



METRIC FIGURES IN WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS'S *SPRING AND ALL* (1923)

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'it is necessary to dwell in the imagination if the truth is to be numbered'
—Williams, *Spring and All*

Written 'bare handed' [WILLIAMS, *Autobiography* : 20] in retaliation for the stroke of genius and devastating blast of *The Waste Land* published a year earlier,¹ this book of experimental prose and verse comprises twenty-seven poems materializing Williams's struggle with a lifelong search for a middle ground between free verse, this 'misnomer', for all verse 'must be governed', as Williams put it as early as 1917 in 'America, Whitman and the Art of Poetry [1]', and, at the other end of the poetic spectrum, the specter of metrical verse, whether implicitly or explicitly used, as Eliot noted: 'The ghost of some simple metre lurks behind the arras in even the "freest" verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse' ['Reflections on Vers Libre', *Selected Prose* : 31]. *Spring and All*, therefore, offers a snapshot of Williams's theory and practice as the poet grapples with the stakes of numerical data in innovative poetic writing, wrestles with the relation of science with poetry, of numbers with letters—in a nutshell, of arithmetic with life. 'Metric Figure' is the title of not one but *two* early poems inspired by Imagism: the use of identical titles is rare and initiates the doppelgänger motif which operates on many levels in the book. Besides it aptly captures the inner tension between what is objectively countable or quantifiable in a 'metric' system (a figure or number in the mathematical sense) and what resists numerical regularity or strict measuring (a figure in the literary or aesthetic sense).

But, we argued, the poem, like every other form of art, is an object, an object that in itself formally presents its case and its meaning by the very form it assumes. Therefore, being an object, it should be so treated and controlled—but not as in the past. For past objects have about them past necessities—like the sonnet—which have conditioned them and from which, as a form itself, they cannot be freed [WILLIAMS, *Autobiography* : 264].

¹ 'There was heat in us, a core and a drive that was gathering headway upon the theme of a rediscovery of a primary impetus, the elementary principle of all art, in the local conditions. Our work staggered to a halt for a moment under the blast of Eliot's genius which gave the poem back to the academics' [Williams, *Autobiography* : 20].

Williams's use of figures, I wish to argue, is inextricably caught in this double bind of the scientific outlook, the claim for painstaking accuracy, the analytical glance of the medical practitioner and a very intense urge to alter the value of numbers in or through his poetry, in a way analogous to his desire to undermine metrical prosody from within, thereby transmuting the lineaments of prosody itself with the thrust of the 'variable foot', the poet's subsequent breakthrough in theorizing his concept for a new measure. This article seeks to enquire into the poetic consequences of Williams's tenacious use of numerals and metric features in *Spring and All* both as a way of challenging the limits of poetic writing as well as the logic of numbers, repeatedly turned into a formidable disorganizing tool.

1. Serial numbers

The macrostructure of *Spring and All* hinges on several cunningly interwoven principles, namely the alternating use of prose and verse in a sequence of opening prose 'chapters' interspersed with numbered poems. Williams first introduces numerals in order to split his lengthy prologue into several prose units headed with discontinuous section titles (CHAPTER 19, CHAPTER XIII [upside down], CHAPTER 2, CHAPTER XIX) before starting the chronological poem sequence (I, II) followed by another prose passage titled CHAPTER I and followed by poem III. The chapter headings are not only out of sequence; the capitalized CHAPTER is also tautological to the extent that the word's etymology is related to *capitulum*, meaning 'little head, head of a plant, capital of a column' [OED]. Its barefaced association with Arabic digits and Roman numerals also adds to the reader's sense of arbitrariness and confusion, with 19/XIX operating as a baffling repetition of the same (just as with the use of 'Metric Figure' for two different poems), only with a different numeral system. Williams pits the numeral sequence against itself, as a way to challenge logic or any rational impulse toward chronology or its reverse. The countdown from 19 to I is doubly set against logic—the system is turned literally on its head (a reversal performed typographically with CHAPTER XIII upside down). Despite the radical disruptions, however, the Roman 'I' [Williams, *Autobiography* : 15] does correspond to the end of the prose unit count, since the prose sections do not carry numerals from that point on. The readers zero in on the Roman cypher I (cypher meaning zero in Arabic), in a 'chapter I' segment that remains open ended, albeit sliced up by the numbered poems popping up amidst the prose haphazardly, but in chronological order (from I to XXVII). Out of all the Roman numerals available (the capital letters of the Latin alphabet I V X L C D M), the poet only uses I and X for the prose segment divisions. 'I' also happens to be the first person pronoun, a single capitalized letter I standing for the lyrical subject yet occurring phonemically in a dual sound or diphthong, as the beginning of poem VI wryly emphasizes:

VI

No that is not it
 nothing that I have done
 nothing
 I have done

is made up of
 nothing
 and the diphthong

ae

together with

the first person
singular
indicative

of the auxiliary
verb
to have

if to do

is capable
of an
infinity of
combinations

The poem seems to offer a punning perspective on a popular wisdom (I have done nothing, 'nothing/I have done') combined with echoes of a Leibniz-like metaphysical enquiry (Why is there something rather than nothing?) It posits the absence of nothingness or vacuum (*'in vacuo'*) since the assertion of nothing is already something; besides the poem does not occur *ex nihilo* but is propelled by an 'I' which is inaccurately transcribed 'ae' instead of the closer literal approximation 'ai.' Misspelling or mis-transcribing phonetically his 'colossal cypher' (Emerson's phrase about Dante), Williams's 'power of confusion' [26] between the numeral and the literal mode is supreme. In the grey area of indeterminacy between 'ai' (I) and 'ei' (A), 'ae' is the most apposite representation of the Williamsian poetic agency, 'which only to/have done nothing/can make/perfect' [26]. The altered transcription conveys a smothered sound; 'ae' encrypts the illegible, the inexpressible, the inaudible, and is ultimately made 'perfect' through its erasure—'have done nothing' is the perfect poetic line. Similarly, the Roman numeral X allows one to cancel or cross out any word or letter when writing on the typewriter. In a book where *nothing* is coincidental, it should not seem surprising that poem XXII performs another variation on doubles, starting with a double crossing of the I's. 'So much depends' is substituted for the poetic 'I' now placed under erasure (XXII).

All poems in the series are numbered, except one. Breaking the serial rule of the (chrono)logically ordered poems is poem VII, a misnomer for the only poem that remains unnumbered ('The rose is obsolete'). There is no poem VII, but a poem in its place. 'The rose is obsolete' takes its place, takes place in its stead. It creates a *u-topia* or non-place for a pure poetic space.

The place between the petal's
edge and the

The event or 'taking place' of the untitled, unnumbered poem is seamlessly integrated into the prose, related to it with a comma and yet immediately followed by poem 'VIII.' VII has gone missing, but the poem misses nothing. Williams thereby reminds us that the rule is set up to be broken, the constraint to be subverted, the series to be interrupted. Number VII is tacitly present, though invisible, unwritten, unspoken. It is absent in its place. This use of a paradoxical *topos*—which goes back in modernity to Mallarmé's 'rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu' [MALLARMÉ I : 376 sq.]—also inspired Robert Duncan in his 'Passages' series, where the poem 'In the Place of a Passage 22' playfully stresses explicitly what was left unsaid, while it remains equally conspicuous in its dramatic absence from Williams's unnumbered poem [DUNCAN : 74]. The effect produced by the use of these serial numbers raises our awareness that 'to engage roses/becomes a geometry—'; it gives poetic writing a direction ('Whither? It ends—'), an order, a sequence, and the poem a place in a system ('From the petal's edge

a line starts'). Pictorial lines end where poetic lines begin yet all intersect in the new figural space of *Spring and All*.¹

2. Poetrics

This portmanteau word suggests the seemingly consubstantial link binding poetry and metrics. Poetry and numbers appear to be naturally complicit. After all poetry is often discovered at school through counting on one's fingers, also known as *digits*; this link is further emphasized in the etymology of a rhetorical term of prosody, the dactyl, also meaning *finger*, and nonetheless designating a metrical *foot*. Based originally on the structural analogy between the finger's three joints and antepenultimately-stressed trisyllabic words in dactylic prosody, the Greek word *daktulos* conveniently makes up a dactyl—in an eerie, Cratylid morphological manifestation. In medical or biological terms, the dactyl refers to a *digit* (finger or toe) in any vertebrate. It seems an easy step then, from finger to foot, from counting numerals to metrical feet, from arithmetic to prosody.

For Williams writing poems consists in inventing new forms. As he wrote in the introduction to *The Wedge* (1944): 'There is no poetry of distinction without formal invention, for it is in the intimate form that works of art achieve their exact meaning' [*Collected Poems II* : 51] Establishing that the poem, having a form, is akin to the work of art, the poet reminds us that in the verbal art, just as in all art, form is content. Or, as Olson famously wrote in his 'Projective Verse' essay of 1950, in an axiom actually formulated by Robert Creeley in a letter to him: 'FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT' [OLSON : 240]. However, like Creeley, Williams never relinquished the fight for new forms against what he saw as absolute formlessness. In his view Whitman's 'free verse' had been a moment in poetic history, a necessary and momentous break with traditional metrical norms and fixed forms. Yet it was a dead end, as he wrote Kay Boyle in 1932:

Free verse—if it ever existed—is out. Whitman was a magnificent failure. He himself in his later stages showed all the terrifying defects of his own method. Whitman to me is one broom stroke and that is all. He could not go on. [...] His invention ended where it began. He is almost a satirist of his era, when his line itself is taken as a criterion. He evaporates under scrutiny—crumbling not into sand, surely, but into a moraine, sizable and impressive because of that. [WILLIAMS, *Selected Letters* : 135]

Indeed to him the short lyric had to be fashioned, sculpted, chiseled with acute attention. His passion for verbal compression aligned him with Emily Dickinson's (posthumously numbered) formally contained poems rather than with Whitman's unrestrained 'cantata of the self' [PETILLON : 15]. In 'Speech Rhythm' (1913), Williams had vehemently stated: 'I do not believe in *vers libre*, this contradiction in terms. Either the motion continues or it does not continue, either there is rhythm or no rhythm. *Vers libre* is prose' [qtd. in WEAVER : 82]. *Spring and All* is the reflection of Williams's battles on the poetic front, equally at war against 'the profitless engagements with the arithmetical' [54], 'plagiarism' or 'crude symbolism' [22] or the use of the imagination as a way 'to avoid reality' [91]. It is also peppered with self-contradictions and mutually exclusive claims accounting for the inner tensions underlying the work itself. Thus the poet solemnly asserts over several pages that between

¹ J.-F. Lyotard defined the 'figural' in *Discours, figure* (1971), namely in the passage partially quoted here: « Le figural s'oppose au discursif par le rapport de la trace avec l'espace plastique [...]. La façon dont le sens est présent dans la ligne (dans tout constituant de la figure) est ressentie comme opacité par l'esprit habitué au langage. Un effort presque sans fin est exigé pour que l'œil se laisse capter par la forme, se laisse communiquer l'énergie qu'elle détient » [216].

prose and poetry ‘the cleavage is complete’ [67], before eventually acknowledging that there may be ‘no discoverable difference between prose and verse’ and that ‘both are different phases of the same thing’ [83]. Likewise, the poet’s claim for perceptive precision is best expressed in poem X, a text that ‘engages the favorable/distortion of eyeglasses/that see everything and remain/related to mathematics—’ [46]. The poet seeks to attain ‘the universality of things’ through the mathematical precision of optics yet is aware of the risk of optical illusion or visual distortion, just as he deplores ‘the profitless engagements with the arithmetical’ in a theoretical passage introducing poem XII (‘The red paper box’ later entitled ‘Composition’), which indeed starts like the physical description of a material item yet eludes the representational or referential mode to delve into a subtly surreal, compositional world.

‘Somebody dies every four minutes/in New York State—’: the striking opening of poem XXV is revealing of the poet’s thirst for scientific precision, which constantly resurfaces through attempts at quantifying things ranging from the infinitesimally small to the incommensurably large, exhibiting an extraordinary ability to single out an individual amidst the infinite: ‘flying above the wreck of ten thousand million souls, I see you’ [7]. The moment of identification, the capacity for recognition or discrimination anticipates the advent of the poem objects that will instantly pop up and stand out against the prosaic background, just as the ‘now’ is set against cosmic time in the introductory pages: ‘ten million, billion years’; ‘that huge and microscopic career of time’, depicted as a wild horse racing and ‘running without a stop for the millionth part of a second’ [10-11]. Williams is a self-conscious physician willing to engage as a poet with recent scientific breakthroughs: ‘It would be a stupid insult to Einstein to write him a sonnet. We do not live in a sonnet world; we do not live even in an iambic world; certainly not in a world of iambic pentameters... such things are out of place for us today’ [qtd. in CUSHMAN : 93].

The result is compelling. Out of the 27 poems scattered throughout *Spring and All* and intermingled with prose passages (mostly made up of theoretical notes and digressions on art and writing), 15 are written in a single, fixed stanza form; out of which 7 are exclusively written in couplets, 5 in tercets, and 3 in quatrains. The 12 remaining poems are written in hybrid stanza forms, in other words in a looser kind of free verse combining various stanzaic patterns making up an asymmetrical whole. After all, the volume calls for such statistics and invites us to read the text against the data, which we might be tempted to call morphometrics. In fact, each poem is meant to be read as data or metric material. In the following table, H stands for hybrid (with a range for the number of lines per stanza).

I	H couplet, quatrain (+5, 6)
II	H mostly tercets (+5, 1)
III	single stanza
IV	H mostly tercets
V	H (1 to 4)
VI	H short line (3, 4)
VII	H (1 to 8)
VIII	TERCETS
IX	H
X	long TERCETS
XI	COUPLETS
XII	H (2 to 5)
XIII	H (6 to 8)
XIV	short QUATRAINS

- XV long QUATRAINS
 XVI H
 XVII COUPLETS
 XVIII TERCETS (long-short-long)
 XIX H (1 to 4)
 XX TERCETS (long-short-long)
 XXI short COUPLETS
 XXII short COUPLETS
 XXIII COUPLETS
 XXIV COUPLETS
 XXV H
 XXVI COUPLETS
 XXVII short TERCETS

These examples show that Williams's repeated calls for a new prosody actually materializes in the shape of his stanzas of free verse. In his 1932 letter to Kay Boyle, the poet insists:

...don't write sonnets. The line is dead, unsuited to the language. There can no longer be serious work written in 'poetic' diction. It is a contortion of speech to conform to the rigidity of line. It is in the newness of a live speech that the new line exists undiscovered. [*Selected Letters* : 134]

With its emphasis on 'live speech,' this last statement might seem confusing, as it suggests that the poem would be fashioned by the natural breath of the American idiom, with the line endings matching pauses in vernacular 'speech rhythm'. Yet numerous critics (Perloff, Sayre, Cushman) have shown that Williams's typical line break or stanza form did not correspond to verbal or semantic units, but rather to visual or semiotic units. The reading experience gives primacy to the process of visualization of the poem on the page. In this light the author's multiple assertions about his use of metrics, *i.e.* a prosody based on syllable or stress count, are nevertheless thought-provoking for they are revealing of the larger flaws present in metrics as a 'science' in the first place. As Henri Meschonnic noted in his groundbreaking anthropological study of language entitled *Critique du rythme*, 'metrics itself is imaginary, as the very notions of foot or isochrony forcefully testify'.¹ In 1955 Williams depicts his search for 'a poetic foot that is not fixed but varies with the demands of the language, [...] it ignores the counting of the number of syllables in the line, which is the mark of the usual scansion, for a measure more of the ear, a more sensory counting' ['The American Language, Again']. The poet insistently lays the emphasis on the musical nature of his measure ('a measure more of the ear'), as opposed to metric scansion. Of course, this opposition is reminiscent of Ezra Pound's third injunction in what amounts to the 1913 Imagist manifesto, initially published under the banner 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste' in *Poetry Magazine*: 'As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome' [*Literary Essays* : 4]. However, pitched against the metrical foot, Williams's poetic 'measure' cannot be based on isochrony; yet he insists on the relevance of the musical analogy: 'But if we keep in mind the *tune* which the lines (not necessarily the words) make in our ears, we are ready to proceed. By measure I mean musical pace' [*Selected Letters* : 326]. The confusion is caused by Williams himself, when he writes numerals under each 'foot' of his three-step line in his letter to Richard Eberhart: 'count a single beat to each numeral' the poet insists [327]. 'Beat' should not be understood strictly as a musical term, but more as a unit, a measure. Indeed Williams finally clarifies his view of poetic measure in a letter to Cid Corman, in 1958: 'I use the word

¹ « La métrique est imaginaire. Ce que les notions de pied et d'isochronie suffisent à représenter. Il s'agit d'un imaginaire musical plaqué sur le langage » [528]. And this other comment: « Le paradoxe de la métrique est de se constituer par rapport à la langue mais en plaquant un ordre non linguistique sur le langage » [522].

'measure' in the original sense 'to mete', as the English used it at the beginning' [qtd. in MARIANI : 719]. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'mete' meant 'boundary or limit' (as in *metes and bounds*), as well as measure; the verb meant 'to ascertain the quantity or dimensions of'. Although Williams insists on the musical nature of his writing principle, it seems clear that his combination of speech rhythms and visual lineation brings out the ambiguity inherent in the use of terms such as meter, foot, rhythm, measure such as used in modern prosody. Williams reminds us that most of these terms are in fact excellent examples of *cataphoreses*, in other words dead metaphors or words whose meaning is stretched or distorted to accommodate a new acceptation. They are always figures of speech and, as such, can be stretched beyond recognition to adapt to the necessities of the figural space of the poetic page.

3. Counting (*the chickens*)

XXII

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

Known to most of us as 'The Red Wheelbarrow' (its title when reproduced in anthologies and collections), this short lyric was originally published under the simple banner 'XXII' in *Spring and All*. The precise context of publication—this hybrid experimental book, the series of poems, the prose surrounding these poems—, along with the punctuation (ulterior versions have added a period at the end), the roman numeral (versus added title), and the layout of the original poem matter greatly to the experience of reading and the value of the poem, as Lisa Steinman has convincingly shown [STEINMAN : 53-65]. It is arguably one of the most iconic Modernist poems, and although it is indeed written in free verse, and therefore should not be governed by 'metrical' rules, I posit that it hinges primarily on what metrical verse is founded on—counting. Yet this Swiss watch of a poem is the exception confirming the rule.

We may start with a stress count. Its stress pattern is rather odd (it opens with a spondee, 'so much,' followed by an iambic foot, 'depends'); line 2, which consists of a single foot, is iambic; in the second and third couplets, the initial line is incomplete for the second foot carries just one syllable, but we do return to the iambic pattern in the initial line of the last stanza ('beside the white'), with a trochaic inversion in every other line, thereby emphasizing chickens, barrow and water, all stressed on the first syllable. There is a rising pattern in the first line of every stanza, counterbalanced by a falling, brutally trochaic beat in the second line. The only exception to the rule is line 2 which is very much used as a springboard, to gather impetus before the leap over the gap from the conceptual level of 'so

much depends upon' (emphasized by the triple consonance in d/p/n) into the concrete world of the farm yard prominently featuring the red wheelbarrow.

Secondly, the poem also invites us to proceed with a syllable count. What stands out is the perfect symmetry between each stanza, with 4/2, 3/2, 3/2, 4/2, the two outer stanzas creating a framing pattern in chiasmic fashion around the two central units. A word count will yield the following result: 3+1 in each stanza, with the imbalance suggesting that what we're reading might just be a quatrain whose four original lines have been broken into smaller units, precisely to foreground the line break.

so much depends upon
a red wheelbarrow
glazed with rainwater
beside the white chickens

In a nutshell, in XXII the figure 2 provides stability for every other line (a two-syllable line) and we also find two stresses in every first line of each stanza. The poem is built on the tension between embedded binary and ternary patterns which enhance its value as a figural object. The metrical alternation of two stresses and one stress within each couplet, which translates visually into a longer first line followed by a snappy monosyllabic line, has been interpreted by some critics as imitating, just as in an Apollinaire calligram, the structure of a wheelbarrow glanced from the side, with the long handles at the rear and the single wheel below at the front. In 'Diagramming the Forces in a "Machine Made of Words": Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" as Picture Poem', Anne Waldron Neumann makes the case for the mimetic dynamic whereby 'off-center stanzas suggest pictures of wheelbarrows' so that 'The Red Wheelbarrow' depicts what it describes.' The critic goes further:

Its stanzas are not only shaped like wheelbarrows; the first stanza actually superimposes on this shape a diagram of how wheelbarrows distribute loads. When a wheelbarrow is used, the load—'so much' weight—above and on the left in this diagram, 'depends'—in the literal sense—from the handles, here on the right, but the load also rests 'upon' the wheel below. [NEUMANN : 16]

Yet this reading of the text as a 'picture poem', which follows from the idea that the longer line stands for the cart in turn supported by the wheel, simply ignores Williams's work with *poetic forms*—line, stanza, measure—and his general critique of the act of copying the real in a figurative or representational fashion. Far from being driven by *mimesis*, the poem literally depends upon its form, which entirely hinges on the 'wheel/barrow', *i.e.* the line break itself. Many interpretations of the poem have been unavoidably metaphorical: poetry 'depends upon' an image; art 'depends upon' noticing the unnoticed; or, since the three colors of the American flag are present in the poem (red, blue metonymically associated with rainwater, and white), America itself 'depends upon' a snapshot; or in a wider, Whitmanian scope, the universe, the *kosmos* 'depends upon' the microcosmic order of the poem. A metapoetic reading could see in the wheelbarrow a metaphor for metaphor itself. Pushing this reading further, if the small cart on wheel ('wheel/barrow') is the vehicle, then what is the tenor? If we follow I.A. Richards' analysis of metaphor as articulating tenor and vehicle, the tenor in this metaphor is actually missing (in the statement X is Y, X is the tenor and Y is the vehicle). Yet let us not forget that this is, in fact, no metaphor; the poem does not say America *is* a wheelbarrow. This is the poem's force. Nonetheless, reading this poem as a vehicle without a determined tenor offers a noteworthy echo to the empty car in poem XVIII's coda: 'No one/to witness/and adjust, no one to drive the car' [67]. It also corresponds to what Marjorie Perloff has described as 'a poetics of

indeterminacy,' a word ('so much') whose referent remains undecidable.¹ All we know, in the end, is that much depends on the line break: nothing depends on the 'wheelbarrow,' but *all* depends on the 'wheel/barrow', *i.e.* all depends on the transport or transfer (*meta-pherein*, carry over) imposed by the line ending, the return or *versus*, and in this case the hard, morphemic enjambment. The vehicle, motion, poetic form, is all; indeed for Williams the words are 'put down without comment other than the facts of which they speak, no comment, nothing 'about' the subject, a bare placing of the matter before the attention' [WALKER : 128]. For all its minimalism and close attention to morphemic units in the process of decomposition, a great deal of emphasis is also laid on the singularity of the object, the unity of perception, the scene envisaged as a whole. With all its metrical and arithmetical precision, it appears that XXII is an exception to the rule, in a book where each poem is seen as a measuring tool, a new unit and a part in a greater whole.

Thus poem XXI forms a diptych with XXII since they share the same space, the unit of the poetic page. Furthermore the short lyric is also arranged into four couplets, and thereby 'formally presents its case' as an object made up of eight minutely carved lines. And we shall say nothing about the design of a wheelbarrow unmistakably present in the opening stanza.

XXI

one day in Paradise
a Gipsy

smiled
to the blandness

of the leaves
so many

so lascivious
and still

A quick glance suggests a similar metrics, which, however, does not resist closer scrutiny. A syllable count reveals an irregular structure (6/3, 1/5, 3/3, 4/2), while a stress count discloses a similarly asymmetrical pattern (3/1; 1/2; 1/2; 2/1), as does a word count (4/2; 1/4; 3/2; 2/2). Visually, though, the first two stanzas make up a symmetrical whole in chiasmic fashion (long, short, short, long) while the second half also displays inner consistency. Oddly enough in this overall binary structure, the number three also seems to operate as a hidden fulcrum supporting the poetic arrangement: the three syllables 'one day in' followed by the dactyl 'Paradise', 'a Gipsy' followed by 'smiled/to see' with an inner rhyme in mid-line, 'the blandness' followed by 'of the leaves' and 'so many'; at this point the steady ternary flow—already in contradiction with the line break in stanza 2—is disrupted with the trisyllabic thrust of 'lascivious' following 'so' and followed by a two-syllable final line, thus ending in a 4/2 pattern. In this satiric rewriting of Genesis—substituting a Gipsy for Eve in the garden of Eden—Williams offers a scene, a story ('one day') in a single snapshot pervaded with a commendable example of consonantic dissemination, with the snake's insistent hissing from 'Paradise' to 'so many//so lascivious/and still', suggestive in the aural performance of the poem of the dark, demonic

¹ In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, M. Perloff made a strong case for 'equivocation' and the 'undecidability' of the relationship of the word to its referents in Pound's *Cantos*, Stein's *Tender Buttons* and Williams Carlos Williams's *Spring and All*: 'the symbolic evocations generated by words on the page are no longer grounded in a coherent discourse, so that it becomes impossible to decide which of these associations are relevant and which are not. This is the 'undecidability' of the text in question' [18].

bliss of an erotic ‘embrace’, complete with ‘Gipsy lips’ and ‘kiss/of leaves’ (poem XXIV)—an open tribute to Whitman’s *Leaves* and eroticized conception of nature.

In conclusion, rather than on counting or any form of actual metrics, Williams’s entire poetics hinges upon the line break, on the semiotic and semantic tension it generates, which Stephen Cushman has called ‘line-sentence counterpointing’ in the context of Williams’s unpunctuated free verse:

Without these customary signposts the poem produces yet another layer of counterpointing, as significant conflict develops between the system that produces enjambments and caesurae (line-sentence counterpointing) and the system that inhibits the apprehension of these (suppression of punctuation and capitalization). [CUSHMAN : 30]

Williams dramatizes all sorts of cuts, breaks, and fissures on line end. It is particularly significant in ‘the rose is obsolete’, a black hole in the series, a poem floating in space (‘the fragility of the flower/unbruised/penetrates space’), unnumbered and unfettered, a little unhinged too, since it is one of those poems in *Spring and All* following a very loose stanzaic pattern and jagged line length, in fact one of the poems coming closest to actual *free* verse. What stands out is that Williams’s preferred type of line end is enjambment, which results from the non-coincidence of syntax and meter or the non-alignment of syntax and lineation.¹ Indeed run-on lines occur when syntactic and metric boundaries do not match, therefore it produces a much-needed *modicum* (meaning measure) of poeticity when most traditional prosodic features have been removed. Much more metrically or formally measured is poem XIV:

XIV

Of death
the barber
the barber
talked to me

cutting my
life with
sleep to trim
my hair—

In such a compressed lyric, the short line entails a continuous enjambment, a spinning, almost dizzying revolving motion; in return, the enjambment determines or governs the form of the line; line length is not ruled by any other criterion than the place of the line break (whether it is soft lineation as in ‘the barber/talked to me,’ or hard lineation as in ‘cutting my/life with/sleep to trim/my hair’ where each line is tightly tied to the word above or below by grammatical relations under severe strain). As is evident in these poems, Williams evolves a cutting principle, foregrounding mutilated lines, lines punctuated with dashes, maimed with hard enjambments. In this sense poem XI (later entitled ‘The Right of Way’) ends dramatically on the figure of the missing leg or foot, literally an *enjambment*.

¹ For J.-Cl. Milner (*Ordres et raisons de langue*): « La notion d’enjambement, qui n’est rien d’autre que la possibilité d’une contradiction entre limite syntaxique et limite poétique, se trouve analytiquement contenue dans celle de vers » [qtd. in JENNY : 116]. Jenny talks of « une structure de discours où est assurée la possibilité de l’enjambement, c’est-à-dire d’une disjonction entre limites syntaxiques et limites formelles. Une telle définition dessine bien les contours de la forme vers en même temps que ses lignes de fuite » [116].

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

In free verse all definition of the poetic line is based on the *versus*. The line exists because of its cut, because of the disjunction between its various limits. The event of the run-on line constitutes what precedes it into a line; the succession of words and the event of lineation make up the basis for prosody in non-metrical verse. Williams wrote in a 1955 letter to John Thirlwall: 'Measure serves for us as the key: we can measure between objects; therefore, we know that they exist' [*Selected Letters* : 331]. As Paul Mariani has observed, Williams sought at the same time to read or hear 'lines that remain unpredictable', 'keeping the ear in 'suspense'', and to create 'a perfect order, a meter to reassure us', and everywhere 'stressed the need to incorporate into the poetry of his time the American vernacular' [MARIANI : 446]. Throughout his work and poetic practice (in the poems as well as the theory, which are often intermingled as in *Spring and All*) Williams has sought to identify recognizable units, identifiable measures (the line, the stanza, the poem, the poetic page) because Williams's credo is that 'Without invention nothing is well spaced' [*Paterson* II : 50].

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