly or wrongly, characteristic of modernist literature—its horror at the unruly messiness of real life and his use of the colon in this quote syntactically underscores poetry’s provisional relation to reality. Williams posits art, not as an ordering system, but as a desire to engage that which already exists, to “make: make clear the complexity of his perceptions in the medium given to him.” This repetition of the primary verbal form *to make* implies a stuttering doubt that qualifies artistic agency. In short, Williams asks how can one *make* anything new in a world already filled with aesthetic value? Moreover, how can one create work beyond the accidents one’s culture, personal experience, and the limits of one’s talent impose?

In answering these questions, Williams’s poetry in the early 1920s relies on a troping of the found that conceives of the poet/artist as creating nothing entirely new at all, taking what is already readily available. Thus, along with the cautionary roving of the Sperry car, the poet’s representational ambitions are conceived as a kind of theft:

When a man *makes* a poem, *makes* it, mind you, he *takes* words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them—without distortion which would mar their exact significances—into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses. (emphasis mine, *SE* 257)

According to Williams’s formulation, a poem is equally valid whether *taken* or *made*. The resources a poet “finds . . . interrelated about him” provide the primary method and means used in drafting a poem. This qualification, as I have argued throughout this study, guides Williams’s experiments, as well as those in the visual arts that rose up in response to Duchamp’s precedent.

Williams's relation to the early avant-garde in New York inspired him to rethink the aesthetic value of those environments and places that others had failed to document in art and poetry, most expressly the landscape of the everyday that, he suggests, contains within it a found aesthetic potential. For Williams, this troping of the found assumes both a public and a highly personal relevance. In his "Introduction" to *The Wedge*, he disapproves of those Freudian critics who reduce art to a psychological "resort from frustration . . . The making of poetry is no more an evidence of frustration than is the work of Henry Kaiser or of Timoshenko. It's the war, the driving forward of desire to a complex end" that more accurately supplies evidence of psychological frustration (*SE* 255). By contrast, the arts must maintain a complex and more fluid relationship to society, and "There need be nothing limited or frustrated about that . . . Let the metaphysical take care of itself, the arts have nothing to do with it" (*SE* 256). To illustrate art's independence from the burdens of metaphysics, Williams views the modern poem as distinct from the expressionist and sentimental model of art. "There's nothing sentimental about a machine," Williams proclaims, and "[a] poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there's nothing sentimental about a poem I mean that there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant." Language discovered in the world provides each poem with its unique singularity and in this sense, the environment breeds poetic content, while the artist/poet struggles to contain these elements in a shape that maintains and accentuates its own objective agency.

Williams's sense of isolation from the early avant-garde, as I have suggested throughout this study, his recognition of the inherent value his life in New Jersey and medical career provided him, suggests the material for one's work exists all around if one remains open to it.

Throughout the early 1920s, Williams made radical attempts to locate this inherent value, what he describes in *The Great American Novel* as a uniquely idiosyncratic “Representative American verse,” an avant-garde poetry that might “appear new to the French . . . prose the same” (167)—in other words, to *out avant-garde* the French avant-garde. In the place of the precedents Mallarmé, Baudelaire, and after 1915, Duchamp helped to establish, all of which relied in some capacity on the banal and familiar as a challenge to habit and the legacy of the Romantic artist-subject, Williams forwards a more empathetic treatment of the everyday.

It is this unsentimental sympathy towards the natural world that also shapes Smithson’s critique of Duchamp and Conceptual art, especially those practices from the 1970s that utilize the process-based formulations the ready-made helped to establish. For Smithson—and for Williams, too—the ready-made extends a mechanistic world-view that colonizes nature and our observations in the “creation” of an art object. Smithson views his art as maintaining an “unresolvable dialectic” with the natural world, which posits that an art object never exists in isolation.¹¹⁸ Smithson viewed Sol Lewitt and Conceptual art as furthering a Cartesian worldview, a calculated rationalist paradigm that exists in counter-relief to Williams’s notion of the poem as a machine made of words inter-related about him. Lewitt famously defined Conceptual art as machine that follows a course wholly independent of the artist-subject, in which

decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman. It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to become emotionally dry. There is no reason to suppose, however, that the conceptual artist is out to bore the viewer. It is only the expectation of an emotional kick, to which

¹¹⁸ This is Robert Hobbs’ term for Smithson’s aesthetic.

one conditioned to expressionist art is accustomed, that would deter the viewer from perceiving this art. (Harrison and Wood 834)

Though Williams also wanted to free art from expressionist paradigms in which subjectivity dominates and colonizes the representational and conceptual field, he acknowledged the influence of the local as paramount to the poem. In Lewitt's model, an idea moves the machine of art. For Williams, the machine is made of words, discovered or found, and finally, shaped into form.

Smithson argues Williams's use of New Jersey offers contemporary art a means of bypassing Duchamp's cynicism and irony, especially as manifest in the absurdity of conceptual art, a position I hope will become central to future inter-art studies of Williams's work. For Smithson, Duchamp and the ready-made embody an ego-based problem that Williams's poetry largely avoids. In criticizing Duchamp's attitude, Smithson characterizes the French artist as "amused by a certain kind of American naïveté, and he [Duchamp] constantly makes references to certain functional aspects, like the statement about his being impressed by American plumbing and that sort of thing. That seems to me a kind of inverted snobbism." Smithson views this elitism as a "very laborious, opaque, and humorless [attitude] so that when you get somebody like Duchamp who is putting forth the whole art notion of the amusing physics or the gay mathematics, or whatever you want to call it, I am not amused. It is a kind of Voltairean [*sic*] sarcasm at best" (Flam 312).

This irony provides an uneasy fit for the empathy I associate with Williams's troping of the found, his poetic machine made of words that faithfully appropriates language he encounters *inter-related* about him. Though many of the innovations in art created after Abstract

Expressionism re-directed Duchamp's methods toward new social, cultural, and conceptual ends, Smithson would apply Williams's model to qualify (and contain) what the artist viewed as the only options the ready-made leaves for future art. On the one hand, an artist can join Duchamp's church of irony and become "a spiritualist of Woolworth" or follow Warhol's example and conceive of art as a commercial form of manufacturing, which eventually "leads to a kind of Cartesian abyss" (Flam 311). Both avenues utilize a mystification of the everyday that Williams and Smithson call into question.

Smithson, like Williams before him, had one infamous encounter with Duchamp in which the younger artist asked a question regarding the artist's attitude in relation to the material world, a query that I offer to those future studies that continue to position Duchamp as a primary influence on the development of Williams's objectivist poetics. Smithson ran into Duchamp in 1963 at an opening held at the Cordier-Ekstrom Gallery on Madison Avenue. As was the case with Williams, this brief exchange provides another example of Duchamp's terse irony and intellect. Smithson describes the exchange this way: "I just said one thing to him, I said 'I see you are into alchemy.' And he said, 'Yes.'" (Flam 312). This notion of alchemy as a stand-in for art suggests Duchamp acknowledged a belief that art is capable of transforming the world, transfiguring base and corrupted matter into gold, an impulse both Smithson and Williams cautioned against in their respective interest in the elemental and the everyday. The transmutation of common metals into gold symbolizes an evolution from an imperfect, diseased, corruptible and fallen state towards a perfect, ideal and everlasting condition; the artist or philosopher's stone represents a mystical key that makes this alchemical principle possible.

Within the legacies of modern art and Williams studies, Duchamp is often thought to be the possessor of that key.

Over time, Williams's initial curiosity about Duchamp and the expatriated avant-garde was displaced in favor of a belief that art might faithfully track transformations already in progress out in the world. The poem's appropriation of language and scenes already inter-related about him demonstrates the dialectical relationship between inside and outside, the textual and the actual, nature and culture, image and thing that Williams remained committed to throughout his mature work, a receptivity to the world and a notion of self-surrender at odds with the charlantry one might associate with alchemy. Williams does not want to transform the world through language. In fact, the limits of language carry within it a restorative potential in which the immanent materiality of the word provides the structural equivalent of what is already available to us in the world, a potential just waiting to be found.

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Appendix

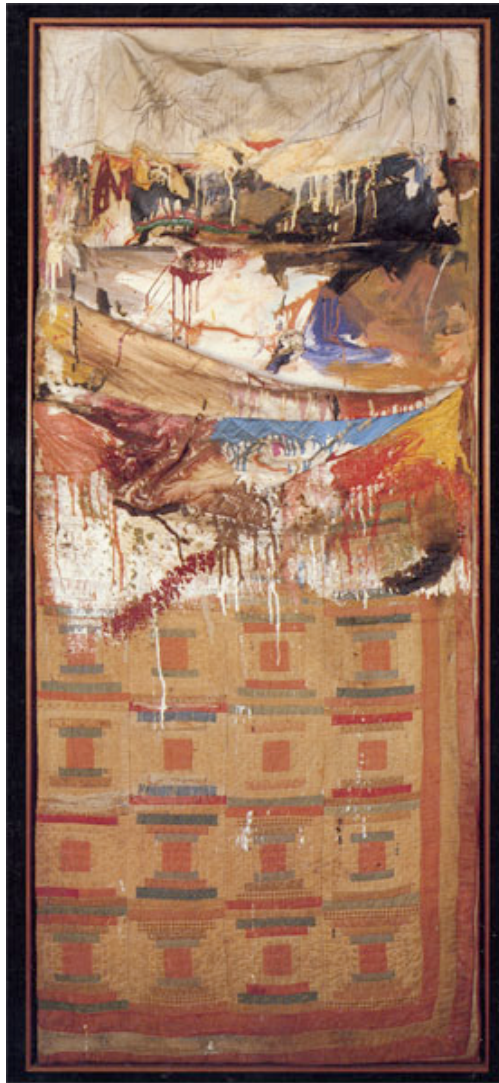


Figure 1: Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955.

SUBSTRATUM	
ARTESIAN WELL AT THE PASSAIC ROLLING MILL, PATERSON.	
The following is the tabular account of the specimens found in this well, with the depths at which they were taken, in feet. The boring began in September, 1879, and was continued until November, 1880.	
DEPTH	DESCRIPTION OF MATERIALS
65 feet. . .	Red sandstone, fine
110 feet. . .	Red sandstone, coarse
182 feet. . .	Red sandstone, and a little shale
400 feet. . .	Red sandstone, shaly
404 feet. . .	Shale
430 feet. . .	Red sandstone, fine grained
540 feet. . .	Sandy shale, soft
565 feet. . .	Soft shale
585 feet. . .	Soft shale
600 feet. . .	Hard sandstone
605 feet. . .	Soft shale
609 feet. . .	Soft shale
1,170 feet. . .	Selenite, 2 x 1 1/16 in.
1,180 feet. . .	Fine quicksand, reddish
1,180 feet. . .	Pyrites
1,370 feet. . .	Sandy rock, under quicksand
1,400 feet. . .	Dark red sandstone
1,400 feet. . .	Light red sandstone
1,415 feet. . .	Dark red sandstone
1,415 feet. . .	Light red sandstone
1,415 feet. . .	Fragments of red sandstone
1,540 feet. . .	Red sandstone, and a pebble of kaolin
1,700 feet. . .	Light red sandstone
1,830 feet. . .	Light red sandstone
1,830 feet. . .	Light red sandstone
1,830 feet. . .	Light red stone
2,000 feet. . .	Red shale
2,020 feet. . .	Light red sandstone
2,050 feet. . .	
2,100 feet. . .	Shaly sandstone
At this depth the attempt to bore through the red sandstone was abandoned, the water being altogether unfit for ordinary use.	
. . . The fact that the rock salt of England, and of some of the other salt mines of Europe, is found in rocks of the same age as this, raises the question whether it may not also be found here.	

Figure 2: William Carlos Williams, “Substratum,” from *Paterson*.



Figure 3: Robert Smithson, *A Nonsite, Franklin, New Jersey*, 1968.

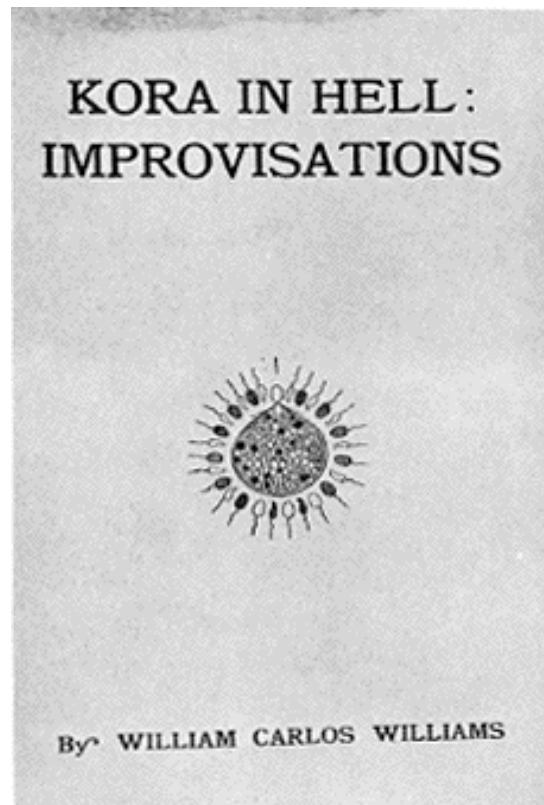


Figure 4: Cover for William Carlos Williams's *Kora In Hell: Improvisations*, 1920.

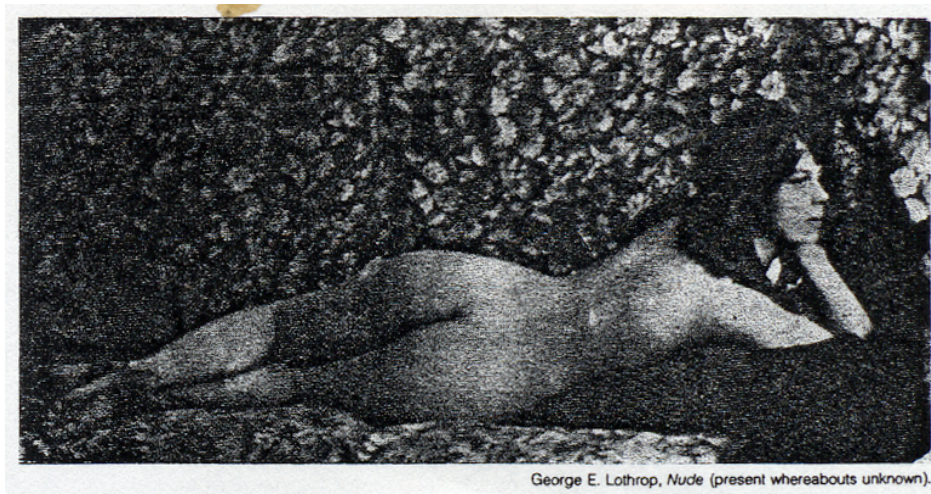


Figure 5: George E. Lothrop, *Nude*, 1917.



Figure 6: Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917.

Vita

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