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978-0-521-43130-9 - The Revolution in the Visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams

Peter Halter

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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The formation of Modernism in general and of Modernist literature in particular took place in a cultural climate that was characterized by an unprecedented collaboration between painters, sculptors, writers, musicians, and critics on both sides of the Atlantic, with centers in Paris, London, Berlin, Zürich, and New York. Within this multifaceted movement, William Carlos Williams may well be the paradigmatic case of a writer whose poetics are the result of a “cross-fertilization in the arts,” to borrow the expression James E. Breslin used in one of the best articles written so far on Williams and the visual arts.<sup>1</sup> Peter Schmidt, in an equally pertinent essay on the subject, even writes that “[o]f all the poets who have been influenced by the visual arts, William Carlos Williams may present the most complex case”:

Blake, Rossetti and Pound turned paintings into poems and saw poems become paintings. But none seems to match the combined range and depth of Williams’ involvement in the arts. Blake’s work represents a one-man movement in both painting and poetry. Rossetti and his fellow Pre-Raphaelites had a much more uniform style and subject matter than did the artists Williams knew. Pound’s artist friends were certainly as diverse as those of Williams, but they exerted a more problematic influence, and it is not surprising that the single most important visual influence on Pound – the ideogram – was largely his own invention. Williams, on the other hand, paid close attention to three quite different art movements.<sup>2</sup>

The movements referred to by Schmidt are the Stieglitz school of “straight” photographers and Precisionist painters, European Cubism and its American adaptations, and Dada and Surrealism. To these one could add Postimpressionism, Vorticism, Futurism, Expressionism, and Early Abstraction – movements with which Williams was in touch through such artist friends as Pound, DeMuth, and Hartley, as well as through many other channels.

Since this book is not the first to relate Williams’s achievement to the revolutionary movements in the visual arts, it can rely in many ways on the material and the insights assembled and gained in previous studies.<sup>3</sup> (Needless to say, this

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debt also extends to dozens of books and articles on the relationship between literature and the visual arts in a more general way, as well as to a great number of pertinent studies on Williams and on Modernism.)

With the exception of two recent publications,<sup>4</sup> all of the few book-length studies on Williams and the visual arts, beginning with Bram Dijkstra's pioneering study and extending to those by Dickran Tashjian, William Marling, and Christopher MacGowan, extensively document biographical influences, above all the multifaceted contacts between Williams and the New York avant-garde. All of them, with increasing complexity, also try to reevaluate Williams's work in the light of their findings.

All in all, however, we still have relatively little extensive, and even less in-depth, literary analysis in this field, and many of the basic questions about the deeper affinities between Williams's poetry (or Modernist poetry in general) and painting have not yet been fully explored. If, for instance, one of the common features of Modernist poetry is the discarding of the traditional "continuous" forms in favor of the discontinuous, broken, "illogical" forms of montage, what are the deeper connections to the abandoning of the continuous space in Modernist painting? Are there fruitful applications of such concepts as synesthetic and kinesthetic art, much talked about in Futurism and Orphism, to Williams's preoccupation with verbal force within an "aesthetics of energy"? Can we establish connections between Williams's programmatic insistence on "contact" and the creation of a Cubist space that is no longer organized around a vanishing point receding into infinity but rather opens up toward the viewer? And if one can indeed relate a specific space in poetry with a specific space in painting, are the related spaces rooted in phenomenological changes that establish a common ground between some of the basic forms of Modernist poetry and Modernist painting?

The aim of this book, in the context of these and other related questions, is twofold. First, it is to contribute to a deeper understanding of Williams's poetics and to affirm his poetics as one of the important contributions to Modernist aesthetics; and second, to contribute to the continuing exploration of the common ground of the various art forms in Modernism, a ground which, of course, can only be found beyond the ineluctable differences of each artistic medium. Williams himself is a case in point here: His importance as a poet is rooted in the very fact that he was able to find in the visual arts an essential inspiration for the development of his own poetics without violating his own medium, writing.

Of the book-length studies devoted so far to Williams and the visual arts, Henry Sayre's *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams* and Peter Schmidt's *William Carlos Williams, the Arts, and Literary Tradition* are closest to the present study insofar as they rely largely on previous scholarship and concentrate on the specific nature of Williams's Modernist poetics in light of its relation to Modernist

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painting. Schmidt's book, published around the time that I was about to finish the present study, can be taken in several ways as a valuable counterpart to my own approach. Schmidt tries to show "how even during the decade in which Williams wrote *Spring and All* he sought to integrate ideas from the visual arts with what in 1939 he called 'the usable past' – the full range of both American and European literary tradition." He accordingly argues that "in general Williams used the inspiration he gained from the arts not . . . to create a visual poetics, but to return to and renew specifically *literary* traditions and modes" (p. 7). Although I agree with Schmidt that Williams did not primarily create a visual poetics *as such*, I nevertheless propose that he tried to develop, by way of the visual arts, an aesthetics informing *all* Modernist art, including literature. Whereas Schmidt thus reads Williams's poems in the light of the *literary* concepts which Williams had derived from the visual arts, my own book redefines Williams's specific achievement in terms of a *basic aesthetics of Modernism* developed in direct response to the revolution in the visual arts. This difference of approach not only influences Schmidt's reading of Williams's poems (or the selection of the poems treated); it also leads to a different conception of those aspects of Dada, Precisionism, and Cubism that are considered vital or fruitful for Williams's own achievement.

The differences between my own approach and Sayre's book, on the other hand, are of another kind. Sayre fully identifies Williams's aesthetics with the formalist approach, that is, with the need to foreground in multiple ways the status of the work of art as artifact: a created object of its own that must never be mistaken for the reality it refers to. The importance of this dimension is amply confirmed in the present book, but I will argue that it must not be regarded as determining the poem to the point that it becomes irreconcilable with other important dimensions – above all Williams's conviction that there exists a deeper connection between artifact and thing-world: The work of art comes alive by sharing the life of the object it "imitates." The poem, in other words, is for Williams a product of the imagination that enables us to empathize with the world of nature because the re-creative mind and nature are correlative and extend each other.

The importance of this basic tension in Williams's poems between the referential and self-referential dimensions, between the poem as an autonomous work which yet depends on the deeper connections to the empirical world it refers to, is stressed in several recent interpretations of Williams's aesthetics, most notably Charles Altieri's *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* and Albert Gelpi's *A Coherent Splendor*. Both Altieri and Gelpi see Williams's achievement essentially in terms of this double fascination with the poem as a plastic medium and as an object endowed with the power of reference.

In this respect Williams's poetics anticipates what has sometimes been regarded as a typically Postmodernist attitude: a poetics of participation which, in Altieri's words, essentially "seeks to uncover the ways man and nature are uni-

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fied, so that value can be seen as the result of immanent processes in which man is as much object as he is agent of creativity.”<sup>5</sup> My own approach here, unlike Sayre’s, endorses the interpretation first advanced by J. Hillis Miller in his seminal chapter on Williams in *Poets of Reality*, albeit not in the sense that the poet’s self fuses with the world it mediates to the point of total obliteration.

To say therefore that Williams takes us beyond a rigid dualism of self and other, subject and object, is not to deny the existence of a separate self. With Joseph Riddel we could say that, “[o]n the contrary, it [Williams’s attitude] affirms both the finite self and its finite imagination. . . . The self closes with the other; it wanders in the intimacy of a world which like itself is governed by change, growth, and decay. Neither the self nor nature has an essence, except in the necessity of their relationships.”<sup>6</sup> This, basically, is the phenomenological stance behind Williams’s famous dictum, “No ideas but in things” (*P*, 6, 9).

As a consequence of this, the most fundamental tension underlying Williams’s poetics is the double awareness of the work of art as a separate reality *and* as an “imitation” of the world at large because of the essential kinship between the experiential self and the outside world. This means that both the formalist impulse and the will to establish that essential “contact” with the empirical world are constantly at work in Williams’s poems, which hence are largely the result of the complex ways in which these basic forces interact with, and work against, one another.

For both of these fundamental dimensions Williams discovered important sources of inspiration in the visual arts. All of the revolutionary movements, from Cézanne and the Fauvists through Cubism, Futurism, and Vorticism to Dada and Surrealism, stressed the autonomous nature of the work of art and insisted, in the words of the Cubists, on the painting as a *fait pictural*. All of these movements, however, also eschewed total abstraction and insisted on the necessity of figuration, since all of them regarded art as a heterocosmos that loses its deeper meaning the moment it abandons its connection with the empirical world. Reference is often made in this context to the turning point in the history of Cubism. At the end of its “analytic” phase Picasso and Braque had reached the point of nearly total abstraction; at that moment they realized that to abandon representation also meant giving up the possibility of foregrounding the problems of artistic creation and of the viewer-response dimension that were so essential to them. Even Kandinsky, the only artist who had gone over to total abstraction in 1911, insisted on what we could call the isomorphic nature of his art, regarding his forms and colors as a means of representing the object-world stripped, as it were, of all accidentals in order to arrive at the pure “inner sound” of things.

Stressing the object character of the work of art, therefore, did not entail severing the ties with the outside world; on the contrary, many Modernists strove to develop an art that conveyed or embodied a *more essential* dimension

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of the reality referred to. In this respect Williams was inspired and/or confirmed in his own energy-oriented aesthetics by such movements as Vorticism and Futurism, as well as Kandinsky's theories of expression and Pound's concept of the ideogram, developed by way of Fenollosa's writings on the Chinese ideogram. All of these movements and theories share the notion that art should be related to a universe of process and interaction; in writing this means that, among other things, one should accurately mime these processes by using transitive verbs instead of nouns, since nouns are products of the categorizing habits of the mind, with a far too static and abstract concept of "the real."

The call for "contact" that Williams developed in this context was directly related to the need to create an indigenous American art. Genuine "contact," Williams and his artist friends believed, could be established only with one's own immediate environment; and since in all viable art sharp attention to the particulars of such an environment was identical with attention to the vital underlying processes manifest in each of them, the particular *was* the universal, as Williams never tired of stressing.

This meant that the poet can be "both local (all art is local) and at the same time . . . surmount that restriction by climbing to the universal in all art." Poetry then, like all art, can and must be the result of the artist's attempt "to lift an environment to expression" (*SL*, 286). This was a conviction, Williams discovered, that in his own particular situation had far-reaching consequences with regard to both iconography and form. The artist who tried to be "a mirror to this modernity" (*CP1*, 108) had to reflect contemporary America in all its aspects – above all the innumerable things banished from traditional art as banal or ugly. As a consequence, poetic or artistic form had to be the result of an adaptation of the revolutionary European achievements to the specific American needs – it had to highlight its own status as an artifact or *made* thing but at the same time had to be capable of accommodating the "actual" in all its manifestations. The synthetic form evolving from these needs is another version of the basic tension in Williams's poems between the concrete and the abstract, the referential and the self-referential, the one and the many, and it was once again inspired by achievements in the visual arts, ranging from Gris's Synthetic Cubism to Duchamp's ready-mades and the Precisionist adaptations of Futurism and Cubism developed by Williams's friends Demuth and Sheeler.

Thus all the subsequent chapters take up in one form or another the rich balance to be found in Williams between, on the one hand, this concept of the poem as an artifact that "deals with words and words only" (*I: SA*, 145) and, on the other hand, his fidelity to the poem as a means "through metaphor to reconcile / the people and the stones" (*CP2*, 55) – that is, fidelity to the poem as a field of action "transfused with the same forces that transfuse the earth – at least one small part of them" (*I: SA*, 121). Each chapter deals with the analogies between these basic aspects and the corresponding structural elements in the visual arts.

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Invariably, the relationships between the different art media are grounded in analogy and not identity, as Williams was well aware. A case in point is iconicity, dealt with mainly in the last chapter. The iconic dimension, albeit important in many Williams poems, always interacts with the symbolic dimension (as defined by C. S. Peirce and Jakobson),<sup>7</sup> since Williams works with both the imitative and the systemic nature of language. Thus, to start with, he tried to exploit the analogy of poetry and painting by asserting that “a design in the poem and a design in the picture should make them more or less the same thing.”<sup>8</sup> “Design,” in both media, can be both concrete and abstract, both mimetic and nonimitative, and thus a poem, in its overall concrete or iconic design, can visually embody what it refers to in its words. But since design can also be abstract or nonmimetic, the words on the page, Williams realized, could as well be arranged in a stanzaic form that, in its arbitrariness, mirrored not only the arbitrariness of the sign but, once again, the status of the poem as artifact.

Thus on the visual or spatial level the poem, like the painting, could work with the tension between mimesis and creation. On the other hand, the generation of meaning in all language unfolds in time, and thus Williams, working with, and not against, the sequential nature of language, extended the iconic dimension into the temporal level: In the arrangement of words and lines on the page his poems reflect how the self – step by step, moment for moment – explores the environment. Williams, in other words, embodies on the iconic level not only the objects themselves but also the processes by which these objects are perceived. But on this level, too, his poems are once again imitative *and*, at the same time, part of an autonomous linguistic structure, since both the tension between lineation and syntax and the distribution of the words on the page also highlight the nature of the poem as artifact.

Thus iconicity is part of the mimetic or “imitative” dimension, rooted in an organic form that interacts with (or counteracts) the “design” imposed on the poem by “an Objectivist writer whose characteristic form is Cubist construction made of free-verse units.”<sup>9</sup> This basic tension is finally resolved (or relinquished) in the longer poems of the fifties, which are devoted less to foregrounding the object character of the poem and more to emphasizing voice and the spoken idiom, devoted less to the enactment of sense experience and more to reveries and meditation, to explicit musing and the intense effort to explain the meaning of past events and experiences. Poems such as “Asphodel, that Greeny Flower” or *Paterson*, Book 5, mark the peak of a major change whose first occurrence, as Stephen Tapscott notes, is to be found in the second book of *Paterson*:

The famous example of this discontinuous development, of course, is the appearance of the tri-partite line – as early as Book 2 of *Paterson*, in a brooding section about history, memory, and the (female) park at the outskirts of the (male) city: “The descent beckons / as the ascent beckoned.” Later, by the time of “Asphodel,” Williams had consolidated the formal discovery, recognizing the thematic uses to which it could be put. In this context, I think, it’s clear that something

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happened through *Paterson* 3 and 4; gradually the visual, Cubist form of the poem shifted toward more spoken forms. (“Williams, Sappho, and the Woman as Other,” p. 30)

*Paterson* is thus essentially a work of transition, in which Williams gradually moves beyond the Imagist and Objectivist poetics which is the subject of the present book. Although the overall structure of *Paterson* is unthinkable without the collage form derived from Modernist painting, it in many ways leads beyond the poetics and aesthetics informing Williams’s previous poetry, and it can be properly appreciated only if one takes into consideration the specific ways in which Williams’s Objectivist poetics interacts with, and finally gives way to, the new style that fully emerges in the 1950s.

To conclude these opening remarks, it seems important to stress that this book is not limited to the relationship between Williams’s poetry and the visual arts in the sense of clear-cut influences only. Rather, it sets out to establish some of the deeper analogies between several art forms and many artists whose achievements may be related on the basis of direct or indirect influence *or* on the basis of phenomena that exceed these categories altogether. The deeper connections are important on all levels, but to distinguish clearly between them is often difficult or downright impossible. Williams himself, and many of his artist friends of the New York avant-garde, regarded their theories and achievements largely as the result of a collective enterprise, and although there are many instances where direct influence is evident and/or acknowledged, the work of an individual artist or writer is also imbued with innumerable cultural and aesthetic stimuli that lead beyond any specific single source. In view of the speed with which, since the late nineteenth century, avant-garde publications, art periodicals, exhibitions, books, and personal contacts have disseminated artistic styles and ideas, the notion of influence, though still viable, has to be qualified and expanded. The deeper relevance of Williams as poet, after all, is rooted in the fact that his artistic achievement, beyond its personal, retraceable history, is an important embodiment of the *Zeitgeist* and thus reflects many of the fundamental issues of the age.

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## *Prelude*

### *Getting in Touch*

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On February 17, 1913, the Armory Show opened in New York. In this huge exhibition the revolutionary European movements in the visual arts, such as Postimpressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism, were introduced to the general American public for the first time, side by side with a comprehensive show of progressive American art. The exhibition was an object of derision and amusement to the vast majority of visitors and critics alike, but it deeply impressed a number of artists and critics, who were increasingly dissatisfied with the triteness and utter conventionality of the established artistic forms. Their main reaction was one of fascination and excitement: The revolutionary European art threw the provincial and conventional character of most of their own products into sharp relief and created in turn an intense hope for an American art of equal temerity – for an art that would neither ignore what had happened outside America nor withdraw from the crass contemporary world of materialism and science into the creation of spurious idylls based on an anemic idealism. The feeling of hope for an imminent fundamental change has been well described in a number of studies, such as those by Milton Brown and Meyer Schapiro:

About 1913 painters, writers, musicians, and architects felt themselves to be at an epochal turning-point corresponding to an equally decisive transition in philosophic thought and social life. This sentiment of imminent change inspired a general insurgence, a readiness for great events. . . . The world of art had never known so keen an appetite for action, a kind of militancy that gave to cultural life the quality of a revolutionary movement or the beginnings of a new religion.<sup>1</sup>

All of Williams's own comments on the Armory Show reveal this same feeling of elation:

There was at that time a great surge of interest in the arts generally before the First World War. New York was seething with it. Painting took the lead. We were tinder for Cézanne. I had long been deep in love with the painted canvas through Charles Demuth but that was just the beginning. . . . Then the Armory Show



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burst upon us, the whole Parisian galaxy, Cézanne at the head, and we were exalted by it. (A, MS version, Williams files, YALC)

In several ways Williams was ready to be deeply influenced by the show and the subsequent excitement.<sup>2</sup> Introduced into the world of art through his mother's still lifes, he had shown a keen interest in painting from the beginning. Even after he had begun to write, he toyed with the idea of becoming a painter for several years. His early friendship with Demuth, whom he met in 1905 in Philadelphia, was the first of several intimate relationships with painters, such as those with Charles Sheeler and Marsden Hartley. Other contacts of primary importance were those he established later in 1913 with the New York avant-garde circles in which artists from various camps – writers, painters, photographers, composers, and so on – were closely associated for the whole of the coming decade.

In the fall of 1913 Williams met Alfred Kreymborg, who was about to publish the little magazine then called *Glebe*, and who had agreed to publish Pound's *Des Imagistes*. When Pound sent Kreymborg the poems for the anthology, he told him in the accompanying letter to “get in touch with old Bull.”<sup>3</sup> Kreymborg belonged to a group of artists who formed a little artists' colony at Grantwood near Richfield, New Jersey. In summer 1913 Man Ray and Samuel Halpert had found what Williams described as “several wooden shacks there in the woods.” “Several writers were involved, but the focus of my own enthusiasm was the house occupied by Alfred and Gertrude Kreymborg to which, on every possible occasion, I went madly in my flivver to help with the magazine which had saved my life as a writer” (A, 135). The magazine was *Others*, successor to *Glebe*, and Williams was to meet there, among others, Orrick Johns, Malcolm Cowley, Man Ray, Alanson Hartpence, Peggy Johns, Mina Loy, and “the great Marcel [Duchamp], who would be there now and again” (A, 135). Through Kreymborg and Demuth, Williams was soon introduced into the two other centers of the avant-garde, Stieglitz's gallery, 291, and Walter Arensberg's apartment on West 67th Street.<sup>4</sup>

Together with Edward Steichen, Stieglitz had opened his *Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession* (called “291” after its address on Fifth Avenue) in 1905, and from 1908 onward he presented a series of shows by Rodin, Matisse, Toulouse-Lautrec, Henri Rousseau, Cézanne, and Picasso. It was for all of these artists their first exhibition in the United States, and Stieglitz was not exaggerating when he wrote to a friend that the Armory Show was “really the outcome of the work going on at ‘291’ for many years,”<sup>5</sup> although he was not directly involved in its organization. Of equal importance was Stieglitz's famous periodical *Camera Work*. At first exclusively devoted to artistic photography, it soon developed into the most important periodical for avant-garde activities in all the visual arts.

After the Armory Show Stieglitz concentrated his efforts more and more on

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propagating and supporting the Americans among the early Modernists, such as the painters John Marin, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Georgia O'Keeffe, Charles Demuth, and the photographer Paul Strand.

Among the third group of artists to gather around Walter Arensberg were the New York Dadaists. Marcel Duchamp, who moved into a "studio" at the Arensbergs' immediately after his arrival in New York in 1915, was the most important of a large group that included the Frenchmen Picabia, Gleizes, Henri-Pierre Roché, and the composer Edgar Varèse. They were joined by a number of young American painters – Man Ray, Demuth, Joseph Stella, Morton Shamburger, and Charles Sheeler – and writers such as Kreymborg, Williams, Allan Norton, Mina Loy, and Amy Lowell. Among a large group of less regular callers were Alfred Stieglitz, Wallace Stevens, and Isadora Duncan. Last but not least were a few *enfants terribles*, such as the adventurer Arthur Cravan, who claimed to be a nephew of Oscar Wilde, and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Cravan produced one of the earliest happenings at the 1917 Independents Exhibition. He was supposed to give a lecture on modern art before an audience that consisted largely of society ladies and gentlemen, but he arrived completely drunk and had hardly staggered to the speaker's desk and started his lecture when he began undressing himself. Arensberg and his friends were delighted by the resulting tumult, and Duchamp called the evening a true Dada event.

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who was over fifty at the time, was an eccentric who once shaved and painted her head and wore assorted tools as embellishments; she was one of Duchamp's protégés and made her own object-art in the wake of his ready-mades. When Williams met her, he was fascinated; for him she embodied a Europe as steeped in culture as it was decadent. On the other hand, Williams was for her a primitive American hick whom she offered to turn into a true Dionysian artist by letting him become her syphilitic lover. His refusal led to some violent scenes, which, as Williams put it, "all but finished me."<sup>6</sup>

Williams's immersion in the activities of the New York avant-garde movement of those years was of crucial importance for his whole future career. For the first time he had found his own people; for the first time he really felt in touch. It did not even matter that "no one knew consistently enough [what they were seeking, so as] to formulate a 'movement.'" "Here was my chance, that was all I knew. There had been a break somewhere, we were streaming through, each thinking his own thoughts, driving his own designs toward his self's objectives" (A, 148, 138). One thing, however, was obvious: For the really new, for the revolutionary discoveries, one had to go to the visual arts. And ultimately these discoveries were applicable to literature, too, for "impressionism, dadaism, surrealism applied to both painting and the poem" (A, 148).

At the beginning there was a feeling of liberation, simple and pure. "The Nude Descending a Staircase'," Williams wrote in his *Autobiography*, fifty years