THE TRIADIC LINE OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

by

Brian Ralph Swail

A thesis
presented to the University of Manitoba
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
Department of English

Winnipeg, Manitoba

ISBN 0-315-71924-9

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
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MASTER OF ARTS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Robin Hoople for his guidance and his patience.

DEDICATION

To my parents, Wesley and Eileen Swail.

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used throughout the thesis. All works are by William Carlos Williams.

A	The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams
EK	The Embodiment of Knowledge
I	Imaginations
Int	Interviews with William Carlos Williams: "Speaking Straight Ahead."
IW	I Wanted To Write A Poem
L	The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams
P	Paterson
PB	Pictures From Brueghel
PJ	"America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry," The Poetry Journal
PR	Paris Review
QRL	"Preface" Quarterly Review of Literature (1944).
RI	A Recognizable Image
SE	Selected Essays
SP	Selected Poems
YALC	Yale Collection of American Literature, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

In an early letter to his brother,[1] William Carlos Williams expressed his hope "to show the world something more beautiful than it has ever seen before." At the time he wrote this (1908), Williams could have been contemplating a perfectly formed sonnet, full of "apt" rhymes and refined sentiment, yet he was to become a seminal poet in the movement from iambic pentameter to free verse and beyond. Williams came to write poetry of the unbeautiful, of the unexalted, of the everyday; thus he was to address a poem to a sparrow "flattened to the pavement" (PB 132).

Williams established himself as a poet who would not only allow "unpoetic" objects into his poems, but who would also refuse to assign a referential, symbolic value to these objects. Williams found immediacy in the local, physical object (to the extent that he would declare that "the local is the only universal"), indeed his "no ideas but in things" (SP 109), first expressed in "A Sort of a Song" (1944) and reiterated throughout Paterson, has become his most-quoted line, akin to Eliot's "objective correlative." To present the local divorced from any classical frame of reference, to present phenomena purged of noumenal references, was to cost

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[1] Letter to Edgar, 1908, copy at YALC.

Williams years of misunderstanding and even hostility from critics. Yet late in life, when critical acceptance was finally coming his way, Williams risked further critical confusion by further innovation; he made what he felt was his greatest discovery, the "variable foot," and he chose to frame it in what he called the triadic line.

Indeed, the inadequacy of the vision of Williams as a "poet of things," when it is applied to triadic poetry, would seem to be illustrated by the relatively small body of Williams criticism addressed specifically to the triadic line. The triadic line achieves full flower in the long poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," which W.H. Auden has called "one of the most beautiful love poems in the language," yet this poem has generated fewer scholarly papers than has the starkly short poem "The Red Wheelbarrow." Williams cited the "Descent" passage in Paterson Book Two as the "birthplace" of the triadic line, which he told John Thirlwall was "the culmination of all my striving for an escape from the restrictions of the past" (SL 334). I shall go a step further. In this thesis I contend that the triadic line was the culmination of Williams's search for a poetic form for his meditative verse.

The second chapter of this thesis will address the question of measure, a term Williams used frequently to describe various aspects of poetic form. I will discuss certain techniques, such as one which I call Williams's "participatory grammar," which Williams developed over the course of

his career, and which he employed, in varying degrees, in his triadic poetry. Williams was intimately concerned with the ways in which form created meaning, and he firmly believed that to say something new he had to "say it" in a new form. The third chapter will describe the triadic line and its constituent, the variable foot. In illustrating the nature of the triadic line I will show its suitability for meditative verse. The fourth chapter will demonstrate how the workings of the variable foot and the triadic line contribute to the meditative poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," Williams's longest and most important poem written entirely in the triadic line, and the poem in which Williams believed he "hit the fusion of language and meter" (Int 48).

Chapter II

MEASURE

The legitimacy of poetry, for Williams, depends upon a vitality of form; thus he sought a free verse, where "Free verse means verse whose proper structure escapes a man's efforts to control it" (I 28). Williams strove to make his poems "local," so that they would present with great immediacy the world (mental and physical) with which Williams was engaged. Williams in fact defined the local as "the sense of being attached with integrity to actual experience" (SE 118). As a man shaped by America, Williams sought to find a voice shaped by his land and its people, an "American idiom" free from the restrictions of its European precursors ["It must be a new definition, it must cut us off from the rest" (I 170)].[2] While this idiom would itself be "an escape from the restrictions of the past," Williams was emphatic that it would be measured. In this chapter I will show that the

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[2] For Williams the treatment of the "common" or the "unpoetic" as the subject of his poetry was linked to the project of giving America a poetic voice:

> We can't believe that we poor colonials...we poor people who are not living in the great centers of Europe could have anything happen in our lives important enough to be put down in words and given a form. But everything in our lives, if it's sufficiently authentic to our lives and touches us deeply enough with a certain amount of feeling, is capable of being organized into a form which can be a poem. (Int 17)

line is the fundamental unit of Williams's measure, but that Williams meant measure to be many things: the reader's activity of "measuring" the poem by establishing the relationships that parataxis leaves unresolved; the poet's activity of providing the poem with a measure (primarily a rhythm) appropriate to the world the poem addresses (A world which will nevertheless refuse to "fit" the poem's rhythm and which will therefore provide a needed tension to the poem); and the poet's activity of "measuring" the world through the poem (of imitating rather than copying the world).

Any discussion of measure in his poetry must take into account Williams's need to see himself as something of an arch-inventor. When Williams was first experimenting with poetic form, visual apprehension of the world was undergoing a revolutionary redefinition at the hands of painters and photographers, and Williams supported this revolution and tried to incorporate much of it in his own work; he hoped to "see the world anew" through his poetry. In order to proclaim his poetry as radically new, however, Williams made statements that show an almost willful mis-reading of his poetic predecessors, above all Walt Whitman. Recognizing Whitman's efforts to give poetry an American voice, a "thingliness," and a photographic quality must have made Williams's blood run cold. Seeing himself as a "liberator," Williams had a vested interest in establishing the "rigidity" of earlier poetic forms, and thus the novelty of his own

formal excursions. Technopaignia, the shaped poetry of classical tradition, offers Williams a precedent for experimentation with the shape of the poem,[3] as medieval alliterative poetry offers the solace of a tradition of English-language poetry free from the "tyranny" of meter and rhyme. Perhaps influenced by the reluctance of critics to accept him, however, Williams chose to reject this solace, instead seeing his poetic form as pulling itself up by its own bootstraps, and thus being too innovative for critics to appreciate. That his statements on poetic form must be taken with a grain of salt, however, detracts not at all from his formal innovations or from the poetry itself.

Hugh Kenner describes Williams's use of language as words "dissociated into their molecules" (59), a turn of phrase which neatly describes Williams's clean, spare diction and suggests his frequent use of parataxis, but we must go on to say that these molecules are organized in a matrix; words are gathered into lines, the Williams poem's basic unit of measure, and this lineation is the visual manifestation of poetic form. For Williams, the word "measure" is rich with meaning, and has implications not only for poetic form but for epistemology: "The measure intervenes, to measure is all we know" (P 277). This suggests that Williams felt that a poem's measure, its lineation, was intimately related to its

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[3] Indeed, the work of E. E. Cummings offers a more "modern" approach to this idea, but for Williams it appears to have been too radical, for as he said of "(im)c-a-t(mo)": "I would reject it as a poem....I get no meaning at all" (P 261).

meaning.

Lineation can be used to influence the reader's grammatical expectations, and so it seems natural that Williams invested in the grammar of his poetry the same dynamism that inhabits his lineation. Erle Patrick Moore describes six syntactical features of Williams's poetry, and because of the completeness of this list, I will quote it here at length:

> First, he often breaks the line into so many pieces that the normal flow of meaning and the patterns of emphasis are stopped....Second, he does not use finite verbs in some poems, preferring instead, participles in modifying clauses. Third, he uses parataxis and appositives extensively, thus limiting the subordinating and coordinating connectives that create the logical relationships between parts of a sentence. Fourth, he frequently uses copulative verbs, especially "to be," to pile up many different attributes to a thing, rather than limiting a noun to a single attribute or a set of related attributes with non-copulative, transitive verbs. Fifth, Williams uses exclamations and rhetorical questions extensively to assert the priority of instinct and feeling over analytical discourse. And Sixth, Williams inserts dependent phrases and clauses before the subject or between the subject and the verb of a sentence to temporarily suspend closure and meaning. (172)

It is indeed "to temporarily suspend" that Williams employs these measures. Williams suspends expectations and conclusions. In every case, Williams's tropes seek to engage, rather than instruct, the reader, for Williams forces the reader to make meaning, to create the grammar of the poem. Everything is brought into question, and the reader must measure out, or redistribute, the meaning in the poem.

Williams places words in unfamiliar physical contexts and--through techniques such as lack of punctuation--unfamiliar grammatical contexts. The reader creates the relations between words, and must occasionally reintegrate these relations. The following examples show how lineation creates alternatives of perception just as does a shift in a viewer's physical perspective:

> I saw a girl with one leg
> over the rail of the balcony
> ("The Right of Way" SP 50)
>
> elder women are looking
> after the small
> fry
> ("Pictures from Brueghel
> [X, Children's Games]" PB 12)

In the first example, the girl's one-leggedness is a product of lineation alone; she straddles the railing as well as the line. The dependent phrase may indeed modify "saw" rather than "the girl (with one leg)," but Williams has shown us that lineation can draw us to dangerous conclusions (certainly dangerous for the girl in question, who may be in danger of falling off of the balcony or losing a leg according to our conclusion). In the second example the division of "looking / after" changes (temporarily) active supervision into a passive "looking," and the word "after" tends to push the women into the background temporally and spatially: in the poem as in the painting it describes, the women are subordinate to the playing children. The word "fry" is made strange by its separation from "small", and this positioning

causes us to reflect on the peculiarity of the phrase--this is not simply another word for children, it equates them with young fish, ironically suggesting that they are insignificant, while at the same time suggesting the teeming energy of the children. By isolating and bisecting this phrase Williams shifts its meaning and asks "Why do we speak thus?" In Williams's poetry both the meaning of a word and the expectations that the word arouses are in question.

In William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure Stephen Cushman presents a fascinating view: the "measure" of which Williams spoke throughout his life is a new way of looking at poetic trope. In "The Rose" (poem VII of Spring and All, 1923), Williams suggests that the rose can no longer represent the abstract idea of love, but may be measured against love:

> The rose carried weight of love
> but love is at an end--of roses
> It is at the edge of the
> petal that love waits
> (SP 27)

Love is not "at an end," but it is at the end of being represented by roses, and it is at the end--the edge--of the rose. Williams opens the poem with what appears to be a preposterous notion:

> the rose is obsolete
> but each petal ends in
> an edge, the double facet
> cementing the grooved
> columns of air--The edge
> cuts without cutting
> meets--nothing--renews
> itself in metal or porcelain--
> (SP 26)

The edge of the rose's petal cements the grooved columns of air, it gives a wholeness, a physical shape to the otherwise amorphous "nothing" that surrounds it. In the same way, the ever-present yet ungraspable quality, love, is given a kind of physical reality when the rose cuts its shape into it. The rose thus "measures" love. We may say that the rose has "displaced" love, for in giving a shape to love it may be mistaken for love--assigned a too-simple representative function, thus it needs to be renewed in other (artist's) materials. Williams argues that "to engage roses / becomes a geometry," emphasizing the theoretical and physical "shaping" that is the heart of the artist's task. The poem concludes with this stanza:

> The fragility of the flower
> unbruised
> penetrates space.
> (SP 27)

The penetration of space, the quality of having a physical shape, has the second sense of moving through space, the quality of motion (from the physical to the mental world, and from the artist's mind to many other minds) that an artist invests in an object when he or she treats it in his or her art.

Williams's argument that the rose's edge "meets--nothing" is given more physical, geometrical representation in the following passage describing the rose:

> --fragile
> plucked, moist, half-raised

> cold, precise, touching
>
> What
>
> The place between the petal's
> edge and the
>
> From the petal's edge a line starts
> that being of steel
> (SP 27)

In this passage the blank space following the line "edge and the" means what it is; open space, emptiness. Lineation has become the subject of the poem; the empty space which love fills.

When Williams proclaims that "verse is measure" (QRL 349) he may be making both a Classical and a Romantic claim; verse must adhere to a formal measure, and verse measures the world by imitating it. Cushman sees this second sense of "measure" as essentially Romantic:

> In making the verse measurements of formal scheme, the nonmetrical poem takes as its standard the verse line. In making the mimetic measurements of poetic trope, the imitative poem takes as its standard the spectrum of sameness and difference, or likeness and unlikeness, which Coleridge uses to distinguish an imitation from a copy. (105)

In employing expressive tropes he was clearly selecting a Romantic rather than a Classical approach to poetry, but Williams saw the distinction between imitation and copying to be a classical one: "You do not copy nature, you make something which is an imitation of nature--read your Aristotle again" (SE 303). Whether it be Classical or Romantic, Williams saw the distinction between imitation and copying

to be absolutely fundamental, and his poetic expression of this distinction is to be found in "The Desert Music" (1954), which contains Williams's boldest affirmation of poetry and of the place of measure in poetry:

> How shall we get said what must be said?
>
> Only the poem.
>
> Only the counted poem, to an exact measure:
> to imitate, not to copy nature, not
> to copy nature
>
> NOT, prostrate, to copy nature
> but a dance!
> (PB 108-9)

Williams's emphasis on counting and exact measure harkens back to his rejection in 1917 of "free verse" because "verse must be governed" (PJ 32). The lineation of "not to copy nature, not / to copy nature" turns the repetition almost into a stuttering, underscoring how critical is the difference between imitation and copying in getting said "what must be said."

Williams is not opposed to mimesis, only to fraud:

> It was a mistake to say, as it was said twenty years ago, that the object of modern painting was to escape representation. Not so. (It was to escape triteness, the stupidity of a loose verisimilitude--to trace a scene and thus to confuse paint values with natural objects.) (RI 69-70)

The modern requirement that painting be regarded first and foremost as blobs of paint on a canvas underscores the physical nature of the painting at the same time that it frees

painting from this "loose verisimilitude." Seen only as a "transcription" from nature, a painting can only be an inferior copy of the "real thing." Art must be an interaction; not a copy of nature "but a dance!"

Forced to confront an unexpected object, we are at a disadvantage, for we must take the object on its own terms (or the poet's); we must see it afresh. The same is true for a word or phrase which, by its placement, or by its very occurrence in a poem, is unexpected. By its repetition and realignment, we are forced to "re-measure" a simple phrase in the poem "To a Poor Old Woman":

> munching a plum on
> the street a paper bag
> of them in her hand
>
> They taste good to her
> They taste good
> to her. They taste
> good to her
>
> You can see it by
> the way she gives herself
> to the one half
> sucked out in her hand
>
> Comforted
> a solace of ripe plums
> seeming to fill the air
> They taste good to her
> (SP 97)

Williams's experimentation with various arrangements of the sentence "They taste good to her" is a fascinating demonstration of his technique. Since we don't expect repetition, we read the second line of the second stanza: "They taste good" with the expectation that the previous line will

be further developed, perhaps "They taste good/because...." Instead the sentence is repeated, so that "good" and "to her" are given special emphasis, for one tends to reread the line in order to see how it is a repetition and how it is a change. The change is in line end and in apparent sentence end; they taste <u>good</u>, and that they taste good <u>to her</u>. The pleasure of the plums, and the fact that it is <u>her</u> pleasure, is reinforced. The division of the third sentence: "They taste / good to her" may emphasize that the pleasure is in the taste, and that it is she who judges it good ("good to her"), but it does more. This sentence shows, if the others did not, that this exercise in lineation is an exercise not only in emphasis and meaning but also in rhythm. Williams is playing with the <u>sounds</u> of this simple sentence.

It is no new observation to say that poems often address the question of how to write poetry, but "To A Poor Old Woman" does this most clearly. The third quatrain (I consider the title to be the first line of the poem) suggests a sexual energy in the woman's act (she "gives herself"), but it also suggests a certain voyeurism on the part of the poet and reader. By observing the erotic in a passerby on the street Williams places us in an uncomfortable position, especially since the passerby is an old woman. What is for the poet an image to be observed, fiddled with, and polished in a detached, intellectual fashion, is, for the old woman, real life, to be engaged in vigorously, hungrily. Her vitality calls the validity of poetry into question; poetry

can describe human experience with almost indecent accuracy, but can it be more than voyeurism?

The fourth quatrain resolves the question. The old woman's comfort becomes available to all through the poem. We return to plain-spoken observation when the sentence is repeated in the final line, but the observation has been energized through poetry. As Stephen Cushman puts it: "It is as though he has been savoring the possibilities of English syntax as she savors the plums" (24). In the fourth quatrain the separate pleasures of the poet and the old woman come into congress. Williams is "measuring" a single idea: "they taste good to her." By fitting it variously into poetic measure, he gives it a richness--the idea takes on an almost tactile reality. This poem shows that the pleasure of poetry is more than the enjoyment of apt description; a poem can allow us to partake of another's experience.

By their subtlety and complexity Williams's poems declare that "this is another way of knowing." They must never descend to the level of mere documentation of his experiences and ideas: "poetry should strive for nothing else, this vividness alone, per se, for itself. The realization of this has its own internal fire that is 'like' nothing" (I 247). We cannot unravel a poem into a common language. We must therefore think of a poem, I suggest, not as a document to be translated but as an interaction between text and reader.

For Williams, an idea must have motion and energy; its function is the de-formation of received notions. He believes that a poem written in fixed form is like a poem written in purely denotative language; because form controls meaning, a fixed form has a fixed meaning. Thus sonnets all "mean" the same thing, and writing a new sonnet would be pointless:

> Because, unless the idea implied in the configuration can be de-formed it has not been <u>used</u> but copied. <u>All</u> sonnets mean the same thing because it is the configuration of the words that is the major significance. Because it is a configuration (the sonnet) whose meaning supersedes any idea that may be crammed into it. It is not an invention but anchors beyond the will--does not liberate the intelligence but stultifies it--and by its cleverness, apt use stultifies it the more by making pleasurable that which should be removed. (EK 17)

Old forms must be broken, Williams declares, for they become the receptacles of "fitting" sentiments. This is not so radical as it may at first sound; all great poets have recognized the importance both of formal innovation and of tension between meter and rhythm--Williams simply places a greater value on variation from the norm because dissonance is peculiarly modern:

> a dissonance
> in the valence of Uranium
> led to the discovery
> Dissonance
> (if you are interested)
> leads to discovery
> (P 207)

The importance of formal freedom could, in fact, inspire Williams to fiery pronouncements on liberty:

> Anything which predicates what you must say, as a poet, without complete freedom to determine, from the sensible facts, your own conclusions or that attempts to foist a form upon you, outside your choice, in which you must say it, is a lie. Destroy it. (RI 171)

If this makes Williams sound like a champion of liberty in the American tradition, we must temper this view by considering Williams's view of his poetic forebear, Walt Whitman. Williams saw himself as an almost unwilling successor to Whitman, for though they share both a belief in a "democracy of the line" and a distrust of established (European) rules limiting form and subject, Williams felt Whitman ran too free:

> What we have wanted is a <u>line</u> that will allow us room in which to develop the opportunities of a new language, a line loose as Whitman's but measured as his was not....verse is measure--that is the only permissible term (QRL 349).

Never fully appreciating declamatory speech-rhythm as measure, and hoping to see himself as a radical innovator, Williams felt Whitman introduced freedom to the line, but never learned to control this freedom--in Stephen Tapscott's words: "relying more on assertion than on illustrated argument from specific poems, Williams characterizes Whitman as a dissenter whose formal rebellion was co-opted by his initial successes" (119). For Williams, Whitman's formal

rebellion became harmless because it seemed formless; it is the struggle within a form that produces the tension necessary in a good poem.

Williams determined to be more "measured" than Whitman, and thus discovered the "variable foot": "The foot not being fixed is only to be described as variable. If the foot itself is variable it allows order in so-called free verse" (IW 82). The foot in poetry alludes to a tapping foot, or steps in a march; are we therefore to assume that the variable foot corresponds to something like tap-dancing? Williams was in fact disovering a metric not unlike that of the alliterative verse of Old and Middle English, whose "essential pattern was four stresses to the line, with two, three, or four stresses alliterating and unstressed syllables not counted" (Harper 15). Ezra Pound, who kept up a lifelong and often stormy friendship with Williams, had translated such verse (for example "The Seafarer"), and it may be that this had some influence on Williams's vision of a variable foot. In adding freedom in the number of stressed syllables to a line of an undetermined number of unstressed syllables, Williams is further reducing the emphasis on counting, but he is not relinquishing regularity: "The line must, as a minimum, have a well-conceived form within which modification may exist. Without this internal play upon the stops, it cannot achieve power" (L 136).

For Williams a poem must "make real" by "making new," and old forms cannot do that. In recognizing poetic diction and

form, the reader recognizes what to expect from the poem; (s)he is immune to surprise, and thus to learning. Surprise is, for Williams, a necessary adjunct to true learning,[4] and therefore a word "means" most when its old meaning is shattered, but this elevated level of meaning recedes as it becomes denotative: "There are no 'truths' that can be fixed in language. It is by the breakup of the language that the truth can be seen to exist and that it becomes operative again" (EK 19). When a word is de-formed the difference between signifier and signified is illuminated, and we instantaneously apprehend a clearer image of the object and of both the limitations and the dynamics of language.

Williams apparently felt that Walt Whitman's pioneering work was too close to home to be safely praised without casting doubt on his own (Williams's) originality. As I have already observed, however, photographers and painters were at a safe enough remove. But Williams's interest was not limited to movements and painters he discovered at the Armory Show in 1913. "Pictures From Brueghel" is a tribute to an artist very similar to Williams. Just as Williams could write of a mundane object without reducing (or inflating) it into "The Object As Contemplated by Art", so Brueghel presented a

> painting
> that the Renaissance

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[4] Learning is, at its most energetic, the unexpected grasping of the new (whether it be information, an idea, or a perspective), and surprise may be called the vigorous apprehension of the unexpected.

> tried to absorb
> but
>
> it remained a wheat field
> over which the
> wind played ("Haymaking" PB 8)[5]

Like Ezra Pound, Williams often spoke of poetry in musical terms, but the quality of simultaneity in Williams's work means it no longer shares the strict sequentiality of music. It is in fact experienced like a painting, with the viewer's eye moving about in a somewhat self-directed fashion. Both artists present unexpected subjects and deal with them in local terms, while avoiding many of the conventions which proclaim them as works of art. As Joel Connaroe notes,

> Brueghel was the first Western painter to treat landscape as an independent subject. Even in his historical and allegorical work he provides settings that connect the subject with sixteenth century Flanders, in much the same way Williams "places" his unicorn in a world of sweating horses and oak trees. (Connaroe 567)

In speaking of Brueghel, Williams speaks of himself; The first poem in the series describes a painting which Williams knew to be of a shepherd, yet the poem is entitled "Self-Portrait"--the shepherd is both Brueghel and Williams.

"To Flossie" appears in Pictures From Brueghel, the "heartland" of the triadic line, but the poem's structure is in fact two-ply, and this binary quality enhances the build-up of tension. The "one-two, one-two" shape of the poem and the structure of the lines give a choppiness and a "point-

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[5] "Resistant" as Brueghel's painting was, Williams is nevertheless able to turn the hayfield into wheat.

counterpoint" quality to the poem. The poem describes roses being kept "on ice // against an appointment." The word "against" stands apart from its normal context, so that rather than the rose being "kept against" the appointment, the rose and the appointment stand in opposition to one another. The very nature of the roses rebels against preservation: "you can't smell them / they're so cold." The poem concludes with this quatrain:

> but aren't they
> in wax
> paper for the
> moment beautiful
> (PB 45)

The roses are (in wax paper for the moment) beautiful, but they are also in wax paper for the "moment beautiful," the moment when they will be unveiled and appreciated. The fleetingness of such moments, and our contradictory desire to control and extend experiences whose beauty is magnified <u>because</u> it is passing, is captured, momentarily, in the final line. There is a further possible reading that these are "roses in wax," but whereas "beautiful" may be said to modify "roses" and "moment" more or less equally, the appearance of "paper" makes it clear that "wax" is not modifying "roses." We see a multitude of meanings and configurations of meaning, and it is perhaps in seeing the movement between possible meanings, rather than in selecting one of these meanings, that we see most clearly.

"All nations have written their strongest and most vivid literature before they invented a grammar" (16) said Fennollosa, and much of Williams's poetry draws strength from the absence of grammar's handmaiden, conventional punctuation --readers must choose when (or if) to subordinate one idea to another, and sometimes where ideas begin and end. The relation of line and sentence is at the heart of Williams's technique. The expectation of a conclusion at the end of a line (or at least of the completion of a grammatical unit) often leads one to assumptions proved false or doubtful by the following line.[6] Our expectations concerning the girl on the balcony in "The Right of Way," as I have already shown, are frustated but not disproved. The reader must mete out (measure) meaning in the poem; in other words, the reader of "To Flossie" must decide to what degree "beautiful" is modifying "roses" and to what degree it is modifying the "moment."

Readers are further faced with incompleteness and the repeated beginnings of what Stephen Fredman calls the "generative sentence" (29 passim); the poem is a series of unexpected beginnings because it follows a paratactical flow rather than a syntactical argument. The reader's progress through the poem is one of discovery:

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[6] The technique Williams is using in these cases is rejet and contre-rejet, defined in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics thus: "The r[ejet] occurs as the result of a conflict between syntax and metrical pattern in enjambement (q.v.), when the lesser part of a grammatical phrase-unit flows over from one line to the next....[a contre-rejet occurs] when the greater part of a grammatical phrase-unit overflows in this way" (687).

> By raising expectations of syntactic rather than metrical fulfillment (or other parallel constructions offered by verse), Williams keeps his attention and ours in a constant state of discovery, always on the alert for the grammatical indicators of the relation of one notion to another. (Fredman 49)

Williams does not relate a poem, he implicates a reader in a poem. As many of his poems lack conventional punctuation, and thus a clear, extrinsic grammar, the elements of the poem have the (essentially visual) quality of simultaneity which the reader, using both logic and spontaneity, orders. Williams's frequent avoidance of finite verbs further invites the reader to give the poem its motion.

Because Williams frequently eschewed metaphor in favour of a list of objects linked by the verb "to be," the changing relation between things in the list must be determined by the reader. When Williams says of the colour "yellow":

> It is summer!
> It is the wind on a willow,
> the lap of waves, the shadow
> under a bush, a bird, a bluebird,
> three herons, a dead hawk
> rotting on a pole--
> (CP 161)

he is not equating these things, but moving among them. Moore says that "The value of 'is' in 'Primrose' and other poems is that it merely links objects, as white mortar links bricks" (183). Cushman's notion of measure as trope, "the mimetic measurements of poetic trope" (105), suggests that, while "is" mortars the objects together, the poet, and then

the reader, arrange the objects by measuring them against one another. The reader must "weigh" the colour yellow against: the freshness of the sound of waves lapping against the shore; the vibrancy of a bird, then of several birds; and the emotional urgency of the sight of a dead hawk rotting on a pole.

Because the relationship between one line and another is rarely predictable, and our "provisional syntax" is often reversed by later lines, each line acquires a kind of simultaneity and discreteness. The line becomes a step which must, to some degree, be viewed on its own, for until the dance of the poem is completed, we do not know for certain where this step falls. By its "participatory grammar" the poem proclaims itself as literary, linguistic object, for the reader must round up the local nouns for questioning whenever the referent of a pronoun is unclear, subordinate clauses to those appearing preeminent, and apply tense and mood to the absolute constructions and participles.

Chapter III

VERSOS SUELTOS AND TRIADIC LINES

In 1955 Williams declared of the variable foot (or versos sueltos):

> As far as I know, as my forthcoming book [Journey to Love] makes clear, I shall use no other form for the rest of my life, for it represents the culmination of all of my striving after an escape from the restrictions of the verse of the past. (SL 334)

The triadic line may be regarded as a departure from his earlier poetry partly because of the intensity of Williams's promotion of this discovery, but it is important to remember that poetry written in the triadic line constitutes some of Williams's most important work. I feel that the triadic line must be seen as an effort to make his poetry more personal, more discursive, and thus more accessible.

In creating the triadic line and its component, the variable foot, Williams was, I believe, coming to terms with abstraction of the sort that manifests itself in regular poetic form. Six years before the publication of "The Descent," Wallace Stevens wrote his "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942), whose sections, entitled "It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change" and "It Must Give Pleasure," might be Williams's own prescription for poetry. In the

first section, Stevens says "You must become an ignorant man again / And see the sun with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it" (207). To see the pure idea of the sun, freed from preconceptions, has been Williams's project from the start. To conceive of an abstraction, "the inconceivable idea of the sun" (207) before the intervention of formal categories, is to see the very heart of a thing. Williams had seen regular poetic form to be another of these formal categories, an imposed abstraction that gets in the way of understanding. Williams resolutely believed that the form of a poem shapes the poem's meaning, thus he found any regular form to be restrictive. In the thirties and forties, his response was to experiment with asymmetrical typography (in which regular stanzas and adherence to the left margin are abandoned) but beginning in 1952 symmetric typography became dominant, and it remained so for the rest of his life, even after he stopped writing in the triadic line.

Part of the reason for this may be that rather than relating a story, the persistent radical line-splitting of asymmetrical typography creates, as John Hollander observes, an awareness of language and the nature of discovery:

> When enjambement is systematic, as in Paradise Lost or some of William Carlos Williams's free verse, a wide range of effects ensures that even strong, pointed cuts at line breaks will never startle by their mere occurrence but, if at all, for what they reveal--about language, about the world, or because of when or where, in the course of the poem, they show it. (110)

When punctuation and syntax are unconventional, the effect of enjambement becomes further rarefied, for the reader's grammatical expectations are somewhat suspended. The typographical experimentations of "Choral: the Pink Church" (1946) may well be the precursor to the triadic line, but because a regular pattern is not established, grammetrical expectations are not established:

> Now,
> the Pink Church
> trembles
> to the light (of dawn) again,
> rigors of more
> than sh'd wisely
> be said at one stroke,
> singing!
> Covertly.
> Subdued.
> (SP 122)

The bracketing of "(of dawn)" is, I suggest, no more unexpected than if the words were isolated in a line of their own, of whatever typographical placement. Similarly, the final three lines of this passage would be considerably more arresting if more expectations had been established. "Covertly" and "subdued" merely modify "singing," but if the reader had clearer expectations as to when a sentence or a line was to begin, the appearance of these one-word sentences would carry greater ironic power. When poetic form is more regular, variation from the form becomes more significant. When line and sentence are discongruous, a visual counterpoint is established which is essentially not "performable." Irregularities like extremely long or short

lines, syntactical units split at line endings, or terminal junctures appearing in the middle of the line (enjambement and caesura) do not belie the regularity of the line; they are made more striking because of this regularity, as long as a regular form has been established.

In the thirties and forties, in order to be faithful to the chaotic world he saw before him, Williams sought freedom from the abstract forms imposed upon him by poetic convention. In a sense, when the necessary regularity of poetry is recognized, the essential irregularity of the modern world is being evaded; Eliot's "contrast between fixity and flux" (230) is also a contrast between poetic convention and the disorder of the world we inhabit. Williams saw escape from poetic convention as a way to see the world clearly [because "We do not live in a sonnet world" ("VS" 4)], but he came to recognize, despite his opposition to "presupposed measures" (I 120), the need for a regular line against which other lines can be measured. This must have come in part because critics such as Phillip Horton, astute enough to "discover" Hart Crane, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, could see Williams's poetry only as "the application of a theory" and "an exercise in spiritual hygiene" (Horton 738). Williams could hardly hope to communicate through his poetry if his technique was causing such difficulty, and his response, I believe, was to create a more regular, discursive form. In the variable foot[7] Williams saw the opportu-

[7] As Cushman observes, Williams read Edgar Allen Poe's "The Rationale of Verse," in which "the term 'variable foot'

nity to increase regularity without succumbing to rigidity.

The triadic line is composed of three variable feet (Eleanor Berry calls them "lobes"), the first beginning at the left margin, the next one line lower and indented to the right, and the last another line lower and indented further still:

> I'm persistent as the pink locust
> once admitted
> to the garden,
> ("The Pink Locust" PB 140)

The regularly moving margins of the triadic line assert a regularity which the variable length of each lobe resists. In this passage Williams seems almost to suggest that once it has been admitted to the "garden" of formally regular poetry, the variable foot will rain down like a biblical judgement, denuding the fields of conventional poetry. Moreover, Williams is claiming for his new measure a vegetative persistence and resilience, for the pink locust is a weed. To claim this quality for himself and his work is a constant theme in Williams's poetry: "And so, / like this flower, / I persist" (PB 141).[8]

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is used to mean a metrical substitution which rescues a poem from tiresome regularity..." (84).

[8] While it may seem contradictory to indicate "line" breaks <u>within</u> a triadic line, the gaps between lobes must somehow be shown in quotations which occur in the body of the text. In this and all following instances I shall use a single virgule to indicate the gap between lobes in a triad (a form used by Cushman and Marilyn Kallet, among others), and a double virgule to indicate the gap between triads (the form used by Berry).

The variable foot, or versos sueltos, which Williams translated literally as "loose verses,"[9] is the building block of the triadic line. In a letter to John Thirlwall, Williams claims that:

> The rigid impositions imposed upon us by the regularly measured foot (which Whitman felt but did not properly know what to do with) are to be understood only when we conceive of it as a fault in the foot itself. With the concept of more liberal interpretation there the difficulties disappear. (SL 334-35)

Williams continues:

> The modernists who break their verses into convenient patterns of often incomprehensible jumbles of too abrupt transitions of the sense forget that in all they write the foot remains unaltered. (335)

Such misled modernists are apparently using irregular numbers of stressed and unstressed syllables, but they continue to count these syllables. The nature of Williams's "more liberal interpretation" is a matter of continual debate, but I would like to suggest as a point of departure that the variable foot is the rhythmic unit of triadic poetry.

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[9] Though versos sueltos is one of the standard Spanish terms for blank verse, the others being versos blancos and versos libres, Williams was clearly not under the misapprehension that he was writing unrhymed iambic pentameter. Williams seems to have chosen the term because most of the meanings of sueltos (as defined by Appleton's New Cuyás Dictionary) describe Williams's poetry quite aptly: "loose, light, expeditious, swift, able, free, bold, daring, easy, disengaged, voluble, fluent, odd, disconnected, unclassified."

The relationship of the variable foot to the triadic line is often seen as the relationship between sight and sound. By refusing to adhere to the left margin, the triadic line is suggestive of a "relativistic" or an "organic" form, but this is belied by the regular shifting pattern of the margin. As Henry Sayre observes, Williams was aware that poetic form is an abstraction which comes from the poet's mind rather than being organically generated by the world:

> He shared with Kandinski's expressionism, with cubism, and with surrealism a sense that in the abstract lay a revelation of order which might unify the chaos of modernity. His work is the record of a constant effort to find a place for abstraction in his poetry--an effort complicated, however, by his honesty: his realization that the order discovered in most modern work is one independent of objective reality, rather than one integrally related to it in any organic sense. (29)

Williams's solution, Sayre implies, is to write poetry which is aurally independent of the abstract (visual) order imposed by the poet:

> The variable foot[10] is visually "mechanical" or "abstract"; it is aurally organic. It achieves overall visual orderliness while at the same time it allows the American idiom to determine the more or less "loose" shape of the individual lines. (85)

Sayre is suggesting that the regular pattern of the margin creates a visual order which is the only order in the triadic line; each variable foot is free to follow the American

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[10] Sayre is equating the variable foot with the triadic line rather than the triadic lobe.

idiom and thus to aurally mime the world the poem confronts. However, I believe that the triadic line is more than a simple visual assertion of order.

The triadic line may be defined as a collection of three variable feet arranged typographically to suggest descent. Indeed, though he had experimented with the form in earlier poems, notably "Choral: the Pink Church," Williams made a point of locating his "solution of the problem of modern verse" (SL 334) in the poem "The Descent," a meditation upon the discovery of new beginnings in loss:

> The descent beckons
> as the ascent beckoned.
> Memory is a kind
>
> of accomplishment,
> a sort of renewal
> even
>
> an invitation, since the spaces it opens are new places
> inhabited by hordes
> heretofore unrealized
> (PB 73)

"The Descent" is about Williams's own descent into old age and, eventually, death, but it is also about the power of memory to overcome death. The descent into Hell to rescue Kora (Kore, or Persephone), the imagination, is fundamental to Williams's poetry, and the typography of the triadic line is a constant reminder of this descent; the reader's eye descends across the page while reading triadic poetry. This lineation allows the line sufficient length to suggest the

high tone of formal, elevated poetry while still allowing the frequency of pauses typical of speech, through the gaps between variable feet. Descent for Williams also means descent into the physical, profane world in order to give vitality and local expression to the world of ideas.

The "meaning," then, of the triadic line is in its visual signification (which I will discuss further): the variable foot's significance resides in its status as rhythm unit. Denise Levertov, a younger poet who communicated with and was influenced by Williams, saw the variable foot as giving a regular beat[11] to the poem:

> I think that the idea of the variable foot, which is so difficult to understand, really depends on a sense of pulse, a pulse in behind the words, a pulse that is actually sort of tapped out by a drum in the poem. Yes, there's an implied beat, and as in music, there is such a beat, and you can have in one bar just two notes, and in another bar you have, you know, ten notes, and yet the bar length is the same. (32)

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[11] Levertov supports her understanding of the variable foot with this recollection:

> On his records he'd sometimes ignore a line break, and he'd pause in the middle of a line in other places because he didn't have full control over his speech by then; and I, being sassy, took him to task for not observing his own scores. I read to him his own poems according to how I thought they were scored. And you have only my word for it, although maybe Flossie remembers and would back me up, but believe me he said, "You're absolutely right and if I were able to give public readings now that's the way I would do it." (69)

This is not to say that the variable foot is a regular metrical unit or is governed by a principle of isochrony; that is, to read the line "even" slowly enough to be of equal duration with the line that follows it "an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places" may be possible, but this would hardly be in the "American idiom." Nevertheless, readers try to recite the lines of a poem with some degree of isochrony[12] so that one tends to rush over the second line, just as Williams did when he wrote it: "You see how I run that line? I was very much excited when I wrote this. I had to do something. I was sitting there with the typewriter in front of me" (PR 119). This is reminiscent of a comment Williams had made on The Tempers, a work written in 1913, fifty years before the Paris Review interview: "The rhythmic unit usually came to me in an outburst. I wanted it to look that way on the page" (IW 27).

If the variable foot governs the pace of a recitation, it seems reasonable to assume that variable feet, like verbal utterances, are often regulated in terms of cognitive units, or what Whittaker calls "sequential units of attention" (33). In spoken English (American or otherwise), ideas are more likely to be expressed in individual utterances than to be strung across several utterances or to end in the middle of an utterance. In fact, triadic poetry is less enjambed than Williams's other poetry, so that ideas more frequently "end" when lines end. On the other hand, it is precisely

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[12] Berry notes that Kenneth L. Pike first described the isochronic tendency of spoken American English. (Berry 377)

Williams's "no ideas but in things" and his use of compression (the elimination of "unnecessary" words) that inspires Alan Ostrom's observation that "the clear, precise image" is the "fundamental unit" of Williams's verse, with lineation serving to "break the image into its parts"[13] (Ostrom 109-110). The regular use of punctuation and complete sentences in triadic poetry would appear to reduce the correspondence between line and image (or idea). Returning to the same example that vitiated the "rule" of isochrony, it is difficult to see "even // an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places" as two ideograms, or sequential units of attention.

My formulation that the variable foot is a unit of rhythm and consequently often a unit of meaning is comparable to Berry's proposal that "the norm for Williams' metrical unit (for a lobe of a triadic line) is a single syntactical unit (of whatever level and function in the sentence) that could be a rhythm unit in a naturally expressive reading of the text arranged as prose" (379). This view meshes nicely with a view offered by Williams of the line as a picture of speech: "The line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he

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[13] As Williams advised Levertov:

> Cut and cut again whatever you write--while you leave by your art no trace of your cutting--and the final utterance will remain packed with what you have to say. The stream does not ripple or at best go wild save by the swiftness of its flow, as well as by the obstructions it encounters. ("Letters to Denise Levertov" 163)

writes..." (A 331). This approach compliments the idea of the line as a unit of time (and thus a unit of attention); long lines would be rushed, perhaps in the passion of discovery, and short or one-word lines would thus be aurally as well as visually isolated from the other lines of the poem.

It is the variable foot's intimate relationship to the poet's voice that makes it Williams's "answer " to the problem of measure:

> The thing that concerns me is the theory of what I was determined to do with measure, what you encounter on the page. It must be transcribed to the page from the lips of the poet, as it was with such a master as Sappho. "The Descent" was very important to me in that way." (PR 118-19)

Arrangement into triadic lines isolates each variable foot (for, relative to the lines surrounding it, each variable foot has a unique margin) visually reinforcing Williams's suggestion that each foot be counted to a single beat (SL 325-27).

In order to apply these claims to an example of triadic poetry, we can consider the opening passage of "The Yellow Flower":

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What shall I say, because talk I must?
          That I have found a cure
                    for the sick?
I have found no cure
          for the sick    .
                    but this crooked flower
which only to look upon
          all men
                    are cured. This
is that flower
          for which all men
                    sing secretly their hymns
of praise. This
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is that sacred
flower!
(PB 89)

If the variable foot is a rhythm-unit, then the nine-syllable opening line must have some degree of equivalence (both in duration and, to a lesser extent, significance) with the two-syllable lines "all men" and "flower." In other words, the opening lines must be run over quickly, miming the emotional, perhaps defensive voice of the poet as he asks his question. Conversely, the fact that all men are cured by this flower is accentuated by the isolation of "all men." The word "flower" is visually the most isolated in the passage. That "flower" is separated from "sacred" brings to the foreground the natural (as compared to spiritual) quality of the flower. The line "for the sick ." would invite a pause due to its shortness alone, but the gap between "sick" and the period emphasizes this pause, adding drama to his failure to find a cure, but also suggesting, as the following lines bear out, that the cure he has found is for all men. Most lines are, as Berry's hypothesis suggests, single syntactical units, so that we may consider exceptions to be part of the variation necessary to good poetry. In both of the exceptions above, the word "this" begins a sentence which is continued in the next lobe. The result is a rhetorical emphasis and pause: <u>This</u> is that flower, <u>This</u> is that sacred flower!

Williams presented the variable foot as an "invention," a break from European tradition, with the American speech-rhythm as its foundation. This giving voice to a New World is, of course, a very Whitmanesque project, and Williams saw that it was in his best interest as an innovator to observe a "formlessness" in Whitman's poetry. Williams also recognized, though perhaps grudgingly, that Gerard Manley Hopkins[14] had worked toward a new line; indeed he had "half-realized it, but not freely enough" (SL 321). Rather than an invention, Cushman calls the variable foot a "fiction":

> The fiction of a "variable foot" allows Williams to have it both ways, as he appears to escape from meter and Eliot, while maintaining the necessary "contrast between fixity and flux," which Eliot--or before him Poe in "The Rationale of Verse"--considers the very life of verse. (134)

That Williams may be "having it both ways" in regard to his claims for the variable foot is, finally, insignificant. The aural organization of the triadic poem may be loose, but it is regular. Sharp-eared critics who "debunk" this view through the detection of differences in two recordings of Williams reading a poem are making, if only accidentally, an important point: performances must differ because a poem is more than a score for a recitation. A reading (silent or aloud) can only be an interpretation; it can never be definitive. In fact, it could be said that it is in the conflict

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[14] Paul Mariani finds Williams's first mention of Hopkins in a note to talk to his audience about "something called 'spring rhythm'" (Hopkins 21). This note comes early in the same year (1948) that Williams published "The Descent."

between various readings that the "meaning" of a poem lies. When the poem is modern, the range of possible readings and interpretations is broadened greatly, though the good modern poem is never chaotic: "Good modern work, far from being the fragmentary, neurotic thing its disunderstanders think it, is....a multiplication of impulses that by their several flights, crossing at all eccentric angles, might enlighten" (SE 123). If the measure of the variable foot is indeed in the poet's breath, then a "definitive" reading would certainly seem possible, except for the existence of the triadic line. In other words, why organize a sequence of units having approximately equal duration into groups of three, and further order the lineation of these threes into "triads"? Clearly, Williams intended his lineation to have meaning. The question, then, would seem to be "at what eccentric angles do sound and typography cross?" If "versos sueltos" are units of rhythm, what are triadic lines?

Most obviously, triadic lines are threes. Cushman calls the formation of the variable foot into triadic lines a "landscaping": "In choosing the triad, Williams landscapes an utterance with a beginning, a middle, and an end" (88). Cushman recognizes, of course, that very few triadic lines correspond thematically to this beginning, middle and end landscaping, but "lineation gives each line its epigraphic quality" (88). Developing this idea of the triadic line as epigraph, he continues:

> The symmetric format inscribes balanced parts within the whole. If the stanza were dyadic, we would see antithesis endlessly projected. If it were tetradic, we would see two sets of pairs. If it were pentadic or longer, we would lose Dante's triple unity to multiplicity. (88)

The "triple unity" to which Cushman refers is that of the terza rima, which Williams felt contained both a strong formal integrity and a vigorous resistance to this integrity. A group of three has integrity because threes do not split; it has tension because Williams's natural predilection is for groupings of four: "I found myself always conceiving my abstract designs as possessing four sides" (SL 333)[15] As Paul Christensen notes, Pan's battle to be among the Trinity is "a battle raging in the poem" (153). Being in the poem, the battle manifests itself as formal tension. Paul Mitchell sees tension as Williams's way of moving from the particular to the universal:

> For a man like Williams, who revels in the full perception of usual things, tension is the literary device which allows him to present a completely realized verbal picture or image and make an indirect universal statement through it without having to resort to more direct literary vehicles. (28)

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[15] In "Against the Weather" Williams contrasts the "flat-footed quadruple rhyme scheme" (SE 206) of Juan Ruiz's Libro de Buen Amor with the terza rima of Dante's Divina Commedia. While Williams admires Ruiz for breaking away from the trinity of the three-line stanza, Williams notes with pleasure a recurrent "dissonance" in the terza rima ; "this fourth unrhymed factor, unobserved, is the entrance of Pan into the Trinity" (207).

Moving to symmetrical typography, and particularly to the triadic line, would be for Williams a movement toward regularity in order to accentuate the tension between regularity and the evasion of regularity.

Because the triadic line frequently employs conventional punctuation, lines and sentences can be more clearly co-terminous, and this is frequently the case. The triadic line's harmony between line and syntax gives an epigraphic quality to the line, and allows the poem to more clearly make assertions and arguments. This is demonstrated especially powerfully in the uncommon cases when a sentence and triad are congruent, forming what Cushman calls a "closed triad":

> Be patient that I address you in a poem,
> there is no other
> fit medium.
> (PB 75)
> There is nothing to eat,
> seek it where you will
> but the body of the Lord.
> (PB 93)
> We will it so
> and so it is
> past all accident.
> (PB 126)

Cushman asserts that the natural tone of such assertions is elegiac, noting that in "To Ford Madox Ford In Heaven" (published in 1940, eight years before Paterson, Book Two and "The Descent") Williams shifts from elegiac couplets to the triadic line:

> the triadic stanza replaces the elegiac couplet, expanding the typographic alienation of longer with shorter lines to distribute an utterance more evenly. It is the modern elegiac format....Like

> the elegiac couplet out of which it grows, the triadic stanza has many uses, ranging from the celebration of erotic love to the lament for mortality and the search for consolation. Reading each of the triadic poems, we have the sense of an occasion, a ceremonial moment inscribed on the page with a power and grace that certain works in any age, even the modern, possess. (92)

In the triadic line the process of beginning again is inscribed[16] into line; each line must be re-begun twice. Each line, then, has three cycles, and this cyclical quality makes triadic poetry an appropriate background for the theme of the cycles of life, love and death. Moreover, because of the reduced use of grammatical techniques in which the reader creates meaning, the triadic line is the solution, I believe, to the Patersonian objective of moving "from mathematics to particulars" (P 5). In other words, in the triadic line the question of how to write poetry (and the consequent inquiry into the nature of language and meaning) is less often the subject of the poem; the poem is more directly a relation of Williams's ideas or experiences to the reader.

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[16] I find John Sparrow's definition of "inscription" most helpful:

> A "literary" inscription, then, is a text composed with a view to its being presented in lines of different lengths, the lineation contributing to or enhancing the meaning, so that someone who does not see it, actually or in his mind's eye, but only hears it read aloud misses something of the intended effect. Such inscriptions are examples of a literary form that differs both from verse and from prose as it is ordinarily composed and presented. (5)

The propriety of the triadic line as a stanza is doubted by some. Philip K. Jason, who coined the term sight-stanza to describe a contemporary woe which he attributes to "misapplications of some of William Carlos Williams' pronouncements" argues that: "To borrow the prestige of stanzaic form without paying the price of stanzaic control is a deceit" (738).[17] Jason's implicit condemnation of almost all of this century's poetry seems rather extreme, unless we consider (as Jason apparently does not) that "stanzaic control" may consist of something other than a strict scheme of meter and rhyme. Stephen Tapscott says that "In effect, the triadic line itself is an extended dactyl, a single line composed of 'variable' feet"(117). While the idea of the dactyl suggests the palpable unity of the triadic line,it does not answer the question of why Williams chose to collect his variable foot into groups of three.

Submitting triadic poetry to grammetrical analysis, Berry shows that:

> Sentence-endings coincident with the end of the third step of a triad generally occur at the end of a section or whole poem or at a point of particular rhetorical significance. Sentence-endings <u>within</u> the third lobe are common, followed by the beginning of a new sentence, so that syntactical expectation carries the reader back to the left margin. (391)

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[17] Jason manages to make the "sight-stanza" appear positively promiscuous when he concludes: "It is difficult to write effective, controlled stanzaic poetry. The monuments of stanzaic poetry should not be cheapened by our easy satisfaction with the deceit of the sight-stanza" (744).

Clearly, then, Williams treats the triadic line as a unit, though as Berry goes on to say, "the occurrence of an incomplete triad is sufficient to give autonomy to the lobes as lines in themselves.... Williams's "foot" is a perceptual unit, ready, as such, to assert its autonomy"(395).

Triadic lines have some of the visual "weight" (and corresponding promise of elevated tone) of long lines, though triadic lines allow much greater flexibility in moving about the page. Clearly such a form would satisfy Williams's desire to avoid a rigid structure.

I have said that the triadic line is the shape of Williams's meditative verse. A meditation is by its very nature personal, and requires tropes expressive of the poet's inner life. Parataxis must therefore, as a poetic strategy which invites the reader to "create" the meaning of the poem, find a reduced role in triadic poetry. Williams makes extensive use of conventional punctuation and complete sentences in his triadic poetry, and lines frequently coincide with syntax: "The lobes of Williams' triadic lines...have...a close relation to grammar, indeed, are typically coextensive with syntactical units" (Berry 377). The resultant reduction of enjambement and contre-rejet means reduced confusion and contradiction; lines are less often played against each other.[18]

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[18] One is certainly not justified in claiming an absence of enjambement in "Asphodel," but the frequency and the "strength" of enjambement is certainly reduced. Berry observes that the strength of enjambements does not depend solely upon the "level of delicacy of the syntactical unit they split":

Williams guides his reader, perhaps at the risk of reducing spontaneous interaction between reader and poem, for the "multiplication of impulses" is reduced. This is not the case in all triadic poetry; in fact Berry herself, in analyzing "The Orchestra," describes a series of essentially typographic effects which parallel parataxis:

> The visual brokenness of the text on the page, resulting from the stepped indentations of the lobes, the sentence boundaries within lobes and the suspension of syntactical expectation at metrical boundaries, induce in the silent reader an almost kinesthetic feeling of alertness. (383-84)

However, as Berry goes on to say, this is a quality of that small branch of triadic poetry which, like Williams's short-lined, highly-enjambed poetry, constantly plays metrical divisions against syntactical divisions.

Triadic lines are generally less jerky than Williams' other poetry; metrical divisions (enjambement and caesura) are weaker in part because of the way in which movement is inscribed in the triadic line. I have said that smooth,

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> In general, a cut at a given syntactical level will be perceived as stronger or weaker as the lines are shorter or longer, as the lengths of the parts of the suspended syntactical unit that precede and follow the line-division are shorter or longer, as junctures occur closer to or farther from the end of the one line and the beginning of the next, and as the semantic weight of what precedes or follows the line-division is less or greater. (131)

The movement visually incorporated into the triadic line reduces the strength of enjambements, especially within a triad, because the movement from one lobe to another is less a beginning again than a continuation.

steady movement is almost a visual necessity in the triadic line (it has even been suggested, erroneously, that Williams chose to use the triadic line because after his stroke he found it facilitated reading), and the result of this smoothness is that steps between triadic lobes are less dramatic than steps between lines of stanzaic poetry,[19] and the steps between triadic lines are less dramatic than steps between stanzas. Steps between syntactical units, too, are less "dramatic" insofar as they are less "participatory" because parataxis is reduced in triadic poetry.

Williams uses punctuation, complete sentences, and metaphor in order to make his message more clear and his ideas less feverish, for they are no longer realized by the reader's scurrying back and forth between lines. The reader's eyes, however, are busy. While meaning is more explicit and movement is more regular, the poem is perhaps a more clearly visual artifact than ever, because it is ordered according to a unique visual pattern. It is only natural that Williams should embrace metaphor at the same time that he accepts an abstract visual form, for both represent a relaxation of his stricture "no ideas but in things"--in both cases, Williams is making greater room for abstraction. The "idea" carried by a metaphor needn't spring from a "thing." Similarly, the "idea" of the triadic form does not spring directly from a particular poem--arguably, the form of a triadic poem is less mimetic of the poem's material and less

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[19] In fact, we may choose to consider these "steps" to be regularly occurring caesuras.

expressive of the poet's response to this material. The rhythmic and visual structures of the poem are, after all, mutually supportive, hence they doubly reinforce the steady tone of the poem. However, the converse of this is that variations from the triadic form are given further emphasis because they are a double evasion: rhythmic and visual. The mimetic and expressive powers of the poem are thus "virtuosic" at the evasions, while they are more muted or "choral" when the form is regular. In other words, the regular triadic form is suited to a particular type of poetry--specifically, the meditative poem.

Chapter IV

"ASPHODEL"

The first line of "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" suggests that the poem is to be Williams's triadic epic, and thus a summing-up. As Marilyn Kallet notes, the inverted phrase is reminiscent of the opening line of The Aeneid, "Yet instead of 'arms and the man' Williams sings 'to you' 'of asphodel,' the 'greeny,' ghostly flower of memory" (70):

> Of asphodel, that greeny flower,
> like a buttercup
> upon its branching stem--
> save that it's green and wooden--
> I come, my sweet,
> to sing to you. (PB 153)[20]

The two triads establish a dignified yet personal tone, with each lobe falling like the regular steps in a syllogism--with the exception of the aside "save that it's green and wooden--." The asphodel's transcendence of time--it is at once young (green) and mature (wooden)--is mirrored by the lobe's momentary transcendence of the regular progress of the triadic line. The length of this opening sentence, combined with the withholding of the subject and verb until the end, helps to establish the elevated tone of "Asphodel." Williams sets out to descend into memory in order to do bat-

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[20] All further references to "Asphodel" will be from this source, hence to avoid repetition I will indicate only page numbers.

tle with the "silence" of death which faces him, to reaffirm the discoveries of "the beautiful" that he has made in his life, and in so doing to rediscover his love for his wife, Flossie. The steady, stately tone of the triadic line, its suitability for the discursive mode, and the descent implicit in every line ideally suit the theme of "Asphodel."

"Asphodel" has no lines of the abruptness nor the direct physical representation of "The Rose"'s "the place between the petal's / edge and the ." Rather than the ideas in things, this poem seeks through meditation upon Williams's past to affirm the power of love and the imagination. Williams uses less radical techniques to achieve this goal because the way in which the poem produces meaning is in a sense being reversed; rather than moving from an object to a multiplicity of meanings, the poem moves among the numberless events of a single life, alighting at moments of illumination, and draws these moments together into a message of love, forgiveness, and the triumph of the creative mind, the unleashed imagination, over death.

This less radical approach supports the stately tone of the long triadic lines. Contre-rejet, a technique which Williams had frequently used in earlier poetry to open up a field of meaning, is not employed in "Asphodel." Rather than being found through hunting back and forth from line to line, meaning is revealed (and achieved) in the steady progression from line to line. Moreover, the ambiguity characteristically produced when the poem's meaning moves among

various possible readings is of much reduced service to a poem like "Asphodel." Williams is, after all, roaming amongst his memories in order to draw meaning from them; ambiguity would tend to diminish this meaning.

A reduction in contre-rejet suggests an increase in the integrity of the lines and lobes of a triadic poem; each lobe depends less on its neighbours to produce meaning. This is not to say that each lobe is a single, complete syntactical unit, nor that sentences end when triads end. However, line-splitting which is less radical combines with the shape of the triadic line to give each line a sense of coherence and rhetorical unity; in Berry's words: "Where a sentence ends at the first or second lobe of a triad, the diagonal thrust carries us to the next lobe(s); a sentence-ending coinciding with the end of a final lobe is doubly metrically reinforced" (392-93). When the need to hunt back and forth between lines is substantially reduced, as it is in "Asphodel," the visual unity and movement of the triadic line can assert itself, and the long triadic lines can more easily support the elevated tone their length promises.

The poem is organized around the image of asphodel, the flower which, according to Homer (in the Odyssey), grows in Hell. Williams has long identified himself with the vegetative, regenerative power of the flower ["saxifrage is my flower that splits the rocks"[21] (SP 145)], but in choosing

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[21] "I have always believed in keeping myself out of the picture. When I spoke of flowers, I was a flower, with all the prerogatives of flowers, especially the right to come alive in the Spring" (IW 21).

the asphodel he is clearly addressing the question of mortality, and the possibility of overcoming death in some way. Having survived several strokes, Williams had already been forced to confront difficulty in communication and the imminence of death itself. It is the silence of death, the dying "incommunicado" (166) like the Rosenbergs[22] that Williams can battle, both through the creative act of writing poetry and through seeking Flossie's forgiveness for his past philanderings, thereby achieving a rejuvenation of their love and the release of their imagination.[23]

The poem is a reconstructed history, especially of the lives of Williams and Flossie, ordered in such a way as to gain Flossie's acquiescence. The triadic line's regularity imparts an inevitability to the poem, adding boldness to Williams's statement:

> In the name of love
> I come proudly
> as to an equal
> to be forgiven.
> (PB 170-71)

By preceding the subject of the sentence with a brief apostrophe to love Williams confers an almost ceremonial tone upon the lines, reflecting his pride and putting love into

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[22] The first American civilians to be executed for espionage (June 19, 1953), the Rosenbergs were accused of providing the Soviets with information vital to the production of the atomic bomb. That "we admire their fortitude" (167) suggests that, like the Rosenbergs, we have fallen under Death's spell.

[23] As Audrey Rogers notes, for Williams the imagination is freed by the love of a woman, whether it be a hag dipping him in the Passaic or Flossie forgiving him (7).

the foreground. The poem's emphasis is not on infidelity but on the power of love. This is not simply a persuasive policy on Williams's part: it is a declaration of faith. The firmness of Williams's expectation of forgiveness is the firmness of his belief in the power of love. Forgiveness makes its appearance after the triad has ended, almost as an afterthought; by not appearing in the "entrance" triad, forgiveness is made subordinate to love. "Asphodel" is Williams's assertion of the power of love over death.

Love and devastation are, for Williams, inextricable. Audrey Rodgers notes that as early as Kora in Hell Williams wrote that "The best that we have enjoyed of love together has come after the most thorough destruction or harvesting of that which has gone before" (I 22). Williams opens the third book of "Asphodel" by asking "What power has love but forgiveness?" (169), and as Rodgers shows, the entire poem is a demonstration of the regenerative power of love:

> Her forgiveness renews him, and so he yields up the only gift he can offer her in return--the gift of the imagination, the poem: the "final flower." As always, Williams disarms us with the irony of this final humility, for his ultimate offering is always art! (147)

"Asphodel" has the quiet, stately tone consonant with an offering made in humility, and the triadic line excels at supporting such a tone. Paul Mariani, observing the poem from an essentially visual perspective somewhat different from my own, observes that:

> Even when the old nervous excitability so characteristic of Williams threatens to well up in the poem, it is checked by the measured cadence, the musical stasis of the variable foot, split apart wave-like, suspended in time on the page, quietly resisting forward impetus. The poem takes its peculiar floating sense from the way the "variable feet" are suspended, almost islanded, on the page. (Satyr 4).

The way that the variable feet are "almost islanded" on the page imparts a discreteness, I believe, a suggestion that each foot gets its single beat in the regular, implacable rhythm of the poem. The resistance to forward impetus is, I feel, essentially a resistance to any evasion of the regular beat of the poem.

The steadiness of the triadic line can achieve a disconcerting effect:

> We lived long together
> a life filled,
> if you will,
> with flowers. So that
> I was cheered
> when I first came to know
> that there were flowers also
> in hell.
> (153)

Though it was first the flower of the Elysian Fields, for Williams asphodel is the flower of Hell. Williams would have learned that the asphodel is said to grow in Hell in his study of flowers, but he came to know that there were flowers in Hell when he experienced Hell. The form of this discovery suggests that the steady movement of the triadic line can be overwhelming rather than stately. The rhythmic

regularity can lull the reader into expecting a corresponding thematic regularity. The reader may expect that the final sentence of this passage will end in a final, cheerful triad--instead it ends in the middle of a triadic line; "in hell." Sentences end somewhat more often, but by no means exclusively, when triadic lines do. That this is the "regular" form of the triadic line is much less a statistical than a perceptual fact; sentences and clauses whose endings coincide with the end of a triad carry an additional sense of completeness, as I have shown on pages thirty-eight and thirty-nine.

The imminence of Williams's death, so central to the creation of the poem--and to securing a hearing from Flossie--is articulated in the triadic line. The discreteness which each triadic lobe enjoys, suggests Williams's uncertainty as to what the next moment holds for him:

> 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.
> (154)

The urgency of the message of these lines rebels almost desperately against the measured pace of the triadic line. Eleanor Berry uses the above passage to show that "In 'Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,' where the text is a representation of an utterance spoken under pressure of time, the foregrounding of the temporal element of the linguistic medium enhances the thematic emphasis" (382). What Berry does not go on to observe is that in this short passage two sentences end at the end of final lobes. Berry has, however, predicted the result of the coincidence of triad and sentence-ending: "Where a sentence ends at the end of the first or second lobe of a triad, the diagonal thrust carries us to the next lobe(s); a sentence-ending coinciding with the end of a final lobe is doubly metrically reinforced" (Berry 392-93). In both cases in the above passage, this double reinforcement applies to Williams's mortality. The combined force of these two effects makes this passage, in my judgement, an example of the triadic line at its most powerful.

Williams of course recognized the necessity of variation within a form: "Without this internal play upon the stops, it cannot achieve power" (L 136). While "Asphodel" itself is constructed in a triadic form (it is made up of three books) the triad is violated--there is a coda. In general, Williams uses variation from the triadic form to escape from the steady rhythm--with its promise of thematic stability--of the triadic line. Moments of special rhetorical signifi-

cance are heralded by variations from the triadic form to indicate the power of the interrupting idea to alter the steady rhythm of the triadic line.

The first variation occurs soon after the above passage, and achieves a similar effect. Instead of a triad, we are presented with two lines, and the effect is similar to the that of the line "missing" from "The Rose" (discussed on pages nine to eleven); we are confronted by empty space, though in this case the empty space exists only as an expectation:

> Give me time,
> time.
> When I was a boy
> (154-55)

The "missing" line suggests a pause and a lack; Williams is desperately short of time. The skipped rhythmic beat suggests a skipped heartbeat--the need for time, and for the continuation and completion of the poem, is foregrounded. Williams is able to secure a sympathetic hearing not by pleading his case for forgiveness incessantly, but by supporting this message through the prosody of the triadic line, which mimes the intractable progress of time.

The next deviation from the triadic form is the omission of both the second and the third lobes of the triad, and this time a space is left to indicate the lack. This occurrence punctuates an interlude in which Williams pokes gentle fun at the pain that has sometimes been a part of their marriage:

I cannot say
that I have gone to hell
for your love
but often
found myself there
in your pursuit.
I do not like it
and wanted to be
in heaven. Hear me out.
Do not turn away.

I have learned much in my life
from books
and out of them
about love.
Death
is not the end of it.
(156-57)

Again, the occurrence of several sentence-endings coincident with the end of final triads suggests that this is a passage of some importance, as does the one-line "triad" that precedes Williams's statement of the primacy of love. Not wanting to claim the status of a hero or god, Williams nevertheless asserts, rather amusingly, that he has been to Hell for his love, or rather, he has found himself there. The delicate balance Williams struggles to achieve between lightness and the painful facts shows that he knows he is in dangerous territory. Williams's statement that he does not like to be in Hell is at first glance a rather straightforward admission of his humanity. His wanting to be in Heaven is, upon further reflection, a confession of having sought that Heaven with other women. The appearance of the short sentence "Hear me out" in a final triad where a sentence has already ended makes the sentence an exclamation which must be cried out quickly; Williams cannot afford to lose his

audience (specifically Flossie) at this point. The missing lines and the space below "Do not turn away" indicate a pause, emptiness, and, once again, a missed beat. It is almost as if Williams is catching his breath after making this confession. The visual "breakdown" of the triadic line mimes the breakdown in communication that the poet most fears at this moment. The one-line triad further suggests that this section has come to an end at the climatic moment of his confession. Now he can begin to speak in earnest of love, forgiveness, and the imagination. With a kind of calculated indelicacy, Williams's claim--and admission--of his knowledge of love follows. Williams's comic-flippant dismissal of his experiences of love with Flossie--and with others--is an interjection ("and out of them") which occurs in a final lobe. The syntactical "islanding" of this phrase violates the steady flow of the triads, but this thematic and rhythmic "indelicacy" bestows greater import upon the more delicate rhythm and sentiments that follow; they are a return to the "natural" rhythm of the poem. What Williams has learned of love in books and out of them (with Flossie and others) has taught him that love overcomes death:

> There is a hierarchy
> which can be attained,
> I think,
> in its service.
> Its guerdon
> is a fairy flower;
> (157)

The "guerdon" of love lives beyond death. A guerdon is a recompense or reward, but in this case it is also a garden, a source of endless regeneration.

The poem's third typographical deviation is occasioned by the sea:

> And so books
> entered our lives.
> The sea! The sea!
> Always
> when I think of the sea
> there comes to mind
> the Iliad
> and Helen's public fault
> that bred it.
> (158)

The beginning of a meditation on literature would seem to renew the promise of a steady, stately tone, but the sea bursts in. The arrest of this triad, and of the description (and, potentially, of the very existence) of the intellectual life they have shared together, leads Williams to think of the sea, with its promise of renewal: "The sea alone // with its multiplicity / holds any hope" (158). The wave-like movement of the left margin, combined with the repeated exclamation, mimes the energy of the life-giving sea, and presents Williams with the chance to reconstruct the Trojan War, in order to suggest that it was the fertile energy of sexual infidelity--"The sexual orchid that bloomed then" (158)--that inspired the Iliad. The phrase "Helen's public fault" is rich in possible meanings, but paramount is the sense of the open expression of sexuality which sets free

the imagination, "breeding" such works of creative genius as the Iliad. The life-affirming energy of sexual appetite is directly opposed to the silence of death--it sparks the imaginative energy necessary to produce art. That we fail to see this makes us:

> a race of fools
> or heroes
> if silence is a virtue.
> (158)

Williams is clear on the question of silence's "virtue," as he observes in this closed triad:

> Silence can be complex too,
> but you do not get far
> with silence.
> (159)

Suppression of one's sexuality is a silence, but passion, too, is followed by silence, because the storm of passionate love is ephemeral, it "bursts / or fades!" (160). Love, however, is a garden which expands, it "swallows up all else...and that I saw in you" (160).

The sea is almost as important a symbol in "Asphodel as is the flower--in fact, the sea is a garden:

> when the sun strikes it
> and the waves
> are wakened
> (156)

The sea is a garden which no one tends, yet which "puts all flowers / to shame" (156). The sea, expansive and undulat-

ing, reflects light, becomes, in fact, light's playground, and thus the playground of the intellect and the life-force. Throughout "Asphodel" Williams reflects upon the artists and "discoverers" who have influenced his life and thought, among them Homer, Cezanne, Darwin, Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley and Chaucer. In his most extensive catalogue of heroes, Williams presents John Donne, Tolstoi, Villon, St. Anthony, Kung, Rimbaud, Buddha and Abraham Lincoln, with the implied message that he wishes to join these luminaries. "Asphodel" is, in fact, Williams's contribution to the "struggle with darkness" (180), made in the knowledge that, like all other works of the intellect, it will fall short of "the light": "the palm goes / always to the light" (180).

Silence is such a dark virtue, and love so capable of swallowing up all else, that Flossie must love Williams not just in spite of his infidelities, but because of them. In the following passage there is a double sense of power: poetic and sexual. The power of reassurance that the triadic line commands is demonstrated at the end of this passage, which Flossie must surely have found difficult to read:

> Love
> to which you too shall bow
> along with me--
> a flower
> a weakest flower
> shall be our trust
> and not because
> we are too feeble
> to do otherwise
> but because
> at the height of my power
> I risked what I had to do,
> therefore to prove
> that we love each other

while my very bones sweated
that I could not cry to you
in the act.
Of Asphodel, that greeny flower,
I come, my sweet,
to sing to you!
(161)

The "act" of which Williams speaks is the creative act, both poetic and sexual. Even Williams's acts of poetic creativity are a sort of infidelity since they are a consummation in which Flossie cannot take part. The repetition of the now-closed triad "Of Asphodel, that greeny flower, / I come, my sweet, / to sing to you!" takes on a chant-like, ritualistic quality; Williams depends upon the steadiness of the triadic line for a certain reassuring quality.

The first book closes with a declaration of the power of poetry:

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.
Hear me out
for I too am concerned
and every man
who wants to die at peace in his bed
besides
(161-62)

Far from "art for art's sake," Williams claims that poetry acts in the world, that it informs and directs, and he asks that on this basis Flossie--and the reader--"Hear me out." When a sentence and a third lobe end together, Williams is emphasizing the "conclusive" nature of what he has said.

Here he is closing the first book with the thought of the conclusion of his life. What Williams seeks is more than just Flossie's love and forgiveness. The single word which constitutes the final lobe of the first book, "besides," points outwards, and tends to resist the finality inscribed into the line. Indeed, though grammatically "besides" is linking every man who wants to die at peace in his bed with Williams in their need of what can be found in poems, the pause which rhythmic regularity would demand of this one-word "triad" would suggest an interjection to follow, a further reason. When nothing follows but the beginning of the second book, a tension between the poem's form and content is hinted at; though formally this lobe looks very much like a conclusion, and thematically it essentially is, there is a slight suggestion of incompletion.

The second book of "Asphodel" relates the "deaths" Williams has suffered, and the third book begins to show how Flossie's love redeems him. One might expect to find less technical flamboyance in this, the body of the poem, and indeed this is the case. In this entire section there is but a single closed triad:

> The end
> will come
> in its time.
> (165)

While the coincidence of lobe-endings and sentence-endings is more common in the final lobe than in the first or second

lobes in Book I and the coda, indicating a preponderance of "thesis sentences" in these sections, sentence endings are fairly evenly dispersed in the second and third books. This seems appropriate since this is the "body" of the poem; these books focus on the "events" more than the "ideas" of the poem. The incidence of extremely short or long lobes (I have arbitrarily defined the "normal" range of lobes to be from three to eight syllables; ten of every eleven lobes in "Asphodel" fall within this range) is more-or-less evenly divided among the poem's sections. Rhythmically, "Asphodel" is generally regular except when triads are closed or "violated." By "violated" I mean those lines which lack a third or perhaps even a second lobe. There are three such lines in Book I and four in the coda; only one such line occurs in the middle two books, at the end of Book II, and because it is the final line of a book in a section where sentence-endings are evenly distributed among the lobes, it is less abrupt. Thus, besides having fewer propositions and conclusions (often found in closed triads), the middle section has fewer diversions from a regular rhythm (often created by violated or extremely short or long lobes).

In the second book Williams recollects the deaths and moments of darkness he has seen, and squares them against the "pinnacles" of life and light he has experienced. Perhaps inevitably, Williams chooses to see these moments as flowers, evoking the vast regenerative power of something as fragile as a flower, or the human spirit. The second book

opens with a musing on the loss of a sense of engagement with the everyday, physical world, a loss brought on by the knowledge of imminent death.

On the verge of death, and the death of Flossie's love for him, Williams journeys through time to discover the "key" to our time in order to better understand his death and his place in the world.

> If we are to understand our time,
> we must find the key to it,
> not in the eighteenth
> and nineteenth centuries,
> but in earlier, wilder
> and darker epochs . .
> So to know, what I have to know
> about my own death,
> if it be real,
> I have to take it apart.
> (162-63)

Williams begins taking his death apart by seeking to find out what memory of his artistic achievement will be left behind--there seems to be little hope. Speaking of one of his primary formative influences (Cezanne), Williams learns that the young artist he addresses is not interested, though he does like one of Williams's poems, and has heard of another. Williams's poignant response: "I was grateful to him / for his interest" (163) conveys a certain resignation.

Williams next conveys to us the "pinnacles"(164): the appearance of the Jungfrau ("the Virgin," a mountain in the Alps) out of the mist after four days of rain; and his stumbling, lost, upon some gypsy women in Granada, who find him a young girl to guide him on his way. Both are discoveries,

made at a respectful distance, of the mysterious, the foreign, and the feminine. Despite these pinnacles, Williams suffered deaths due to his witnessing "the world's niggardliness"(164); in fact "I was lost / failing the poem"(164).

Williams may be saved by the poem because like waves, poems reflect

> The free interchange
> of light over their surface
> which I have compared
> to a garden.
> (165)

Though the garden is always for Williams a metaphor for richness and life, flowers are by no means purely benevolent:

> I am reminded
> that the bomb
> also
> is a flower
> dedicated
> howbeit
> to our destruction.
> the mere picture
> of the exploding bomb
> fascinates us
> so that we cannot wait
> to prostrate ourselves
> before it. We do not believe
> that love
> can so wreck our lives.
> (165)

Like the storm (157), the bomb is a flower, one which destroys not only through its blast[24] but also through its effect on men's minds; we prostrate ourselves before its

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[24] Williams may be playing on the fact that the words "blast" and "blow," frequently linked to a bomb's explosion, both carry a further sense of a bud or a bloom.

very image. The devastating power of love recalls the love of which Williams speaks in "The Drunk and the Sailor." In it, Williams tells of witnessing a drunk screaming at a sailor:

> But me--
> the shock of it--
> my heart leaped in my chest
> so that I saw red
> wanted
> to strangle the guy
> The fury of love
> is no less.
> (PB 147)

The drunk may be berating the sailor for making a sexual advance; it is the love of his fellow-man that makes Williams ashamed of and furious at the drunk. If Williams had no pity or fellow-feeling for the drunk, the spectacle would be merely humourous. Only when it springs from love can anger grow to such a destructive fury. We would prostrate ourselves at the sight of love, Williams suggests, if we only knew the destruction it can wreak.

In triadic "steps" that suggest the steps of a syllogism, Williams insists that:

> There is no power
> so great as love
> which is a sea,
> which is a garden--
> as enduring
> as the verses
> of that blind old man
> destined
> to live forever.
> (166)

The poem reflects the dance of light upon the sea, and gives immortality to a blind,"sexless old man"(166) (Homer?). The power of the poem to confer immortality has little currency in the minds of many, who believe rather

> in the bomb
> and shall die by
> the bomb.
> (166)

Again, shaped by its material, the triadic line takes on a syllogistic quality, emphasized by the requirement which "by" places on us; the preposition requires an object, and the bomb is there to quickly, almost inevitably, assert itself.

As avarice soured Columbus's discovery, the bomb threatens to raze the gardens which Einstein and Darwin have offered to the world. The "bomb" existed before nuclear physics, for it is destructive energy unharnessed. Cruel and hungry, the bomb demands sacrifice, and it generates silence:

> For there had been kindled
> more minds
> than that of the discoverers
> and set dancing
> to a measure,
> a new measure!
> Soon lost.
> The measure itself
> has been lost
> and we suffer for it.
> We come to our deaths
> in silence.
> The bomb speaks.
> (167-68)

What discoverers give to mankind is a measure, and thus, though his "secret life" has been made up of such "trivia" as Floss's smiles and the lives of babies he has saved, Williams most regrets that there will be an end to the words "made solely of air / or less" (169), for the measure Williams has presented mankind is a measure of words. As Williams and Floss treasure "the few paintings / we still cling to,"(168) they love also his art. Book Two ends on this observation, and the final line, being an initial lobe, mimes the embarkation of their relationship:

> For in spite of it all,
> all that I have brought on myself,
> grew that single image
> that I adore
> equally with you
> and so
> it brought us together.
> (169)

As I have observed, this is the only violated triad in the middle section of "Asphodel;" it is also the only violated triad which ends a section of the poem. The sense of a brief pause, of something missing, suggests the terrible brevity of their lives together, seen from old age. The beginning of their love is followed by an unexpectedly swift end.

What power has love but forgiveness?" (169) begins Book Three. It is for its Koreate powers of regeneration, Williams says, that he invokes the flower: "Asphodel, the ancients believed, / in hell's despite / was such a flow-

er"(170) Without Flossie's love Williams is in Hell; hence the asphodel, despite its "forboding" nature, is an emblem of hope and regeneration for him. The "work" of the poem begins at this point; Williams hopes to show Floss the steps "by which you shall mount, / again to think well / of me" (171).

The steps seem rather precarious. Williams presents three images of "crude force," all suggestive of male sexual force: a man on horseback with a "naked sword;" a "horse rampant" roused by a mare; and finally, a freight train thundering through a station. The suggestion of a centaur implicit in the combined images of man and horse leads to another image: a contemporary satyr.

Williams describes a black man on a subway, and the man is described in a fashion suggesting the image of a satyr; between his legs are a "worn knobbed stick" (172) and a case "bulging with its contents" (173). Mariani observes that the image of the satyr on the subway "conflates the earlier images of man, beast, and machine"(New 676), and he further observes a likeness of this figure to D.H. Lawrence's black-faced Great God Pan, who is "'careful never to utter one word of the mystery' (Lawrence 420) as he stands over against 'the mechanical conquered universe of humanity'"(New 676). This man, whom Williams saw on the subway "yesterday"(172), reminds Williams--who is thirty years older than he--of his father, and he seems to possess "the secret"(173).

The man is a mythical progenitor, he carries all men and women in his loins, and the failure to make contact with him "seemed to me / a flower / whose savor had been lost" (174). Williams is moved to find other flowers that he has gathered in his life. Though this Pan is rather dilapidated, he allows Williams at last to enter the "earlier, wilder / and darker epochs" (162), and observe the "lilacs" of perhaps the first artists: cave painters. In praising these primeval artists Williams invokes his father using an archaic oath pattern, thereby predicating his own place in the ancient line of artists. Though in the form of an exclamation, the triadic line confers a meditative and, because of Williams's self-affirmation, a quietly confident tone to the passage:

> But what
> draftsmen they were!
> By my father's beard,
> what draftsmen.
> (174)

Because the sight of a stranger on a subway train can inspire him to "build a picture / of all men"(174), Williams can know Flossie, and know her compassion, a compassion observed in her caring for her plants. Thus his art gives him the courage to seek Floss's forgiveness. The rushed lobe which ends the following passage is expressive of Williams's desperate need for Floss's acceptance: "It will cure us both. / Let us // keep it to ourselves but trust it" (175-76). This is a point at which an isochronic theory, or

a theory of triadic lobes as rhythm units, seems to produce meaning reliably, but in the following example, such theories seem tenuous:

> There are many other flowers
> I could recall
> for your pleasure:
> the small yellow sweet-scented violet
> that grew
> in marshy places!
> (177)

The ten-syllable lobe describing the violet could mime Williams's excitement at the memory recovered, and his eagerness to please his wife with this discovery. We could just as well understand this passage, however, by means of an "iso-semantic" theory. For example, we could read the lineation to show that the violet, its "growing," and its marshy surroundings are all of roughly equal importance. I am not trying to undermine my own claims concerning the triadic line, but to face what Tapscott called the "impressionistic" quality of criticism of the triadic line: "formal analyses of the effects seem to find an inevitability of form only after the fact" (Tapscott 118). Because Williams's visual ordering generally affects the tone of the poem, and because the rhythm of the variable foot is so open to variation, a wide range of effects is available, and one's interpretation of the poem's prosody is inevitably influenced (for the good, I believe) by the poem's thematic content.

Book Three ends with Williams offering Flossie a "last flower"--the poem--in tribute to her forgiveness, the very forgiveness which was the original object of the poem. Coming on the heels of Williams's rebirth through Flossie's forgiveness, then, Williams's offer of this "last flower" is more than a poetic figure; it is a statement of faith in the unity of flowers, love, and poems. Here the triadic line becomes more than stately; indeed it approaches exaltation, which is necessary to support the content:

> Are facts not flowers
> and flowers facts
> or poems flowers
> or all works of the imagination,
> interchangeable?
> Which proves
> that love
> rules them all, for then
> you will be my queen,
> my queen of love
> forever more.
> (178)

Alliteration accentuates the incantatory quality of this final passage of the final book of the poem.

Though it comprises only four of the thirty pages of "Asphodel," the coda contains one half (eight) of the closed triads occurring in the poem. It also contains one half (four) of the violated triads in the poem, and the greatest frequency of extremely short and extremely long triads. Clearly, then, variations from the triadic norm are used extensively in the coda to give emphasis and energy to its conclusions.

The coda broadens the focus of the poem from the specifics of Williams's and Flossie's love to the tension between imaginative expression and silence, light and darkness, life and death:

> Inseparable from the fire
> its light
> takes precedence over it.
> Then follows
> what we have dreaded--
> but it can never
> overcome what has gone before.
> In the huge gap
> between the flash
> and the thunderstroke
> Spring has come in
> or a deep snow fallen.
> (178)

The closed triad, acting as introduction to the coda, stands as a kind of metaphysical manifesto. To live "In the huge gap / between the flash // and the thunderstroke" is to live in the instant, with death ever-present. If this knowledge lives in one's imagination, then the heat-generated thunder (or the fiery release of energy following the flash of a nuclear explosion) can never efface the light that has gone before. Once this idea is expressed, it is immediately reinforced in a closed triad:

> in an eternity
> the heat will not overtake the light.
> That's sure.
> That gelds the bomb,
> permitting
> that the mind contain it.
> (179)

The mind, like the asphodel, expands to comprehend, to "swallow up" death. Contemplation of the "sweetest interval" when love will blossom is interrupted--before the triad is complete, and before the delicate moment can fade--with Williams's reassertion of the argument in the closed triad which follows the first violated triad of the coda:

> This is that interval
> that sweetest interval
> when love will blossom,
> come early, come late
> and give itself to the lover.
> Only the imagination is real!
> I have declared it
> time without end.
> (179)

The closed triad violates the previous line, bursts in, just as does the triad following the second violated triad of the coda:

> Then indeed
> for him
> the light has gone out.
> But love and the imagination
> are of a piece,
> swift as the light
> to avoid destruction.
> (179)

Whether claiming the primacy of the imagination or the "relativity" of love and the imagination, Williams visibly sets these claims apart from the rest of the poem. Destruction presents itself as an afterthought to the triad, and it is precisely this enfeebling of death and destruction that the Coda sets out to achieve. Where the rest of the poem is a

statement of faith in the power of love, the coda is more forceful, arguing for an intellectual usurpation of death's dominion.

The remaining two deviations from the triadic form celebrate "Light, the imagination / and love"(180), with the triads in both instances stopping short in order to underscore the union and dominance of these three forces. Poets and other discoverers have served the light, and at Williams's wedding to Floss "the light was wakened/ and shone"(181). Williams's celebration of the light and his love for Floss are one. The flower that can live in "hell's despite"(170), and whose odor exists only for the imagination, and hence forever, is Williams's own asphodel, Flossie:

> Asphodel
> has no odor
> save to the imagination
> but it too
> celebrates the light.
> It is late
> but an odor
> as from our wedding
> has revived for me
> and begun again to penetrate
> into all crevices
> of my world.
> (182)

Where his early poetry strove to reveal the very essence of an object or a sensation, in the triadic line Williams addresses Flossie (Journey To Love's dedication is "For My Wife"), the imagination, love's power of forgiveness, and "the light"--the beauty forever discoverable in the world.

In allowing the abstract into the poem, Williams allows the poem to more fully enter the world of the poet's mind. Where vegetable energy fractured to make new ["saxifrage is my flower that splits / the rocks" (SP 145)], now the flower's odor, directed to the imagination, penetrates "into all crevices / of my world" (182). Where contemporary beauty sprang, blemished, from the "detritus" (Mariani, "Satyr" 7) of the modern world, timeless beauty is evoked, contemplated, partaken of. Where a hag dipped him in the filthy Passaic, Williams is now baptized in Floss's love. In conveying these changes the triadic line is eminently successful.

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