

**“NO IDEAS BUT IN THINGS”: WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS’  
OBJECTIVIST POETRY**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present paper aims to define and discuss the main features of William Carlos Williams’ objectivist poetry relating them to Imagism and the modernist movements in visual arts which are envisioned as the movement’s major intellectual precursors. Williams is likewise situated within the larger frame of Objective poetry to spot the unique aspects of his philosophy which separate him from other representatives of the movement and which turn him into an influential force in the formulation of the Pound-Williams-Olson lineage in American Poetry. These theoretical formulations are supplied with the analyses of several representative poems: “The Red Wheelbarrow,” “Between Walls,” “The Term” and “Proletarian Portrait.”

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Let... the writing  
be of words, slow and quick, sharp  
to strike, quiet to wait,  
sleepless.

-- through metaphor to reconcile  
the people and the stones.

Compose. (No ideas  
but in things)...

— W.C. Williams, “A Sort of a Song”

And art exists that one may recover the sensation  
of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make  
the stone *stony*.

— V. Shklovsky

The roots of letters are things.

— H. D. Thoreau

Gaining its essence from Ezra Pound’s Imagist principles and the radical innovations launched into the field of visual arts in the beginning the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Objectivism functioned as a buffer zone between the modernist aesthetics of Imagism and the Projectivist school heralded by Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” in 1950s. As a major representative of the movement,

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William Carlos Williams asserted his central position in what became to be known as the Pound-Williams-Olson lineage in American poetry. In contrast to E. Pound's and T.S. Eliot's cosmopolitanism, Williams focuses on his immediate surroundings and formulates a distinctly American poetic voice by bridging the gap between the language of prose and verse. Using the printed page rather than metric pattern as a governing poetic unit, Williams envisions the poetic field as an energy construct, anticipating in this way Olson's projectivist aesthetics. Another central achievement of Williams' objectivist poetry is the introduction of the notion of the poem as an object with autonomous reality, as a "machine made of words" (1988:54), upon which the "machine aesthetics" gains ground in American poetry?" (Kimmelman, xvii). This feature is closely allied to his famous statement "No ideas but in things" (*Paterson*, 6) which rests at the core of his objectivist philosophy.

The present paper aims to discuss these features of Williams' objectivist stance relating them to Imagism and the modernist movements in visual arts which are envisioned as the movement's major intellectual precursors. Williams will be likewise situated within the larger frame of Objective poetry to spot the unique aspects of his philosophy which separate him from other representatives of the movement. These theoretical formulations will be subsequently illustrated by the analyses of several representative poems: "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923), "Between Walls" (1938), "The Term" and "Proletarian Portrait" (1935).

The publication of William Carlos Williams' first truly characteristic book *The Tempers* in 1913, coincides with two important events in the cultural life of the US. The first event is related to the promotion of Imagism by Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine. The 1913 January issues of the magazine included "Three Poems" by "H.D., Imagiste." Hilda Doolittle's poems were followed by E. Pound's "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," and F.S. Flint's "Imagisme". The same year the 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment Armory became the site of the phenomenal 1913 New York Armory Show. Both events were of tremendous importance for the tempering of the poetic vision of the budding talent who had just launched into the field of poetry. He joined the group of the Imagists, "the first important literary fellowship of the new century" (Hatlen, vii), formed by figures such as Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, Amy Lowell and Richard Aldington, adopting the three principles formulated by Ezra Pound: "1. Direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective. 2. To use absolutely no word that did not

contribute to the presentation. 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome" (104).

Despite the formulation of a common "manifesto" the movement soon dissolved into fractions and each of the group members announced his/her unique poetic voice by reshaping/reformulating/improving Pound's credo. Swerving himself to Vorticism, Pound specified his notion of the image stressing its hostility to ideas: "The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a vortex, from which, and through which ideas are constantly rushing" ("Vorticism," (1914)). The same essay provides an explanation of his "Metro" poem stating that in a "poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective" (in Malkoff, 7). As Pound embraced Vorticism, Amy Lowell became the spokesperson of the movement. Pound named it disparagingly "Amygism" to refer to her adherents who "emphasized the pictorial aspects of Imagism and for them the term seemed finally to encompass almost any short poem in free verse" (Malkoff, 7).

William Carlos Williams, in his turn, tried to rescue and develop the legacy of Imagism establishing, together with George Oppen and Charles Reznikoff, the Objectivist Press which came to be associated with the term Objectivism. In addition to Pound's insistence on direct treatment, economy of words and sequence of the musical phrase the proponents of Objectivism emphasize the essence of the poem itself as an object. According to them the poem should assert its own independent existence rather than present a mimetic picture of reality. Taking as a starting point the precepts of Imagism, the new movement justifies Kimmelman's premise on the centrality of the image in modern American poetry:

As Parini has observed, 20th century American poetry had a love affair with the image, not least of all because of the influence of the imagist and, later, objectivist poets. Commenting on that, he says, "even when there is an overarching narrative," imagery tends to be central and the poetry exhibits "an overriding concern with concreteness" (xx). The breadth and multiplicity of 20<sup>th</sup> century American poetry are evident in its use of images, in the very fact of their proliferation. The American language starts with and is embodied by things. (xv)

This belief in the power of *things*, expressed vividly in Pound's statement that "the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object" (109), is tightly allied also to the notion of perception. In the Introduction to *Crowell's Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry* Karl Malkoff explains the "shift from ethics to epistemology" in contemporary American poetry with the poet's interest in the act of perception itself. The critic suggests that Contemporary American poetry can be viewed as "a series of attempts to reinterpret the relation of man's inner world to the perceptual universe: the effort to expunge the subjective ego and concentrate on the object perceived, which led from Imagism to Objectivism to Projective Verse" (3).

The evolution of W. C. Williams from an Imagist to an Objectivist perspective was stimulated likewise by the achievements in the realm of visual arts. In an article based on the impact of the New York art world on American poetry, Brian M. Reed explains W.C. Williams' tendency for *thingness* with the fact he spent the most turbulent phase of Cubism and Dadaism in New York where he was exposed to experimental works of the scale of Marcel Duchamp's urinal. His initial encounter with the artist's products in The Armory Show had a bomb like effect on the young poet. Williams' *Autobiography* testifies the tremendous impact the exhibition had on his poetic sensibility: "I went to [The Armory Show] and gaped at a "picture" in which an electric bulb kept going on and off; at Duchamp's sculpture (by "Mutt and Co.), a magnificent cast-iron urinal, glistening of its white enamel... The "Nude Descending a Staircase" is too hackneyed for me to remember anything clearly about it now. But I do remember how I laughed out loud when first I saw it, happily, with relief" (134). The impact of Duchamp's ready-mades can easily be discerned in Williams' tendency to focus on mundane objects and turn them into *objects of art* by isolating them from their habitual functions.

(Alfred) Stieglitz's 291 Gallery was also instrumental for the formation of Williams' objectivist style. In a discussion of the poet's relationship with visual arts Marjorie Perloff observes that Williams' poems of the late teens represent his first "attempts to create verbal-visual counterparts to the paintings and drawings" (1985: 101) exhibited in the gallery and reproduced in the pages of the 291 magazine. 291 promoted experimental poetry too. Its first issue, for example, reproduced Apollinaire's *calligramme* "Voyage," a work which stresses the visual aspect of poetry. Williams was deeply impressed by the construction of the poem as a visual text and saw it as a source "for possible alternatives for the structuring of his poetic discourse" (Perloff, 1985: 167).

Francis Picabia's *machine drawings*, on the other hand, demonstrated the possibility of visual art to incorporate verbal material. Along with Apollinaire's typographic innovations and Picabia's verbal/visual paintings, Perloff names also Alfred Stieglitz as a vital source of his poetic credo: "Williams also plays homage to the defamiliarization of the mundane object in the urban landscape characteristic of Stieglitz's photographs" (1985: 172). Williams' poetry can be observed, likewise, as an attempt to defamiliarize everyday objects by isolating them from their conventional setting and usage and by establishing new relations between the words which are used for their presentation.

From that point of view, Williams' treatment of objects forms a perfect illustration for Victor Shklovsky's idea that the purpose of art is "to make objects 'unfamiliar,'" a theory he suggested in "Art as Technique" in 1917. This article can function as a valuable theoretical background in the evaluation of Williams' objectivist works as Shklovsky deflates the symbolic treatment of image in poetry claiming that "...poets are much more concerned with arranging images than with creating them. Images are given to poets; the ability to remember them is far more important than the ability to create them" (17). And the ability to remember them functions as a bulwark against what he names as the "algebrization," "automatization," or "habitualization" of objects:

The object, perceived thus in the manner of prose perception, fades and does not leave even a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what it was is forgotten... The process of "algebrization," the over-automatization of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort. Either objects are assigned only one proper feature – a number, for example – or else they function as though by formula... And so life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been. And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is the way of experiencing the artfulness of an object.* (20)

The scholar continues his argument by claiming that the purpose of the image is not to trigger a search for meaning "but to create a special perception of the object – *it creates a 'vision' of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it*" (25).

Shklovsky's insistence on the *stony*-ness of a stone calls to mind Williams' assertion of the *thingness* of things announced in his famous statement "No ideas but in things" which has been accepted as the fundamental principle of his objectivist aesthetics. Thus the poem is no longer a means for expressing thoughts, feelings and ideas. His objectivist works can be defined as "still lifes, poetry of things or even linguistic objects *trouves* ("found objects"), reminding many critics of Marcel Duchamp's Dadaistic "antiart" of the same period" (Kimmelman, 527). Another aspect of Williams' Objectivism is his notion of the poem as an autonomous object, i.s. "a purely textual, stand-alone creation" (Reed, 120). This feature is underlined in the poet's own definition of "objectivism," written for the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry:

OBJECTIVISM: a term used to describe a mode of writing, particularly the writing of verse. It recognizes the poem, apart from its meaning, to be an object to be dealt with as such. Objectivism looks at the poem with a special eye to its structural aspect, how it has been constructed... It arose as an aftermath of imagism, which the Objectivists thought was not specific enough. Objectivism concerned itself with an image more particularized yet broadened in its significance. The mind, rather than the unsupported eye entered the picture. (in Perloff, 1987: 190)

The term was introduced by Louis Zukovsky in "Objectivists' 1931," a special issue of the *Poetry* magazine. Besides Zukovsky and Williams, the group included figures such as George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, Lorine Niedecker and Carl Rakosi. Despite the lack of a specific manifesto *An "Objectivist" Anthology* published in 1932 signaled their claim to belong to a distinct movement. Its basic tenets were formulated by Zukovsky in "Sincerity and Objectification: *With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff*" (1931). The essay postulates that the "poet ought to compose always with "sincerity," the most scrupulous attention both to the objects and events about which he writes and to the particulars of his own language, and the finished poem ought to exhibit "objectification," an object-like, tangible form as if language were material" (Kimmelman, 349).

While Zukovski insists on "sincerity" and "objectification" as underlying principles of the movement, Charles Reznikoff relates the term "objectivist" to the poet's attitude towards reality rather than the form of the poem. Michael Davidson's definition of the term, however, excludes this aspect as a fundamental feature of the movement: "Despite the name, Objectivism is not a variant of Eliot's impersonality; the focus was less on the poet's objectivity as

detachment than on the poem *as* object. The objectivists sought to restore the materiality of language to the poem while gaining greater access to the *realia* of everyday life. In order to achieve this objectivist position, the poet must eliminate all traces of what Zukovsky called "predatory intent," those elements that reduce the poem to an advertisement or statement" (237).

This lack of a unifying approach makes Burt Kimmelman claim that rather than being a label for a coherent school of poetry with a specific manifesto, "Objectivism" was initially a "useful marketing device" (349). Despite the lack of a unifying "objectivist style" the critic notes certain common features shared by these poets: They prefer free verse to traditional rhyme and rhythmic structures; their works demonstrate intense political awareness (stemming from their pro-communist views). In his list of common characteristics Kimmelman includes also their precision in the use of words and their preoccupation with perception. He illustrates the latter quality with Zukovsky's insistence on "sincerity," Oppen's statement that "the poem is concerned with a fact which it did not create" (2) and Reznikoff's tendency to view words as a sworn testimony given in the court. The critic relates these similarities to the poets' ethical concerns: "The objectivist poets, then, share a sense that the relationship of the poem and the world must be in some sense a relationship of truth - an ethical relationship. They must not write in superficially realistic styles, but their works always bears an ethical responsibility to the real as perceived and experienced" (350-1).

Despite Kimmelman's claim for inclusiveness, his definition cannot be thoroughly applied to Williams' objectivist poetry as political awareness and ethical responsibility are extraneous to his philosophy. Michael Davidson includes the atmosphere of the Depression of the 30s and the impact of Marxism in his list of the philosophical influences on objectivist thinking. He illustrates his argument referring to Zukovsky's poem "A" which contains passages from Marx's *Capital* and Oppen's and Rakosi's membership to the Communist Party. Hatlen refers, though, to another significant aspect of the movement: "All the objectivists were sympathetic to the political left... But at the same time, the objectivist poets... also stimulated one another to pursue a rigorous testing of language and its relationship to the perceived world" (x). Williams' objectivist works explore, doubtlessly, the potentiality of language as an artistic rather than a political device. Unlike his colleagues who "fuse their formal experiments with social issues" (Davidson, 237) Williams insists persistently that "it isn't what the poet says that counts as a work of art, it's what he makes" (1969: 257).

He persistently accentuates the idea that his poetic principle rests upon the notion that the poem is an object:

...the poem, like every other form of art, is an object, an object that in itself formally presents its cause 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.

The poem being an object (like a symphony or cubist painting) it must be the purpose of the poet to make of his words a new form: to invent, that is, an object consonant with his day. This was what we wished to imply by Objectivism, an antidote, in a sense, to the bare images haphazardly presented in loose verse. (in Malkoff, 7)

Thus, Williams' intention to turn the poem into an object with an autonomous existence, into what he names as a "machine made of words," marks his departure from Imagism, or rather his tendency to improve it because his objectivist works reflect Pound's principle of "the direct treatment of the thing." Poems such as "The Red Wheelbarrow," "Between Walls," "This is Just to Say," "The Term," "Proletarian Portrait," "Young Woman at a Window," "The Great Figure," "Nantucket," "Poem," "Composition," and "Chinese Toy," which can be analyzed as illustrations of his objectivist aesthetics, provide direct presentations of objects, people and landscapes "rather than treating the world as a dictionary of potential symbols for poetic expression" (Middleton, 215). Williams aims to see "the thing itself without forethought or afterthought but with great intensity of perception" as he himself announces in the prologue to *Kora in Hell* (1970).

Williams' definition of the poem "as a machine made of words" demonstrates his adherence to the Imagists' principle of precision of expression and maximum density too. "Words are the burden of poems, poems are made of / words" (281), the poet announces in *Paterson* to stress the function of words as the building blocks of his works. In addition to Pound's belief in the power of the exact word, Williams' poems demonstrate a willful desire to strip words of their conventional associations, to release them from the burden of social, cultural and political connotations. "Words are either free or they are bound, either clean or smeared (with historical overtones, symbolic implications, metaphorical associations)," postulates Rod Townsley in a study of Williams' early poetry pointing to his drive to "free" words (338). Williams stresses his tendency for a fresh approach to language as one of his main assets in the

opening sentences of his *Autobiography*: "I was an innocent child and have remained so to this day. Only yesterday, reading Chapman's *The Iliad of Homer*, did I realize for the first time that the derivation of the adjective venerable is from Venus! (3). Marjorie Perloff subtly observes that his "innocence" is "a carefully constructed pose" (1987: 163) rather than a sincere confession, as such a pose is an absolute necessity to construct the atmosphere of a linguistic Eden governing his works.

In his article "William Carlos Williams: The Poet as Engineer" Powell Woods qualifies this tendency as "purification" or "de-smudging" of language, referring to the poet's own comment on Marianne Moore's poetry. Williams praises Moore's ability to clean words from the stains of associative meanings which have accumulated upon them throughout the ages: "For the compositions Miss Moore intends, each word should first stand crystal clear with no attachments... With Miss Moore a word is a word most when it is separated out by science, treated with acid to remove the smudges, washed, dried and placed right side up on a clean surface" (*Selected Essays*, 128). This statement can be applied unconditionally to Williams himself as he endeavors to remove the layers of "artifactual and associative resonances until they [are] left with only their simplest referential powers" (Woods, 80).

Because of this drive for "purification" Williams has generally been juxtaposed to his tradition conscious colleague T.S.Eliot. In "William Carlos Williams: The Poet as Engineer" P.Woods examines the two poets as representatives of the two trends governing American poetry viewing Eliot as a "poet-as-bricoleur" and Williams as a "poet-as-engineer." Woods takes as a starting point of his argument Levi-Strauss's *Savage Mind* (1962):

We may infer that the artist – in Levi Strauss' sense of him as part engineer and part *bricoleur* – moves closer to the *bricoleur* to the degree that he accepts and utilizes a language and poetics which are heavily artifactual and residual, or, more kindly, tradition-conscious and derivative, and moves closer to the engineer to the degree that he attempts to create new techniques and a new vocabulary to serve his formal designs (82).

According to Levi-Strauss *dissolution* – rather than *construction* – is the final goal of science. "It is by this ongoing process of recognizing dissonance, forcing dissolution, and gaining discovery that the poet remakes his world just as the engineer remakes his; by clearing blockage and dissolving complex residual or artifactual structures" (Woods, 82). Thus, as the poet-as-bricoleur

T.S.Eliot is “heavily artifactual,” a term Woods explains as preference for poetic techniques such as allusion, symbolism and allegory which “force a poem into participation synchronically and diachronically with the rest of literature and culture” while Williams, as the poet-as-engineer, insists on “purifying or “combing out” (*Paterson*, 173) the language” and tends to “marry art and life” (82).

In a study of the relationship between British and American poetry David Herd underlies the tremendous importance Williams had for the formulation of a distinctly American poetic voice contrasting him with T.S. Eliot. Referring to Thoreau’s statement that the “Roots of letters are things” the critic marks that “the roots of Eliot’s letters were other letters, and largely British letters at that. For Williams this constituted a catastrophic misdirection of American poetry” (43). His impulse for *dissolution* of artifactual systems allies him, instead, with W. Stevens’ notion of “decreation”:

Williams wanted to destroy the world in order to make it new. Poetic destruction – or what Stevens called “decreation” – involved a Nietzschean attack on reason, logic, and system and a corresponding investment in the earth and the processes of nature. “No ideas but in things,” is his famous objectivist claim in *Paterson*, which does not mean that there are no ideas but that ideas must be embodied and materialized... As a program for poetry, such embodiment involves focusing on the thingness of things, on the textures and surfaces of ordinary objects – including words. (Davidson, 236)

The “de-smudging,” “combing out” or “decreation” of words results in the creation of the material which is necessary for the construction of the “machine poem.” At this stage Williams resorts to the typewriter as an engineering device to produce his distinctly visual style. This can be qualified as one of his methods to upgrade the Imagist free verse. In a conversation with Edith Heal the poet confesses: “Free verse wasn’t verse at all to me. Art is orderly... From the beginnings I knew the American language must shape the pattern; later I rejected the word language and spoke of *the American idiom* – this was a better word than language, less academic, more identified with speech” (in Perloff, 1985: 88). Thus he turned prosaic statements to poetry through the use of the printed page as the ultimate field of poetic expression. Besides manifesting affinity with visual arts, the tendency to view the printed page as a poetic unit enhances the “purified” aspect of Williams’ words, as Perloff marks in a study of the visual aspect of his poetry:

[O]nce the *page* rather than the foot or line or stanza becomes the unit of measure, the typographic composition of that page can consist of prose as early as easily as of verse, provided that, in Hugh Kenner’s words “art lifts the saying out of the zone of things said.” Poetry, in this larger sense that would include both “verse” and “prose,” is a form of writing, of *écriture*, that calls attention to words as words rather than as referents to a particular reality. (1985:111)

Williams’ departure from the Imagist notion of free verse in favor of what he names as the “variable foot” (expressed in the visual organization of lines) is achieved through the technique of the line cut characteristic of Cubist painting. This increases further the defamiliarization effect established initially through the “de-smudging” of words by establishing new relationships between the dissolved linguistic segments. Stated in simpler terms Williams strips, first of all, words of their referential baggage and this semantic cleansing is followed by a structural “decreation” through the practice of unconventional line breaks. This double de-automatization verifies Shklovsky’s postulation that “poetic speech is formed speech” (28) which, in its turn, supports Williams’ notion of the poem as an object, as another thing among the things the poet describes. Townsley marks, though, the essential paradox of this impulse:

[Williams’] intent was not to “describe” at all, but to fuse the imagination with the things he was contemplating so that his words would “express” those objects, almost speak for them. He seems actually to have believed that, when successful (that is, when dynamized by the imagination), the poem will behave in accordance with natural law and so will become an “addition to nature,” another object under the sun. Paradoxically, in becoming a natural object the poem becomes separate from nature. (141)

Powell Woods links Williams’ tendency to order “prose sentences” into neatly organized poetic structures and the introduction of mundane objects to the space of poetry as the “marriage of life space and art space”: “Williams’ insistence upon the co-occurrence of natural and artistic energies is manifest in his refusal to separate art-space and life space. Here again like the engineer who relates the enclosed and non-referential world of mathematics to the plastic physical world, the poet, according to Williams, must intimately relate his experience to his poetry and vice versa, otherwise both are worthless” (84-85). The critic notes that this “coincidental space,” “this primal meeting ground” is envisioned by Williams in terms of the annihilation of the distance between “self and world, between life-subject and art-object” (85), a statement which points to the issue of perception, another paramount aspect of the

Imagist/Objectivist lineage of American poetry embraced subsequently by Olson in his theory of Projective verse.

Pound's concern with perception finds reflection in his notion of the interaction between inner and outer worlds. This idea is clearly discernible in Williams's proposition that in "the composition, the artist does exactly what every eye must do with life, fix the particular with the universality of his own personality" (in Malkoff, 8). In response to this announcement Karl Malkoff utters a statement which allies Williams with the poetic credo of W. Stevens: "If, as modern science tells us, there is no absolute model of the universe, if the "real" world lies neither totally within the sensory system of the observer nor within the material properties of the object observed but in an interaction between the two, then each individual is in a very real sense the creator of his real universe" (8).

Williams' drive to focus on the *thingness* of things rather than on their meanings calls inevitably for a distanced, "scientific" approach to the treated object but this strategy of un-involvement can be interpreted also as a drive to merge with the object as the poet himself confesses: "When I spoke of flowers, I was a flower, with all the prerogatives of flowers, especially the right to come to live in the Spring" (1958, 21). Perloff defines this tendency as a "Romantic urge to enter the life of the object or person," a quality which links him, according to the critic, to poets such as Whitman and Lawrence, but she is eager to add that it is "held in check by a curious, almost clinical detachment, by a quality Robert Lowell defined as his "hard, nervous, secular knowingness" (1987: 176).

Examination of specific poems will be of use to illustrate Williams' objectivist stance expressed in his focus on mundane objects, on his tendency to strip words of their artifactual burden, to turn the poem into a visual construct by poetic rearrangement of prosaic statement on the page and view the resulting work as an independent object. "The Red Wheelbarrow" is one of Williams' emblematic poems which is automatically associated with the objectivist school because of its explicit relevance to its tenets.

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens. (1951: 277)

The poem gains its force from its concentration on a trivial, commonplace object which is treated with pronounced brevity. Only a "red wheelbarrow glazed with rain water" placed "beside the white chickens" constructs the scene demonstrating thus an amazing economy of words. The focus on a "wheelbarrow" validates Donald Davie's observation concerning the admission of objects and ideas into poetry according to their "rank": "The idea that 'there is no occasion too small for the poet's celebration' is naturally at home in a society that resists any ranking of certain human and civic occasions bellow or above certain others... Williams's 'it all depends' asserts and takes for granted the absence of any agreed hierarchies, hence the freedom of any individual to establish and assert his own hierarchy, without fear or challenge" (376). Williams believes that it is the poet's obligation to "lift to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose" (*Kora in Hell*, 14). Therefore objectivist poems present a "world of things made, strange things, radial tires, lunar modules, combination locks, plastic bottles, disposable lighters, but not 'aesthetic' things: not for instance, statues" (Kenner, 180).

The poem owes its potency also to the expressive power of words which are alienated from their conventional association. "Red" and "white," for example, are highly artifactual words/colors as the two primary colors have been widely used because of their rich connotative power. The mind of the reader is conditioned to associate whiteness with notions such as purity, chastity, virginity on the one hand and anemia, death on the other. Red,

likewise, is associated with blood, passion, zest for life. Taken as a combination the two colors generally stand for the Apollonian/Dionysian opposition. Hugh Kenner reports an event from his teaching experience which illustrates that a mind accustomed to draw prescribed relationships between words and ideas tends to accept a work of art in terms of this set of prearranged links:

I once had a student who insisted that "The Wheelbarrow" could yield a hidden meaning. He argued that "the red wheelbarrow" of Communism would soon have the "white chickens" of Capitalism decapitated and inside it. But he didn't know what to do with "glazed," rather than, say "flooded" with rainwater. By the same token, "The Red Wheelbarrow" cannot be read as the red passion and the white of being "chicken" - that is, virgin. The poem is what it is, a "mobile-like arrangement," as Wallace Stevens said critically, a system of tensions, a structure of checks and balances. (in Perloff, 1987: 191)

W.C. Williams has another poem about another mundane object, "the red paper box" (from "Composition"), which strips the color of the layers of meaning which have been accumulated upon it through the rules of convention: "The red paper box/ hinged with cloth/ is lined/ inside and out/ with imitation/ leather." Here the color of the box ("red"), and the materials from which it is made ("paper," "cloth," and "leather") are immaterial in terms of loading the object with a specific meaning. The work suggests rather the notion of the poem as an autonomous object by turning the reader's attention to the poem as manufactured object as Brian M. Reed suggests: Williams "seems to want us to stop thinking about the world external to the poem and focus on *the poem itself*. It, after all, has "lines." It has "boxes," too, that is, stanzas. And "hinges," that is line breaks. If a poem ceases to refer to things other than itself, "The red paper box" intimates, then it can still comment endlessly and inventively on its own origins, appearance and purpose" (120-1).

The same rules govern also the poem about the red wheelbarrow since it proves to be a verbal construct with a separate existence. As Kenner proposes, Williams takes the words he sees "interrelated about him and composes them – without distortion which would mar their exact significance (55). In "The Red Wheelbarrow" the word "wheelbarrow" and the object it corresponds to, preserve their internal significance since they are not marred by connotative associations. Thus, the poem does count as a work of art not with what it says but with what it makes since the work does not finally assert what depends on the wheelbarrow. The poem stresses the act of making through the transportation of words from the field of normal usage to a zone defined by

Kenner as the "zone of attention". Williams himself refers to this field as the "imagination". In a comparative study of Williams and Marianne Moore, William Doresky explains the anti-romantic attitude of the poet towards the issue of "imagination" arguing that in his works

the text is made out of signifiers not out of fantasy. The purpose of the imagination is to generate a text, not to transcend language. This insistence on the material limitations of language and poetry distinguishes him from much of romanticism, in which reality is at least as manifest in the "glory and dream" as in the landscape that inspires the vision. Williams does not reject the dream, which he sees as Freudian wish-fulfillment; but he is determined to avoid confusing it with the exterior world. (50)

As opposed to the substantial, tangible world of physical reality, the field of the "imagination" is a domain of artifact. In the world of physical sensations the wheelbarrow is seen by the human eye whereas in the world of imagination it exists in a zone created/made by the poet. Perhaps this is what Williams means when he says "the mind rather than the unsupported eye" should enter the picture as it is only in the zone of imagination where the poem acquires its vitality.

Hugh Kenner proposes an experiment to show the difference in the power of words depending on which zone they exist in. If the words which compose the poem are written (or better uttered) as an uninterrupted sequence they form a "normal" prosaic sentence: So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens. Yet written/uttered in this way it transgresses the norms of a "normal" prose sentence. Kenner suggests such an awkward expression can just be "the gush of an arty female on a tour of Farmer Brown's barnyard" (60). The critic asks further a number of questions to stress its semantic incongruity:

To whom might the sentence be spoken, for what purpose? Why, to elicit agreement, and a silent compliment for the speaker's "sensitivity." Not only is what the sentence says banal, if you'd heard it you'd wince. But hammered on the typewriter into a *thing made*, and this without displacing a single word except typographically, the sixteen words exist in a different zone altogether, a zone remote from the world of sayers and sayings. (60)

The words dissolve into neutrality or even nonsense when they are placed as a prose sequence but when they are typed on the page they acquire the form of a poem/object, a poem/machine. It is engineered through the dissolution of



prose statements to poetic units by the “cut” technique reminiscent of Cubist and Dadaist painting practices. Williams deliberately divides the verbs “depend” from “upon” to avoid programmed, automatic reader response. The same concern for agreed, predetermined signification explains the separation of the noun from its qualitative adjective in the clauses “rain water,” “white chickens,” and the splitting of the compound noun “wheelbarrow.” Doing so, the poet makes us reconsider the meaning of the compound nouns and to defamiliarize them reducing them to their components. “Rain water” (written hyphenated or not) on a single line of the poem is received by the reader in a rather “prose-like” way, while cutting the two nouns and placing them in two different lines creates suspense. The eye which sees the word “rain” commands the mind for any other relevant expressions such as “rain-bow” or “rain-drop.” Furthermore the words “rain” and “water” written in this way can be interpreted as parts of two different semantic structures: the initial unit “a red wheel barrow glazed with rain” is followed by another which starts with the word “water.”

“Between Walls” is another poem which illustrates Williams’ predilection for “prosodic, syntactic, and semantic defamiliarization” and “contorted syntax” (Perloff, 164).

#### Between Walls

the back wings  
of the

hospital where  
nothing

will grow lie  
cinders

in which shine  
the broken

pieces of a green  
bottle (1951, 343)

Like in the previous work in ““Between Walls” discovery can come only by attentiveness to the tiniest of local manifestations,” namely the broken pieces of a green bottle (Perloff, 1987: 198). In his study on Williams’ early poetry, Rod Townley notes the pervasiveness of glass imagery in his works. A glass image is used, for example, in his two line poem “Lines” reminiscent of

Pound’s “Metro” composition: “Leaves are grey green,/ the glass broken, bright green” (1951, 206). “My luv” is another short composition which exploits the same image: “My luv/ is like / a / green glass / insulator / on / a blue sky”. The critic marks the movement from “essentially structureless” poems like “Lines” and “My Luv” as a movement from Imagism to Objectivism, “from notations transcribed direct from the mind’s retina to a set of built structures (the poem as purring machine, the poem as “object”) (118).

“Of Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” (1955) is another poem which contains a reference to broken bottle pieces:

He liked my poems  
about the parts  
of a broken bottle,  
lying green in the cinders  
of a hospital courtyard.

The similarity to the image presented in “Between Walls” is striking yet this poem fails to function as what Perloff names as a “mobile or suspension system” (1987: 199), a term which can be applied to objectivist poems because of their tendency to “decreate” prosaic structures through quaint disjunctions. Perloff observes that in the above poem “syntactic units break predictably enough at the point of natural juncture” while in “Between Walls” any “change of word placement or the elimination of a single word would destroy the poet’s mobile, the machine made of words which is the poem” (1985: 109). Like in “The Red Wheelbarrow,” the interaction between words in “Between Walls” creates a “field of energy,” to borrow Olson’s term generated from the objectivist philosophy.

Restoring the prose structure underlying the work will be of help to demonstrate how exactly Williams’ “suspension system” works. If we follow Perloff’s instructions and insert the definite article “the” between the two words of the title and the preposition “of” between the title and the first line of the poem, it turns into a “normal” sentence: “Between the walls of the hospital where nothing will grow lie cinders in which shine the broken pieces of a green bottle” (1987: 192). What turns this statement into a poem is cutting it at most inconceivable places and creating thus units of curious breaches. The initial line - “the back wings”- creates in the mind images related to “flying birds” (Perloff,

1987: 192), to flight, nature, and freedom. But the introduction of the word “hospital” in the next line deflates this expectation. Williams achieves the same effect in the last two lines of the poem: “pieces of a green/ bottle.” “Green” is again alienated from the noun “bottle” which it qualifies. This creates a sense of suspense and lends physical force to the line.

Despite the presentation of a stable object (pieces of a green bottle), the interaction between the words which have been disjoined from their “prose meaning” create the effect of “motion picture of a still life,” as Townley defines the composition:

Between Walls” works like the zoom lense of a camera – moving in from the hospital wings to the cinders and finally to the shining edges of glass. The poem’s shape contributes to its efficacy, by constantly surprising one’s expectations, while at the same time providing a symmetry that will please by retrospect. The word “lie,” the primary word of the poem, serves as the main fulcrum of surprise; its grammatical position makes the reader suddenly wonder if the title should not be read as the first line. Although the poem as a whole moves (that is, zooms in), this verb does not; it is the intransitive conveyor of the subject, which is itself motionless. The moving focus, the enjambments, the small grammatical surprises excite one’s interest without disturbing the intense quiet; the poem is a motion picture of a still life. (118-9)

The same interaction of words can be observed in the poem “The Term” as well. In this case the “suspension system” is created by the poetic dissolution of two prose sentences which focus on a rumpled sheet of brown paper:

A rumpled sheet  
of brown paper  
about the length  
  
and apparent bulk  
of a man was  
rolling with the  
  
wind slowly over  
and over in  
the street as  
a car drove down  
upon it and  
crushed it to

the ground. Unlike  
a man it rose  
again rolling

with the wind over  
and over to be as  
it was before. (1951, 409)

Like the two previous poems “The Term” is characterized with the simplicity of its form, the matter of factness of its subject and its material immediacy which relates it to the “thingness” of everyday life. The poem is divided into stanzas but they are stanzas as they are seen written on the page. Williams seems to use a “cookie cutter,” as M.Perloff wittily remarks, to create his “visual stanzas” (1985: 109). In “The Red Wheelbarrow” and “Between Walls,” for example, he cuts the “dough” of the prose sentence into two-line “stanzas” with similar geometric patterns (a long line is followed by a shorter one). In “The Term” Williams uses a three-line “cookie cutter” to shape the two “prose sentences” into “stanzas” formed of two longer lines sandwiching a shorter one. What operates Williams’ “cookie cutter” is thus neither rhyme nor meter.

In an interview conducted in 1950 John W. Gerber asked Williams what it is that makes “This Is Just To Say” a poem. Conforming to the norms of Williams’ “variable foot,” this is another representative work of the poet: “I have eaten/ the plums/ that were in/ the icebox// and which/ you were probably/ saving/ for breakfast// Forgive me/ they were delicious/ so sweet/ and so cold” (1951, 354). Williams’s response to the question about the “poetic” features of this work was rather perplexing: “In the first place, it’s metrically absolutely regular.” Marjorie Perloff explains this announcement by stating that he “mistakes sight for sound: on the page, the three little quatrains look alike; they have roughly the same physical shape. It is typography rather than any kind of phonetic recurrence that provides directions for the speaking voice (or for the eye that reads the lines silently) and that teases out the poem’s meaning” (1985: 91).

The same rule governs the poems which have been discussed above too. All of them validate Williams’ tendency to bridge the gap between life and art through the inclusion of everyday objects and his drive to erase the barrier separating prose and poetry: “It is ridiculous to say that verse grades off into prose as the rhythm becomes less and less pronounced,” declares the poet in

*Spring and All* (1923). According to Williams, verse should not be necessarily a victim of stress and meter and prose too should not be deprived of the possibility to profit from these poetic devices since “prose may be strongly stressed” too. Williams defines the tendency of poetry to ascend to the zone of the imagination as the difference between prose and verse: “poetry feeds the imagination and prose the emotions, poetry liberates words from their emotional implications, prose confirms them in it” (in Kenner, 62).

The present discussion has stressed Williams’ essential deviation from the political commitment of objectivists such as Zukovsky and Oppen. During the political and economic turbulence of the 1930s the poet was often criticized by leftist critics for lacking political involvement. He did find the material of his poetry in “local, working-class life and experience” (Herd, 44) but unlike his colleagues he did not merge his formal experiments with social messages since, as it was already explained, it was against the grain of his objectivist philosophy. Kimmelman explains the composition of his “proletarian portraits (reminiscent of the photographs of Walker Evans)” as a response to the disparaging remarks of leftist circles (527), but a closer look at “Proletarian Portrait” shows that Williams does not swerve from the norms which have generated poems like “The Red Wheelbarrow,” “Composition” “Between Walls,” “This is Just to Say,” and “The Term.”

#### Proletarian Portrait

A big young bareheaded woman  
in an apron

Her hair slicked back standing  
on the street

One stockinged foot toeing  
the sidewalk

Her shoe in her hand. Looking  
intently into it

She pulls out the paper insole  
to find the nail

That has been hurting her (1951, 101)

The poem presents a brief moment in urban life focusing on a “proletarian” woman. This is the only politically loaded word in the poem but within Williams’ objectivist philosophy its function does not differ from that of the color “red” which defines the wheelbarrow (in “The Red Wheelbarrow”) or the paper box (in “Composition”). The initial title of the poem “Study for a Figure Representing Modern Culture” is another indicator for the fact Williams does not aim to bridge the gap between art and politics.

The whole description dissipates the “proletarian” nature of the portrait signaled in the title. The phrase “A big young bareheaded woman” may provide a relevant picture for the vitality of a working class woman yet being dressed “in an apron” she may equally well be a housewife. Even if we accept her to be a representative of the working class, as the title suggests, the poem describes her in a situation which distances her from the factory or any other locale and activity which may evoke a class conscious figure or a class conscious approach to its presentation. The lense of the observer’s camera approaches the woman, it makes a downward movement from the “hair slicked back” to the “stockinged foot tooing/ the sidewalk” and zooms in to focus on the “dramatic” event: the woman pulls out the paper insole to find the nail that has been hurting her.

The common practice of breaking the line at unexpected places can be observed in this poem too. The splitting of the second “stanza” after the word “standing” instead of before it, for example, is a good illustration for how the page acts as field of energy. Syntactically the word “standing” belongs to the second line: “Her hair slicked back/ standing on the street”. Being placed in the previous line it is “pulled” structurally by the phrase preceding it while at the same time the semantic “drive” pushes it to the second, turning thus the couplet into a field of energy. It results in fresh linguistic structures too, as Perloff suggests: “[W]hen lineation goes *against* rather than *with* the syntax – a phenomenon for the eye rather than the ear – a semantic shift takes place. To put it another way, the linear pull can remove words from their natural habitat in the sentence and create new configurations” (1985: 95).

In a comment on the political aspects of Williams’s poetry Dickran Tashjian notes that poems like “Proletarian Portrait” point to the “tensions Williams felt in trying to reconcile a long-standing split between the avant-garde and the political vanguard on the left” yet their study demonstrates that “the best conditioning he could imagine was to portray [the workers] essential worth without sentimentality or idealization” (119). Perloff notes however he

“was never the happy Naturalist, patiently depicting the objects or persons in the world around him” linking his emotional involvement to the constant play of the dissolution and re-engineering of language (1987: 159).

“No ideas but in things” has been the governing principle generating the poems which have been discussed in this paper. The significance of this statement is explained by the poet himself in the following terms: “What I put down of value will have this value: an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from “reality... The word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole” (102). Yet there have been attempts to read Williams’ poems against their objectivist grain, i.s. efforts to extract meanings from them or rather “to load” them with ideas. Camille Paglia reads “This Is Just to Say,” for example, as a “love poem,” a “mock confession” which “triggers deep associations in the reader by playing on mythic patterns of sin and desire, female secrecy and fertility, and male aggression and revelation” (133). “The Term” may suggest the inevitability of death (Unlike a human being, the brown paper which is crushed by the car rises to roll on in the wind). “Between Walls,” furthermore, may be interpreted as the assertion of the idea that an unattractive façade may veil tremendous beauty. This “interpretation” is suggested by Perloff too but the critic points to the objectivist features of the poem as the source of its artistic power:

What we admire in “Between Walls” is surely less the idea that beauty can be found even among trash, than the way this small observation is turned into a “field of action” in which line plays against syntax, visual against aural form, creating what Charles Olson was to call an energy-discharge, or projectile. Words are “unlinked from their former relationships in the sentence” and recombined so that the poem becomes a kind of hymn to linguistic possibility. (1985: 107)

Williams invites us to a poetic journey in which we observe our immediate surroundings through fresh eyes as he places common objects, scenes and people in the context of a formal piece of art. By “de-smudging” language he strips words of their normal cultural and political connotations and uses them as the building blocks of his “machine-poem.” Looking for inspiration in the field of visual arts rather than the conventions of Poetry, he turns the printed page into a central poetic unit. All these features have turned Williams into a unique voice in 20<sup>th</sup> century American poetry who has functioned as an influential force in the formation of the Pound-Williams-Olson lineage in American poetry.

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