

“Terrible intimacy:” Modernist destruction and recreation in Williams’s poetics**Bureu GÜRSEL¹**

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Abstract

Perhaps in keeping with Ezra Pound’s dictum, “Make it new,” the modernist poetics of William Carlos Williams thrives on the dialectics of destruction and recreation, descent and reemergence, isolation and contact—a poetics that reflects the doctor-poet’s views on natural and social processes. Stripped of conventional and sentimental associations in contact with the poet’s isolated but sympathetic imagination, each particular thing must reemerge in its vivid and authentic presence. But are all “things,” all objects of poetry, on equal footing in the dynamics of poetic destruction and recreation—objects, words, social entities, individuals? On the one hand, the poet’s humanism combines with curiosity and sensual fascination as he gently delivers the human subject from obliterated social constructs, in rebirth. On the other, he inclines more toward destruction in his treatment of the “intimate” woman, who somehow channels social constructs back into his imagination, thereby threatening his creative equanimity and becoming an impossible poetic object herself. Often missed in literary criticism is the fact that it is the figure of the intimate woman—rather than the distant woman—that brings out the ruthless poet-god in Williams. Disintegrating the intimate woman into a thingly physicality in an unfulfilled and ambivalent project of remaking, the poet in fact both celebrates and regrets his destructiveness in intimacy and its poeticization. The intimate woman in Williams’s poems problematizes what we mean when we talk about “destruction and recreation” in modernist aesthetics.

Keywords: Williams Carlos Williams, modernist poetics, representation of women, intimacy

“Korkunç yakınlık:” Williams’ın şiir anlayışında modernist yıkım ve tekrar yaratma**Öz**

William Carlos Williams’ın şiir anlayışı, belki de Ezra Pound’un “Sil baştan (Make it new)” düsturu doğrultusunda, yıkım ve yeniden yaratma, iniş ve yeniden ortaya çıkış, yalıtılmışlık ve temas diyalektiğinden beslenir. Bu şiir anlayışı doktor-şairin, doğa ve toplumun işleyişi konusundaki görüşlerinin de bir yansımasıdır. Başlı başına her “şey”, şairin yalıtılmış ama olumlu hayalgücü ile temas ettiğinde, alışlagelmiş ve hissi çağrışımlarından sıyrılarak, capcanlı ve hakiki varlığıyla yeniden meydana çıkmalıdır. Ancak her “şey”, her şiir nesnesi—nesnelere, sözcüklere, toplumsal varlıklar, bireyler—bu yıkım ve yeniden yaratılış dinamiğinde aynı ölçüde yer alabilir mi? Bir yandan, şairin hümanizması merak ve tensel bir büyülenmişlikle birleşir ve insanı toplumsal yapıların yıkımından usulca kurtararak yeniden doğuşa ulaştırır. Öte yandan, yakın ilişkideki kadın figürünü işleyen şiirlerinde şairin yıkıcılığı artmaktadır, zira bu kadın toplumsal yapıları şairin hayalgücüne geri sevk etmekte, onun yaratıcı sükunetini bozmakta ve kendisi de imkansız bir şiir

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nesnesi haline gelmektedir. Edebiyat eleştirmenlerinin genelde gözden kaçırdığı, mesafeli kadın figüründen ziyade, yakın ilişkideki kadın figürünün Williams’da acımasız bir şair-tanrıyı ortaya çıkardığıdır. Hiç bitmeyen bu yeniden yaratma projesinde şair, yakın ilişkideki kadını şeyleştirerek fiziksel parçalarına ayırır. Yakınlık kurarken ve yakınlığı şiirleştirirken ortaya çıkan yıkıcılığın ikilemleri bir yaklaşım sergilemekte, hem hayıflanmakta, hem de bir ölçüde övünmektedir. Williams’ın şiirlerinde gördüğümüz yakın ilişkideki kadın, modernist estetikte ‘yıkıp yeniden yaratma’ ile neyi kastettiğimiz sorusunu gündeme getirir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Williams Carlos Williams, modernist şiir, kadının temsili, yakınlık

Violence, descent and isolation clear the ground for recreation, reemergence and contact: William Carlos Williams presents this dialectic not only as a principle of nature and society, but also of his poetics. In keeping with the modernist dictum, “Make it new,” he strives to strip away constructs and associations, expanding his experience of particulars in microscopic recreation. His exhilaration releases unconventional beauty in the ordinary object. Williams’s humanism appears to gently deliver the human subject, too, from obliterated constructs, in rebirth. The poet’s destructive isolation seems to be counteracted by his sympathetic, regenerative contact with the individual. This aesthetic dissolves, however, as he becomes aggressive in his treatment of the intimate woman, who somehow reintroduces social constructs into the poet’s isolated imagination. In art as in life, the intimate woman thus becomes a challenge to his aesthetic, both as a threat to the mental state enabling his creativity and as an impossible poetic object. In intimacy, Williams can no longer remain the sympathetic doctor-poet and instead disintegrates the intimate woman in an unfulfilled project of remaking, reifying and effacing her. Conflicted, the poet delves deeper into the vicissitudes of the aesthetic in question, rather than open up the object of his poem: the intimate woman.

Critics frame the complications of Williams’s poetic treatment of women by and large as a category onto itself—as a problem of gender roles and representations—without sufficiently addressing the composite aesthetic problem of the various kinds of poetic object and poetic distance. Some critics emphasize either Williams’s support for modernist women poets or make the most of his famous “female principle” that takes the woman as inspiration for and engine of creativity. According to Audrey Rodgers, for example, Williams is able to pack many dualities into the figure of “the virgin and the whore,” such as the ideal and the real, the sacred and the profane, the pure past and the debased present, innocence and experience, life and death, etc. “The whore” might even be Williams’s own alter-ego within a trinity of sorts between the poet, the woman, and the poem (1987, pp. 18-43). In Rodgers’s reading, however, the intimate woman, too—the grandmother, the mother, or the wife—is generative of meaning and creative empowerment. It has also been argued that Williams identifies himself with the intimate other in all her complexities.² The poet is even considered to be “solving the paradox of love . . . by framing it within Neoplatonism” (Ricciardi, 1993, p. 135). For her part, Linda Kinnahan explores Williams’s often paternalistic support for contemporary women poets and their wavering appreciation. Perhaps due to the influence of feminist movements, Williams sometimes displays a “revolutionary attitude toward gender,” but is always torn in “a seeming paradox . . . between a recognition of gender as a constructed, historically specific category and sexual difference as a natural, essential set of characters” (1994, p. 31). As for his works, in *In the American Grain*, for

² According to Kerry Driscoll, “He depicts [his mother] variously as his conscience, muse, alter ego . . . creativity, the sublime, the ethnic and cultural diversity of the New World” (1987, p. 25). However, Williams also identifies with her repressive views, according to the critic.

instance, “women appear fleetingly and often anonymously,” even if this fragmentation serves to expose the hierarchies of masculine discourse (1994b, p. 117).

Williams is sometimes more heavily criticized for his sexist views based on a dogma of biological difference (Crawford, 1993, p. 69) and on Otto Weininger’s notions of gender and psychology. Also noted is his chauvinistic glance (Driscoll, 2016, pp. 143, 145), his “voyeurism and exhibitionism,” and “his insistence on initially degraded objects” which “betray[s] an element of sadism” (Eby, 1996, p. 34, 36). The poet is known to endorse polarized, conventional gender notions and roles that grant “man but not woman transcendent, transgressive desire,” and for preserving a “painful gender formulation” where the woman is “cast in the role of keeper, guardian, even maternal disciplinarian” (Fisher-Wirth, 1996, pp. 51-2). Such a critical stance also appears incomplete, however, considering the poet’s taste for deliberate provocation.³ The poet might be thematizing such psychoanalytic notions as the infant’s destructive urges in “what Kohut would call the first stage in the relinquishment of narcissistic delusions” (Bremen, 1993, pp. 55). Kerry Driscoll returns to the issue in “Williams and Women” to point to the variety in the woman’s distance as a poetic object, from “members of his immediate family—most notably, his mother, grandmother, and wife—to casual acquaintances and passing strangers” (2016, p. 143). In fact, growing up, Williams only had contact with women of his family, a situation that he claimed contributed to his extreme curiosity. According to Driscoll, his attitude toward women began to evolve—albeit with lingering ambivalence—as he kept meeting accomplished women later in his life (pp. 148-157).

Assimilated into a general interpretation of questionable gender images and roles, the instances of intimacy in Williams’s poetics are not recognized as the aesthetic problem that they pose: the object of aesthetic destruction and recreation. Williams himself provides conflicting accounts of intentionality in his poetic treatment of “the woman.” On one level, he presents these instances as an intrinsic aspect of his creativity and aesthetic: destruction of constructs, isolation from conventions, and celebration of thingly particularities. For him, the act of writing itself is an act of violence: “My interest in writing is so violent an acid that with the other work, I must pare my life to the point of silence” (1970, p. 280). On another level, however, Williams expresses a desire for empathetic and inspiring human contact, where instances of destructive intimacy appear as an unfortunate byproduct or aesthetic failure. Whether the poet celebrates or regrets the destruction that he finds—or deliberately causes—in intimacy, the intimate individual remains beyond the balance of his poetics.

The problem of aesthetic destruction and the intimate object

Williams’s poeticization of the intimate woman further complicates his simultaneously sympathetic and objectifying treatment of the distant woman, thereby not only inviting gender criticism and psychoanalytic inquiry, but also opening up to the aesthetic problem of what we mean when we discuss “destruction” in art. As Joseph Miller notes in his chapter on Williams in *Poets of Reality*, Williams often sexualized objects themselves (1965, pp. 325-26). Similarly, in *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, Marjorie Perloff puzzles over how *Spring and All*, so deeply invested in the notion of object as image, can end with the lines, “Arab/ Indian/ dark woman”—in retrospect, the dark woman always fuels sexual and poetic desire in his poetry (1999, pp. 135-36).

³ By arguing against the poet’s intentionality and claiming that Williams detested Freud’s theory of artistic creativity, Carl Eby analyzes the unconscious level in Williams’s openly proclaimed sexual “expression” (as opposed to “repression”) and sexual “perversion” (as opposed to “neurosis”), both of which form a “loop” ensnaring the poet (1996, pp. 32-5).

Perhaps, while objects are sexualized and things made intimate in Williams, human intimacy becomes objectified and reified. In fact, in *William Carlos Williams and the Ethics of Painting*, Terence Diggory interrogates the poet's figuration of "the virgin" as a limit of representation. Whereas the poet trusts that the figure of the woman always already brings in intimacy to representation, Diggory points out that this is more a claim about representation than women in themselves (1991, pp. 88-89). As Celia Carlson also suggests, "objects in Williams's poems, far from being 'innocent' artifacts in the world, demonstrate the quality of Williams's relations with himself and his others" (2006, p. 27). They further lay bare the poet's "dogmatic" attachment to his "theory" of destruction and recreation, which of course implies metaphorical, not literal, harm: "If there is an ethical element to art, it is that it offers the viewer or reader or auditor an experience into which he or she can enter and leave unharmed, if not 'untouched.' It achieves this by means of the abstraction of form" (p. 32). However, this particular poetics, by severing the possibility of the reader's self-projection onto the poem, also severs their connection to it, as Charles Altieri argues: "The modernist dream of composing expressive particulars now becomes a nightmare in which those particulars offer only the feeling of disinheritance" (2006, p. 105). The poet's "simple attention" falls short of satisfying "human energies," which in fact require greater "complications" than early modernism can afford (p. 44).

But what is "destruction" in modernist poetics, if the aesthetic affect (if it is one) of destruction neither performs destruction in reality nor represents some destruction found in reality? In Joseph Riddel's Heideggerian reading, the concept of aesthetic destruction seems to come to its own:

What occurs, however, is not destruction but a reversal, a violent torsion of the expected which brings it into question yet leaves it fundamentally as it was... The violence produces an unexpectancy, a disruption of the expected syntax of things suddenly revealing the priority of the thing and its immediate relations to any general grammar... The destructive art of these poems functions linguistically, thematically, stylistically, structurally, to embody as well as exemplify the violence of *aletheia*: springing, unconcealing, flowering, bursting out, e-merging, and thus the simultaneous breaking down of some previous unity, idea, concept, "World." (1991, c. 1974, p. 218)

Still, breaking "destruction" down to literary elements does not answer the question: How does a poem "embody," in addition to exemplify or thematize, violence? Given Williams's affinity with Cubism, Dadaism, and Futurism, among other movements in visual arts since the "Armory Show" of 1913, and despite the differences of medium in poetry and art, both the analytical (fragmented, analyzing, dissecting) and synthetic (reassembling, collage-like) stages of Cubism appear relevant to Williams's notion of destruction and recreation (Wrede, 2005, pp. 36-37; Halter, 2016, pp. 37, 46).⁴ While Juan Gris remains Williams's favorite Cubist, *Spring and All* (1923) is dedicated to Charles Demuth (Halter, 2016, p. 49). The question of aesthetic destruction is raised perhaps most acutely by the avant-gardists, for whom the poetic and the visual come together. Since before Williams's Imagist phase and his flirtation with the Objectivist movement, which he also inspired, and throughout his career, his poetics dovetails with visual aesthetics.⁵

By way of comparison, then, we can pose the same questions for a Cubist painting of an intimate woman. Does the disfigured or fragmented face of a woman—of a lover—represent violence done to the woman, or does it represent the idea of some such violence? Is it performative by way of enacting violence through aesthetic means? Or does it perform violence some other how, making a performance

⁴ For an analysis of the Armory Show, a landmark artistic event of the year 1913, itself a key year of Modernism, see Jean-Michel Rabaté, *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (2007, pp. 40-42). Also see the discussion of Piet Mondrian's abstract art of the same year (pp. 115-16).

⁵ See *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics* for studies on Objectivism, and especially Altieri's contribution on its genesis (1999, pp. 25-36).

of it? Is it a kind of "dramatization," or a "symbolic act," or a "mental act?"⁶ Charles Altieri repeatedly grapples with the question of what kind of act the poetic act constitutes:

"The Red Wheelbarrow," for example, does not attempt primarily to provide a mimetic picture of some "real" scene, nor to make a purely aesthetic artifact of its subject, nor to argue an interpretation of its significance. Instead it creates a poetic space in which the aesthetic patterns invite us to reflect upon one kind of relationship between concrete objects and a mind at once dependent and creative. (1979, p. 498)

Altieri explains the operative aesthetic event here as "an act of mind" without being a "speech act" in John Austin's terms, but an act that opens a "poetic space." Reworking the idea, he provides a second reading of "This is Just to Say" as the performance of an apology where, he writes, "by performance I mean the self-conscious presentation of self in an act so that its qualities might be assessed in relation to the situation and the laws or procedures appropriate to that situation" (1981, p. 174). For Altieri, there are no "just sayings," except that they are also doings, and as such we can look to what the poet can "perform himself as," as well as how his audience can relate to it. This performance, however, depends not only on its audience but also on its object. Reading Williams's poems for "how" the objects appear in them, in destruction and recreation, often leads critics to focus either on the objecthood of actual objects—namely, things—or the subjecthood of human figures, the individual as poetic object. But just as important for the human poetic object is the distinction between the distant woman as an image, an idea, an emblem, an impersonal encounter—a being at one remove—versus the intimate individual.

Poetic destruction and recreation of the non-intimate: Abstract, inanimate or animate objects and distant individuals

In Williams's universe, explosions deliver energy for potent recreation, decay shelters the sprouts of rebirth, and death gives way to reawakening. Published in 1923, *Spring and All* opens with such a still-life of winter in a world of "cold," "muddy," "dried," "twiggy," "dead," "brown," "leafless" elements in "By the Road to the Contagious Hospital" (1991, vol. 1, p. 183). Yet this world is only "lifeless in appearance," under which things are reborn to "enter the new world naked," undergo a "profound change," and "begin to awaken." Later, the initial hues of "pink confused with white," luminescent with "a shaded flame," grow into a kaleidoscopic display of mauve, red, and flamegreen, "radiant with transpiercing light" (p. 184). Likewise, "Catastrophic Birth" juxtaposes the images of a volcanic eruption and childbirth to foreground the violence in the creation and continuation of life: "By violence lost, recaptured by violence / violence alone opens the shell of the nut . . . The impasse becomes a door when the wall / is levelled" (1991, vol. 2, pp. 55-57). What blocks or suspends the birth and conceals the kernel of things is eventually destroyed through a violence that "revives and regathers."⁷ Only then, "The revelation is complete. / Peace is reborn," as the poem ends on a note of tranquil growth, the violence still breathing within. Just as nature thrives on the dialectics of destruction and creation, so too does society: "destruction and creation / are simultaneous" (1991, vol. 1, p. 213), and "violence and gentleness" form "the valid juxtaposition" (vol. 2, p. 68). While the former poem, "Light Becomes Darkness," describes "the phenomenal growth of movie houses" from the decay of religious constructs, the latter, "To All Gentleness," thematically links a thorny flower, a violent but tender childbirth, and the perishing "classic tradition" of the opera in the creation of a new poetry unjustly called "the antipoetic." This dialectic, in its simultaneity or alternation, is where the imagination finds its origin.

⁶ See, for instance, Bremen's discussion of Kenneth Burke's notion of the symbolic act, in relation to Williams's poetry, and the latter's distaste for it (1993, p. 63).

⁷ Williams favors this dialectic in his later work as well, for instance in *Paterson* (Riddel, 1991, p. 210).

For Williams, violent destruction and gentle recreation are not mere natural and social phenomena, but a vocation in which he finds extraordinary relish.⁸ In two of his early poems, Williams aggressively questions the meaning of conventional religious values and ceremonial practices of birth and death. Redesigning 'the funeral' in "Tract," he discards the artificial spectacle of sentimentality and grandeur: "For what purpose? Is it for the dead . . . or for us" (1991, vol. 1, p. 72). The poet also attacks conventions for obfuscating immediacy and spontaneous expression, but concedes that they are unavoidable in the social order of both the living and the dead. Subverting conventional graveside meditation in "On First Opening the Lyric Year," he describes the identical graves in the infallible order of the cemetery: "It's good no doubt to lie socially well ordered," he muses, but only "when one has so long to lie;" that is, so long to lie in death and deceit at once (p. 27).

Social institutions and ethics must be equally transgressed. "Choral: The Pink Church," which the poet calls a "protest poem," calls on "all ye aberrant/ drunks, prostitutes, / Surrealists . . . / to bear witness" to his denial of original sin (1991, vol. 2, p. 177).⁹ The poet ultimately rejects the claims of the church on a primary purpose of marriage—procreativity—by comparing the church itself to "the nipples of / a woman who never / bore a / child." Williams violates appropriate expressions of sexuality as well. "Sympathetic Portrait of a Child" and "The Ogre" successively describe a child in the preliminary stages of her growth into a sexual being (vol. 1, pp. 94-5). Amused by the child's apparent attraction in the first poem, the speaker then inverts the point of view to express his own self-conscious attraction to and intangible invasion of the child's territory by mere thought. His self-excusing voyeurism of the child's growth reveals the poet's deliberate presentation of a pedophile's point of view. Such violations in Williams's poetry might not be merely rhetorical.¹⁰ It would not be an overstatement to claim that Williams is against all civilization, from formalities to the entire socioeconomic order. As the poet lists the detailed medical codes of cleanliness he fails to observe in "Le Médecin Malgré Lui," he dismisses them as a cause for mental sterility, "a white thought" (p. 122). In fact, his disdain is deeply rooted in an aggression against the entire institution. In "Young Love," the speaker repeatedly qualifies his illicit affair with a nurse as "breaking" the hospital, and asserts the image of an aggressor against the whole city: "Clean is he alone / after whom stream / the broken pieces of the city— / flying apart at his approaches" (1991, vol. 1, p. 200). The irony remains, however, that the new, recreated "world after its destruction is not new at all. It repeats itself exactly again from the beginning, down to the last detail" (Miller, 1970, p. 421) for if nature has its limitations, so does the imagination.

Williams likewise strives to "destroy" linguistic and literary conventions to recreate an immediately expressive, original language and poetics.¹¹ Echoing Gertrude Stein, "the rose is obsolete" with its conventional symbolism of love, as is 'April' with its traditional poetic associations of beauty and sentimentality (1991, vol. 1, p. 195). If T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* "gave the poem back to the academics," according to Williams, "April is the Saddest Month" (vol. 2, p. 117) humorously describes two dogs in a game of mating, exposing the month in its unabashedly natural, unsentimental associations.¹² In both "Flight to the City" and "Catastrophic Birth," Williams also professes that

⁸ According to Riddel, Williams's theme of descent, "as in the Kore myth, follows an initial loss, a violence, a penetration of surfaces, a questioning of the ground" (1991, p. 31).

⁹ Williams's remark, notes to the poem (1991, vol. 2, p. 477).

¹⁰ Williams writes in *Kora in Hell*: "I have been reasonably frank about my erotics with my wife. . . . [w]e can continue from time to time to elaborate relationships quite equal in quality, if not greatly superior, to that surrounding our wedding. In fact, the best we have enjoyed of love together has come after the most thorough destruction or harvesting of that which has gone before" (1970, p. 22).

¹¹ Riddel describes Williams's recreation of language as the "breaking up of prescribed or historical language, but not the annihilation of speech. It dissolves the given set of relations, the governing syntax and its moral law, in search of an original (and originating) syntax. And it does this . . . by violent juxtapositions" (1991, p. 112).

¹² In his *Autobiography*, Williams calls *The Waste Land* "the great catastrophe to our letters" (1951, p. 146).

sentences and words must be broken to recreate an immediately expressive, original language: "Burst it asunder / break through to the fifty words / necessary" (vol. 1, p. 191), for "the best is hard to say—unless / near the break" (vol. 2, p. 55). Among the many poems in keeping with this principle, "To Have Done Nothing" reenacts it: The phrase "nothing I have done" is broken down to its grammatical units, "nothing," "ae" and "the first person / singular / indicative / of the auxiliary / verb / to have" to lead to the conclusion that "everything / and nothing / are synonymous" (vol. 1, p. 191). The poem suggests that structured language and action are tantamount to no action and no statement, and have to be broken down so as to be recreated. Williams's destruction can seem "antipoetic," but only if divorced from the process of recreation that follows: "And they speak, / euphemistically, of the anti-poetic! / Garbage. Half the world ignored" (vol. 2, p. 68).

In Williams's microscopic recreation, each particular thing is liberated from its constructs in an individual existence, as in "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1991, vol. 1, p. 224), or may become a universe encompassing an "eternity" in each physical detail, as in "Composition" (vol. 1, p. 210). In such Imagist poems, the poet works with and against the elemental and inevitable associations of objects for the sake of rediscovery. He savors the experience of recreating inanimate things. "The rose is obsolete" as it has been inherited from tradition, but "if it ends / the start is begun / so that to engage roses / becomes a geometry" (vol. 1, pp. 195-96). Concentrating on its "edges," the poet lets the rose "renew" itself without a load of associations: "The rose carried weight of love / but love is at an end—of roses." At the edge of the newly created thing where conventional love "ends," a renewed love can begin, like the poetically recreated, fresh and "touching" thing itself. Though "fragile" and "plucked," the reborn particular asserts a tangible existence: "Sharper, neater, more cutting," "crisp," "cold" and "precise." Similarly, "Burning the Christmas Greens" describes how the greens of solace and peace are "burnt clean" and transformed by this "recreate" destruction into "a living red / flame red / red as blood wakes / on the ash . . . instant and alive." The poetic mind in simultaneous destruction and creation is in a state of wonder: "we, in / that instant, lost, / breathless to be witnesses" (1991, vol. 2, pp. 62-65). The more animate poetic object is, the more compassionately Williams liberates and revives it in celebrating attention. For example, in "The Sparrow" (1991, vol. 2, p. 291) 'the thing' becomes "a poetic truth / more than a natural one." The poet reanimates the sparrow in "his voice / his movements / his habits . . . sympathetically, / with profound insight / into his minor / characteristics." Yet he also humorously anthropomorphizes it: "Practical to end, / it is the poem of its existence / that triumphed / finally . . . it says it / without offense, / beautifully; / This was I, a sparrow. / I did my best; / farewell." In this instant the poet posits an identity between the bird's existence, its song, and his own poem.

All the constructive and creative urges of the doctor-poet—compassion, curiosity, fascination, desire, admiration, love, and inspiration—intensify in his involvement with the ordinary individual—most often, and famously, the woman. As he writes in his autobiography, a practicing pediatrician and obstetrician, the poet is absorbed in "the coming to grips with the intimate conditions of [his patients'] lives," proclaiming complete self-identification with them: "I lost myself in the very properties of their minds: for the moment at least I actually became them, whoever they should be . . . so that when I detached myself from them . . . it was as though I were reawakening from a sleep. For the moment I myself did not exist, nothing of myself affected me" (1951, p. 356). "Complaint" expresses such constructive desires: his constant serviceability to and self-conscious compassion for the suffering woman, his admiration for her greatness; his "joy" at his thoughts of her possible labor; and his poetic evocation of a night "for lovers" (1991, vol. 1, p. 153). Likewise, he compares "The Young Housewife" to a "fallen leaf," perhaps implying a violation in her apparent state of possession by a husband (p. 57). Despite self-conscious implications of subdued sexual aggression and voyeurism, Williams emphasizes

his attraction to her natural morning appearance and the ephemeral magic of this one-sided encounter. The speaker professes admiration "To A Woman Seen Once," as well: "[n]o one is lovely / but you alone." For the poet, her beauty is intensified by the violation which transforms her to "a green branch / fallen into the sea," "jostled," "broken" and "returned," after the strength from "that mold" is consumed (1991, vol. 2, p. 13). He ends on the statement "I am through with you" that the woman must have experienced; his imaginary echo of it conveys both compassion and reenactment. "The Waitress" is another example of Williams's desirous and imaginative attention to the minute details of a woman's physical being and life conditions, and his admiration for her surviving sensuality (p. 279). All that the poet desires is to isolate himself from the world in order to feel her inaccessible "momentary beauty" alone, and "nobody else and nothing else / in the whole city." Williams achieves the same simplicity and poignancy in a few essential physical details of the woman's body and sensations in "To An Old Jaundiced Woman" (vol. 1, p. 215), "To Waken an Old Lady" (p. 152), "To a Poor Old Woman" (p. 383), and "Proletarian Portrait" (p. 384). In "Portrait of a Woman in Bed" (p. 87), too, Williams expresses, even without commentary, the confinement of individuals from lower economic classes to a rigid social order. The same compelling presence of the distant woman can be found in "The Widow's Lament in Springtime" (1991, vol. 1, p. 171) and "The Raper from Passenack" (p. 385) in the woman's powerful monologue. In "To Elsie" (p. 217), which famously begins, "The pure products of America / go crazy—" but turns to Elsie's physical 'ungainliness' and trauma, Williams derives a parable of the horror and helplessness in the human condition, which the imagination desperately seeks to evade.

The wife in poetic destruction and recreation

In the domain of intimate poetic objects, destructive elements can be seen overpowering even one of the most affirming poems by Williams, "Queen-Anne's-Lace" (1991, vol. 1, p. 162), where he depicts his wife, "Flossie again."¹³ The body dissolves in the microscopic scrutiny and poetic recreation of her skin, which decidedly nullifies and devalues any inherent beauty, emotion, or personality. The poem begins with a denial of ideal beauty and desire in the skin. During the poetic recreation, however, Williams transforms the skin into a dominant metaphor of "the field" and breaks his vision of the whole down to the infinitesimal parts of "flowers," which he vitalizes. Through his aesthetic passion emitted from "his hand," the field of the skin blossoms, while underneath, "the fibers of her being" merge into a recreated single stem, unifying the particular flowers into a "cluster." Nevertheless, this new aesthetic whole of metaphor, sexual allegory and syntax is itself framed in negation: If it were not for the poet's glorious transcendence of the conventional ideal in "whiteness," and for his recreation of the woman's "white desire," this culminating encounter would amount to "nothing."

Her body is not so white as
anemone petals nor so smooth—nor
so remote a thing. It is a field
of the wild carrot taking
the field by force; the grass
does not raise above it.
Here is no question of whiteness
white as can be, with a purple mole
at the center of each flower.

¹³ Cited in the notes to the poem.

Each flower is a hand's span
of her whiteness. Wherever
his hand has lain there is
a tiny purple blemish. Each part
is a blossom under his touch
to which the fibers of her being
stem one by one, each to its end,
until the whole field is a
white desire, empty, a single stem,
a cluster, flower by flower,
a pious wish to whiteness gone over—
or nothing.

The only palpable aspect of the woman's presence in the poem, her skin, is far from the conventional ideal of perfect 'whiteness' and 'flowers:' "Her body is not so white as / anemone petals nor so smooth." Nevertheless, her skin is also far from Williams's unconventional aesthetic, where flowers sustain their associations of fragile, fresh, reawakened beauty, but also assert their particular thingliness. "Whiteness" embodies the dualities of sensual, corruptible purity and parochial morality, of love and hatred, of isolated imagination and unbridled passion. On its own, the body cannot yet achieve Williams's own aesthetic and sensual ideal of the snow-white virgin-whore image, an example of which we can see in "Naked" (vol. 1, p. 54). No, the body of the poet's wife "is not so white." Yet Williams, emphasizing a second denial at the line break ("nor / so remote a thing"), points to his interest in the immediate reality of 'the thing,' rather than the remote ideal. The un-white, un-smooth skin is the object to be recreated in his poetic imagination: "It is a field / of the wild carrot taking / the field by force." This field may be "The Poem as a Field of Action," where every single element needs to be reawakened from its slumber, even if by force of the "wildcarrot," just like the first sprouts of reawakening in "Spring and All."¹⁴

"Grass" and the "wild carrot" in "Queen Anne's Lace" may suggest that the grass is a conventionally feminine figure, subjugated by the dominant male counterpart of the wild carrot, like the feminine field under the revitalizing hand of the sun, or under the active flow of the stream, as in, for instance, "Marriage:" "So different, this man / And this woman: / A stream flowing / In a field" (p. 56). Moreover, as Flossie's body is "not so white" in desirability, "nor so smooth" to awaken to desire, we may judge her to be a source of frustration: "I was always repulsed by her. She was never passionately loving. Regret that we were not excited by the same things."¹⁵ Revealing her reserved nature and occasional attempts at transforming slumber into vivid beauty in "The Modest Achievement," the poet depicts Flossie's desire to rejuvenate her 'crushed' flowers with apple blossoms that are "charged to lift and waken / the somber show" (1991, vol. 2, p. 118). Yet the transformation is not always possible, as in many poems "about" his wife: "Portrait in Greys" (vol. 1, p. 99) or "Lovesong" (p., 71). So far in "Queen Anne's Lace," Flossie again fails to attain 'whiteness:' "Here is no question of whiteness."

While the speaker decidedly denies to Flossie "the whiteness" of passion and revival, he actually transforms her from an emotional or sexual challenge into an aesthetic one. In so doing, he poetically

¹⁴ "The Poem as a Field of Action" is the title of an essay in *Selected Essays* (1951, pp. 280-292).

¹⁵ Notes to the poem for "Portrait in Greys" and "A Lovesong."

recreates her body, transforming the conventional metaphors for sexuality and marriage into a metaphor for poetics. Accordingly, the line breaks in “It is a field / of the wild carrot taking / the field by force; the grass / does not raise above it” emphasize “the field” and “grass” as the feminine field of his poetic recreation, his “taking.” The occupation of the field by the wild carrot evokes the aesthetic resuscitation of the object by the wild imagination of the poet, as he summons all his poetic “force.” Williams also changes the symbol of “whiteness” into a metaphor of poetic desire. Denying the conventional “question of whiteness,” he asserts its limit and lack of meaning: “white as can be.” Like “Burning the Christmas Greens,” which transforms them into a living, fiery blood-red, the white skin’s blemish turns it purple: “white as can be, with a purple mole / at the center of each flower.” If the poet’s aim is to invert convention, the question then is whether this poetic “force” destroys the poetic object—the intimate human being. These deliberate aesthetic elements of destruction, absence, dominance and devaluation must be understood as the complication of an aesthetic that overdetermines both the occurrence and the poeticization of such instances.

In this respect, the poem recalls the poet’s treatment of ‘things’ that are *themselves* destroyed and reincarnated, rather than distant human beings, whose presence and beauty are revealed through demolished constructs. Thus, the poetic creation of the woman becomes the transformation of one ‘thing’ or metaphor into another. On the way to the full transformation, the poet breaks down the “field” of the skin to recreate it in its particular units. Each line break shows the steps of the transformation. Initially, “whiteness” is turned into a concrete metaphor of flowers, of which the particulars (“each flower”) are created around the multiple centers (“a purple mole”), and stripped of ideal whiteness. Then the concrete metaphor itself is transformed into the signified reality, the spatial units of skin: “a hand’s span / of *her* whiteness.” The woman’s body may not be “so white” as the abstract idea, but the loss of the idea leads to discovery, as in “The Descent:” “A / world lost, / a world unsuspected, / beckons to new places / and no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory / of whiteness” (1991, vol. 2, p. 245). “Birds and Flowers” also revels in the whiteness, not of an abstraction but of particular ‘things:’ “Nothing is lost! the white / shellwhite / glassy, linenwhite, crystalwhite / crocuses with orange centers” (vol. 1, p. 326).

Nonetheless, the human quality of the intimate individual is effaced as one aspect of her physicality is transformed into a chain of metaphors. Her person and their relationship being outside the picture, “her body” and ultimately “her being” are reduced to some ‘thingliness’ other than their own, where the only emotion is the desire projected by the poet’s “hand.” Williams characteristically concentrates on ‘things’ in his ‘positive’ poems about Flossie: he observes with “pure happiness” the “gay pompons” of her slippers, and talks to them in “his secret mind” as they take a tour in the house, or lie in peaceful order by the bed (“The Thinker” 1991, vol. 1, p. 167). In “To Flossie,” he finds the ephemeral roses she preserves in ice “for the / moment beautiful.” It is only by effacing her full and continuous presence, and by depicting ‘things,’ that the poet can ‘recreate’ the intimate woman (p. 417). There is a conscious, but persistent aesthetic aggression in this almost purely visual treatment of the woman as a white flower, as in “A Love Poem:” “Basic hatred / sometimes has a flower / pure crystal / a white camellia” (vol. 2, p. 22). Under the white heat of the understanding, in the logical precision of the flower, emotions become crystalline, aflame, isolated, sharp, geometrical, and destructive. In creating a purple “blemish” in the whiteness, could the poetic touch be loving? “The purple mole” can no longer remain natural, but incorporates a destructive ‘bruising’ violence in the implicit cause-consequence relation.

True, the destructive touch miraculously draws a flower-field out of the woman’s skin, and perhaps aspires to grasp the unity of “her being” through physical desire and artistic passion. Accordingly, the

poet unifies the metaphor of 'the flower, the field and whiteness' into an identity, completes the sexual allegory, and counterbalances two-to-three line sentences with a unified nine-line sentence. The recreation of "each part" of the skin as "a blossom under his touch" goes beyond physicality, for the "end" is a final reunification, not only in a "cluster" of physical particulars, but also in a deeper merged spiritual and artistic unity. Every line-break points to the ultimate aesthetic project of recreating the skin under "his touch," making "the fibers" of her entire nervous system, "her being," reach out to the surface of the skin, to this "end."

At every step, Williams juxtaposes two kinds of unity, the one where the infinitesimal components are perceivable, the other where they are inseparably blended. Unifying the skin "until the whole field is a / white desire, empty, a single stem, / a cluster, flower by flower," the poet reenacts the touch of nature, echoing "The Crimson Cyclamen." Visually and spiritually, the skin is broken down into particulars that are combined into a *cluster* of physical desire "until the whole field is a / white desire," underneath which "the fibers of her being" merge into "a / white desire, . . . a single stem." The enjambment in "a / white desire" thus reflects the extension into a single all-encompassing desire in the skin. The two kinds of unity recall "Flowers by the Sea" which "seem hardly flowers alone / but color and the movement—or the shape / perhaps—of restlessness / whereas / the sea is circled and sways / peacefully upon its plantlike stem" (1991, vol. 1, p. 378). The poem might be best described in the poet's own words for a Monet painting: "All drawn with admirable simplicity and excellent design—all a unity—" (p. 198).

This unity of the woman's body and "being" is to be destroyed, however, for they amount to "nothing," if not to the poet's moral and aesthetic transcendence in "a pious wish to whiteness gone over." Perhaps kindling the woman's desire and poeticizing the feat, the poet transcends conventional morality and aesthetics, asserting this aim as the sole value.¹⁶ Which is more pious, one might ask, "a pious wish" or the "whiteness?" Ultimately, "her body" and "her being" must be "gone over" like the constructs and conventions they connote, and both exceeded and recreated poetically. "Or," they do not exist in their own right: they are "nothing." "Queen-Anne's-Lace" is not the only poem about a woman that Williams frames in a negation. Yet when distant women are concerned, his negations yield affirmations: "The Waitress" begins and ends with such apparent negations. But in "Queen-Anne's-Lace," the poet denies all value—other than *his* vision and creation—to the woman. In a god-like act, "her body" (here reduced to the skin) is created out of "nothing" aesthetic, and remains "nothing," if not transformed by "his hand" alone, and is based not so much on a desire overtaking him, but poetic generosity.¹⁷ Williams believes that his isolation is a condition for his poetic talent, and in fact 'god-like,' as intimated in "March" and "Dance Russe." Williams even spells it out: "Surely in isolation one becomes a god—At least one becomes something of everything, which is not wholly godlike, yet a little so—in many things" (1991, vol. 1, p. 198). The poet's 'marriage' with Flossie appears to warrant his destructive urges, as familial roles and social associations (including those with his mother and children) constrict his life and creativity. According to Marjorie Perloff, Williams's early love poetry can be regarded as a reflection of his sexual dissatisfaction in his marriage (1993). The poet deprecates such relationships and prefers intimacy of a more 'inspirational'—and often illicit—kind, as in "And

¹⁶ William Marling similarly suggests: "Either the poet can fertilize the erotic and the poetic potential of the material at hand... or he fails and creates 'nothing.' Williams intends this as a transcendent statement; if not . . . there is not much that the reader can do with it" (1982, p. 169).

¹⁷ Thomas Whitaker argues that Williams's initial, distancing negations of consciousness yield to passion (1989, pp. 39-40). Peter Halter also argues that "a pious wish to whiteness gone over" indicates the "whiteness of Apollonian clarity and restraint gone over to whiteness of Dionysian ecstasy, gone over to the climactic moment" after which the poet arrives back at his own consciousness (1994, pp. 57-8). It is important to note, however, that the poet never includes *himself* in the "white desire."

Thus with All Praise,” “Naked,” “Rain,” or “Young Love,” even as he realizes that the aesthetic behind his poetic creativity emotionally drains him, as the speaker proclaims in “Pigheaded Poet:” “Everything I do / everything I write / drives me / from those I love” (p. 23). According to Riddel, in Williams’s notion of marriage, “two partners do not become one, as in some ideal union, but they join in their separateness and therefore incorporate a third. They confirm society; a new relation exists” (1991, pp. 25-6). For Williams, however, such new relations inspire a desire for destruction and isolation.

The illicit lover in poetic destruction and recreation

Even when Williams poeticizes an alternative, luring instance of illicit intimacy, his aesthetic destruction of the intimate woman outbalances his recreation of her. “Young Love” poeticizes one such instance in the past, where the woman is violated in an act of transgression and doomed in the present writing to that moment, despite a tinge of sympathy in retrospect (1991, vol. 1, pp. 200-204). Introducing her breakdown in the account of the memory, Williams raises expectations for further elaboration. However, in a contemptuous denial of emotion, the speaker resigns himself to an isolated drunkenness of ‘things’ and of writing. In his interested but detached eyes, the woman’s breakdown inevitably interrupts his past imaginative experience, but also enigmatically inspires his poem, finally attesting to his ideal of “breaking” through conventional morality and poetics. As with the “whiteness” in “Queen-Anne’s-Lace,” the word “clean” is transformed and repeated to weave together the fragmented memory: the cleanliness of the body, of the hospital, and of the moral codes becomes the cleanliness of expression, isolation, and destruction. The concept looms large in Williams’s life as a doctor and obstetrician.¹⁸ Thematically, this fragmented first person memory successively evokes the memory of the woman in self-conscious writing, then the passionate, poetic world of ‘things’ surrounding her breakdown, and finally an ironic ideal of destruction. Drawing attention to the act of writing, the first section alternates between the process of recapturing a memory and the woman in that memory. Ultimately, the poet dismisses the entire emotional scene.

What about all this writing?

O “Kiki”

O Miss Margaret Jarvis

The backhandspring

I: clean

clean

clean: yes... New-York

Wrigley’s, appendicitis, John Marin:

skyscraper soup—

Either that or a bullet!

Once

anything might have happened

¹⁸ See, for instance, “An Ideology of Cleanliness,” a chapter that T. Hugh Crawford devotes to the issue in *Modernism, Medicine, and Williams Carlos Williams* (1993, pp. 98-112).

You lay relaxed on my knees—
 the starry night
 spread out warm and blind
 above the hospital—

Pah!

It is unclean
 which is not straight to the mark—

The initial question “What about all this writing?” refers back to the prose of *Spring and All*, while setting up a conversational tone and a self-consciousness of writing. Williams chooses to place the poem within his tribute to Whitman for “the largeness which he interprets as his identity” (1991, vol. 1, p. 193). For the mutual detachment and freedom of the imagination and of ‘things’ the writer must isolate himself from all social convention (p. 207). The poem embodies this aesthetic as it unfolds. In this mutual detachment both in experience and in writing, the poet moves at will among fragments, announcing the levels of violation involved in his project. Beginning his address with “O,” he intones dramatic significance, but also archaism. Just as ambiguously, by “the backhandspring,” the poet might imply both the sexual act in a term for an acrobatic movement and the poetic act within the break-down of the word: the poet’s “hand,” “springs” to a moment left “back” in time to recreate memory.¹⁹ The poem thus works at two levels, of fragmented experience and of fragmented writing. On the level of the experience, the allusion to Kiki, by evoking the image of a ‘model’ violating conventional moral codes in her interactions with artists,²⁰ reflects the nurse in her intimacy with Williams while he was a doctor in training.²¹ On the level of writing, just as the sense of intimacy in the nickname “Kiki” contradicts the formal address “Miss,” the reader finds himself infringing on the privacy of the affair *and* witnessing its transgression.

The word “clean” gets reiterated on this pathway to remembrance, vaguely evoking ‘space’ and ‘time,’ but coming to a halt at the only alternative of destruction: “Either that or a bullet!” The speaker associates himself with cleanliness, and searches back in memory for its significance, “I: clean / clean / clean,” arriving vaguely at “yes... New York.” These lines could reflect a distracted consciousness, for example, of wandering through hospital corridors and rooms, and noticing how every unit of space is oppressively clean. Yet, they could be a reassertion of the poet’s own cleanliness: “I: clean / clean / clean: yes.” Without verbs, the poet merges these fragments by colons: “I: . . . clean: New York,” evoking an ironically vague ‘space’ and ‘time:’ “Wrigley’s, appendicitis, John Marin: / skyscraper soup—” Of all possible historical incidents, Wrigley’s campaign of spearmint marks the year 1907; of all possible descriptions, John Marin’s paintings of “skyscraper soup” represent New York, and a

¹⁹ Ahearn also takes “the backhandspring” to be “the act of an acrobat”—a sexual and poetic act on the poet’s part, as well as one of extricating himself from the relationship (1994, p. 149).

²⁰ “Kiki” (Alice Ernestine Prin) was a ‘model’ modern woman—a nude model for Parisian artists and an artist herself, well-known for her liberated behavior, artistic endeavor, and profession. Her memoirs were published as *Les Souvenirs de Kiki* (1929).

²¹ The actual Miss Margaret Purvis was a student in the nursing program at the hospital where Williams was a doctor in training (Notes to the poem). In this poem, the larger violation of a social institution and codes of professional ethics by the sexual relationship is curiously identified with the violation of the woman. This is perhaps a way in which the works *Spring and All* and *Kora in Hell* reinterpret the myth of Persephone.

presumable case of "appendicitis" randomly completes this background.²² Betraying all conventional expectations of cohesion or priority, Williams gives free reign to insignificant memory associations, which become significant only because they are remembered. "Either *that* or a bullet!" he insists mysteriously, in self-communication. Either New York, or death? Either a case of appendicitis, or of a bullet in the abdomen? Is this a threat, perhaps of suicide, perhaps by the woman?

Revealing indifference to the intimacy, Williams begins to dissolve the emotionality of the incident: "Once / anything might have happened." "Once," emphasized in its single line, could indicate a one-time occurrence: "anything might have happened" perhaps only that one extraordinary time, perhaps as an unexpected consequence. Most plausibly, however, in the vague period "once . . ." in youth, this incident is 'anything,' any random thing that could have taken place. The poet doubly absents himself from the active creation of warmth and closeness: "Once / anything might have happened, / You lay relaxed on my knees— / the starry night / spread out warm and blind / above the hospital—" Despite sentimental conventions (where the poet personifies the night as having a permissive "blindness" and a warm protective "spread" over the lovers) the speaker ultimately rejects the scene in contempt: "Pah!" There is no place for such conventional impurities, either in experience or in expression: "It is unclean / which is not straight to the mark—" What Williams seeks is a kind of mental hygiene, a clean isolation of the imagination from the "rigidities of vulgar experience."

Since this isolation often demands "leav[ing] yourself at the door" with *its* emotional or social associations, Williams deflates all emotion, on the grounds that it obstructs a clean experience of 'things' (1970, p. 53)—an idea also expressed in "To A Friend Concerning Several Ladies" (1991, vol. 1, p. 165), "The Thoughtful Lover" (vol. 2, p. 19), and especially "A Crystal Maze:" "Take it! . . . / laying desperately with impeccable / composure an unnecessary / body clean to the eye—" (vol. 1, p. 354). Only through the destruction of emotions can the poet enjoy an artistic drunken passion:

In my life the furniture eats me

the chairs, the floor
the walls
which heard your sobs
drank up my emotion—
they which alone know everything

and snatched on us in the morning—

What to want?

Drunk we go forward surely
Not I

beds, beds, beds
elevators, fruit, night-tables

²² Notes to the poem on the Wrigley Campaign and Williams's view of John Marin's paintings.

breasts to see, white and blue—
to hold in the hand, to nozzle

It is not onion soup
Your sobs soaked through the walls
breaking the hospital to pieces

Everything
—windows , chairs
obscenely drunk, spinning—
white, blue, orange
—hot with our passion

wild tears, desperate rejoinders
my legs, turning slowly
end over end in the air!

The speaker attributes his lack of response to 'things' that "drink up" his emotions by invading, consuming and inebriating his imagination. The furniture *always* "eats" him beyond his control, the poet seems to imply, and things "alone" always "*know*" everything. In his account of a past incident in past tense, Williams thus makes these generalizations that *always* apply to him—a peculiar insistence Driscoll also notices in a different context.²³ Forsaking human sensibility, he confers it on 'things' that reappear in the morning light and take over his cleared imagination. Much like the 'pure thought' and logic embedded in the whiteness of "Queen-Anne's-Lace," the morning light brings emotional detachment and indifference along with 'things.' The elliptical question "What to want?" is separated from the scene and left without a subject or tense, thus conveying a sense of detached, aimless search.

The poet, though emotionless, is "drunk" with passion, not for the woman, but rather for the "things" in his imagination: "Drunk we go forward surely / Not I // *beds, beds, beds* / elevators, fruit, night-tables."²⁴ The "we" seems to signify the couple in their togetherness, in a denial of the poet's self-centered isolation. Yet, these lines may offer an alternative togetherness, an ecstatic, drunken unity with the 'things' in his imagination: "Everything /—windows, chairs / obscenely drunk, spinning—/ white, blue, orange/ —hot with *our* passion." Seemingly, the inebriety might originate from the couple and reflect into the world of 'things.' Yet, in addition to diminishing the woman's role in this tumult, the poet generally associates drunken passion with his isolated, imaginative universe of 'things,' with the destruction of all limits and conventions, and with poetic recreation of experience. In *Spring and All* Williams devotes a chapter to his exhilarated fantasy of annihilating just about all humankind: "Kill! kill! . . . friends or enemies . . . kill them all. The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill. The imagination is supreme" (1991, vol. 1, p., 179). In his *Autobiography*, Williams declares his lifetime decision to "write, write as I alone should write, for the sheer drunkenness of it" (1951, p. 51). For Riddel, sexuality and drunkenness in

²³ See her reading of Williams's letter to the musicologist Sophie Drinker (2016, p. 153).

²⁴ In this section, Ahearn finds claustrophobia and desire for freedom (1994, p. 149), while Donald Markos sees the speaker's projection of guilt (1994, p. 127). However, the entire passage emphasizes the inebriating power of 'things' over the imagination.

Williams’s poetics are “paradoxical forces of destruction. They serve to break up the isolated or discontinuous self, and merge self and other in an elemental relationship. They repudiate the dream of the simple, separate self, the immutable soul” (1991, p. 232). Here, the dissolution of the boundaries of the self and unity with the other can be seen between the speaker and *things*, rather than with his partner. ‘Things’ are the true source of commotion and drunken passion, effacing the presence of the intimate woman.

In this drunkenness with things, the intimate woman is reduced to a partial physical presence, and takes no emotional part in this passion except as a violated source, cost, or trophy of his moral-aesthetic destruction. Her breasts are regarded apathetically as purely sensory—and not even sensual—objects among others, like Kiki’s “breasts to see:” “ beds, beds, beds / elevators, fruit, night-tables / breasts to see, white and blue— / to hold in the hand, to nozzle.” Their placement reflects the poet’s indifference in their order among the objects listed (despite the two lines they get), as also in the absence of the subject relating to them: “to hold in the hand, to nozzle.” The bluish color also evokes corpses in a hospital morgue. At first, her desperate breakdown is but an insistent emotional interruption of the poet’s tumultuous imaginative experience: “It is not onion soup / Your sobs. . . .” Does he mean that he does not belittle her tears, but takes them seriously? If so, why does he make this belittling comparison at all? Williams perhaps makes a conventional association with teary-eyed onion-cutting, recalling the conventionally domestic image of the housewife as the cook of the house. Even in her transgressive act, she is prone to the primordial image of the vulnerable, sentimental, and domestic woman. Perhaps it is such inevitable associations that cause the poet’s destructive intent—in mere indifference—toward her. Ultimately, her wild tears embody the poet’s fantasy of breaking the institution asunder—“Your sobs soaked through the walls / breaking the hospital to pieces.” Even the poet’s tumultuous physical movements are fueled by these tears: “my legs, turning slowly / end over end in the air!”²⁵

In the beginning of the final section, Williams finally reveals the act that had caused her enigmatic breakdown—both an inspiration for and obstacle to his imagination:

But what would you have?

All I said was:

there, you see, it is broken

stockings, shoes, hairpins

your bed, I wrapped myself around you—

I watched.

You sobbed, you beat your pillow

you tore your hair

you dug your nails into your sides

²⁵ Bernard Duffey finds the same idea in Williams’s conscious reduction of the intimate individuals to poetic objects, in the plays “Many Loves:” “the result... is an antiromanticism produced by the obduracy of scene in face of act, though the work is given its form, of course, by the very act which it thus resisted” (1986, pp. 202-3).

I was your nightgown
I watched!

Despite his disclaimer, "All I said was," the poet, in a matter-of-fact tone, declares his act of violating the concrete integrity of the woman's world of things, and consciously watches for a reaction. Can body parts be "things?"²⁶ Suspecting unreasonable demands and expectations on her part, he readily assumes an inability to understand her. The previous 'shared' passion is lost in the contradictory physical closeness and emotional isolation: "I wrapped myself around you—// I watched." In a line break, he separates her bed from the other clearly feminine objects, specifically qualifying it as *hers*, just like her violent reaction: "You . . . sobbed . . . You beat . . . You tore . . . You dug." Even when the poet is closest to the woman, transforming himself into a 'thing'—a nightgown—belonging to her, he also remains inanimate and unresponsive: "I watched!" The poet both declares his act of "breaking" and detaches himself from its emotional resonance.

This scene inverts Kiki's creative ecstasy when, ready to pose nude for an artist, she ends up drawing sketches of him, "dancing, singing, walking, crying," almost in celebration of her own creativity.²⁷ The "Kiki" we have in "Young Love" is certainly the opposite, as this realm of drunken, creative ecstasy belongs entirely to the poet and not to the intimate object.

Clean is he alone
after whom stream
the broken pieces of the city—
flying apart at his approaches

But I merely
caress you curiously

fifteen years ago and you still
go about the city, they say
patching up sick school children

The trochees of the first two lines stress the absolute image of the destroyer, inflecting the earlier emotional and moral implications of the word "clean" and bringing it home to its full scope. Switching to an abrupt mode of retrospection, and perhaps regret, the speaker views the intimate woman's violation as a possible cause for her state of wandering and "patching up" the more vulnerable children. The woman thus gains the martyr-like quality we also see in "A Crystal Maze." She is granted merely a phantom's presence, stuck at that eternal point in time past, unable to "go forward" as in the

²⁶ Markos interprets the speaker's statement as an explanation of the cause of the woman's "wild grief:" "the loss of virginity—and the absence of a marriage proposal" (1994, p. 129). Williams often makes statements about finding pleasure in the "misery and brokenness" and beauty "at the edge of deflowering" (1970, p. 57, 59) which results from violation. Also in his *Autobiography*, he refers to his flirtation with the nurses, who "were kind, but wanted marriage," (1951, p. 78) and describes one such incident in more detail (p. 101).

²⁷ Foujita's preface to *Les Souvenirs de Kiki* describes her thus: "When the work was over, [Kiki] had sucked, bit all my crayons and lost my little eraser, and delighted, was dancing, singing, crying, walking on the box of *camembert* . . . and triumphantly left, her sketches under her arm" (1929, p.9, translation mine). It is ambiguous whether Williams's speaker names the woman "Kiki" merely in an allusion to a liberated woman or ironically for her failure to match up to that ideal.

earlier assertion of “we.” The speaker has only heard from others that she continues her old occupation. Doomed to a domestic image of “patching up,” the woman seems to be putting fragments back together desperately, for re-use. Her “patching”—a fragmented struggle—is a final connection between them. Whereas his fragmentation reaches integrity as a poem, hers remains broken asunder within his poetry. The poet is curious—perhaps “merely” intellectually—and caressing, but only “fifteen years ago,” when reaching deep into the past in his memory, for writing is “not a conscious recording of the day’s experiences ‘freshly and with the appearance of reality’” but a simulated rite of destruction and recreation all over again (1991, vol. 1, p. 207).

Coda: The mother in poetic destruction and recreation

It is not only in poeticizing the dynamics of sexual intimacy that Williams becomes destructive toward the intimate object of his poetry, alternately regretting and reveling in his estrangement and aggression, while accounting for them in aesthetic terms. “An Eternity” (1949) is Williams’s hymn, at the age of sixty-six, to his mother for a final connection, a prayer for emotional exchange, as he is about to lose her for “an eternity” (1991, vol. 2, p. 218). The speaker expresses ambivalence—a desire for unity, but one within the knowledge of its impossibility; a desire to ‘give up rhyme’ between him and the intimate woman, but to forsake it together. Repeatedly imploring his mother to rejoin him in the first part, the poet addresses her in her mental absence:

Come back, Mother, come back from
the dead—not to “Syria,” not there
but hither—to this place.

You are old, Mother, old
and almost cold, come back from
the dead—where I cannot yet join you.
Wait awhile, wait a little while.
Like Todhunter
let us give up rhyme. This
winter moonlight is a bitter thing,
I like it no better than you do.
Let us wait
for some darker moment of the moon.

At ninety the strangeness of death
is upon you. I have been to all
corners of the mind. What gift
can I bring you but luxury and that
you have taught me to despise. I
turn my face to the wall,
revert to my beginnings and turn
my face also to the wall.

The distance of death and mental deterioration is translated into spatial terms: "Syria," "there" and "hither—to this place." In his insistent appeal to her to "come back from / the dead," the speaker is reaching for a person who is both at the brink of death and already with the dead. The distance between life and death is not only spatial but also temporal: "I cannot yet join you. / Wait awhile, wait a little while." Given the impossibility, the speaker conveys an absolute desire for reunion in a repeated trochaic appeal. He both uses (internal) rhyme in 'old and cold' (at the line-break and caesura) and forsakes it. Similarly, he denies harmony to their relationship, but wishes to deny it together: "*let us give up rhyme.*" As in "Young Love," the speaker rejects the sentimentality projected to things, finding that "winter moonlight" bears "bitterness," and that "the starry night" of the lovers "spread out warm and blind." In his dislike of the moonlight, he hopes to connect to his mother in a negation: "I like it no better than you do."

Gradually realizing his hope for rekindled intimacy in the dimming night, the speaker simultaneously avoids it: "At ninety the strangeness of death / is upon you. I have been to all / corners of the mind." Not specifying whose mind, he seems to imply a mental identification with the mother in their gift for thingly connections. "I," he stresses at the line break, "turn myself to the wall," which, as in "Young Love," drinks up his emotions. Even when he reverts to his beginnings, seeking a primordial connection in maternal love, the poet remains emotionally unresponsive: "Frankly, I do not love you" (1958, p. 16). Only "the soul of things," in the middle section, holds the power of transformation. Folding back on itself is the mother's own detachment reflected in the son: for the poet, his mother's immigrant background, remoteness, and idealism in the arts are the basis of his own nature and conduct.

In the last section of the poem, the speaker evokes instead an impersonal humanism, which is again deflected into a reflection on his poetics and the world of 'things:'

I remember how at eighty-five
you battled through the crisis and
survived!

I suppose, in fact I know,
you've never heard of Shapley—
an astronomer. Now there's a man—
the best ..

Not like Flammarion,
your old favorite, who wanted
to popularize astronomy, Shapley's
not like Flammarion

You preceded him.

It is the loveless soul, the soul
of things that has surpassed
our loves. In this—you live,
Mother, live in me .

always.

As in "Eve," the mother's crisis always kindles humanistic shame rooted in the idea of violated human dignity, rather than a spontaneous emotional response (1991, vol. 1, pp. 410-14). It is with the mind's eye that he watches his mother's stroke, the way he watches the nurse in her breakdown in "Young Love." Violent fantasies lurk directly under the surface of this conceptualized shame: "it is bestial in a man to want to slaughter his old mother—so that he had better find an alternative. It took the form of an old book," he writes in *Yes, Mrs. Williams* (1982, p. 36). In crisis, even as Williams puts forth the transformative power of his art, he is transported to space, this time by conjuring astronomers. Comparing "the best" with the most famous among them, he prefers "the best." The mother and her battle, then, are mirror images of the son and his mission. What connects them, however, is the aesthetic ideal of capturing "the soul of things," both in its creative power and in its obstruction of love: they identify with one another in their shared inability to identify themselves with the intimate other.

Williams's self-consciousness loops around itself when challenged by the intimate woman: "What made them tick? It was a fascinating experimentation. I would draw back from them and try to write it down . . . I become self-conscious—too aware that she is ready to tell me I've got her all wrong" (1958, pp. 64-65). The poet even finds himself explaining the inadequacy of his compassion, giving psychological explanations, evoking his mother's inability to love and express love, and her artistic idealism in observing the qualities of 'things.' Repeatedly coming back to his wish to revitalize the failing ideal by taking it to its limits in the intimate woman, he seeks a "fantasy—what is wished for, realized in the 'dream' of the poem" (1954, p. 281). On the face of it, the poetic dream echoes the dream of mutual desire with the intimate woman—"a dream / we dreamed / each / separately / we two / of love / and of / desire— / that fused / in the night" (1991, vol. 1, p. 430). And yet, any desire for intimacy is in fact sustained by the lack of compassion for and disinterest in the human subject, as a result of which the dream of intimacy and the dream of "clean" poetics remain at odds. Williams's dream of love is, then, self-consciously, "a dream / toward which / we love— / at night / more / than a little false."

The image Williams cultivated as a committed humanist convinces some critics that he "embraced passionately what contemporary radicalism deplores under the name of 'humanism'" (Bertonneau, 1995, p. 34). In his later works, such as "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," the poet is well aware that the only kind of humanism he can claim is the general, abstract idea: "the love of love, / the love that swallows up all else, / a grateful love, / a love of nature, of people, / animals, a love engendering / gentleness and goodness that moved me" (1991, vol. 2, p. 317). Criticizing his earlier ideal of destructive isolation, he now concludes, "It is ridiculous / what airs we put on / to seem profound / while our hearts / gasp dying / for want of love." In a revisionist conviction, he finds that love, reason, and the imagination can all be reconciled as one force against destruction, which he now deplores, for instance, in "The Rewaking:" "But love and the imagination / are of a piece, / swift as the light / to avoid destruction." While "only the imagination is real" for Williams, love can now become the driving force behind his "striving / to re-establish / the image the image of / the rose" (1991, vol. 2, p. 437). But behind this re-idealized aesthetic of all-conquering love, itself developed through the distance of a lifetime, lie the moments of "terrible isolation," of "terrible intimacy:" "Alone! / . . . So they stay / Adjacent / Like to like / In terrible isolation // Like to like / In terrible intimacy / Unfused/ And unfusing" ("The Marriage of Souls," 1991, vol. 2, p. 233). The intimate individual remains beyond the "act" or "performance" of violence, defying the underlying solipsism of the poet. He can enforce poetic

whiteness and cleanliness only at the expense of the intimate individual who, reduced to a postponed image and to broken things, becomes, not even a surface, but a front.

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