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### “Animal Spirits”

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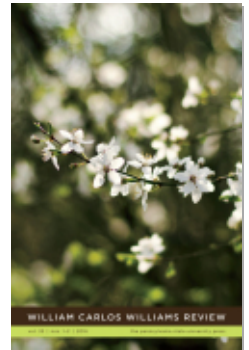
“Animal Spirits”

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# “Animal Spirits”

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PETER SCHMIDT, SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

**ABSTRACT** | In “Animal Spirits” looks in some depth at several of Williams’s poems about dogs or cats written over the course of his career, from “Sub Terra” (1917); “Poem (As the cat)” (from the 1930s); the dogs of *Paterson*; and “To a Dog Injured in the Street,” which exemplifies the elegiac poetics and representational paradoxes of Williams’s late triadic style. Cats for Williams exemplify energy in precise control, its perfection in form—and that was his lifelong quest. Dogs, on the other paw, embodied for Williams the boundary-breaking force of uncorralled creativity *breaking* form. Both spirits, figured as animals, were totems central to Williams’s understanding of the human creative act, and these twin aspects of Williams’s method have proven profoundly inspirational to later writers. This article concludes with a brief consideration of the final poem Williams wrote, “Stormy,” a tribute to the Williams’s dog; in many ways it sums up the goal of his life’s work. The article ties that to A. R. Ammons’s poem “WCW,” also from the 1960s, which features an irrepressible dog as part of Ammons’s homage.

**KEYWORDS** | William Carlos Williams, cats, dogs, creativity, animal poems, A. R. Ammons

Poetry is “a cry in the night—the night that surrounds us all”  
—Williams, “The Modern Poem,” 1955 lecture, YouTube.com

In “Animal Spirits” I look at several Williams poems about dogs or cats written over the course of his career, from “Sub Terra” and the three “Pastoral” poems from *Al Que Quiere!* (1917) to “Poem (As the cat)” (1930), the dogs of *Paterson*, and the late poems “To a Dog Injured in the Street”

and “Stormy.” Why such a seemingly narrow thematic focus? Because it’s not. Cats for Williams exemplified energy in precise control, its perfection in form—and that was his lifelong quest. Dogs, on the other paw, embodied for Williams the force of uncorralled creativity *breaking* social and literary forms. Both spirits, figured as animals, were totems central to Williams’s understanding of the human creative act, and these twin aspects of Williams’s poetics have both proven inspirational for later writers.

Williams’s careful observation of animal bodies in motion was a key source of inspiration throughout his career for a *poem’s* motion, that is, how through syntax a poem—a “machine made of words”—could move in time as we read or hear it. “Poem” is a superb (and playful) embodiment of this idea, tracking a cat’s walk along a shelf with the dance of Williams’s poetic feet and his crisp placement of printed words on the page.

In contrast, dogs in Williams’s work—as Colin Dayan recently observed—are persistently connected to Williams’s idea of creativity itself as a kind of abject sublime violating the boundaries of propriety and good form in order to nose out new creative power. Below I’ll trace my own reading of Williams’s abject sublime as a way of marking key stylistic variations from Williams’s early work and *Paterson’s* obstreperous and inexhaustible canines, to “To a Dog Injured in the Street,” which in many ways exemplifies the elegiac poetics and representational paradoxes of Williams’s late triadic style. This essay concludes with a brief consideration of the final poem Williams wrote, “Stormy,” a tribute to his and Flossie’s dog that in many ways sums up the goal of Williams’s life’s work, along with A. R. Ammons’s “WCW,” also from the 1960s, which features an irrepressible dog as part of Ammons’s homage.

### **Urban Pastoral As You Like It: “Sub Terra” and the “Pastoral” poems in *Al Que Quiere!***

“Sub Terra,” from *Al Que Quiere!*, has all of the delightful but also rather jejune gusto of Williams’s breakthrough book. The apostrophes and exclamations of Whitman, the endless searching, the edge of anxiety that the speaker won’t be able to find the instances of new energy his soul craves—all are placed in rather frenzied motion here. Williams’s speaker wants to be part of a “band” of “fellows” (CP1 63) but the poem also desperately cries not to be ignored or left behind. “Oh, I have you!” begins stanza three, but that confidence quickly falters—window-panes separate the poet and the

creatures of his imagination, and by the stanza's end he can see them but they've "vanished"—we can only conclude that his visions of them are false, or too limited. The poem's fourth stanza, its conclusion, expresses such cathartic yearning even more desperately—"it is you, / you I want"—and the stanza's ruling verb is in the future tense; it governs the frantic action of the gerund verbs:

You to come with me  
 poking into negro houses  
 with their gloom and smell!  
 in among children  
 leaping around a dead dog! (64)

The poem anticipates *Spring and All's* sure sense that the forces of renewed life can be found amidst the waste and detritus of dead forms, only if the poet is persistent enough, willing to dig down ("sub terra") and roam widely. Williams here does not have the confidence that he's made "contact," that he's able to "grip down and begin to awaken," to invoke two famous phrases from his poems and essays from a few years later, in the early 1920s. Here the energy is all in the pursuit, and in anxiety whether it will yield anything. The goal is clearly associated with spring, both Nature's and a new force that will come into culture when dead proprieties are transgressed: "earthy tastes [ . . . ] / the burrowing pride that rises / subtly as on a bush in May" (stanza one), the "advent" of fresh leaves of grass. As I said, Williams's channeling of Whitman is not that subtle; nor is this poem able to achieve the particularity of Whitman's visions of the new, unlike truly fine poems of 1917 such as the first poem called "Pastoral" in *Al Que Quiere!*, "When I was younger." That poem, in contrast to "Sub Terra," has a preternatural calm and sustained attention to detail demonstrating confidence and focus.

What's most original in "Sub Terra" is Williams's emergent canine spirit: his poetic quest becomes figured as a hunting dog. At first it is both leashed and lashed (and figured as light itself rather than dog). But certain aggressive energies associated more with dogs than sunlight are invoked: "The light shall leap and snap / that day as with a million lashes!" Contrasting with this energy is the specter of the dead dog placed forebodingly at the very center of the final stanza. For the poem's climax, Williams lets the dogs out: "to go with me tip-a-toe / head down under heaven / nostrils lipping the wind!" (64). He's still desperate for camarados (one of Whitman's other

words for companion, borrowed from Spanish), but hasn't yet been able to secure his place among this imagined pack of roustabouts.

Williams may have used dog imagery to signal that he's drawing for inspiration on a writer very different from Whitman—Francisco de Quevedo, particularly the notorious ribaldry in his most famous picaresque satire, *El perro y la calentura* [*The Dog and the Fever*] (1625).<sup>1</sup> The connection between Quevedo and Williams's transformation as a writer was first substantiated by Julio Marzán's book, *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams*. Williams became interested in this Spanish writer after his trip to Spain in 1910, and through his father's and especially his mother's encouragement. Elena Williams would often quote Quevedo's proverbs, Williams recalled, and recount "salty stories" from his life (Quevedo 35). After his father's death, Williams and his mother sporadically worked together on a translation, which finally was published in 1954. From *El perro y la calentura* Williams learned to associate dogs with frenzied, profane energies, always wandering out of bounds both linguistically and socially. And from it too he learned to juxtapose "low" and "high" subject matter and diction for maximum dramatic effect. In 1926 he praised Quevedo to John Riordan, associating him with all that was bawdy and transgressive of proper taste and invoking him, indirectly, as one of his modernist muses (Mariani 251; 799). Williams sounded precisely the same note in his introductory remarks to *The Dog and the Fever* in 1954, when he stressed that Quevedo was a product of the decadence following Spain's "Golden Age" renaissance and compared him to Aristophanes, Rabelais, Swift, and Byron (Quevedo 8).

The best evidence for Quevedo's satiric energy shaping Williams's mature poetic voice is found in *Al Que Quiere!* Quevedo was arguably as important a goad as Whitman or Ezra Pound in prodding Williams to shed his remaining nineteenth-century affectations and invent a toughened-up and sometimes acid-edged modernist style notable for clipped cadences and abrupt changes of mood. We might even say that Williams "signs" Quevedo's mark on his new voice via the feverish dogs of "Sub Terra." But in general there's too much *fever* for the good of that poem, a desperate snapping of jaws as the quarry gets away. Williams's most impressive imitations of Quevedo in *Al Que Quiere!* are not in "Sub Terra" but in other poems audaciously celebrating scatological and other scandalously "low" subject matter, coarse language, and a devil-may-care sassiness unimaginable in the Williams of a decade earlier.

Three poems somewhat ironically named "Pastoral" are most notable in this regard for their Quevedo-esque spirit. The first "Pastoral," which

begins "When I was younger," I've already mentioned; it's a portrait of the poet wandering through a hardscrabble neighborhood and finding beauty in ugliness. We might think of it as half "Ash Can" school, half Quevedo. The third "Pastoral," "If I say I have heard voices" (CP1 96), is the least successful. It is far too dominated by Williams's older voice, pure sentimental romanticism: "no tree has waited / long enough nor still enough / to touch fingers with the moon." Yet Williams soon swerves away from mooning after unrequited love by looking downwards, sub terra, hearing "little frogs / with puffed out throats / singing in the slime."

It's the second "Pastoral," "The little sparrows" (CP1 70), that bears Quevedo's clearest imprint. The lyric opens by juxtaposing quarreling but delightfully energetic sparrows with the hypocrisies of human society: "we who are wiser / shut ourselves in / [ . . . ] / and no one knows / whether we think good / or evil." (I've always thought that the newly jumpy enjambments of *Al Que Quiere!*'s line-breaks were in part inspired by those quick sparrows.) And then comes a shocker. When Williams's eye shifts from sparrows to the human scene, he spies an impoverished man gathering old dog-shit from the gutters. In order to get his poem printed Williams had euphemistically to call it "dog-lime." As if such a subject weren't bad enough, Williams then had the audacity to compare this vagabond's gait to that of "the Episcopal minister / approaching the pulpit / of a Sunday." This is classic Quevedo-like blasphemy via juxtaposition. It not just links excrement with religion; it presents the two as equals. Via the sacramental transubstantiation of literature, what's profane becomes sacred, indeed more worthy of respect than any religious creed, cadence, or ritual.<sup>2</sup>

Years later Williams would let his dogs loose again in *Paterson*. That epic poem is inspired not just by the peregrinations of the Passaic River as it winds toward the Atlantic, but by dogs going where they shouldn't go. They are the alter ego and avatar, the Muse and camerado, of the poem's epic hero Faitoute, a.k.a. Dr. Paterson. Before considering *Paterson*, however, we should look at a classic poem from the 1930s, arguably the decade of Williams's whose lyrics get the least attention, even though in that period Williams produced some of his best.

### **The Poem as a Machine Made of Fur**

"Poem (As the cat)" wittily embodies not a dog's boundary-breaking energy, but its opposite—balance, poise, and utmost restraint. Such a mode (of

which this poem is one of the best exemplars) is a kind of “classical” version of Williams’s aesthetic, complementing his intentionally satiric, coarse, and rough-edged mode.

The 1930s proved to be a fascinating decade in Williams’s career. While enthusiastically venturing into new genres, especially short fiction and novels, Williams also used that era to consolidate and perfect the varied lyric modes he’d invented earlier. This is not the place to survey Williams’s lyric cornucopia from the 1930s, but suffice it to say that its benchmarks include sprawling or headlong poems like “The Yachts,” “Catholic Bells,” and “Paterson: Episode 17,” but also understated masterpieces of economy and philosophical inquiry into the nature of poetic language itself, such as “Nantucket,” “The Red Lily,” “Proletarian Portrait,” “This is Just to Say,” and “Poem (As the cat).”

To have a “new Williams,” we really need a new reading of the lyrics produced in the decade or so leading up to *Paterson*. For a small contribution to such an inquiry, consider this poem from 1930. It appears to be “written” by a cat in motion:

Poem (As the cat)

As the cat  
climbed over  
the top of

the jamcloset  
first the right  
forefoot

carefully  
then the hind  
stepped down

into the pit of  
the empty  
flowerpot (CP1 352)

First, ponder the opening word, “as.” The word functions as both preposition and conjunction. That is, as a conjunction, “as” functions as a temporal marker: it tells us that *as* one thing is occurring *so* is another, synchronized



with the first. "As" as a conjunction also operates as a hypothetical thought-experiment in time: *as if* something were so. "As" is commonly used as a preposition too. It's very familiar in simile construction, for instance, where either "as" or "like" can set up the comparison.<sup>3</sup> I would argue that Williams's "Poem" cleverly asks us to take its opening word simultaneously as both a preposition and a conjunction. It marks an event (the cat's stroll) as it unfolds in time, while simultaneously positioning that entire action *as* a simile for something else, something that "occurs" not in literal space-time (a jamcloset's shelf) but in linguistic or conceptual time—an act in the mind of the observer (Williams) that is then immediately communicated via print to the mind of the reader.

So what kind of temporal movement is enacted "as" the poem proceeds forward like a cat? Well, one could say it both flows forward in a single motion but is also fragmented or segmented by each line break—so that a unitary large motion is also broken down into constituent small units of movement. It's rather like how film "captures" motion but also splits it into (normally) twenty-four frames per second that the human eye then blends into continuously movement when the film is shown. Stop-time motion was crucial in Eadweard Muybridge's films of people, horses, and other animals running, most of them taken in the 1880s and after at Williams's alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania. By studying his stills, Muybridge at last proved the exact sequence of leg motions that galloping horses use, demonstrating that for an instant with each stride all four hooves do indeed leave the ground. Stop-motion was similarly important for Surrealist films such as Man Ray's *Le Retour a la Raison* (1923), René Clair's and Erik Satie's *Entr'Acte* (1924), or Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1926). Instead of presenting an image as if it were in real time, these avant-garde films constantly drew attention to film's artifice via jump cuts, varying film speeds, and other effects.

Williams's cat-in-motion study appears to draw on both Muybridge's and Surrealist film techniques. It breaks down the illusion of continuous motion into linked sequences or parts. But it also foregrounds the metaphorical and conceptual possibilities of what the action "means"—it's not just realism broken into pieces. Let's consider both of these moves in turn.

First the cat has gotten up onto a high shelf in a closet, then it explores that shelf. Its right forefoot steps over and into a flowerpot on that shelf, then the right hind-foot executes the same motion. What do the left feet do? Presumably they walk to one side of the flowerpot? The poem doesn't say. What drew the speaker's eye was the cat's grace and balance: encountering

an obstacle in the path of its right paws, the cat didn't even break stride. Further, Williams notes how in walking, a cat's paws can effortlessly step in the *same* spot, hind foot precisely following the forefoot as each for a millisecond fills the open hole at a bottom of a flowerpot. That hole can't be "seen" by the poem's camera-eye, incidentally; it must be imagined. But with scientific accuracy Williams records one way cats have of walking. In their normal gait, with no flowerpot obstacles in their way, they leave a single, not double, line of footprints: each hind foot steps precisely into the footprints of its corresponding forefoot. This can be readily seen with cats outdoors in winter. The only other animal that regularly walks this way is a fox. Their cousins the dogs, however, leave a set of doubled prints. Williams's poem uses one word per line twice: "forefoot" and "flowerpot." But the graceful economy of its word-prints models a cat's gait.

Williams's syntax and line-breaks function as the equivalent of slow motion, and/or of looking at film stills individually. We can see each split-second of the action, treating each line on the page as the equivalent of a film still, or we can see the sequence play out fluidly in "real" time—letting the reel flow through the mind's camera-eye while reading the syntax as it flows down the printed page. The former mode could be called digital; the latter analog. Both are "true." But it's only with the rise of film and common knowledge of how a strip of film looks and works that a poet (for instance) can become self-conscious about how time in a poem can be full of sampled "stills" yet also flow in motion. The paradox that Williams highlights in this poem—and that has fascinated filmmakers as well—is that while the mind can easily perform both these analog versus digital ways of experiencing time, we can't perform them simultaneously, only separately. We either study the stills or watch the film; we either attend mainly to the line-breaks or we let the syntax-machine do its work and flow forward. An adept reader/viewer can of course move with cat-like agility back and forth between these two modes, but our brains are not designed to be able fully to synchronize these two different ways of seeing.

Williams's visual stop-time technique on the page (or, if properly performed orally, the poem's mix of brief halts marking line-breaks in its flow) also isolates sound patterns, making the poem as intensely aural as it is visual. Attending to stop-time suddenly brings its t-patterns into prominence. Stanza two has three "t" end-rhymes, but particularly delightful to the ear are the three t's in the final stanza: pit, empty, pot. Notice also the p-t combination here, also repeated in triplicate. (Williams's revision

heightened this sound-pattern play, replacing *round* with *pit* [CP1 533].) Each sound-bite, so to speak, is as precisely placed at the heart of these lines as the hole is in the flowerpot's bottom. The poem's graceful motion quietly sounds it all out for us to notice as the poem flows forward in time. Yet, as with imagery, to attend to sound we often move backwards mentally, halting the printed poem's "motion" but creating a kind of spatial, visual map of alliterative patterns that delight our mind's ear.

Consider also all the enjambment going on in this little jamcloset. Enjambment is a line-break that cuts across the natural pauses indicated by syntax and/or punctuation; it "runs over." As many commentators have noted, Williams from *Al Que Quiere!* onwards was definitely in love with enjambment, often radically slicing conventional syntactic units, sometimes even ending lines with "the." Enjambment's hectic motion for Williams was one of the defining features of modernist style. In "Poem," Williams's line-cuts mark continuous motion across borders or barriers: *up* to the top shelf of the closet, then stepping *into and out* of a flowerpot without a break in stride (or knocking over the pot). Each line is linked to the next via prepositions like "over" or "of" (the latter a preposition used to indicate cause, motive, occasion, or reason) and via Williams's temporal sequence words (as, first, then). But each enjambment also sets up the equivalent of a flowerpot challenge for syntax's continual flow.

Many years later, in 1943-44, Williams wrote a kind of *ars poetica* in "Sort of a Song": "no ideas but in things" (CP2 55, 455). This credo has been inveterately, stubbornly misunderstood. It is not the slogan of an "Imagist," as The Poetry Foundation continues to categorize Williams. Nor is it the belief of a poet who didn't trust ideas, only descriptions of the so-called "real world" given to us in prosy fragments cut up into arbitrary line-breaks. Many who first encounter Williams through "The Red Wheelbarrow" mistakenly jump to the conclusion that this poet's main trick was to give us Instagram-style descriptions cut up into arbitrary line breaks. If encouraged to consider how the "Wheelbarrow" poem may be a linguistic exploration of the many literal and figurative meanings of the word *depend*, some readers probably come away from their one encounter with Williams thinking he's both simplistic and tendentious—not an attractive combination. The poet James Merrill understood Williams's motto better, though his sensibility was quite different from Williams's. In *The Changing Light at Sandover*, Merrill's epic poem and *esprit d'Ouija*, W. H. Auden speaks from beyond the grave to laud Williams's "THOUGHTFUL THINGS" (461)—that is, his

ability to get us to see the things of this world as replete with thought, culture, history, the process of their making. “So much depends upon them” because each thing comes with a world attached—a world Williams’s poems help us see and sense.

“Poem (As the cat)” exemplifies this: It is a “machine made of words.”<sup>4</sup> But the poem isn’t a machine at rest; it *moves*, stepping so carefully and gracefully across the page that we should really call it dancing. (Compare Williams’s late poem “Heel & Toe to the End” (CP2 436), celebrating Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin’s space flight around the earth.) The “things” in Williams’s poems, in short, often reveal the process of their making or un-making. And they are often in motion, not static.

I’ll end this section with a little tribute to that oddest of words in “Poem,” “jamcloset.” As Hugh Kenner noted years ago in *The Pound Era*, “jamcloset” is the one word in the poem that appears to have dated.<sup>5</sup> It’s aged precisely because our culture has changed—closets in pantries or basements with shelves to store jams and jellies and other homemade items in jars are rare in American houses and apartments now, especially in suburbs such as Rutherford, New Jersey. This particular shelf (in the Williams household?) seems to have become a space for storing all kinds of odd things involving household projects—some garden stuff (such as empty clay pots) as well as Mason jars full of vegetables, or fruits turned into jam and preserved. No jars are mentioned in the poem, so we don’t know if in this particular household preserving’s been displaced by gardening, or whether the two activities still occur together. We certainly have many poems and other documents testifying to both Flossie’s and Bill’s love of garden and landscape projects, though. If there were preserves on the “jamcloset” shelves at 9 Ridge Road, perhaps some of those jars held jam from plums Flossie managed to keep her husband from stealing!

That “jamcloset” now needs a footnote shows us how language and culture itself shift in time. Williams’s poem occurs *in* time but on the page it mostly exists in a space *outside* of time, timeless as the way cats walk. Yet the fact that “jamcloset” needs to be explained to many twenty-first century readers means that at least part of the poem’s language is tied to cultural, historical time, and is fast receding from our present. “Jamcloset” is a radiant linguistic gist that allows us to date the poem via measuring the half-life of its decay.

Or does it? For the humble household shelf celebrated in Williams’s poem may be making a comeback in U.S. cultural practices, so that we can

no longer definitively say that it's archaic and needs explanation. Locally sourced foods and the arts of preserving what you grow or buy are practices that are growing again in popularity, both in urban and suburban homes, not just in the rural countryside, as a reaction against mass industrial and corporatized agriculture. And cats now, just as they did once upon a time, may enjoy transgressing into our new "home storage" closets and checking everything out. Williams's "Poem" adroitly steps in and out of historical time itself, its modernist moves both dated and eternal.

### **Doggy Style: the Dogs of *Paterson***

Recently in Colin Dayan's provocative talk on *Paterson*, "The Dog of the Poem," she rightly located Williams's epic in a counter-tradition to the American Sublime, poems written under the belief that to court the visionary and the eternal they must transcend the entanglements of particularity, locality, history.<sup>6</sup> Dayan is not the first to celebrate Williams as the lyric and epic poet of the anti-Sublime, but she's prescient in explaining how the rambunctious dogs in his poems served him well as muse and role model—especially when they pursue their quests nose to the ground, ignoring signs the authorities have posted declaiming "No Dogs Are Allowed in This Park." Williams, she argues, constantly troubled decorum and privilege, the Puritan legacy of dividing souls into the Elect and the Preterit, the saved and the damned. He repeatedly renewed his creative forces with contact with everything and everyone that the arbiters of "proper" American culture rejected as damaged, disinherited, disgusting, corrupted, passed over or passed out. It's a scatological or abject Sublime.

Ironically for the neat oppositions so loved by cultural historians, both the Transcendental and the Abject traditions in American poetry were powerfully theorized by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Like many before her, Dayan aligns Williams not with the Emerson drawn to abstracted mysticism, but the Emerson of rough particularities, the seer who seethed with frustration at what passed for "culture" in his country.

I would stress this particular Emersonian root even more emphatically. But I will also argue that claiming the Abject as Williams's primary source of inspiration isn't accurate. He was drawn to the Sublime as well, and *Paterson* proves it. As with Emerson and so many of his heirs, it's the rich conflict *between* these two traditions that generates the best poems. Let's take up these issues one by one, with *Paterson* as the test case.

Williams's muse for *Paterson* certainly drew upon the prophetic Emerson who revealed himself at the end of his influential essay "The Poet" (1844) and lamented that too much of American cultural vitality was treated as abject, ignored or, if not, vilified and satirized by U.S. poets.

I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not, with sufficient plainness, or sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life, nor dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstance. [ . . . ] We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival. (Emerson 238)

Emerson's cry of the occasion inspired Williams's refrain-lament resounding throughout the final part of *Paterson* Book Two, the section of "The Descent" and deep despair at false language and lost opportunities: "No / poet has come, no poet has come." It's also no coincidence that precisely at this low point the dogs of *Paterson* sound their own most raucous counter-chorus, exploding with energy on the run: "Bow, wow! Bow, wow! / [ . . . ] / Unleashed!" (P 79–80).

New forms of beauty for Williams could only be found in Hell, a Hell of our own making, what Emerson called the "barbarism and materialism" of our times. This is perhaps the single most common motif in all of Williams's poetry, and it is *the* signature move for any poet of the Abject Sublime. To rescue beauty from what's battering and burying it, the poet has to explore and name all the cultural forces that have tried to imprison it, including the political and cultural forces in the present that construct an exclusionary and rarified realm of the Aesthetic as defined by the past. Those figures act as Hades or Pluto did, trying to imprison Persephone. The dogs of this and other poems of Williams usually act like terriers; they dig and roam and descend; they nose beauty out from underneath the muck that covers her, transgressing the very boundaries, rules, and repressions that have locked beauty down in Hell.

The dogs of Williams's epic poem thus are avatars of another key persona in Williams, versions of the Orpheus figure. Somewhat scandalously, and inventively, Williams associates Orphic energies not with the sublimely transcendental music usually associated with the god of Poetry, but with decidedly transgressive, even coarse canine spirits. Yet it's only through their violence that new forms of Beauty can be rescued and released. *Paterson* also

gives us a joke well suited to its aesthetic of the Abject Sublime: Williams and his pups do better at rescuing beauty than Orpheus did!

Oddly, Dayan's talk didn't cite Wallace Stevens's famous characterization of Williams's aesthetic as "anti-poetic," a term he applied, with typical Stevensian suavity, both to praise and censure (or at least delimit) his friend and poetic rival. Nor did Dayan seek to explain Williams's enraged response, for he hated being typecast as a poet of the "anti-poetic." The fact that such an evaluation was sanctioned by his publisher and placed as the *preface* to his *Collected Poems, 1921–1931* made it even worse in Williams's eyes. He bridled at his friend's term because he rightly felt it was patronizing. Yet the deepest reason why Williams was so upset at being labeled an anti-poet, the poet of all that's abject and rejected, was not that his pride was hurt. With Emerson, Williams believed that his materials weren't abject at all; they were unjustly and condescendingly classed as "low." His job was to show how they could be "rescued" and revealed to be Sublime—indeed be the only lasting or honest route to that exalted, transcendental vision. Precisely here Williams's most profound link to Emerson emerges. Williams quests to capture both the low *and* the high and to link them. He's interested in the route, the current of energy, connecting both versions of the American Sublime. Which also means violently attacking all in American culture that seeks to deny abject and sublime are connected, that labels one profane and the other sacred. Despite such high goals, as often as not, in *Paterson* or elsewhere, Williams despaired and felt that Beauty could not be rescued, or at least that he was unable to achieve his aim.

"Rigor of beauty is the quest," as Williams phrased it at the opening of *Paterson*. But "How do you find it when it is locked in the mind past all remonstrance?"—i.e., past all Orphic supplication or pleading? (P 3). It's no accident that in Book Two, in the midst of a long sequence on divorce, creative blockage, silencing, the failures of language, and American culture at its worst, Williams embedded a magnificent meditation on his own creative blockage and despair—a poem that he would later extract from *Paterson* and publish as a separate lyric entitled "The Descent."

The descent

made up of despairs

and without accomplishment

realizes a new awakening :

which is a reversal of despair (P 79)

After this Orphic descent Williams introduces perhaps the most remarkable reference to dogs in his entire epic poem. Dr. Paterson takes inspiration once again from the roaring of the Passaic River falls near downtown Paterson, but unlike the epic's famous opening pages now a new note is sounded: "Listen! / the pouring water! / the dogs and trees / conspire to invent / a world—gone!" (P 79). "Bow, wow! Bow, wow! / Variously the dogs barked [ . . . ] / No / poet has come, no poet has come" (P 79). These dogs are double-voiced. On the one hand, they act as did Cerberus, the dog guarding the gates of Hell (whom Orpheus must cajole and put to sleep in order to pass through in his quest to rescue Persephone/Eurydice). On the other, these rowdy hounds are avatars for the creative spirit itself, awakening and rescuing what's denigrated, searching for the poet who will come and give it voice, rescuing the New and carrying it back into the world—the ultimate example of poetic creation as an act of boundary transgression. And Dr. Paterson tips his fedora to Emerson here too, just to remind himself and us of his enabling predecessor: "No poet has come" is not at all a bad transliteration from Victorian to modern English of Emerson's "I look in vain for the poet whom I describe."

Neither Williams's lyrics nor his epic, though, can be understood solely as poems whose primary material is abject. Emerson's vision of the transcendental was equally empowering for Williams, as it was for his compatriot Stevens. Orpheus's job is still to liberate the beautiful "thing" from the underworld and initiate spring, after all, not just to depict her imprisonment. This other Emersonian sublime is present in the aestheticization of the abject that we see in Williams's pastoral mode from *Al Que Quiere!* on, not to mention his discovery of a kind of Platonic form-for-efficient-motion in a single cat's linked movements. No early poem displays the fruitful tension of abject and transcendental so clearly as the opening poem of *Spring and All* (1923), but it's also a signature element of Williams's late "triadic" odes, to which I now turn. They are indisputably modern yet also claim a place in the tradition of sublime lyric odes dating all the way back to Pindar and the Greeks. Two of the greatest of Williams's late odes were inspired by animals, "The Sparrow" and "To a Dog Injured in the Street." Since I've written elsewhere on "The Sparrow," I'll turn here to the latter.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Cries of the Occasion: "To a Dog Injured in the Street"**

"To a Dog" (CP2 255–57) at first glance seems written effortlessly, almost spontaneously, without editing the swerves of thought: Williams hears



the collision of a car with a dog, followed by a dog's cries, and is suddenly inundated with other memories of pain, his own and others', including pain that Williams himself caused. Aghast, the poem then deploys seemingly sharp contrasts between the forces of destruction and those of beauty and creativity, treating art as salvational, the one thing that can "assuage" us in our misery and make pain bearable.

Yet the poem becomes stranger and more mysterious with re-reading, its binary oppositions not nearly as stable as they appear. Our easy conclusion that this poem praises poetry's ability to "blot out" pain, replacing it with beauty, doesn't hold up very well, or rather isn't the only truth that the poem enacts. Frightfully, the poem gives us the experience of one pain leading rapidly to another and another, an avalanche of agony released by memory. Dog's yelp leads rapidly to a memory of pain Williams himself, in his childhood ignorance, caused their family dog, which leads to an even more horrific memory of a hunter's sadistic cruelty—an act which was not accidental at all, and haunts the entire poem as an instance of pure evil, not unintentional pain. Further, these examples of limitless animal suffering from Williams's own experience mushroom into an even more frightening image of violence—the atomic bomb. Uneasily, the poem's speaker suggests that just by building such a device humans have already "laid all the world waste" (255)—hyperbole suggesting a nuclear apocalypse has already occurred in our hearts, not just for the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The bomb's specter haunts other late triadic odes as well, most notably "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower."

No wonder "To a dog" so urgently yearns for "numbness" or visions of healing, mental images to "blot" out the images and sounds of suffering. If memory's liquidity can move rapidly from one horror to another, so does Williams's mind leap for antidotes or a counter-music. First Keats, Williams's favorite poet, never far from his thoughts: "Ode to a Nightingale" also desires "easeful sleep" as a balm for the pain and complications of life, including Keats's memories of his own brother's death from tuberculosis. And then a new favorite, the French poet and Resistance fighter René Char, perhaps especially his poem "La rivière Sorgue," to be discussed in a moment. With either healing or hurtful memories, nothing is static or bounded for the poem's consciousness: light flows into dark and dark into light, repeatedly. Each memory doesn't exist in itself, but as a link to something else. The poem repeatedly swerves or looks away from horrors to more assuring images, such as rivers and flowers, but such "turns" act not to erase

the fears and the pain but to make pastoral imagery act as a kind of necessary cover for darkness, like the flowery fields hiding an entrance-way to Hades in the Eurydice myth. The poet's need for beauty's balm seems a little desperate, perhaps even drunken: note the first stanza's uneasy rhyming—Williams rarely rhymes—linking “hemlock,” “drunk,” and “think” (“I think / of the poetry / of René Char”).

So is the willed optimism of the poem's ending unearned, unbelievable—perhaps one more indication of how Williams's late poems veer toward sentimentality, as some (most notably Marjorie Perloff) have charged? After all, the poem's end does rather “pounce” on us, as Keats said Shakespeare's concluding couplets sometimes did in their efforts to turn a sonnet's dark forebodings or worries into hope. (Think of the “remembrance of things past” sonnet [#30] or “That time of year thou mayest in me behold” [#73], for instance.) “The power of beauty / to right all wrongs” is unusually grandiose for Williams. It's certainly possible to imagine Theodor Adorno—who asserted that lyric poetry was fatuous in a post-Holocaust, nuclear-armed world—pointing to Williams's ode and scowling.

Not so fast. I'll grant that the ending of this poem goes for the grand statement and risks the credibility of the entire poem. Williams's endings, whether early, middle, or late, rarely make such moves. Consider his use of litotes (understatement) in Williams's elegy to his father, which he cast in the form of a memory-poem about the English sparrow, a favorite species for Williams because of its immigrant toughness and exuberance. Its ending is moving because so muted: “I did my best; / farewell.” I propose that we consider the dramatic “turn” at the end of “To a Dog” in a slightly different way. Each of the poem's earlier swerves was linked to the poem's deep access to pain and terror; they were not denials, repressions, lies. Yes, they did attempt to drug pain with a kind of mental morphine—and I choose my medical analogy consciously. But the temporary peace the drug provides allows the mind to function rather than be paralyzed. The poem's mind hardly refuses to think about bodily or mental suffering; in fact it returns to the subject again and again. And when the pain resurges, a temporary analgesic is applied again by the good doctor—just enough but not too much. I think the same sense of a limited medical intervention ought to apply to the poem's “happy” ending as well. It gives us enough of what we need to go on. But it does so with no illusions, doing away with the delusion that the job of art is to make us forget our tragic animal condition.

But what about that word "blot" earlier in the poem, you might say? Doesn't that blatantly suggest the purpose of poetry is to "blot" out the bad, to cover it up? That's about as perfect a recipe as could be imagined for a poetry of beautiful lies. But like Williams's appeal for "drowsy numbness" near his poem's opening, quoting Keats, the meaning of this "blot" in Williams's text may not be as simple as it first appears. *Blot* of course suggests to cover up with ink—writing as repression, error. It's ink covering up prior writing, the opposite of palimpsest. Thus we might conclude Williams is indeed admitting his poem seeks to replace that dog's cry of agony with sweet music. Yet *blot* is ink and ink is necessary for handwriting, Williams's beloved typewriters, and all printed texts. Ink as Williams invokes it therefore doesn't only obscure; it illuminates, defines, connects. Its uses include the opposite of erasure or blotting out: it *shapes*. Shakespeare in sonnet 65, for instance, catalogued how time destroys all monuments, and Williams in 1954 knew a thing or two about loss and the "wreckful siege of battering days." But the one thing time can't completely erase is ink—in the case of sonnet 65's famous conclusion, *freshly written ink*, not the dried ink in books. In a miraculous transformation, it's as if—even though we're reading print—we are present at the creation when Shakespeare's sixty-fifth sonnet were being penned fresh in the author's own hand: "in black ink my love may still shine bright."

I hardly mean to rate these two lyrics as equals—and Williams certainly wouldn't want us to do so. But "To a Dog" also uses ink-blot to assuage the ravages of time. It juxtaposes misery and music and uses ink to create a contrapuntal melody: major and minor working together, the dog's cry and the poem's song including the cry but not reduced solely to crying. As Wallace Stevens wrote in 1950, "The poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it" ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," XII). Stevens's phrase might have subliminally been remembered by Williams when he too spoke of poetry as a "cry" in the 1950s, in the sentence quoted as this essay's epigraph. Williams and Stevens admired each other's works, despite Williams's hurt by Stevens's claim that Williams's poems were fresh because they were so "anti-poetic," so abject. But by the 1950s, with less than a decade to live, the two shared a consensus about poetry's "cry" against the night that surrounds us all.

In this dark vein, let's look more closely at Williams's use of Keats and Char in "To a Dog." Both those poets gave Williams models for how poetry doesn't blot out fears and pain but finds a way to help us survive them. There's no room to give a substantial reading of Keats's great nightingale



waters and nourishes the beauty of this world. We can't look directly at their presence; we must *hear* and imagine it.

One of Char's poems about rivers, "La Sorgue," makes a similar claim. It's the "river where the flash of lightning ends and where my home begins." Also:

River of the powers transmitted and of a scream that enters the  
water's mouth [ . . . ]

River of a heart never destroyed in this world mad for prison;  
Keep us violent and friendly to the horizon's bees.

[Rivière où l'éclair finit et où commence ma maison,  
[ . . . ]

Rivière des pouvoirs transmis et du cri embouquant les eaux,  
[ . . . ]

Rivière au coeur jamais détruit dans ce monde fou de prison,  
Garde-nous violent et ami des abeilles de l'horizon.] (Char 56–59)

Char's "cri" and Char's waters nourish Williams's too. Or perhaps we should better speak of such linguistic interminglings using the metaphor Williams gives us, of hidden "rootlets" as well as streams. Char's "cri" crosses the Atlantic and flows into Williams's English written in New Jersey. There are other linguistic flows networking here too. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one of the synonyms for underground root-stems is "quicken" (a noun, not the verb). But the verb applies as well: according to Williams's conception, in Char's poem and in his own the underground river of pain quickens—gives birth to and nurtures—the flowers that appear above the surface.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, for Williams's aficionados "quicken" the verb—especially when interlaced with a reference to roots—immediately recalls one of Williams's most famous and important early poems, "Spring and All," where this same word plays a crucial role in the poem's climax celebrating the survival of life against great odds:

One by one objects are defined—  
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of  
entrance—Still, the profound change

has come upon them: rooted, they  
grip down and begin to awaken (CP1 183)

As a noun, “quickenings” names the moment when a mother first feels her child stir in her womb; it was first used in this sense as early as 1472, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. But of course *quickenings*’s meaning as a transitive, transformative verb is most important of all: Spring the life-force quickens and makes grow all the living forms of the earth emerging with the new season. Williams’s poem began by cataloguing lots of dead and muddy and blurry things, all the stuff of the old year about to give way to the new. It ends with a celebration of Spring itself, the moment of birth of all the things that “enter the new world naked”: grass sprouts, the stiff curl of a little wildcarrot leaf (another name for the Queen Anne’s Lace plant), and a thousand other things—even Spring itself, personified as sluggish and dazed, as if it’s a child who’s just been through the birth canal and has yet to be slapped awake. But—crucially—the most powerful force pushing all these things into the world, even the season itself, is not named in Williams’s poem save by a mysterious pronoun, “it.” *It* “quickenings” everything, making them move, grow, and get a sustaining grip on life. This force shapes the world without revealing itself directly; we sense it only through its effects, what it gives birth to. It’s a kind of G-d behind the veil of Creation, the unnamed source of all.

I’ve traveled back in time from Williams’s tribute to Char in “To a Dog” to make a broader point. The “roots” that work their way through Williams’s homage to Char signify not just poetic intertextuality, the word-fragments, word-strings, word-roots, and connotative clusters linking two poets to each other, and a late poem of Williams to one of his signature early ones. These textual rhizomes also encode the movement of memory itself, teaching us that we must never forget the dog’s cry when Williams’s poem sounds its sweetest music and invokes its faith in art’s healing miracles. That cry underlies all that follows, and sounds within it. In Char’s words in English translation, pain “embouquant” (cuts a channel; gives voice to) nourishing river waters; it also “transmits” the “powers” to speak from one to another.

Williams’s late sublime odes are sometimes accused of being a poetics of mere surfaces, involving generalizations, abstractions, literary allusions, posturing, and direct moralistic pronouncements. It’s true his late odes often resonate with a kind of Olympian certainty and calm, sure that in the end life overcomes death, just as light outraces darkness and thunder. Certainly “To a

dog" is notable for the poem's direct proclamation that art and beauty triumph over atrocities of all kinds, both world-historical ones such as nuclear bombs and wars, and silent quotidian cruelties all the more devastating because they are so intimate, so close to home. Yet just as important for Williams's odes are the unnamed forces at work *below* these poems' smooth surfaces—dark currents of connection, memory, and terrors that cause sudden swerves and shifts in tone and generate troubling silences. This tangled emotional and linguistic territory is the "sub terra" of Williams's late work. Such instabilities or slippages characterize Williams's late style as much as his newfound ease as a poetic elder, his willingness to call forth all of human history, especially literature and the arts, as his witness as he makes his case for poetry.

The muse of "To a Dog" is terrible—the oft-stricken Williams sees and hears *himself* in that wounded dog. The poem also helps us see and hear ourselves in that dog, and to recognize the abject human condition, even as it affirms that we belong also to the light; we're not just suffering bodies. It does so in part by invoking a hidden intertextuality linking Williams's word-rootlets to word-strings used by those who have come before him, as they too tried to find a way to stem or "assuage" (root meaning: sweeten) unendurable suffering. "To a Dog," then, is layered, light upon dark, just as the poet himself is mysteriously both himself and not-himself: other presences lie within his memory and his poem's textuality. Williams's deliberately strange locution names such double-ness as he opens his poem: "It is myself, / not the poor beast lying here / yelping with pain / that brings me to myself with a start—" (lines 1–4). Similarly, Williams associated René Char with a *contrapuntal* vision of reality, whereby darkness lies underneath the light and—paradoxically—nourishes it. Such a world-view is certainly highlighted in the one poem of Char's that Williams chose to translate, "To Friend-Tree of Counted Days":

Brief harp of the larches  
 On mossy spur of stone crop  
 —Façade of the forest,  
 Against which mists are shattered—  
 Counterpoint of the void in which  
 I believe. (CP2 344)<sup>9</sup>

This too was Williams's way in the 1950s, when he wrote his great triadic odes and melded the abject and the transcendental into a new sublime.

**Coda: The Noisy Gist**

According to Christopher MacGowan, citing Floss Williams’s testimony, “Stormy!” is probably the last poem Williams completed (Mariani 766; CP2 503). It thus provides a fitting coda to this essay’s exploration of some of the animal spirits in Williams’s lyrics. “Stormy!” was inspired by the Williamses’ Shetland sheep-dog puppy of the same name. Of course, like all of late Williams, it’s also a tribute to language itself—or, at least, to *living* rather than dead language, the goal of Williams’s life-long quest.

Stormy

what name could  
better  
explode from

a sleeping pup  
but this  
leaping

to his feet  
Stormy!  
Stormy! Stormy! (CP2 380–81)

Like many young animals, puppies tend to be either extremely active or asleep. Sometimes in the midst of frenzied play they will just drop down and immediately fall into a recuperative doze. That seems to be something like the case here. The pup is sleeping and then hears his name called, storms to his feet, and runs to whoever is calling. At least, it’s plausible to guess that the dog is woken up by the voice we hear in the last two lines calling his name. But Williams’s ambiguous syntax here also hints that perhaps the pup just “explodes” to his feet on his own, not answering his name so much as *enacting* it. As in *Genesis*, in the beginning was the Word. It created all the things it named; the Word came first and then the object or the action. It’s this pure energy—this leaping, this union of word and what the word names—that Williams tirelessly sought. Williams’s last poem contains the gist of all the rest, and its end.

Not too many years later, a member of the next generation of American poets, A. R. Ammons, paid tribute to perhaps his greatest source of



inspiration after Emerson and Whitman. Ammons's "WCW" was eventually placed in the author's 1972 *Collected Poems* right next to one of his most signature works, "Corson's Inlet." (The 1960s gave us another superlative tribute-poem to Williams, John Berryman's *Dream Song #324*, from *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* [1968]. Williams's passing clearly left its mark.) Ammons's poem scappily honors both Williams's roving, irreverent dogs seeking out the abject and the terse, short-line poetic form he worked so hard to perfect in the decades after *Al Que Quiere!*:

WCW  
 I turned in  
 by the bayshore  
 and parked,  
 the crosswind  
 hitting me hard  
 side the head,  
 the bay scrappy  
 and working:  
 what a  
 way to read  
 Williams! till  
 a woman came  
 and turned  
 her red dog loose  
 to sniff  
 (and piss  
 on)  
 the dead horseshoe  
 crabs. (Ammons 147)

## NOTES

1. The true author of *The Dog and the Fever* is not certain. Some sources assert he was Pedro de Espinosa, not Francisco de Quevedo. The confusion exists because in 1625 the same printer published *El perro y la calendura* with Espinosa's name affixed to it and Quevedo's *Cartas del caballero de Tenaza*. For one assertion that Espinosa is the actual author of *Fever*, see *Dictionary of the Literature of the Iberian Peninsula*, Volume 1, p. 561. The editor of the Shoe String Press edition of the Williamses' translation says in the introduction that Quevedo "published under the name of Pedro

Espinosa” but then later concedes that “literary scholars have not yet finally decided whether Espinosa or Quevedo wrote the book.” The publisher’s further notes are pertinent: “Throughout most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the novella was ascribed to Quevedo. [ . . . ] Mr. Williams and his mother regarded the book as Quevedo’s work. Quevedo [ . . . ] [was] sometimes called the Jonathan Swift of Spanish literature [ . . . ] if *EL PERRO Y LA CALENDURA* is not directly from his pen, it is certain that the work is imitative of his style” (5).

2. For a sampling of Quevedo-esque scatology as rendered by Williams, see both one of Elena’s favorite anecdotes about him (13–14) and the following passage from their translation of *Dog and the Fever*: “I saw S. D. F. Quevedo in a dream, into whom several doctors were entering on the backs of mules, which, with their black trappings, looked like so many tombs wearing ears. Their gait was absent-minded, boresome and broken, in such sort that the Duennas drew about all atwitter, rocking back and forth like sawyers, their aspect filthy from so much gazing into urinals and chamber pots [ . . . ]” (78).

3. Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” (1923) is another lyric that opens with a preposition: “depends.” That word can mean “to be determined,” “based upon,” or “contingent upon,” but also “to place reliance or trust upon” and (more literally) “to hang down from.” “So much depends,” indeed. As with “Poem,” the entire poem depends upon or hangs from/follows upon the opening word, as Williams hints how a working farm depends upon a wheelbarrow, and a whole nation upon its farms. Incidentally, one aspect of “Wheelbarrow”’s history that is not well enough known is that it was apparently inspired by a black neighbor Williams knew, Thaddeus Marshall, who kept chickens on his property on 11 Elm Street in Rutherford, New Jersey. Williams paid tribute to Marshall as his inspiration for the poem in 1954, in an article in *Holiday Magazine*: “[The poem] sprang from affection for an old Negro named Marshall. He had been a fisherman, caught porgies off Gloucester. He used to tell me how he had to work in the hold in freezing weather, standing ankle deep in cracked ice packing down the fish. He said he didn’t feel cold. He never felt cold in his life until just recently. I liked that man, and his son Milton almost as much. In his back yard I saw the red wheelbarrow surrounded by the white chickens. I suppose my affection for the old man somehow got into the writing.” For more information and photos, see Leith, “History Chest: Inspiration for ‘The Red Wheelbarrow.’”

4. From Williams’s introduction to his collection *The Wedge* (1944). <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237888>. Accessed 12 April 2015.

5. Kenner 404. See also Kenner’s separate reading of “Poem (As the cat),” 397–99, to which I am indebted.

6. Dayan’s talk was given at the Poetry and Poetics conference at the University of Pittsburgh on November 14, 2014, sponsored by the journal *boundary 2*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djr7ds1bJ5k>. Accessed 27 January 2015.

7. Schmidt, 223–30.

8. For one of the meanings of "quickens" as a noun, the Oxford English Dictionary provides this example, dated 1898: "Quickens are in reality underground stems. Unlike roots they are jointed. [ . . . ] Quickens are not confined to one species of grass.' J. R. Campbell in *Trans. Highl. & Agric. Soc* 85."

9. From Char's *Hypnos Waking*, published in New York, 1956, with Char's French facing Williams's translation on facing pages. CP2 497.

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