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# THE STRUCTURE OF PERCEPTION IN THE POETRY OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

## A Stylistic Analysis

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### I

Perception played a key role in the aesthetics of William Carlos Williams. But, of course, the idea that art ought to concentrate on the authentic rendering of the object in all its immediacy and particularity goes well beyond Williams and, indeed, well beyond poetry as an art form. The authentic rendering of the perceived object is one of the wellsprings of art, and has played a central role in many critical theories. Let me take one instructive example, among many: Victor Shklovsky, the great Russian Formalist critic and writer, added to the importance of the perceived object in art his notion of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization, "making strange"), and concluded that:

[. . .] art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony* (Lee and Reis 1965:12).

Williams, also, wanted to make the stone *stony*. He also saw a crucial link between the object, perceived as "an arrangement of appearances, of planes," and supra-individual human emotional states and experiences. And Williams too added an additional notion to the importance of the perceived object in art, this was his famous concept of "local consciousness." Let me quote Bram Dijkstra on this point:

Williams saw one's immediate environment, one's "locality," as the only source of that universal experience which, he thought, "great" art expresses. Such universal experience was communicable only on the basis of an authentic perception of the objects of the material world, which, he reasoned, could only stem from an accurate representation of the things we know, the things with which we are intimately familiar: the "sensual accidents" bred out of "the local conditions which confront us" (Dijkstra 1978:8).

It is a commonplace for artists and critics both to point to the

importance of the authentic rendering of perceived reality in art. Yet we know little about the dynamics of *how* this is done, whether it be in a poem or an impressionistic painting. Indeed, we do not, as of yet, have much of an understanding of the *differences* each art medium imposes on the process, nor of the specifics of what different media have in *common*.

Given the perceptual bent of much modern poetry, it is not uncommon to see discussions of the relationship between poetry and painting. This is particularly true for the poetry of William Carlos Williams. Almost all critics have conceded a close connection between Williams's poetry and the visual arts, and it has been claimed that "he was largely trying to do in words what the painters were doing with paint on canvas" (Dijkstra 1978:2).<sup>1</sup> And it is not hard to find corroboration for this view, or something approaching it, in Williams' interviews and writings.

Williams's relationship to the aesthetics of the image — the perceived reality — and his connection to the painters are both intimately related to his views on the formal nature of poetry. Williams insisted upon the importance of the structural organization of objects, as well as upon the perceptual integrity of the perceiver and poet. But the poem is also a thing, and Williams insisted likewise upon its structural and perceptual integrity. If it was through attention to structural organization that the poet conveyed the meaning and aesthetic value in things, so also it is by attention to structure that the reader constructs the meaning and aesthetic value of the poem. Williams was clear on the point:

I was tremendously involved in an appreciation of Cezanne. He was a designer. He put it down on the canvas so that there would be a meaning without saying anything at all. Just the relation of the parts to themselves. In considering a poem, I don't care whether it is finished or not; if it is put down with a good relation to the parts, it becomes a poem. And the meaning of the poem can be grasped by attention to the design (Sutton 1961).

What I want to study here are the specifics of how perception is actually worked out in the art medium of poetry, in particular, in the art of William Carlos Williams. And Williams himself gives us the key as to how this can be done, namely, by attention to design. Thus, stylistic analysis, the study of the structure and design of art works, and the relation of structure and design to meaning and aesthetic effects in art, should be able to serve our critical aims here, to explicate the structure of perception in the poetry of William Carlos Williams. In doing so, it ought also to throw light on several areas of

1. Dijkstra cites some of the literature dealing with the close connection between Williams's poetry and the visual arts, though perhaps the most strongly argued case is that in Dijkstra's own book *Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams: The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech* (1969).

critical concern, including the relationship between poetry and painting in their mutual concern for the authentic and fresh rendering of perceived reality.

## II

I will look at three poems, all of them quite famous, and all written at about the same point in Williams's career: "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923), "The Great Figure" (1921), and "Spring and All" (1923).<sup>2</sup> More general conclusions stemming from the particular discussion of each poem will be reserved for the final section of the paper. It should be clear that any very explicit or rigorous answers to general critical concerns about the medium of language for art, the nature of Williams's perceptually based (and, to a certain extent "imagistic") poetry, or the relationship between poetry and other art forms can only be based on a detailed and specific understanding of what actually happens and how it happens in the particular art we are interested in critically discussing and generalizing from.

I will start with the much commented on poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow":<sup>3</sup>

### THE RED WHEELBARROW

so much depends  
upon  
a red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain  
water  
beside the white  
chickens

Below, I present a marked-up version of the poem for the purpose of our discussion. In the marked-up version I use *S* for a strong stress, *M* for a somewhat weaker stress, and *u* for a still lesser stress or no stress:<sup>4</sup>

2. "The Great Figure" is from *Sour Grapes* (1921), the other two poems are from *Spring and All* (1923).

3. In the original edition of *Spring and All*, the poems did not have titles, but were given Roman numerals. The Titles were added in *The Collected Earlier Poems* (1951).

4. The first line can be read in a variety of ways, different readers choosing to emphasize "so," "much" and/or "depends" to varying degrees and in various ways. I have marked a neutral reading of the line, though certainly "so" has more stress, or can have, than "a" in line 3 or "with" in line 5, for example. See also the analysis of this poem in Ramsey (1968: 198–208). Ramsey gives more stress to "white" than to "chickens," which could occur only if "white" were functioning as a restrictive modifier here ("the white as opposed to some other sort of chickens"). I see no reason to believe this.

line		stresses/syllables	
1.	u M u S so much depends	2	4
2.	u M upon	1	2
3.	u M S a red wheel	2	3
4.	M u barrow	1	2
5.	M u S glazed with rain	2	3
6.	Mu water	1	2
7.	u M u S beside the white	2	4
8.	S u chickens	1	2

The poem has a very distinctive rhythm, which is largely determined by the amount of patterning in its formal features. The lines alternate in stresses 2121, etc.; every second line is a two-syllable word. The opening pair and the closing pair of lines are 42 in syllables; the middle pairs of lines are 32. Each long line ends on an S stress, which is preceded in the same line by an M stress and followed in the next line by an M stress, except for the last line, which closes itself and the poem on an S stress. Each short line, save line 2, is trochaic in rhythm. The poem has, thus, a quite structured prosody, as betokens Williams's concern with the structural organization of objects (including poems). Just as the perceptual field is a tightly organized array of light — the organization conveying meaning — so too the poem is a tightly organized array of structured language, the organization conveying meaning, significance, aesthetic effect. And as in the visual field, so here too the patterning is composed from several different intersecting lines of different sub-patterns of structure.

There is, in fact, a basic rhythmic unit in the poem, it is composed of two-line units of the form:

u M u S / M u

But, it turns out, no two lines of the poem actually fit this pattern. The poem simply uses the pattern above as an abstract design it aims at, but always purposefully misses.

lines 1 & 2:      u M u S / u M  
 lines 3 & 4:      u M    S / M u  
 lines 5 & 6:      M u S / M u  
 lines 7 & 8:      u M u S / S u

Basic Pattern:    u M u S / M u

Williams's doctrine that in grasping a particular object in all its immediacy we can come into contact with something universal or supra-individual is, in many ways, a paradox. It is interesting, therefore, to note that this paradox works itself out in one way in the prosody of this poem. There is an underlying pattern in the poem, a universal aspect, but the poem in all its particularity never conforms to it, but rather in the particularity of its every part it gestures to that pattern. It is in the context of the basic pattern that the particularity of the poem makes rhythmic sense. Furthermore, the basic pattern fits a basic curve of emotion, a balanced slower rise (u M u S) and a quicker falling off (M u).

But primarily, it must be said that there is in line, stress, and syllable much more intricate pattern, and play against pattern, that makes up the particular identity, the particular physiognomy, of *this* poem — surely an aspect of its thinghood that, given Williams's aesthetic, we dare not ignore. Indeed, the poem is, formally, an integrated structure with its own perceptual integrity and particularity, much like the objects it depicts.

Within this tight structural frame of the poem, another, more dynamic, linguistic structure is unfolded, a structure that renders exactly the process of perception of the red wheelbarrow within its perceptual setting. Unfortunately, to see this more dynamic structure consciously we must stop a moment to make some important grammatical distinctions, or rather some distinctions that are grammatical in a broad sense.<sup>5</sup>

First, we can make the distinction between *abstract* and *concrete* language, the former about the non-corporeal, non-material in this world, the latter about corporeal and material substances and bodies. Next, the distinction between the *non-specific* and the *specific*: If I say "John wants to marry a Frenchwoman if he ever meets one," "a Frenchwoman" does not stand for any specific person, while if I say "John kissed a Frenchwoman," "a Frenchwoman" does indeed stand for a specific woman. The sentence "John wants to marry a Frenchwoman" is ambiguous, since, depending on context it may mean he wants to marry a particular Frenchwoman or that he wants to marry someone French whoever it may turn out to be. Finally,

5. The existence of the distinctions I will make is in each case widely agreed to by linguists. How each fits into an overall theory of language is a point of more contention.

the distinction between *indefinite* and *definite*: A definite noun phrase is marked with a definite determiner (“the,” “this,” “that” for example) and usually picks out *given information*. Given information is information that has either previously been mentioned in a discourse or information that refers to something physically present in the context of a communicational exchange (or assumed to be known by all from a shared stock of cultural knowledge). Given information usually comes at the beginning of a sentence. Indefinite noun phrases are marked by an indefinite determiner (“a(n),” or “some” in some of its uses, or nothing). Indefinites usually mark nongiven, *new information* and occur after the given information in the sentence.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in the following sentence:

1. The white chickens were standing beside a red wheelbarrow.

the definite noun phrase “the white chickens” marks given, old information and occurs before “a red wheelbarrow,” which marks nongiven, new information. This is the preferred order of old and new information in the world’s languages. (1) is a rather neutral sentence that in all likelihood would occur in the middle of some discourse which has already involved, however indirectly, the white chickens. The reverse order, as in (2):

2. A red wheelbarrow was standing beside the white chickens.

is nonneutral and highlights the red wheelbarrow. If the information in (1) and (2) was all new and intended to start a discourse, we would use either (3) or (4), depending upon whether it was white chickens or a red wheelbarrow we were going to talk about:

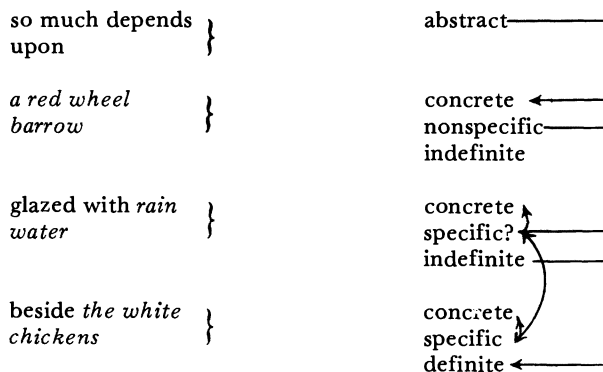
3. Some white chickens were standing beside a red wheelbarrow (and they . . .).
4. A red wheelbarrow was standing beside some white chickens (and it . . .).

Now, the grammatical excursus completed, back to the poem. The most noticeable thing about the poem is, of course, that the syntax is cut up and compound words are cut into or broken apart. This suggests that from the perspective of the fresh light after a rain, when our perceptual engagement with the world is quite keen, the components of our perception, the parts that normally form into larger schematic gestalts, stand out apart and new. Now while this suggests the content of the perception, it does not tell us the *how*, the

6. The notion of given and new information has played a large role in much recent linguistics and interacts with the notions of topic and focus. In a sentence like (2) below I would say that “a red wheelbarrow” is the topic, but is not old or given information, though some linguists want to reserve the notion of topic for old or given information. For a summary of some of the distinctions that can be made in this area, see Clark and Clark (1977: Chapter 1).

process, nor does it indicate the structural identity and integrity of the perception.

In fact, it is the grammatical distinctions we delineated above that key the dynamics of the perception here. The poem moves in an intricate step-by-step way from abstract, non-specific, indefinite language to specific, definite, concrete language (see chart below). Note too how the indefinite "a red wheelbarrow" precedes, and so is out of the normal conversational order with, the definite "the white chickens." Further, "the white chickens" is odd in conversational terms, as no chickens have been previously mentioned or indicated in the environment. Ironically, though, the red wheelbarrow has been previously mentioned, that is, in the title of the poem, where it has a definite determiner, yet the phrase, in the body of the poem, is marked with an indefinite determiner. But, of course, all this is as it should be, as this is not a piece of conversation or discourse, but rather the accurate rendering of a perception. In the perception, the red wheelbarrow is highlighted, and, furthermore, in such a perception we move from something new and not yet fully focused upon, not already given, to a rendering of it as "given" in a particular frame or context by perceptually having grasped it. In this poem, the perception dynamically gets more and more specific, concrete and definite, and eventually renders an object as "given" because now perceptually really present, or better put, now made present by our perceptual engagement. The title, then, states the *product*, what is "given," what is grasped, what is made, and therefore marked as definite, out of the dynamics of the perceptual process. The title is at the beginning, but it is really the end — the being able to make definite the red wheelbarrow.<sup>7</sup>



The specific/nonspecific distinction works in a particularly dynamic way here. The phrase "a red wheelbarrow" starts out as,

7. About the title of "The Red Wheelbarrow," see note 6 above.

at best, ambivalent. We can interpret it non-specifically as “so much depends upon any red wheelbarrow, or any other concrete object you should come upon” — and this could be a tenet in some theory of poetry or value, and in fact it was for Williams. Or it could be interpreted specifically as “so much depends upon a particular, specific red wheelbarrow.” We may very well initially take “a red wheelbarrow” as nonspecific (as in “a lot depends upon getting a good carpenter”) and, then, by the end of the poem reinterpret it as specific. This process is helped by the transition from “a red wheelbarrow” through “glazed with rainwater” to “the white chickens.” “Rainwater” is a mass term, the sort of term for which specificity or the lack of it rarely matters (any rainwater is as good as any other). The vividness of “glazed with rainwater” — the rain here is almost like an enamel glaze — causes us to consider reinterpreting “so much depends upon a red wheelbarrow” as specific, about a particular red wheelbarrow. This reinterpretation is clinched when we get “the white chickens,” which is clearly specific, clearly about some particular, given, white chickens. Thus, the red wheelbarrow gradually gets more and more specific, more and more focused in all its immediacy. Further, as we will see, it gradually leaves the domain of the language of talk about aesthetics and values to enter fully the domain of particularized depiction of specific realized objects. Of course, from the beginning there is a tension between the frame “so much depends upon,” which normally, starting a stretch of language, encourages nonspecificity, and the concreteness and vividness of “a red wheelbarrow,” which encourages, or makes us desire, the specificity we eventually achieve.

The movement from the abstract, nonspecific, indefinite to the concrete, specific, and definite enacts the process of focusing on components of the perceptual environment in a particular setting of fresh perception, as the immediacy and perceptual value of objects becomes clear. But, at the same time, by the end of the poem, the integrity of the whole is respected and authenticated as well.

Note too, then, that the poem moves from the language of *programmatic statement*, suitable for the statement of aesthetic ideologies, to the language of particularized, concrete perception — a movement which in fact enacts Williams’s aesthetic theory, at the same time as it enacts the aforementioned process of perception in a particular setting, in this case a setting of coming upon a fresh and new scene. And, indeed, Williams viewed it that he was “making it new” aesthetically too.

In the experience of perceiving a static object or set of objects — a still life — we have a constant, static structure (in the ambient light) coming from the environment and impinging on the perceiver. However, the perceiver’s process of focusing on and differentially bringing to awareness various parts and aspects of this static structure

is *dynamic*.<sup>8</sup> We extract information from the inexhaustible supply of information in the perceptual environment in a highly dynamic manner, especially when we do not come to our perceptual work in a routinized way. Williams's poem has exactly this overall structure also: a highly dynamic and developing process of language, a process focusing us more and more on the concrete, definite, and specific, works itself out in a constant, static, but highly intricate and organized prosodical structure. And this prosodical structure has the sort of intricacy and integrity, the sort of overlapping network of structures, that a visual field has, not just the simple recurrence of a metrical running rhythm. Just as in still-life perception there are two structures, the static structure of the organization in the visual field itself, and the dynamic structure of the perceiver's work, so in the poem there are two structures of language, the static structure of the organization of the prosody, and the dynamic structure of the patterning of different grammatical features of the language converging on the concrete, definite, and specific. So too, our perceptual work, when done in an authentic, nonroutinized way, converges on the concrete, definite, specific, palpable "stoniness of the stone."

### III

The second poem I will look at is "The Great Figure." Here Williams deals with perception differently; here we have not a still life, but rather the perception of objects in motion.

Below I reprint the poem and a marked-up version of it. In the accented version I mark major (strong) stress by "/." The symbol "/aI/" stands for the diphthong "I" in "lights," "five," and "fire-truck."

#### THE GREAT FIGURE

Among the rain  
and lights  
I saw the figure 5  
in gold  
on a red  
firetruck  
moving  
tense  
unheeded  
to gong clangs  
siren howls  
and wheels rumbling  
through the dark city.

8. For further remarks on the process of perception that are relevant here and elsewhere in this paper, see Gibson (1966), Gregory (1973), and Gregory (1970).

Among the rain /  
 and lights /aI/  
 I saw the figure 5 /aI/  
 in gold /  
 on a red /  
  
 firetruck /aI/  
  
 moving /  
 tense /  
 unheeded /  
  
 to gong clangs / /  
 siren howls / /  
 and wheels rumbling / /  
  
 through the dark city. / /

The poem is a good example of how in a free verse poem the rhythm can change quickly. In terms of its rhythm, the poem divides into three parts.

Lines 1–6 make up the first rhythmic unit (we will see that line 6 goes with two units). These lines (a) are basically in rising rhythm; (b) all contain one strong stress on the last syllable (in this case, the last word, since all of them are monosyllabic words) of each line, save line 6 (line 3 does, of course, have non-negligible stresses on “saw” and “figure,” but rises to its strongest and most prominent stress on the final word of the line, “5”); and (c) together make up three lines of iambic trimeter, with an inversion on the last foot of the last line:

U /            U /            U /  
 Among / the rain / and lights (/aI/)  
 U /            U /            U /  
 I saw / the fig/ure five (/aI/)

U / U U / / U  
 In gold / on a red / firetruck (/aI/)

Each of the lines above ends on an /aI/ sound (a diphthong), and each line is syntactically fairly closed, the first is a prepositional phrase modifier of the second line, and the third is again a prepositional phrase modifier of the second line.

As Williams breaks the lines in the poem, we get a strong stress at the end of each line, throwing emphasis on almost all the content words in the first part of the poem:

rain  
 lights  
 5  
 gold  
 red

Here "5" is embedded in a group of concrete terms standing for sensuous entities. These contrast with the numeral "5," written as a numeral and not a word, but at the same time lend it the sensuous character it takes on in the poem.

The /aI/ sounds and the syntax serve to make out and underscore the syntactic and rhythmic units in lines 1–3 above, while at the same time these iambic trimeters counterpoint the actual line endings.

The second part of the poem is made up of lines 6–9. Each of these (a) are one stress lines, (b) have basically a falling rhythm, and (c) together make up one trochaic tetrameter line:

/  
 firetruck  
 /  
 moving  
 /  
 tense  
 U / U  
 unheeded

/ U / U / U / U  
 firetruck / moving / tense un/heeded

Parts 1 and 2 turn on *firetruck* – it fills out the iambic trimeter of Part 1 and initiates the trochaic tetrameter of Part 2. The change in rhythm between Parts 1 and 2 is abrupt and striking – Part 1 makes us expect line 6 to be iambic; it turns out to be trochaic and to start another rhythmic section of the poem. But these two parts are also tied together, as each line from 1 to 9 has one major stress in it (with the possible exception of line 3 – "saw" and "figure"

have nonnegligible stress, of course, but not as much as “five”), though in 1–5 these stresses always come at the end of the line on the last syllable.

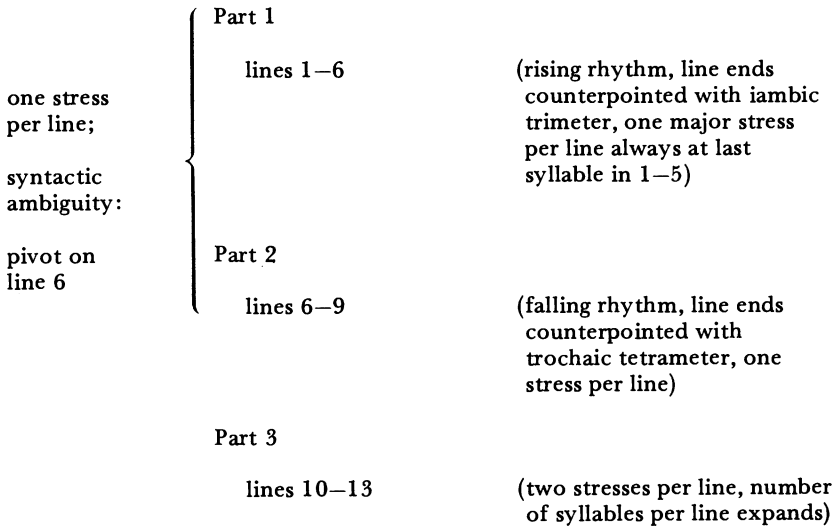
There is also a close syntactic tie between Parts 1 and 2. It is not clear in the poem whether Part 2 – “moving tense unheeded” modifies “firetruck” which initiates Part 2, or “the figure 5” in Part 1. Of course, it does not matter, as Williams wants the figure 5 and the firetruck to blend together, or rather for the figure 5, first seen as isolated from a background, to solidify onto the firetruck. But the ambiguity does tie Parts 1 and 2 further together.

The third part, lines 10–13, is made up of two-stress lines, in contrast to the rest of the poem:

to gong clangs	3 syllables
siren howls	3 syllables
and wheels rumbling	4 syllables
through the dark city	5 syllables

These lines do not approach any accentual-syllabic meter. The lines expand in length from 3 to 4 to 5 syllables. I will argue later that the last line is somewhat separate and achieves closure.

The rhythmic structure and rhythmic evolution of the poem is depicted in the diagram below:



The movement and dynamics of perception in the poem correspond to the rhythmic division above. Part 1 has to do with *vision*;

Part 2 has to do with *kinetic sensation* and *movement*. The two parts hinge on *firetruck*, which is the pivot between the two parts. Note that Part 1 contains the word "saw" and Part 2 the word "moving." As usual, rhythm supports meaning when meaning keys what support it needs. Vision and movement are also blended in Parts 1 and 2 (though they are also discrete) by the factors of stress and syntax which unite Parts 1 and 2.

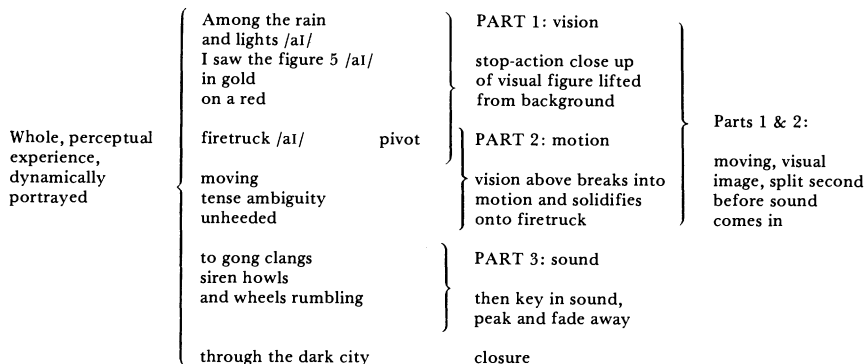
Part 3 is about *sound*. The rhythm changes to 2 beats per line, with no way to construct accentual-syllabic rhythms out of the lines. Internal sound effects in this part of the poem support the sensation of a loud, rapidly moving noise which changes qualities as it moves:

gong clangs (/gɑŋ klæŋz/)  
 siren howls (/saɪrən haʊlz/)  
 wheels rumbling (/hwɪlz rʌmblɪŋ/)

The /z/ sound runs throughout. In "gong clangs" we have an assortment of hard velar stops (/g/, /k/), which together with the /ŋ/ nasal produce a kinaesthetic and sound impression appropriate to the perceptual effect being elicited in the poem at this point. The hard consonants of "gong clangs" give way to the loud, long diphthongs of "siren howls" (/aɪ/ /aʊ/), the first diphthong has the tongue move rapidly to the front of the mouth, the second has it move rapidly to the back. As the truck recedes, we get softer sounds in the glide /w/ and the liquids /l, r/ of "wheels rumbling," though the /r/ contributes a bit of a roar and the labial stops /m, b/ contribute a bumping effect. The expansion in syllables of lines 10–13 also fits with the gradual recession of the truck and the dying away of the noise – the noise peaks at lines 10 and 11 and draws out and away in lines 12 and 13. The last line of the poem, "through the dark city," achieves closure for the poem. It is rhythmically in the third part of the poem, but it is about movement (*through*) – as in Part 2, and vision (*dark*) – as in Part 1.

This poem as a whole captures perfectly a specific perceptual situation. To start, a sight that is at first frozen and lifted from its background (by the rain and lights): *the figure 5*. Then, almost at once, movement – the figure is in motion and solidifies onto a moving firetruck. Thus, the stop-action close-up shot occurs for just a moment and then breaks into motion. Then, suddenly, a bit after the vision moves, the sound comes on, peaking, a bit out of kilter with the vision and movement, and then recedes into the dark of the city, as sight, movement, and sound all evaporate. Williams has captured the inner dynamics of the perceptual situation wonderfully, in quite a cinematic way:<sup>9</sup>

9. For the idea of cinematicity in literature, see Richardson (1969), and Spiegel (1976).



(Thematic structure of poem corresponding to rhythmic structure delineated in the preceding diagram.)

“The Great Figure,” thus, contrasts with “The Red Wheelbarrow” in its formal design. The latter contains a dynamic structure that works itself out inside a static prosodical structure. We said above that this befits the depiction of a still life. In “The Great Figure,” on the other hand, we have a dynamic thematic structure (of sight, sound, and motion) that is keyed to a dynamic prosodical structure, a prosodical structure that moves quickly from one sort of rhythm to another. This befits the depiction, not of a still life, but rather of the visual field transformed by motion, and of perception which is the product of several sense systems working separately and together in a complex way.

#### IV

“Spring and All,” one of Williams’ most famous poems, works quite differently from either “The Red Wheelbarrow” or “The Great Figure,” and yet bears very interesting relationships to them. “Spring and All” is not completely imagistic, containing a second half which, in a sense, comments on the first half. It depicts neither a still life, nor a visual array in motion, but rather a landscape. Furthermore, it focuses on the significance the perceiver draws from the landscape, as well as on the process by which the perceiver derives this significance through acute attention to what is really present, and regard for the ambivalence inherent in the details of this particular setting of late winter. The poem, thus, takes the rendering of perception one step further by getting us into the workings of awareness and the search for significance in the perceiver’s confrontation with the world of objects. It is not that Williams presents us with a landscape and tells us its meaning — he does no such thing — he presents us rather with the active process of a perceiver attuned to drawing meaning and significance from the perceptual environment.

## SPRING AND ALL

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, familiar 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

The poem starts out with two prepositional phrases (“By the road to the contagious hospital,” “under the surge of the blue mottled clouds driven from the northeast”). Following these introducing prepositional phrases, we expect to get an independent sentence. But we do not, rather we get, abruptly, “— a cold wind.” This image is thrust out at us. Next, after “Beyond,” we get a noun phrase (“the waste of broad, muddy fields brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen”). So we then expect to get a verb phrase to go with this noun phrase, to make up a sentence. Again, we do not. Instead, the stanza ends and we get a two-line follow-up that has no syntactic connection with anything. This projects at us these two lines: “patches of standing water / the scattering of tall trees.” In the next stanza, we find the same sort of thing. After “All along the road [. . .] with dead brown leaves under them,” we expect to get a verb phrase to make up a sentence. Instead we find the syntactically unconnected “leafless vines,” which is, thus, foregrounded for us. This means

that altogether the following images are projected at us in the first half of the poem:

*List A*

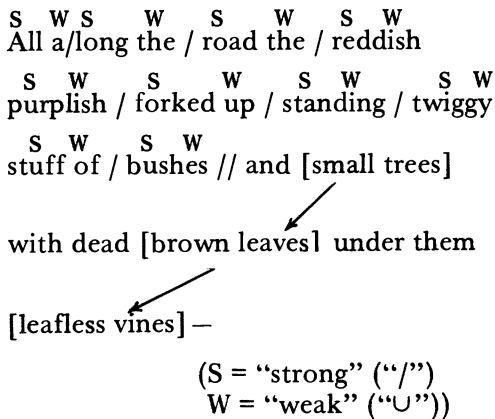
- A. a cold wind
- B. patches of standing water  
the scattering of tall trees
- C. leafless vines

Now, interestingly, if we look at the *internal structure* or pattern of each of the first two large stanzas, we get what amounts to the same result. Stanza 1 contains a set of parallel structures with two elements foregrounded by the fact that they “stick out” of the pattern by not fitting into it:

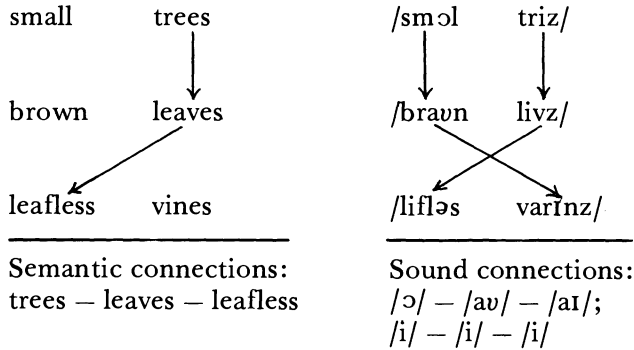
<i>Prep</i>	<i>Det Noun</i>	<i>Prep</i>	<i>Det</i>	<i>Noun</i>
1. [By	[the road]	[to	[the	contagious hospital] ] ]
2. [Under	[the surge]	[of	[the	blue] ] ]
<i>Modifier Noun</i>				
3. [mottled	clouds] //			[driven from the]
4. [north	east] //	a cold wind	//	[Beyond, the]
<i>Head</i>	<i>Prep</i>	<i>Adj</i>	<i>Adj</i>	<i>Noun</i>
5. waste	[of	[broad,	muddy	fields]
6. brown	[with	[	dried	weeds] // standing and fallen

Clearly, “a cold wind” and “standing and fallen” do not fit, while everything else matches up in some form. They are, thus, thrust out at us.

The second large stanza achieves a similar goal with different means:



This stanza contains two and a half lines of trochaic tetrameter and then sets up a parallel series of Adj + Noun combinations that move from the *right* end of line 11 to the middle of line 12 to the *left* end of line 13. These Adj + Noun constructions are related to one another in sound as well, through the vowel /i/ and other factors:<sup>10</sup>



Thus, this pattern culminates in the syntactically outcast “leafless vine,” foregrounding this image. This foregrounding is also aided by the word-play between “leafless” and “lifeless” (in the following line).

The internal structure of these lines, then, foreground the following, which should be compared to List A above:

*List B*

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| A. a cold wind<br>B. standing and fallen }<br>C. leafless vines | First Large Stanza<br>Second Large Stanza |
|---|---|

Clearly, the two lists are thematically the same. The second member of List A is not identical with the second member of List B, but they amount to the same thing. Furthermore, they amount to the same thing in a delightfully playful way that uses “standing” for two completely opposite meanings:

List B, second member:

- |                                   |
|-----------------------------------|
| standing (= upright/vertical) and |
| fallen (= down/horizontal)        |

10. The symbol “/ɔ/” stands for the vowel sound in “caught, pronounced in some dialects as /a/, as in *father*. The vowels /ɔ/ and /a/ sound similar and are similarly produced. The diphthongs /ʌv/ and /aɪ/ start with the sound /a/ and move, in /ʌv/, to /v/ (a vowel made in the high, *back* part of the mouth), and in /aɪ/, to /ɪ/ (a vowel made in the high, *front* part of the mouth). The symbol /i/ stands for the “ee” sound of *tee*. It is longer and tenser than /ɪ/, which is similarly produced. Compare the novel sound in *bit*, /ɪ/, with that occurring in *bead* – /i/.

## List A, second member:

patches of *standing* water (= down/horizontal)  
 the scattering of tall trees (= upright/vertical)

Thus, the foreground elements, in reality, are as follows:

- A. a cold wind
- B. upright/vertical vs. down/horizontal
- C. leafless vines

These three elements are crucial to the meaning of the poem.

At one level, "Spring and All" gives us a very traditional image in fresh terms: the promise of new life brought by Spring. The poem involves a contrast between the lifeless and the seemingly lifeless, between the *dead* and the dormant. The dormant, the seemingly lifeless, is epitomized in the poem by the "leafless vines / – Lifeless in appearance."

The down/horizontal and upright/vertical contrast is a thematic organizing principle of the poem and recurs in various guises throughout the poem. The down/horizontal stands for the posture of death and disease, but also it is the position that one can arise from after nourishing sleep or from which new life can come after the dormancy of winter. The upright/vertical stands for the posture of life, but it must be rooted and nourished to attain and keep life. The poem has several levels at which this imagery is relevant. The down/horizontal is quickened into new life, the dormant is awakened, by spring; the seemingly lifeless and drab environment of late winter is quickened into new life for our awareness through our renewed perception of the beauty that yet exists there if we but look – if our perceptual life is quickened into new life by our coming to really see our environment, to be rooted in it, in a fresh and new way.

The down/horizontal and upright/vertical contrast is one of the key foregrounded images from our list. The other two relate to it directly: the *leafless vines* are in fact a key to this contrast. A vine is a plant that can trail along the ground (down/horizontal) or climb upright objects (upright/vertical). The *cold wind* is double-sided too, it can be the winds of winter that chill and cause a cessation of life, or the breath of life that quickens things into new life ("the old familiar wind," line 19).

Let us look a moment at a few of the guises of the down/horizontal and upright/vertical contrast as it recurs throughout the first half of the poem. In the following citations from the poem all italics and interpolations in parentheses are mine and not from the poem. In the first stanza, we have "by the road (down/horizontal) to the *contagious hospital*," the nature of the hospital tainting this road. The "*mottled clouds*" pick up the suggestion of "contagious" and are also tainted with disease. Now, someone must be *by* the road

*under* the driven clouds. We must assume this to make sense of the opening of the poem. Thus, the persona/poet must be placed standing up (upright/vertical) beneath the horizontal, disease/death implicated road and sky. The upright poet, the human, waits amidst this scene of death for life, and, in part, receives it by seeing beauty even here, just as there is also, in reality, life here in this scene of death and dormancy, life waiting to reawaken. Next, we get "dried weeds" (dormant or dead) *standing* (upright/vertical) and *fallen* (down/horizontal). In the following two lines, we have "standing water" (down/horizontal), which is stagnant, dead water, and "tall trees" (upright/vertical). In the second large stanza, we get "All *along the road* [down/horizontal] [. . .] *upstanding* [upright/vertical] [. . .] dead brown leaves *under them* [down/horizontal]." Notice too how the description of what is all along the road is also tinged with the "contagious," "mottled" imagery: "reddish, purplish, forked twiggy stuff" — though it is "upstanding," still capable of life, and we can see also its beauty if we look. I have already alluded to the double nature of the "leafless vines," which live in both the down/horizontal and the upright/vertical domains. We can also note the double-sided nature of the word "leafless" that is played on here: it is like the word "lifeless," but not the word "lifeless" (many are tricked in reading the poem into thinking for a moment that the word is "lifeless"), just as the vines are only "seemingly lifeless," not in reality lifeless (we must pay close attention to the text to see that the word is "leafless" and not "lifeless," just as we must pay close attention to our surroundings to see that there is *life*, in several senses, where we thought we saw only lifelessness, because our perceptual life was itself lifeless).

The poem ends with three four-line stanzas. These stanzas are much less fragmented syntactically than the lines that precede them. And they have a completely different tone. In fact, they contain many complete sentences, and increasingly play a role for which complete sentences are well suited, namely discursive statement, in contrast to the imagistic structure of the preceding parts.

Each of these three concluding stanzas relates back to one of our key foregrounded images. The first ("They enter the new world naked, [. . .] All about them / the cold, familiar wind—") harks back to *the cold wind*. The second ("Now the grass, tomorrow the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf [. . .] outline of leaf") harks back to the *leafless vine*. The third and final one harks back to the upright/vertical — down/horizontal contrast: "[. . .] rooted, they grip down [down into the horizontal surface] and begin to awaken [come up]."

One can interpret these concluding stanzas in a number of compatible ways. Human beings "enter the new world naked" (line 16), and their "stark dignity of entrance" (lines 24–25) is down/horizontal (the position of death also, if we can make the traditional

womb-tomb association), but they are creatures that waken, live by standing up. And they will be "upright" provided they are "rooted" (given the proper sustenance, physically and morally). The dormant come alive amidst the lifeless, once the profound change of spring quickens their roots; the vines, being dormant, not lifeless, run along the ground and restore it, and climb upright with new vigor. And, yet again, our perception, if we see things with clarity and freshness ("clarity, outline of leaf" = outline of life), can quicken and renew our environment, can find beauty and life by the road to the contagious hospital. In the setting of this poem, the meaning of the cold wind is ambiguous, it is the wind of death and the wind of life. The image of "rootedness" is crucial also to the poem, as is the play of "down" as "down along or in the ground, flat" (the posture of death) against "down" as "down in the ground rooted and standing up" (the posture of life — but the vines can deceive us). The vertical is quickened, the horizontal begins to climb, only by being rooted, by taking root in the profound change of spring. I should point out also that the notion of "rootedness," if viewed as meaning something like taking sustenance from a local environment, was an important part of Williams's aesthetic view of the poet and poetry. He, indeed, thought that both needed to be so nourished.

"Spring and All" has, like "The Great Figure," a highly dynamic, changing prosodical structure. Like both "The Red Wheelbarrow" and "The Great Figure" it has a dynamic thematic structure, as diverse details of the environment are presented one after another (we have not devoted much space to this). But unlike both our other poems, "Spring and All" also has a certain static aspect to its thematic structure: it focuses and refocuses on three foregrounded elements and is ultimately built out of a pervasive use of a contrast between the upright/vertical and the down/horizontal dimensions. In a sense, the welter of perceptual details dissolves into planes and lines in relation and the significance the perceiver draws from planes and lines in relation.<sup>11</sup> This all befits the depiction of a landscape, especially a landscape confronting a perceiver attuned to drawing an overall significance from its details, in that an everchanging, spatially diverse surface is integrated as a whole by being part of an overall structure composed of interlocking relationships and recurrent subpatterns both in perception and in the significance drawn from the perception. The structural thematics of our three poems are also composed of different materials: "The Red Wheelbarrow" utilizes the categorization of experience our language makes, by

11. Cf. "For, Williams argued in his 'Vortex,' it was in the structural organization of objects, and in the poet's perception of their visual presence, of their existence as 'an arrangement of appearances, of planes,' that their significance as universal representants of certain supra-individual human emotional states was revealed" (Dijkstra 1978:6).

grammatical means, into such categories as concrete/abstract, definite/indefinite, given/new, specific/nonspecific; "The Great Figure" utilizes the categorization of experience our language makes, by lexical means, into such aspects as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic experience; while, finally, "Spring and All" utilizes geometrical dimensions that are coded into the language in a great variety of ways. Of course, perceptual experience can be categorized coherently in all three of these ways, and others as well.

These analyses provide an insight into how perception is actually worked out in the art of William Carlos Williams. Clearly, he did not by any means utilize the same technique in each case, but adapted his materials to the particular perceptual situation and the particular aspects of perception he wished to depict.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith, in her book *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language* (1978), has argued that all "poetry" (her term for lyrics, epics, tales, novels, etc.) can be regarded as fictive discourse:

As a mimetic artform, what a poem distinctively and characteristically represents is not images, ideas, feelings, characters, scenes, or worlds, but *discourse* (p. 25).

This view has the virtue of allowing one to say that literary art obeys and disobeys the same rules of language and discourse as those of any non-literary, discursive use of language (see Pratt 1977). The same tools that we use for the study of non-literary language phenomena, perhaps suitably adjusted, can be used for literary uses of language. However, the poems we have dealt with here (save the last half of "Spring and All") are not fictive discourses, they are *depictions* of perceptual reality (nor are they descriptions). The heart of our analysis in each case lies *not* in the use of details of the language of the text to set up and maintain a discourse, but rather in details that set up and manipulate a depiction of a perceptual phenomenon, or, better yet, an enactment of a perceptual process. In fact, in "The Red Wheelbarrow" features of language that are, indeed, typically crucial for discourse relations (definite/indefinite; old/new information, specific/nonspecific) are used precisely to form a structure that enacts a perceptual process and *not* a discourse. For these poems, then, we must construct a fictive perceiver, not a fictive speaker (or thinker). Now, we occasionally use language, in nonliterary circumstances, to enact aspects of a perceptual process (e.g., the repetition in "The bear loomed up larger and larger and larger" enacts and depicts aspects of the perceptual situation, both physical and emotional aspects). But these uses of nonliterary language are usually at the service of a wider discursive, communicational goal (e.g., embedded in a story). When such uses of language are cut free from any service to discourse functions, we begin to get to the heart

of a certain sort of literary art. Thus, Williams's poetry does not say anything, it shows something: what Williams said of Cezanne might equally, in this regard, be said of him:

He put it down on the canvas so that there would be meaning without saying anything at all. Just the relation of the parts to themselves (Sutton 1961).

So, then, are Williams' poem like paintings? Indeed, this is a popular view (see Dijkstra 1978) and Williams often said as much himself. However, as a master of his medium, he utilizes fully the materials that medium gives him. In particular, he uses the sequentiality of language to marvelous effect, especially in "The Red Wheelbarrow," and even more so in "The Great Figure." In "Spring and All" he uses sequentiality to move from a purely imagistic poem to a representation of the grasping of supra-individual significance out of the immediate perception of a landscape (and as he moves into this more meditative part of the poem, he gathers up in another stylistic context all the salient perceptual features of the imagistic part of the poem).<sup>12</sup> Painting does not have this sequentiality, at least not this sort. Cinema does, and, indeed, there is a cinematic aspect to both "The Red Wheelbarrow" and particularly "The Great Figure."

The use of this crucial property of language, its sequential flow through time, adds an important play between static and dynamic elements to the poems, and an energy to them, that renders this linguistic art a powerful medium for the enactment and depiction of perception and perceptual reality. This sequentiality of language, together with language's crucial rhythmic and sound properties, makes of these poems something crucially different from – though of course also related to – painting.

Of course, all depictional art, in a sense, strives to do similar things, but each artform does it differently and can do different things in importantly different ways (perhaps, even, better and worse). And how the thing is done, as our analyses should make clear, is a large part of what is done.

In his remarks on art, Williams often deferred to the painters. And one senses that at times in his career he would really rather have painted had it not been for the cumbersomeness of the materials, and his hectic schedule as a doctor (Dijkstra 1978). Whatever Williams' psychological propensities one thing emerges clearly from

12. Ironically, it is in "Spring and All," with its somewhat discursive second part, that Williams comes closest to the static (nonlinguistically sequential) structure of a painting. This he achieves in the first part of the poem with its higher order static structure of lines and planes in relation. I should say, also, that "static" and "dynamic" are used in completely nonevaluative ways in this paper, there is nothing inherently better or worse about the one or the other (presumably, in some sense, all art forms have or can have a play between static and dynamic aspects).

a close look at his poems: he had no cause to apologize for the art form of which he was a master.

Language is suited to narrative and discourse, as is cinema, because it is sequential, because one thing can follow and develop, in a systematic, temporally-oriented way, out of and into another. Because Williams breaks the discursive and narrative aspect of language, one may be tempted to think that this in itself renders his poetry like painting. But, Williams uses the sequentiality of language to essentially non-discursive ends, to create, indeed like painting, an art of showing, not telling or saying, but an art of showing that depends crucially on its medium.

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