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MEASURES OF ATTENTION: ON THE GRAMMETRICS OF LINEATION IN
WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS' POETRY

In the present paper I would like to treat the formal-prosodic aspects of the modernist predilection for "poetry as epistemology." Anglo-American modernism, at least the Pound-Williams line, demands - in a neo-Romantic manner - that art be an act of *renewal*, *rediscovery*, and as such should *de-automatize* our way of seeing and also our reading process. The sense of freshness that true poetry carries derives, they claim, from an awareness of perception, and can only be achieved through a renewal of poetic techniques, including prosody. Each poem must have its own form, its own prosody, instead of patterning an existing, given one. Through each poem form has to be individually discovered; it is a process taking shape and being shaped organically.

American modernist - and postmodernist - poetics developed an *open prosody* relying on linguistic features, relations and operations organic to and immanent in the English language. Modernist organic form and postmodernist immanent form is defined in its opposition to the traditional control of imposed form consisting of a "set of rules that will bring the troubling plenitude of experience 'within our power.'"¹ In "composition by field" the language material, just as the poetic experience, is not to be ordered, re-structured by the interpretative mind of the poet. Form is taken from language and the poetic experience itself; it is realized through attention, humility and openness to the movements and values of language, when "movement and association ... arise as an inner need."² The poet should allow language itself to speak. "I say this once again to emphasize what I have often said - that here we must *listen* to the language for the discoveries we hope to make," Williams stresses.³ The poet, according to this conception, develops his form through listening to the immanent laws of language. Language is regarded as the most valuable of human assets; the poetic reduces itself to the linguistic, or, the linguistic

is promoted to the rank of the poetic.

Technique as sincerity, this grand Romantic obsession, is re-animated in this poetics by claiming the discovery of form through attention to the objectism of words and to the interacting forces inherent in language. The prosodic implications of this organicist and immanentist position touch the mode of poetic syntax, sentencing in particular. Grammar functioned as prosody for Whitman but in his poetry the sentence was still a normative element displaying completeness. In modernist and postmodernist writing, the sentence strives not towards completeness but the wholeness of the context or the poetic situation. The new sentence becomes a *mobile unit*: it is the active that generates thought. Syntactical boundaries may be disrupted or blurred, and syntactic units may hold several functions at the same time, thus creating an unusually complex web of semantic relations. With the abolition of fixed, routine, grammatical connections, individual words become more palpable, more object-like, and with their unfixed valences they act as nuclei of potentialities. While traditional prosodies relied on accepted deviations from an imposed norm, on the interaction between the regularity and irregularity of the metric superstructure, the prosody of modernist and postmodernist poetics is complicated by the interplay of continuity and discontinuity, coherence and incoherence, expectedness and unexpectedness - all textual strategies inherent in the larger verbal material.

Anglo-American modernism, as it has been argued by Marjorie Perloff, among others, is made up of two separate strands: the Symbolist mode of "high modernism" and the counter-tradition of anti-Symbolism. The former includes such poets as W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost, while the latter is represented by Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein. These two traditions have affected two lines of descent in 20th century American poetry. High modernism is characterized by a Romantic-Symbolist dualism and an emphasis on "coherence, indirection, multiplicity of meanings."⁴ Eliot, in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets," distinguishes between the "ordinary man's" way of experiencing reality and that of the poet: "When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for his work he is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love or reads Spinoza, and these two have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or with the smell of cook-

ing; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes."⁵ Thus, what distinguishes poetic from ordinary experience is, according to Eliot, the intellectual ordering of life's fragments into a meaningful whole. This poetic act of "amalgamating disparate experience" corresponds to the symbolic operation of assigning meaning to natural and social phenomena, of relating signifier to signified. More precisely, the typical Symbolist mode of experiencing is to read meanings into the elements of the natural and social world, and thus to subordinate the external facts to subjective patterns.

The Symbolist brand of modernism relies heavily on the metaphoric or selectional-substitutional function of language, where the structural details are arranged along the selection axis of language, according to such logical relations as similarity-dissimilarity, equivalence-nonequivalence, identity-nonidentity; on the other hand in the anti-Symbolist strand language's metonymic or combinational function becomes the structural principle organizing the poetic text: the elements are arranged along the combination axis of language according to sequentiality, proximity, environment, association, randomness. It was in the writings of the Russian Formalists that the opposition between metaphor and metonymy first served as the basis for a typology of literary styles. Thus, Viktor Žirmunskij, in his paper "On Classic and Romantic Poetry," stated that metaphor and metonymy characterized classic and romantic styles. Roman Jakobson in his essay on Pasternak's prose argued that verse relies more on metaphor, while prose is ordered rather like metonymy.⁶ Jakobson later extended the idea of this opposition, also having observed the dichotomy in non-literary fields. He claims that language, like other systems of signs, involves two operations, selection and combination, and the absence of the capacity for performing one of them accounts for each of the two kinds of aphasic disturbances: "selection deficiency" or "similarity disorder" and "contexture deficiency" or "contiguity disorder." "We distinguish two basic types of aphasia - depending on whether the major deficiency lies in selection or substitution, with relative stability of combination and contexture; or conversely, in combination and contexture, with relative retention of normal selection and substitution."⁷ The operation of selection depends on recognizing similarity among grammatical elements, on being able to identify items which belong to the same substitution set. On the other hand, the operation of combination depends on knowing the

rules of contiguity according to which elements can be combined or contextualized so that they provide a meaningful and acceptable context. These two basic processes of language correspond to the operations underlying the two rhetorical figures of metaphor and metonymy: metaphor operates along the selection axis of language, while metonymy on the combination axis.

"Crude symbolism," Williams points out in *Spring and All*, "is to associate emotions with natural phenomena such as anger with lightning, flowers with love.... Such work is empty.... The word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole - aware - civilized."⁸ The poem as a whole reflects the daily zigzags of the poet's imagination, and the relationship of these units is characterized by intellectual jumps, associations, sequentiality and randomness. "The imagination," Williams notes in the "Prologue" to *Kora in Hell*, goes from one thing to another.... A stream of things having composed itself into wiry strands that move in one fixed direction, the poet in desperation turns at right angles and cuts across current with startling results to his hangdog mood."⁹ Williams does not interpret or impose order upon individual details, but treats them for what they are and what they evoke. "Williams' images, 'wind, flower, farmer, white, purple,' Marjorie Perloff points out, 'are perfectly transparent; all are nature images, reflecting the sexual energy of the universe, the life force. They are images without depth, but in the shallow space in which they coexist, they create enormously varied configurations.'¹⁰ In the absence of the fixed limitations of given referents, the combinational possibilities of grammatical and structural elements are multiplied within and among the collage units. David Antin suggests that in collages of such metonymic nature the combinational possibilities of the elements are multiplied because they have been freed of certain fixed combinations: "the reason the collage elements are more or less free is that the strategy of the collage involves suppression of the ordering signs that would specify the 'stronger logical relations';¹¹ thus, in Williams' collages the relations basic to metaphoric substitution are suppressed. The combination of elements with free valences do not bring about a network of symbolic links, but a contiguous field of associated possibilities.

The metonymic collage technique illustrates well how the modernism of Williams had moved away from Symbolism. Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams,

Gertrude Stein, and later the postmoderns all refused the structural rigidity of the Symbolist mode and developed a poetry of immanence as Charles Altieri termed it in his seminal essay "From Symbolist Thought to Immanence: the Ground for Postmodern American Poetics."

"Symbolism" and "immanence" refer to the two modes of modernist poetry, and go back, Altieri insists, to the modes of Romantic thought. Altieri sees Coleridge as the model for Symbolist theories of value, stressing that "creative imagination is the principle of form responsible for generating the value of the particulars in a poem."¹² For Symbolism – reaching back to this Coleridgean idea – creative imagination is the faculty that orders the otherwise unordered and chaotic world; value depends on human choice and on the capacity to structure the particulars. As such, the Symbolist seeks structure since, for him, the orderly text is man's main defense against the chaos of reality. It is the poet's creativity that provides an interpretive and coherent network of symbolic links for the unstructured mass of experiences. Symbolist dualism and the poetics associated with New Criticism view "experiences as data incomplete until complemented by some creative activity of mind."¹³

The immanentist position treats value and order in a fundamentally different manner. Reaching back to Wordsworth, the stress is not on the human faculty to create value through imagination, but on "the ways man and nature are unified, so that value can be seen as the result of immanent processes in which man is as much object as he is agent of creativity."¹⁴ The immanentist brand of modernism and postmodernism rejects the idea that value and order depend on human choice; instead, value and order, they insist, are immanent in nature, mind, and language, and the poet's task is to explore them, to uncover them, to allow them to manifest themselves.

The immanentist position has several philosophical and poetic implications. In order to discover the values immanent in reality, man must approach the non-human sources of value with humility and meditative attention. The poet puts his energizing power into the poem, but in such a way that his composition does not function as a value-creating activity but as participation in the process of discovery.

The poetics of immanence has important linguistic implications, too. Language for this second strand of modernism and for the postmoderns

presents an infinite source of values because it is a means of discovering the inner processes and boundaries of the mind. The poet's task is not to impose rules upon language, but to *interrogate* it; he should approach language in such a way that the meanings and values immanent in language should emerge. "From the body of the poem, all that words create / presses forth to be," Robert Duncan writes in "Stage Directions." Here the poet acts as a midwife at the birth of meanings and not as the creator of meanings. The poet should carefully listen to language in order to discover what language says. He is not to treat poetic language as a closed system mimetic of and referential to the similarly closed system of experiences; the function of language is not to interpret and order experiences. If the poet does not impose any pre-conceived pattern upon his material, but attempts to follow the movements of his mind through language, if he has a basic trust in language possessing a wholeness similar to forms and phenomena of nature, if he can listen to and interrogate language, then he is able to discover its immanent laws. When the use of language is extended beyond the normative rules of grammar, then new use – even through ungrammaticalness – will reveal new meanings, and language can become a tool for discovery. An enrichment of language brings about an extension of knowledge, which makes poetry an epistemological activity.

Pound-Williams modernism and postmodernism realized, in prosody too, the possibility of a "poetry without fixed limits." "Metrics gave way to measure," Jerome Rotheberg observes, "not the sequence of the metronome' (Pound) but a variable succession of sounds and silences, breath- or mind-directed, a 'musical line' derived from the complex movements of actual speech."¹⁵ Immanentist poetics not only dispenses with the "compositional constraint" of meter,¹⁶ but with the vaguest echo of it too. Metrics gives way to such measure which arises from the interference of language's inner forces, from the extreme testing of its immanent powers.

The typical prosody of Symbolist modernism was characterized by approximations of and departures from the norm of meter, such as the one employed in *The Waste Land*. As the differences between the poetics of the two modernist modes began to show more explicitly, the anti-Symbolist mode of the Pound-Williams modernism developed a free verse prosody fundamentally different from *vers libéré*. This tendency led to the discovery and introduction of new norms, to new ways of managing poetic structure, to the expansion of formal possibilities.

English meters organize the language material by relying on such grammatical scissoring points which relate lower level units of grammar and meter: morpheme and word to syllable and foot primarily. With the abandonment of the metrical frame, however, the prosody of non-metrical poems tends to arise rather from the relationship and counterpoint of grammatical and prosodic units of higher ranks: phrases, clauses, sentences and sentence groups are scissored by half-lines, lines, stanzas and whole poems. "A pedantic insistence upon detail tends to drive out 'major form.' A firm hold on major form makes for a freedom of detail," Pound insisted.¹⁷ As such, free verse prosodies expand the grammatical possibilities toward the interaction of higher units. The modernism of Pound and Williams realized the fruitfulness of this kind of expansion, and discovered cadenced sentencing as the new measure of their free verse, whose basic unit is the movable and divisible line embodying the dialectics of continuity and discontinuity, of enjambment and dismemberment.

Sentencing through lineation is the only explicit feature of the prosody of free verse which completely ignores the norm of meter. To employ grammar as prosody was Whitman's innovation, but the refinement of grammatical rhythm toward continuity and discontinuity, predictability and unpredictability, was the prosodic achievement of Pound and Williams.

The effect of visual dismemberment indicated by typography is more than a rhythmical one: unexpected line-breaks, where grammatical and prosodic units do not coincide, generate a semantic effect in that they throw weight upon those elements which the poet wants to emphasize, and as such they direct and control the reader's attention.

The ideogrammic method is the extreme form of dismemberment since here the juxtaposition of semantically heterogeneous details is punctuated by obtrusive typology. The compression of this "poetic shorthand" is thus achieved by both grammatical and prosodic means; it presents the details, allowing them to interact through immanent but hitherto latent relations and arrange themselves into a new unity. This new unity is not simply the sum total of the elements but is modified by the relational links. Thus, the ideogrammic method relying on the prosodic technique of dismemberment allows that "ideas go into action."

The ideogram as a "form of superposition" found its ideal prosodic expres-

sion in dismemberment, the formal realization of discontinuity. The context of heterogeneous and dislocated ideograms provides a context for multiple expectations in Pound's *Cantos*. The unpredictability of the movement of images and ideas prevents the reader from losing his attention; the ideogram punctuated by the meaningful surprise of dismemberment enriches the text of the poem to "maximum attainability." Beside reducing the predictability of the poem's message, the ideogram well serves the punctuation of individual details: it lends solidity and autonomy to each episode as in "Canto LXXVIII" for example:

...
but as of conversation to follow,
boredom of that roman on Olivia's stairs
 in her vision
that stone angle all of his scenery
 with the balustrade, and antipodes
and as for the solidity of the white oxen in all this
 perhaps only Dr Williams (Bill Carlos)
 will understand its importance,
its benediction. He wd/ have put in the cart.
 (Canto LXXVIII)

These individual ideograms seem to have an associational (metonymic) quality. At first, the stairs, the balustrade and the oxen seem to present a sequence of perceptions of spatial or temporal order. However, it is exactly through the associational line and the implicit paradox between the stone balustrade and the solidity of the oxen that the reader comes to realize the metaphorical arrangement of the images ultimately representing two kinds of poetics, two kinds of approaches to the particulars of reality: Yeats' visionary imagination and Williams' fidelity to reality. Here unpredictability does not result from the surprise generated by the sequence of individual ideograms, but from the realization of their relationship. As we proceed reading the poem, our apprehension of the relations is continuously modified.

Through the rhythmic and semantic effects of lineation and dismemberment, modernists poets refine the notion of the enjambment. "Don't make each line stop dead at the end, and then begin every next line with a heave. Let the beginning of the next line catch the rise of the rhythm wave, unless you want a definite longish pause," Pound demands in the Imagist "Credo."¹⁸ Together with Williams, he was aware that at the beginning of the line the "rhythm wave" rises and made extensive use of it.

Lineation attracts attention to the particulars of language; this is the function of visuality in modernist prosody: to move the line, and together with it, the reader's attention, on the scales of continuity, expectancy and surprise. The notion of the enjambment has become more complex since, now, the rank of grammatical units divided by line breaks are rhythmic and semantic indicators of the poet's intention. Depending on where line scissors grammar, the poet can vary the rhythmic and semantic weight of a given unit. Lines ending with sentences create the impression of natural speech; if lines divide clauses and phrases from each other, the result is still close to the rhythm of speech, although more hesitant and meditative mode of speech. When line breaks occur within phrases, cutting off functional words from semantically independent words, speech becomes discontinuous: interphrasal typography de-automatizes our reading process. Here words are isolated from their immediate grammatical surroundings and gain a tactile quality similar to that of real objects. Williams' "Queen Anne's Lace" employs all gradations of the enjambment and thus refines not only the poem's rhythm, but also its meaning.

Lineation

Her body is not so white as
anemone petals nor so smooth - nor
so remote a thing. It is a field

of the wild carrot taking
the field by force; the grass
does not raise above it.
Here is no question of whiteness,
white as can be, with a purple mole
at the center of each flower.
Each flower is a hand's span

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

interphrasal: Prep/NP
interphrasal: Conj/NP
interphrasal: within NP_{Gen}

phrasal: VP/NP
phrasal: NP/VP
sentential
clausal: constituent S/CI
phrasal: NP/PP
sentential
interphrasal: within NP_{Gen}

phrasal: AdvP/NP
interphrasal: VP/NP
phrasal: NP/VP
clausal: NP/CL
phrasal: NP/VP
sentential: const.S/const.S
interphrasal: Art/N
phrasal: NP/NP
phrasal: NP/NP
phrasal: NP/NP

In the context of such a poem, where 15 lines out of 21 end with sentences, clauses or phrases, the typography of the remaining 6 seems to be odd. Sentential, clausal and phrasal lineations reveal a greater or lesser coincidence of grammar and prosody, or, we might conclude, a greater or lesser subordination of grammar to prosody. Interphrasal lineation, where

prosody violates grammar, points to the key-words of the poem and as such has the same function as rhyme does in that they both direct and control attention. Thus, words emphasized by interphrasal enjambment are: "anemone petals," "so remote a thing," "of the wild carrot," "of her whiteness," "a tiny purple blemish," and "white desire." The last line also gets extra emphasis not only because it functions as closure, but also because the phrasal division is punctuated by the dash at the line ending. These seven key-phrases outline the message of the whole poem, again in a metonymical order. Of course, only a variation of the degrees of enjambment can create prosodic excitement and can punctuate the poem semantically; had Williams ended all his lines on unkinetic particles, typography would have lost its function of controlling rhythm and, through it, the reader's attention.

"When rhythm renounces the support of abstract and independent systems - meter or isochrony -," Charles O. Hartman points out, "the basic principle of the line emerges and takes absolute control."¹⁹ Indeed, the centrality of the line in modernist nonmetrical prosody is clear; it derives from being allowed to serve as the meeting ground of grammatical and prosodic processes. The shifting relations between syntax and lineation create a tension between continuity and discontinuity, thus providing each line with unexpected prosodic and semantic information. Williams' poem "By the Road to the Contagious Hospital" is a fine example for the dynamism of grammatical and prosodic forces generating a semantic effect.

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast - a cold wind. Beyond, the
waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen
patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines -

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches -

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all

save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind -

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

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

Through his abundant use of prepositions in the four opening stanzas (by, to, under, from, beyond, along, under) Williams provides the poem with an initial energy and at the same time expresses the vigour and dynamism of nature in spring. The multiplicity of prepositions implies that spring is not considered as an abstraction or a symbol, but as a concrete entity, and as such demands functional words with the implicit feature of concreteness and locality. In these prepositions Williams appears to have found a series of linguistic gestures which express both the dynamism and the concrete quality of spring.

After some prose passages, "The Contagious Hospital" is the first poem in the volume *Spring and All*; it is a strong upbeat providing the poetic impulse and setting for a whole series of texts. Being the exposition, its lead is all the more important. The drive and swing (or "spring") of the first stanzas is attained by means other than prepositional abundance, too: the grammatics of phrasal and interphrasal enjambments creates the impression of syntactic continuity. Seven lines begin by tying up the syntactically loose ends of previous lines (blue / mottled; the / northeast; the / waste; fallen / patches; reddish / purplish; twiggy / stuff; sluggish / dazed). Also, the first verb only occurs at the end of the 15th line, the first moment of rest both grammatically and prosodically. From this point, the poem seems to calm down somewhat. The train of images is maintained to follow a sequential order, but the shifts are both less frequent and less abrupt. The multiplicity of spring is not detailed as it was in the first stanzas, but is referred to by the collective pronoun "they"; the items are not presented individually; what is depicted is rather their general movement (growing, awakening). The poem moves to a more universal scale ("it" might refer to pregnancy, new life, spring and totality), without, however, becoming abstract: images remain at the particularity of the

grass and the carrot leaf. Typography is still used to create semantic effects by locating key-words and key-images in initial and final line positions. As often in Williams' poetry, the poem is about the process of how things are born: continuous syntax follows the movement of discovery, while discontinuous typography marks the ultimate stages of this process, articulating the particulars as the perceptible results of spring's awakening: "No ideas but in things!"

In *Spring and All*, Williams began to counterbalance the dismembering force of radical enjambments by arranging his texts into visually regular stanzas. However, since this compositional arrangement (just like typography) is not subordinated to grammatical structuring, stanzaic line grouping is another compositional technique which adds to the poem's discontinuous structure (even though visually it creates the impression of regularity and continuity). These stanzas are only stanzas for the eye. "To arrange the text in sight-stanzas," Eleanor Berry observes in her article proclaiming the "sight-stanza" to be Williams' new prosodic form, "is to lay a grid across it that cuts the flow of language arbitrarily into visually equal segments; the interruptions made by the metrical division obtrude and have ... the effect of defamiliarizing individual words and the manner of their syntactical relations."²⁰ After such radical testing of syntactic and semantic coherence by obtrusive enjambments and visually organized stanzas, Williams arrived at what he himself considered his main prosodic invention, the "variable foot," a poetic device servile to the power of language. The poet thus writes about his discovery.

I had to invent my form, if form it was ...
I realized I had hit upon a device (that is the practical focus of a device) which I could not name when I wrote it. My dissatisfaction with free verse came to a head in that I always wanted a verse that was ordered, so it came to me that the concept of the foot itself would have to be altered in our new relativistic world. It took me several years to get the concept clear. I had a feeling that there was somewhere an exact way to define it; the task was to find the word to describe it, to give it an epitaph, and finally hit upon it. The foot not being fixed is only to be described as variable. If the foot itself is variable it allows order in so-called free verse. Thus the verse becomes not free at all but just simply variable...²¹

Accordingly, the variable foot was to become the measure of Williams' free verse because it allows order through variation: it suggested "a way of es-

caping the formlessness of free verse."²²

Critics like Eleanor Berry and Marjorie Perloff argue that the volumes of Williams' verse written in variable foot mark a return to tradition. Berry suggests that it is not regularity but monotony rather which is induced by the phrasal rhythm of the variable foot.²³ Perloff raises the objection that in "Asphodel," for example, Williams forgot about his radical avant-garde past: "no more snatches of documentary prose, no Cubist or Surrealist superpositions or dislocations. The poem is stately and consistent."²⁴ Instead of calling the variable foot a conventional prosodic device, I would rather suggest that it is a final synthesis and crystallization of the formal experiments of Williams' poetic practice.

The variable foot follows the phrasal segmentation of syntax but avoids monotony by employing sentential, clausal and interphrasal "foot divisions" too. Its distinctive feature is relativity: "from being fixed, our prosodic values should rightly be seen as only relatively true. Einstein had the speed of light as a constant - his only constant - What have we? Perhaps our concept of musical time."²⁵ We are back at the third Imagist principle concerning composition in the sequence of the musical phrase. Williams' variable foot is variable in the sense that it does not follow the sequence of the metronome; it has no prescribed number of stresses or syllables. It moves according to the rhythm of speech. Cid Corman calls Williams' language "commensurate,"²⁶ which is a word Williams employs in relation to the relativity of his new measure. Variable and commensurate are seemingly opposite terms relating the variable foot to both freedom and regularity. The variable foot is, however, commensurate in the sense that, within this measure, thought and form are co-extensive. It is, as Donald Wesling puts it, self-correlative because of its mobility, and the continuous restructuring of patterns accounts for its variability.²⁷

The variable foot is characterized by the coincidence of grammatical and prosodic units; it tends to contain complete grammatical units. Lines are usually phrasal and the number of stresses is determined by grammar. Poems in short simple sentences are written in lines of one or two stresses, but if grammar becomes more complex, three or four stresses may constitute a variable foot. This is the style of the later poems.

The smell of the heat is boxwood
when rousing us
a movement of the air
stirs our thoughts
that has no life in them
to a life, a life in which
two women agonize:
to live and to breathe is no less.
Two young women.
The box odor
is the odor of that of which
partaking separately,
each to herself
I partake also.
.. separately.
(From "To Daphne and Virginia")

Visual dismemberment follows the rhythm determined by grammar. But typography does not only serve rhythmical purposes. It also unlinks individual phrases from their context and thus deautomatizes the reading process. The well-famed wedding scene from "Asphodel" progresses through naming, depicting every single emotion, idea, memory - all that slowly comes to the poet's mind when reminiscing.

At the altar
so intent was I
before my vows,
so moved by your presence
a girl so pale
and ready to faint
that I pitied
and wanted to protect you
As I think of it now
after a lifetime,
it is as of
a sweet-scented flower
were posed
and for me did open.

Every foot contains a separate statement about an old man wanting to dis-

cover - and decipher - long-hidden memories. Since the visual dismemberment tends to follow grammar, complete phrases (and also complete images) are isolated and thus given individual emphasis. A kind of prosodic as well as moral measure arises from the poet's humility in face of language and memory. Here again, prosody has the function of controlling attention: phrasal delineation creates an awareness to the particulars of life. As Cld Corman points out, "to see, against the skin, to hear, the core ... a reiterated discovery."²⁸ It is the variable foot which has become Williams' unique device for discovering the fundamental relations between self and world.

Notes

- 1 Robert Duncan, "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," in Donald M. Allen and Warren Tallman (1973), eds. *The Poetics of the New American Poetry* (New York: Grove Press, 1973), p. 209.
- 2 Allen and Tallman, p. 210.
- 3 William Carlos Williams, "The Poem as a Field of Action," in *Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 290.
- 4 Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), p. 27.
- 5 T.S. Eliot (1921/1932), "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1932/1961), p. 287.
- 6 Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism. History - Doctrine* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1965/1981), p. 231 ff.
- 7 Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, eds. *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1956), pp. 53-82.
- 8 William Carlos Williams (1923/1938), "Spring and All," in *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1938/1970), pp. 100, 102.
- 9 Williams (1920/1938), "Prologue to *Kora in Hell*, *Imaginations*, pp. 15, 17.
- 10 Perloff, p. 131.
- 11 David Antin, "Some Questions about Modernism," *Occident*, VIII, new series (Spring 1974), p. 21.
- 12 Charles Altieri, "From Symbolist Thought to Immanence: The Ground of Postmodern American Poetics," *Boundary 2*, 1/3 (Spring 1973), p. 607.