

ORGANIC PROSODY IN THE POETRY OF
WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

"To invent, then, a prosody of our own has
been our first objective in our approach toward
reality in our place and day."

--William Carlos Williams

by

~~John Leising~~ Robert Greiner

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Introduction

Critical reception of the poetry of William Carlos Williams, in recent years, has grown increasingly favorable, one may even say enthusiastic. Once characterized by his friend and mentor Ezra Pound as "the most bloody inarticulate animal that ever gargled"¹--Dr. Williams had even before his death, in 1963, begun to come into the widespread critical assessment which today places his poetry on a par with that of Pound and T.S. Eliot. Williams' "free verse" is no longer disregarded in the English Departments of American academies, no longer quizzically tolerated nor genteelly despised, no longer really felt to be particularly experimental. On the contrary, as the work of an important, established poet, Dr. Williams' verse is presented to college freshmen today as one of the elemental cornerstones of Twentieth Century English poetry.

Yet of all the distinguished teachers, critics, and poets recently shown interest in Williams, none--at least in print--has got to the root of his importance as a poet; none has offered a cogent, technical explanation of Williams' prosody, his metrical technique. Contenting themselves, in general, with repeated expressions of praise for the undeniable fineness of WCW's² personality--his openness, honesty, kindness, his American exuberance, immediately recognizable--critics have so far neglected the means by which that fineness of character is brought across that the reader of the usual discussion of Williams' poetry is often led to question whether the work of a poet (rather than, say, the autobiography of a philanthropist) is under consideration at all.

One critic only--Linda Welshimer Wagner--in her work The Poems of William Carlos Williams³--has so much as attempted a serious approach to Williams' prosody. Though a step in the right direction, her chapter "The Melody Line is Everything" is lacking in depth and clarity and leaves much to be desired. At least Mrs. Wagner does receptively consider Dr. Williams' own theory--his passionate pronouncements on prosody and programs for a "revolution in the conception of the poetic foot";⁴ whereas the typical critic, so far, has tended to regard Williams' "criticism" as the irrational self-deception of an intuitive poet, necessary, perhaps, to Williams' verse practice but without objective validity and usefulness.⁵ Unfortunately, Mrs. Wagner throws no more light on Dr. Williams' prosodic theory than the careful reader can discover for himself in the happy maze of WCW's letters, Autobiography,⁶ and various essays: a light, at best, intense yet but a gleam.

Some formal aspects of Dr. Williams' verse, it is true, have come in for extensive critical treatment--e.g. the imagist orientation of much of his early work, and his fondness for colloquial American diction. But it must be admitted that these formal elements which have been frequently mentioned are of decidedly secondary, relatively superficial importance in the total functioning of a poem. A poem is, first of all, a rhythmic ordering of spoken language. Made of sounds and meant to be read aloud, poems were originally sung. Prior to any discussion of image-structure, for instance, in the work of a poet should come an analysis of his metric.

In the background of this specific critical failure or

reluctance to come to terms with Dr. Williams' metric may be discerned a more pervasive contemporary critical attitude of distaste for the whole subject of prosody. Two chief varieties of this attitude may be distinguished; since both may be usefully regarded as important objections to the methodological approach adopted below, a brief discussion of each will lead us directly into the material of this study.

The first form of modern reluctance to deal, at length, with metrical considerations would seem to derive from the notorious difficulty traditionally associated with the subject. Objectively studied, the history of English metrical theory does not seem an harmonious development of a coherent body of principles, but a confused labyrinth of pedantic dissension and strife. Patently, disagreement among the authorities--not only concerning matters of opinion, but also regarding central problems proper to the field and even the correct vocabulary to be employed--seems, here, the single governing rule.⁷ Given the mixture of confusion and arbitrary precept which marked the culmination of the systematic study of metrical theory in Saintsbury's A History of English Prosody,⁸ it is no wonder that many contemporary critics shy away from abstract prosodic considerations--that they prefer to turn instead toward those factors in a particular poem itself (like metaphor and diction) which admit of a more generally intelligible, inductively grounded discussion. For the modern, scientifically-minded literary critic, the rhythmical structure of a poem tends to be regarded as too subjective a matter to merit concerted critical attention--as, perhaps, even a meta-critical matter, more properly relegated

to the field of linguistics. Williams' prosody, viewed from this standpoint, seems so variously determined by subjective rhythms of speech as to be ineffable--at least until the invention of more sensitive, sound-analysis instruments. At the present time, the most such an enlightened critic would probably venture to say about Williams' prosody is: Dr. Williams wrote his poetry by ear.

In response to this first--or "scientific"--position, we must begin by granting that the study of prosody is dependent upon deeply personal--subjective--data of the intuition. The sensitive guidance of each poet's "ear"--whatever that may be, scientifically--is responsible, in control, in each case in a good poem's sound-structure; and the reader's "ear" is equally prominent in a close and proper reading of a poem. In a field so grounded, it follows that the difficulties of communication should be extreme. Since different reader's ears hear differently, and differently at different times--and since there is nowhere near an exact correspondence between a reader's aural perceptions and the written symbols in which he must attempt to express his perceptions--it is well-nigh impossible for one reader to tell another, precisely, through the use of objectively-intelligible written symbols, even such a simple, concrete thing as the way he hears a single line of poetry. Naturally, the attempt to build an objectively-valid, abstract system of prosody--upon such foundations--faces a yet smaller likelihood of success.

Yet what happens, we must ask, when for these reasons the study of prosody is quietly abandoned? If the function

of criticism is, in part, to isolate and describe those formal factors in the organization of a poem which contribute to the poem's total statement--and if the sound-structure of a poem is (perhaps) the primary organizational device available to the poet in his workings--if, further, as the linguist Roman Jakobson has pointed out,⁹ formal prosodic devices have, in themselves, actual semantic import--then the virtual exclusion of prosody from the field of literary criticism must result in a radical decrease in the full effectiveness of criticism, measured against its supposed function of pointing out a poem's formal structure.

The question is: is such exclusion necessarily part of an "enlightened" approach to Williams' poetry? Of course, our scientific critic would complain here that he doesn't entirely exclude metrical matters--that he is accustomed to referring, in his analyses, to such and such a line as "two stress" or "iambic tetrameter"--provisionally, of course, until the creation of a more accurate terminology--as a kind of concession to time-worn critical custom. But the point is, as our critic should realize--and as Dr. Williams repeatedly proclaimed throughout his life--it is worse than useless, particularly in the analysis of English poetry since 1910, to continue to employ an inexact metrical vocabulary which, when applied to a poem of Dr. Williams, distorts the actual prosodic structure of the piece of verse. Instead of directing the reader toward a proper hearing of the poem--by emphasizing and attempting to describe those admittedly tenuous pauses and phrases of speech rhythm which, for Williams, in large part determined metrical form--the critic who notes,

in passing, that a line is, say, "basically iambic"--or who, like John Ciardi,¹⁰ actually rearranges Williams' line into iambic pentameter--glosses over the real rhythm of the line and leads the reader away from the poem into a realm of hazy abstraction and irrelevance.

Despite the difficulties, the subjectivity, involved, the critic who would be useful to the reader of Dr. Williams' poetry must try to deal, formally, with problems of prosody. If he does hear a metrical pattern--a measure--in Williams' poetry, and if he feels, as I do, that that measure is often vital to the total effectiveness of a poem--that measure often drives home the statement of the poem--then it seems to me the critic lacking a prosodic vocabulary closely applicable to Williams' verse must invent one; he must attempt a critical innovation comparable to the creative act through which Williams himself hit upon his metric--trusting in part to his reader's good will, his willingness to listen, to make his discussion not merely a personal solution, but one widely intelligible means of illuminating sound, as it functions in Williams' poetry. As I see it, the scientific critic's attitude of skepticism regarding the present possibility of metrical discussion simply leaves too much out, closes off too important an element in the structure of verse to critical investigation--especially when Dr. Williams' metrically unique verse is to be considered--to be felt as a serious objection to the analysis offered below.

The second current critical attitude--which we may term: the traditional position--which even more powerfully than the first operates to discourage investigation of W.C. Williams' prosody is, in a sense, the direct opposite of the first--

though a particular critic's attitude is often curiously compounded of both. For some critics--e.g. John Thompson, in his The Founding of English Metre¹¹--prosodic considerations are not too difficult, too subjective, to be worthy of extensive study, but too simple, too settled and obvious. The feeling that the development of English meter, which began in the poetry of Wyatt--after, say, 1587--is a simple elaboration of formal possibilities already contained in the verse of Sidney and Spenser--and that, hence, the subject of English prosody is virtually closed, fixed, already determined by Elizabethan times--is a common one and one against which Dr. Williams fought all his life.

Williams was certainly correct in sensing a mortal enemy in this traditional position, for, in terms of it, his poetry is scarcely verse at all. Since WCW's poems, in general, do not conform to any recognizable traditional metrical pattern--as, for instance, the iambic tetrameter (suspending, here, the question of whether traditional poems themselves conform to traditional metrical theory, and if they do, which theory)--our conservative critic, upon reading Williams, runs into considerable difficulty: what to make of this irregular, this apparently "free," verse? Harriet Monroe--founder and editor of Poetry: A Magazine of Verse--leaps into mind in this connection as a prototype of the traditional critic. Miss Monroe's editorial disapproval of what she supposed to be a disregard for proper verse form in early poems by Williams submitted to her for publication--and Dr. Williams' irate reaction to the appearance in Poetry of certain altered--regularized--poems

of his--are well known.¹² Even to this day, there are critics who refuse to take Williams seriously as a poet because of what they consider the wildly formless prosodic structure of his "experimental" verse.

For the purposes of this study, the traditional position acts less as an objection than as a challenge. Instead of declaring, as does the scientific critic, that the prosodic structure of Dr. Williams' verse is indeterminate--i.e. "free"--because, like that of all poetry, it is too complex and personal to admit of precise formulation--the traditional critic declares that Dr. Williams' verse is not really verse at all--that it is "free" because it lacks coherent prosodic structure and may be called "poetry" only in a loose and conciliatory sense--because of late so many people seem to be writing in the modern way, and they think it's verse.

Of course the only way to counter such a critical prejudice is to proceed to demonstrate the existence of a prosody--of regularity, sound recurrence--in Williams' poetry, which, having marked out the critical background and established our bearings, we may now attempt to do.

Since prosody, in Dr. Williams' poetry, proceeds directly from--or is an expression of--a definite conception of what a poem is--and a conception of the relation between the poem and the modern world, before discussing WCW's prosody, we must examine the literary aesthetic within which Williams' formal inventions find their ultimate justification.

I. Dr. Williams' Literary Aesthetic: Organic Form

Art and life, for Williams, were aspects of the same existence--intimately bound together. Any formal discussion of his poetry, if it is not to distort the wholeness of its subject, must eventually turn toward a consideration of the poem's function in Williams' daily life in Rutherford-Paterson, New Jersey. Conversely, a discussion of Williams' life, of his world-view, leads inevitably into an examination of his theory of the poem. It would be ideal if we could expound the two simultaneously, but since that's impossible, let's begin by exploring his philosophy of life--which centers around a concept Dr. Williams' called "the local"; starting here, we should be led naturally toward his literary aesthetic, then, finally, to a consideration of prosody informed and unified by our understanding of his world-view.

First of all, Williams' sense of the local was not a localism--a sort of provincial tight-little-islandism--but an approach to life in general, perhaps the primary moral message of his poetry. In a letter to Kay Boyle written in 1932, Williams declared: "Everything we know is a local virtue--if we know it at all"¹³--and by this he meant that a man's immediate surroundings--whatever he sees, hears, feels, thinks in the present moment ("the roar, the roar of the present")--constitute his sole reality, all he can hope to know. Again and again in his diverse writings Dr. Williams teaches--almost religiously, preaches--that a man finds himself, or becomes most completely what he naturally is, only through loving participation in his environment--through an actively sought contact with "the flesh of a

constantly repeated permanence"¹⁴--by means of which he ascends to the atmosphere of lovers (in Whitman's language) and come to dwell in an immortal Now in which he communes, as he chooses, with his "contemporaries of mind"¹⁵ Chaucer, Villon, and Whitman.

This sense of down-to-earth, but mystical, a-historical wholeness of the universe permeates Dr. Williams' poetry. It is behind the happy astonishment which so many readers feel when confronted with a poem like "This Is Just To Say"--about eating the plums which were in the icebox--which is not so much a "domestic poem," as a great religious tract--an affirmation of the joy in common things, in touching and speaking directly about one's world. Everything depends on it, for Dr. Williams, whose life may be summarized as a constant attempt to keep the sources of his poetry--these moments of living contact with his world--open for use in reading, writing, walking along. Williams' famous lyric "The Red Wheelbarrow"--more explicitly than "This Is Just To Say"--functions as a declaration of creed:

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

(Collected Earlier Poems, p. 277)¹⁶

So much depends upon any red wheelbarrow because it is--"the flesh of a constantly repeated permanence"--the universal Being in its particular aspects of color, wetness, surrounding--present

and openly available to the poet's sensual and intellectual embrace.

Along the lines of this interpretation, WCW's central philosophical tenet--"no ideas but in things"--which, as Mrs. Wagner notes, tends to antagonize intellectuals--does not mean "no ideas," but rather "no ideas but in relation to things." It signals a large field relationship: Man-in-his-world. It commands attention--that a man turn toward, thus preserve his sustaining connection with, this world. Intimacy with the materials:

a bud forever green,
tight-curved upon the pavement, perfect
in juice and substance but divorced, divorced
from its fellows, fallen low--

Divorce is
the sign of knowledge in our time,
divorce! divorce!
(Paterson, II, p. 28)¹⁷

--has been lost in our age, is (as we shall see below) for Williams the beginning of the stuff of art.

The concept of the local, alone, cannot give us a thorough understanding of Williams' world-view. In terms of it we are able to comprehend the objectivist focus--the constant concern for everyday American people and things--so apparent in Dr. Williams' poetry, the dependence of the poet upon what confronts him in his environment. But there is another side to Williams' philosophy of life--the human element in the encounter with locale--and it is to this projective element that we must now turn. Thus our discussion is led directly into Dr. Williams' theory of the poem.

W.C. Williams believed, passionately, in the Romantic

idea of the self-expression of the individual personality--a concept which he probably acquired, or at least considerably reinforced, through his avid reading of Whitman. In Dr. Williams' philosophy as a whole, the human being is finally more important than any wheelbarrow, for it is through the poet's (the artist's) act of invention¹⁸--his creative constitution of his world--that there comes to be a world of things at all. "To measure is all we know"--says Dr. Williams in the closing lines of his epic Paterson, and when he goes on to add: "a choice among the measures"--he seems to (and does) admit to as many different worlds, as many different "locals," as there are "measures"--i.e. as many as artists are able to invent. "Only the imagination is real"--Williams declares it again and again. If fourteen poets lived in Paterson, N.J., there would be not one, but as many Patersons as the fourteen could imagine--though certainly many would have some elements in common. Thus the concept of the local--if it is not to distort Dr. Williams' essential philosophy--must be taken along with something else; we must consider not only the poet's dependence upon his environment for sustenance and wholeness, but the dependence of the environment upon the poet's shaping imagination, upon the human act of inventive recreation which originally lets "the local" be what it is:

"The imagination is the transmuter. It is the changer. Without imagination life cannot go on, for we are left staring at the empty casings where truth lived yesterday while the creature itself has escaped behind us. It is the power of mutation which the mind possesses to rediscover the truth.

So that the artist is dealing with actualities not with dreams."

(Selected Essays, p. 213)

As the leader of his race, "The artist/has no peer"--says Williams, in Paterson V--because the continual refreshing, the recreation, of the world is the difficult task of the artist:

"On the poet devolves the most vital function of society: to recreate it--the collective world--in time of stress, in a new mode, fresh in every part, and so set the world working or dancing or murdering each other again, as it may be."

(Selected Essays, p. 103)

Yet we must remember that the artist, for WCW, never invents a new world out of nothing; he always returns to "the materials"--to an intimate connection with the flesh of a constantly repeated permanence--out of and in accordance with which rough material his reshaping may proceed. Without this connection with "the local," art has no value, for Williams; it is meaningless:

"...its [art's] virtue lies in relating to the immediacy of my life."

(Selected Letters, p. 131)

The core of Williams' philosophy of life--the interdependency of world upon man (artist) and man upon world (the local)--is nowhere more evident than in his theory of the poem. The poem, for WCW, is essentially an organic extension of his local, both in terms of content and of form. In other words, the poem is the product of an act of imaginative (inventive) revelation, by which the poet--standing in real relation with his world--lifts that world (ideally) intact, just as it seemed to him during a moment of Man-thing confrontation, over into a complete and unified linguistic structure and thus lets it (the world) appear--or reveals (rediscovers) the truth about it. Were it not for the local, the poem would have neither substance nor proper form; but were it not for the poet, the local would never come to

revelation, to being in the poem. Both poet and world are thus equally primary, equally responsible for the existence of a Williams poem, in theory. And the final product, the poem itself--like the ornate Aztec stone and featherwork described by Williams in his In The American Grain--in "primal and continuous identity with the ground itself"¹⁹--exists as a direct outgrowth, or flowering, of its subject matter.

Ideally, for WCW, in a poem there is really no distinction between "content" and "form"; the two are the same progression, and as the poem proceeds the reader is not so much exposed to a poetic structure as presented with an aspect of the real world--which he directly (imaginatively) perceives.

Coleridge's distinction between "organic" and "mechanic" form provides us, at this point, with a useful traditional correlative to Williams' theory of poetic form. Though Dr. Williams, in his published writings, never mentions Coleridge--and though WCW's literary aesthetic is of course less systematically worked out than Coleridge's--this writer is struck by the close similarity of intention (if not expression) in the two poets' theories of the poem. Coleridge states that:

"The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material;--as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and the fulness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the life is, such is the form."²⁰

Now it seems to me that Coleridge's ideal of organic form--directly "arising out of the properties of the material"--is just what Dr.

Williams always wanted, what he required from the formal structure of his verse. Brought into focus by this conception, many of Williams' apparently disparate theoretical announcements fall into place.

For example, his dislike of the iambic pentameter line--for traditional metrics--shows itself in this light as not primarily the result of a personal antipathy for T.S. Eliot (though that may be involved too),²¹ but as a dislike for "mechanic" form--a predetermined structure, according to WCW, more imposed upon his modern American locale than an outgrowth of it. Since a poem has value for Williams only insofar as the immediacy of his world may be embodied in it--and since Williams felt that the speech rhythms which were a poetically vital part of the materials of his environment would fit into the sonnet form, for example, only if wedged in, distorted--out went the sonnet, as a mechanic falsification of locale.

Likewise, the theory of organic form conveniently explains the presence in many Williams poems of colloquial American diction, as well as his predilection for concrete images: both obviously brought over into the poem intact, selected out of what the poet saw and heard about him every day. In fact, Dr. Williams' lifelong experiment in poetic form may be most pregnantly viewed as an attempt to answer a single central question: what factors operative in the immediacy of my everyday world (what I see, hear, feel, etc. around me) may be abstracted from that world and selectively arranged to function also in the poem, as formal devices?--i.e. how may an organic poetic structure be achieved?

Since our major concern in this study is to bring to light Dr. Williams' prosodic workings--having arrived at a general formulation of his literary aesthetic, as founded upon organic form--we may now narrow our investigation and proceed to inquire whether, and in what sense, prosody itself in Williams' poetry may be taken as an organic extension of the local.

Hopefully the reader is by now beginning to wonder how in the world prosody--the metrical structure of verse--of all elements in a poem apparently purely abstract, inorganic, imposed upon the "content" of the poem--how in the world there can be such a thing as an "organic prosody."

II. Dr. Williams' Organic Prosody

Prosody, for Williams, like poetic form in general, was not the object of a cool, theoretical concern. As we have noted above, it is only through the artist's act of formal invention that there comes to be a world of discrete and humanly significant things and events. Faced with the everyday flux, the chaos of the modern American locale symbolized by the pouring waterfall in Paterson--Dr. Williams had to bring his world across into poetic expression, to find an order in it, in order to preserve his very sanity, to go on living in Rutherford. Without formal invention with which to deal with his world, he felt he would have gone under: "Drownéd/wordless in the canal."²²

Hence the glance (or the ear) with which Williams surveyed his environment in hopes of discovering, there, the rudiments of poetic structure was enormously occupied with the success or failure of its task--with the innate form it did or didn't hear or see:

Caught (in mind)
 beside the water he looks down, listens!
 But discovers, still, no syllable in the confused
 uproar: missing the sense (though he tries)
 untaught but listening, shakes with the intensity
 of his listening.

(Paterson, II, p. 100)

Of all the personally vital, structural elements WCW sought to discover in his locale, prosodic order--particularly in relation to his poetry since 1940--was for him most important--as any survey of his statements on poetics amply shows. A sense of the importance of prosody within Williams' general theory of organic form may be best gathered through an examination of a passage from Williams' own writings--a passage in which WCW's rejection of English prosody (a system not native to his American environment), is clearly evident as well:

"But most important of all, since the poem is our theme, the prosody of English does not apply to American. This is destructive to all present day university teaching--or so, to the retrograde ear of our schools, it may appear. It is however a fact. Without this acceptance everything else I say is a worthless heresy. But unless it is true we are doomed to be sycophants and asses.

English prosody is not, finally, an inevitable deterministic dispensation from the gods; it is an historical development growing from English conditions--moral and historical which constitute her history. It is also a citadel, a jealously guarded treasure upon which their knowledge and their formal institutions of learning are based. Its forms are the forms of empire. The first thing we must do as poets (poor things!) is throw it out, body and soul.

Why? To build, if we are men, something better.

To invent, then, a prosody of our own has been our first objective in our approach toward reality in our place and day."²³

Williams states his position strongly, but accurately: the invention of a native American prosody, out of local American conditions, was his "first objective" as a poet--and as a man

needing, intensely, to relate to his immediate world. Here through his emphasis on prosody, Williams provides us with a fertile key to the understanding of his formal achievement.

Given our knowledge of the dominant role of prosodic factors in Dr. Williams' general organic theory, we must now turn toward Williams' poems themselves, to investigate and thus attempt to confirm this importance of prosody more particularly--as evidenced in specific prosodic inventions. Without the signs of at least a partial realization in his work, Williams' program for the discovery of a "new measure" would be but so much specious speculation.

By "prosody," here--since we had better know more precisely what we are looking for--is meant the sound-structure of the poem: all those formal devices having to do with the ordering of language as sound--including the number of stresses and syllables per line, end and internal rhyme, rhythm, the grouping of lines into stanzas, the stanza-organization in a poem, the duration of the pause in the sound-progression of the poem indicated by the cesura, as well as that indicated by the line-break and by the typographical space between words, etc.--i.e. all matters of "ear" in poetry.

Let's begin by posing the question in relation to prosody which Dr. Williams, presumably, asked repeatedly concerning the form of his poetry in general: what aspects of the environment, of the local--what natural organizations of sound--presented themselves to WCW as potential organic arches across into the prosodic structure of the poem?

The first, most obvious, and prosodically most important

natural organizations of sound employed by Williams may be grouped under the heading: sound relations inherent in the spoken American language. Every critic writing on Williams always notices, at least in passing, somewhere in his exposition the fundamental role American speech-rhythms play in Williams' verse. Examining and defining just how speech-rhythms enter into the prosodic structure of Williams' poetry will occupy a major part of our effort below. But there is a second main grouping--another kind of natural sound organization--which the sound-structures of some of Williams' poems follow: the "music of events,"²⁴ as it may be called, or imitative form. Since the music of events had a less pervasive effect on Williams' prosody than American speech--and since it is, in addition, somewhat easier to discuss intelligibly, in more familiar terminology--let's examine this second, relatively secondary organic ordering of poetic sound first.

It should be remarked here, in passing, that the following exposition does not attempt a strictly chronological account of prosodic experimentation in WCW's poetry--superficially, the simplest and most "organic" approach to Dr. Williams' lifelong search for an American prosody--for two reasons. First, on close examination it becomes apparent that, in general, Williams' prosodic technique did not so much develop progressively across the years, but admit to a gradual refinement, in the process of which the poet came to a more conscious realization and determined use of certain prosodic devices previously used intuitively--devices already embedded, or concealed, in the structure of his early verse--with the result that the prosodic form of some of Dr. Williams' very last poems closely resembles that of

some of his poems written forty years before. For this reason, a chronological account--implying a false sense of linear progression--is not adopted below. Again, in the interest of presenting as clearly as possible those successful prosodic devices WCW did invent, an all-inclusive chronology is rejected in favor of a more selective, systematic procedure. Dr. Williams, it must be remembered, wrote and published hundreds of bad and meagerly distinguished poems; he considered himself all his life, in relation to prosody, a "spadeworker"²⁵--continually turning over and tilling the loam of his American locale, looking for devices which might contribute to the growth of a native American prosody. Hence, our task, here, is one of radical selection; we must lift out of the mass of Williams' work sustained prosodic accomplishment--techniques of ordering sound which have already deeply influenced such contemporary poets as Robert Lowell, Denise Levertov, and Robert Creeley--and which may prove a major contribution to the future flowering of the American poetry which Dr. Williams, toward the end of his productive career, felt he failed to finish inventing.²⁶

A. Organic Prosodic Devices Imitative of the Music of Events

Having rejected the eighteen copybooks of "studied Keatsian sonnets" composed during his years in medical school²⁷--and with them the whole body of traditional metrics which the sonnet, for Williams, implied--the young doctor, searching his environment for signs of an organic American prosody, soon discovered sounds and rhythms in the natural world which could be approximated, or imitated, in the structure of his verse. Imitative

form, in principle, is not peculiar to Williams' poetry. In these lines of Browning's, for example:

I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;²⁸

--the rhythm of galloping horses' hooves is approximated in the rhythm of the verse; the poet reinforces his subject matter--brings it sensuously home to the reader--through use of a rhythmical pattern at once metrically regular (amphibrachic)²⁹ and possessed of an imitative function. The prosodic pattern of the lines itself has a semantic significance; rhythm, here, carries at least the descriptive weight of the verb "galloped" and has the same referent. The difference between the traditional use of imitative form and Dr. Williams'--as we shall now see--is that Williams sometimes made a natural organization of sound the sole base of a poem's purely imitative prosodic structure; whereas, as in Browning's verse above, in conventional poetry imitative form is a secondary result, produced within a prosodic framework governed by metrical regularity.

One of Williams most successful experiments in imitative prosody is "The Cod Head":

The Cod Head

Miscellaneous weed
strands, stems, debris--
firmament

to fishes--
where the yellow feet
of gulls dabble

oars whip
ships churn to bubbles--
at night wildly

agitate phosphores-
cent midges--but by day
flaccid

moons in whose
discs sometimes a red cross
lives--four

fathom--the bottom skids
a mottle of green
sands backward--

amorphous waver-
ing rocks--three fathom
the vitreous

body through which--
small scudding fish deep
down--and

now a lulling lift
and fall--
red stars--a severed cod-

head between two
green stones--lifting
falling

(CEP, p. 333-34)

In this poem, Williams manages the organic structure he persistently sought through a skillful approximation of sea rhythms. Carefully varying the length and stress-pattern of his line--tuning the line to the shifting, suddenly active or torpid motion of the ocean--the "small, scudding fish...", the drifting weeds--WCW succeeds in communicating to the reader a feeling of the sea. The climax of the poem is the sudden interjection of "a severed cod-/head" into the "lulling" rhythms of the ocean previously established--by which the real violence of what might be otherwise only a pleasing exercise in imitative form is brought across.

"The Cod Head" is patently not an example of "free verse." As Williams insisted again and again, since all verse is a "measure" of some kind, "there is no such thing as free verse"³⁰--which would be a contradiction in terms. Although the measure of this poem is not founded on the kind of abstract metrical

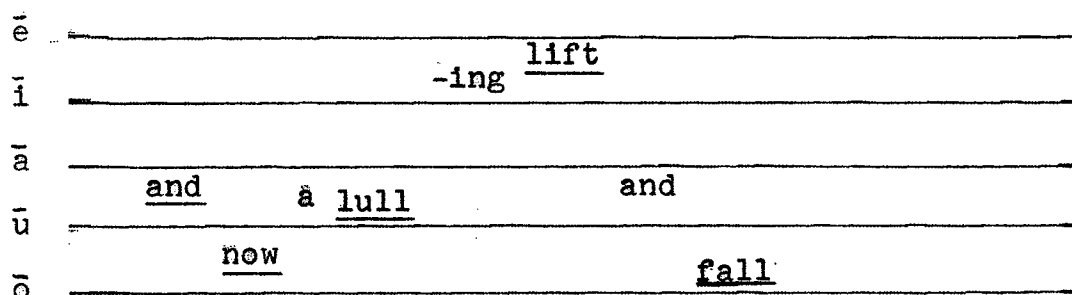
regularity operative in Browning's lines, there is nevertheless, in the shape of the lines, a definite order corresponding to a sequence of events in the natural world.

Rhythm, indicated by lining, is not the only imitative prosodic element in the poem. By attending to the pitch relation of vowels in the words he chooses, Williams molds prosody to wave motion and depth, and thus presents the sea in a form analogous to its own composition. Since the descriptive function of vowel pitch is ordinarily one of the most unconscious factors contributing to a reader's response to a poem--and one of the most difficult to define--let me try to describe my sense of vowel function here more particularly.

For this purpose, a conception of vowel pitch arranged on a vertical scale--determined by relative intensity of vowel sound, as spoken--is highly useful. To my ear, the five "long" vowels of English arrange themselves on a scale thus, in order of descending (or decreasing) intensity: ē, ī, ā, ū, ō; the other vowel sounds--graphed on a chart--occupy positions intermediate between those of the highest-pitched "ē" and the lowest-pitched "ō." The reader may well hear a different order, since vowel pitch is certainly a subjective matter which varies somewhat from listener to listener. Probably an intensive scientific analysis of English vowel-pitch could establish a roughly common scale. In lieu of such a generally established order, since the sound of vowels is an essential component of Williams' organic prosody, we will have to make do with my tentative conception.

In "The Cod Head"--within words already denoting a vertical relationship--Williams reinforces our sense of the sea's depth by

alternating high and low pitched vowels--as in the sequence:
 "through which--/small scudding fish deep/down." Williams
 also employs vowel pitch to help describe the surface rhythm--
 the rising and falling wave motion--of the ocean. For instance,
 as I hear it, the sequence: "--and/now a lulling lift/and
 fall"--may be arranged on the vowel-pitch scale as follows
 (with accented syllables underlined):



It must be emphasized that both imitative rhythm and vowel pitch--like imitative prosodic features in general--do not function descriptively in themselves, in isolation, but only within a definite context established by the more consciously attended to denotative aspects of language. For example, the amphibrachic rhythm at work in Browning's lines is only heard as similar to the rhythm of galloping horses because it occurs within a referential context established by such words as "galloped," "stirrup," etc. In "The Cod Head," roughly the same vowel progression--abstractly, an alternation of low and high pitch, lesser and greater intensity--may help to present either the motion of waves, or the vertical actions of fish. Imitative organic form results from the coming-together of an innate, natural ordering of sound and an abstract, imitative sound progression; the critic should keep both aspects mentally

separate. An ordered progression of vowels may contribute to a wholly non-imitative prosodic pattern.

Imitative internal rhyme in Williams' poetry--an important special case of imitative vowel pitch--is evident in the following lovely short poem:

Prelude to Winter

The moth under the eaves
with wings like
the bark of a tree, lies
symmetrically still--

And love is a curious
soft-winged thing
unmoving under the eaves
when the leaves fall.

(CLP, p. 55)

To an attentive ear, internal rhyme in this poem--each time it occurs (e.g. eaves/tree, soft-winged thing/unmoving, eaves/leaves)--has a significant descriptive effect. By forcing the reader to attend to the connection established between rhymed words, internal rhyme slows the progression of the poem and contributes to a prosodic stillness--a lack of movement in the poem's sound-structure--which corresponds to, and reinforces, the still beauty of the late fall subject.

The organic connection between the stillness of the natural world and an imitative motionlessness, or pause, in the prosodic structure of verse produced by internal rhyme--again--is not a device without traditional antecedents. In good lyric poetry--generally characterized by a closely woven, polyphonic vowel pitch structure--the device is frequently employed. For example, Campion's poem "Shall I Come, Sweet Love, To Thee" begins:

Shall I come, sweet love, to thee
When the evening beams are set?³¹

In this song the stillness of the sunset situation is presented, in part, by imitative internal rhyme: the four repetitions of long "ē" in "sweetthee/ ...evening beams." The slow prosodic pace thus effected corresponds to the quiet world of the poem and, in another sense, to the quiet earnestness of the poet's emotion.

I should make explicit here the fact that imitative prosody in Williams' poetry is imitative of "the music of events" in a large sense which includes the poet's emotional reactions to aspects of his world as well as those aspects themselves. "Event" in this wide sense means a happening in the Man-thing field--a confrontation occurring in the "local." Emotions, as well as objects, have their inherent rhythms--a quick, excited pace, or--as in "Prelude to Winter"--a slow, contemplative character. Thus the prosodic stillness effected by internal rhyme in "Prelude to Winter" is equally imitative of the motionlessness of the moth and the still speaker's quiet love--itself "unmoving," up in the eaves.

In addition to imitative rhythm and vowel relations, there is in Williams' verse yet a third important prosodic device proceeding, in a number of good poems, in accord with the music of events--a device which solved for WCW, completely in some poems and partially in others, a problem for which many traditional forms provide a built-in solution: how to begin and end a poem, to impart a sense of wholeness to the prosodic structure? The poet writing in the Spenserian sonnet, for example, knows that his verse must end with the fourteenth line--that he is

given a natural mold for the progression of his thought in the octave and sestet--that the rhyme scheme provides him with a means of linking octave and sestet and offers, in the final couplet, an opportunity to round out his poem in resolute harmony. Even a bad, or merely skillful, Spenserian sonnet is bound to impart some impression of wholeness of statement; so long as the poet fulfills the customary prosodic pattern, the reader responds to the verse as "a sonnet"--a complete unit.

Refusing this crutch of custom, determined instead to evolve his entire prosody from what he saw and heard around him, Dr. Williams discovered natural sequences of action, which began and ended--organic units--embedded in the continuous flow of daily life--which he had but to follow in his poetry, to begin where they began and end when they did, to arrive at a complete and unified prosodic structure. For instance:

Poem

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

(CEP, p. 340)

Here a whole segment of action from his environment is selected out and lifted, intact, over into the prosodic structure of a poem, making the poem all of a piece--as well as making it live,

convincingly actual--as though, reading the poem, we really were directly perceiving the cat. This is, of course, an elemental instance--verging on the fault of purely descriptive poetry, in which the presence of the poet is insufficiently felt. This poem might be taken as Williams' equivalent of the merely skillful sonnet mentioned above: prosodically, a competent piece of work but by no means a great poem--competent, here, because Dr. Williams succeeds in capturing a real section of his world, thus fulfilling the basic requirements of organic prosodic form.

Yet the principle of imitating the completeness of a sequence of events in the environment may be employed to much greater advantage if, like the sonnet, the organic unit is conceived as a metrical mold--empty in itself but capable, with the help of other formal devices (e.g. interesting rhythm, metaphor, etc.) of shaping and imparting a sense of distilled wholeness to the human meaning which fills it. Many of Dr. Williams' good short poems owe at least part of their success to this innate wholeness of subject matter.³² In addition, Williams' epic, Paterson, gains the major portion of its total unity not so much through the "metaphysical conception" which WCW felt brought the poem together--i.e. that "a man in himself is a city"³³--but because, like a city, the poem is a collection of innumerable, discrete sequences of action--convincingly presented by means of an imitative prosody which often appropriates each event in all its organic wholeness, without imposing a mechanic connection upon actually disparate events--with the end result that reading the epic is like walking about in Paterson, like a guided tour to the city's principal landmarks--including

a visit to the library, where we are permitted to glance through old newspaper files and one or two volumes on Paterson's history. In other words, the unity of the poem derives largely from the many, diverse unities of event imitatively incorporated into it--unities which, taken together or juxtaposed in the poem, produce the effect of actuality--of being in a teeming modern metropolis. Paterson is perhaps the best sustained realization of Ezra Pound's ideogrammic method in modern poetry to date--primarily because, like the ancient Chinese, Williams builds his total ideogram out of characters directly imitative of real events in his environment--and thus in large part avoids the pitfall of private reference which, for the reader of Pound's Cantos, so often blocks, or slows, comprehension.

Although imitative organic prosody--approximating the music of events rhythmically, in various vowel pitch patterns, and by borrowing natural groupings of action--is an important part of Williams' prosodic achievement, and a means of ordering his poetry which he continued to use throughout his career, Dr. Williams never felt it was the new measure--the answer to English prosody--which he needed to invent. This excerpt from "This Florida: 1924" helps us to understand why:

And we thought to escape rime
by imitation of the senseless
unarrangement of wild things--

the stupidest rime of all--
(CEP, p. 330)

From the beginning, as a proponent of organic form in general, Williams' chief specific objection to the mechanic forms of traditional English prosody (forms denoted by the second, wider

use of "rime" above: verse structure) had been that modern use of a rigidified prosody of the past necessarily occasions a distortion of the American language, as spoken. For Williams, American speech was the primary element of his "local" upon which an organic prosody might be founded:

"This is the first essential, to discover a new metrical pattern among the speech characters of the day which will be comparable to but not derived from the character of past speech. For each speech must have somewhere in it that quality corresponding to the potential greatness of the environment which engendered it. The poet feels about for that distinguishing character."34

But what happens when American speech--which has "structural elements in time and pace....which are not those of English,"35 and which, hence, conflicts with English prosody--is put into a prosodic structure, like "The Cod Head," largely determined by imitative organic form? Forced to accomodate itself to the "senseless/unarrangement of wild things"--e.g. the motions of the ocean--the distinctive character of American speech is virtually obliterated. Look at "The Cod Head": doubtless much less distortion of the rhythm of colloquial American occurs in the Petrarchan sonnet. Running into a conflict of organic prosodic interests, Williams saw that the same objection he had made to traditional metrics applied just as devastatingly to imitative prosody--particularly imitative rhythm, or lining--i.e. if it is allowed to govern the sound-structure of a poem. Thus in the organic prosody of Williams' later poetry, American speech became the prime determining factor; whereas elements imitative of the music of events were given a decidedly secondary function.

B. Organic Prosodic Devices Proceeding From American Speech

Convinced that "our own language is the beginning of that which makes and will continue to make an American poetry distinctive"³⁶--listening hard to spoken American in search of that measurable factor inherent in the language itself upon which a modern prosody might be based--Dr. Williams hit upon the metrical unit he later came to call "the variable foot"³⁷ actually as early as the composition of the poems in The Tempers, his first commercially published book, in 1913. In the passage below, describing how and why the poems in The Tempers took on their short-lined structure, Williams tells us quite succinctly what the organic determinant of the variable foot was, and assists us in defining the unit itself:

"The rhythmic unit decided the form of my poetry. When I came to the end of a rhythmic unit (not necessarily a sentence) I ended the line.... I was trying for something. The rhythmic unit usually came to me in a lyrical outburst. I wanted it to look that way on the page. I didn't go in for long lines because of my nervous nature, I couldn't. The rhythmic pace was the pace of speech, an excited pace because I was excited when I wrote. I was discovering, pressed by some violent mood."³⁸

Given the availability in print of this statement--particularly the first two sentences--it seems hard to explain why critics have usually hedged so, have been so puzzled and sarcastic when forced to mention Williams' notion of the variable foot. John Malcolm Brinnin, for example, notices that WCW's search for a prosodic base in the American idiom "takes on the obsessive power of a mystique" and goes on to dismiss the variable foot vaguely as Williams' "name for a vague entity meant to delineate a unit of language that might carry into formal expression

the tilt and accent of natural speech."³⁹ Admittedly, Williams' discussions of prosody are somewhat cryptic--either cursory or repetitive--but he did say enough about the variable foot to enable us to define the unit, and its function in his prosody, explicitly.

Williams explains that the "rhythmic unit" decided the form of his poetry--i.e. that his line was determined by the rhythmic unit. Now what is this unit?

Spoken language, when heard, tends to arrange itself into rhythmic groups of syllables: phrases and the pauses between phrases. These syllabic groups are usually not complete sentences, because most spoken sentences are too long to be easily pronounced without a pause; most sentences, further, are structurally divided into syntactic units, and it is natural for the speaker of a sentence to pause slightly at the points of syntactic division--particularly when these are indicated by marks of punctuation, such as the dash and comma. Further, pauses in the flow of speech are sometimes occasioned by sense-emphasis within a syntactic clause. Thus, though rhythmic groups of syllables are often equivalent to syntactic units, they are not necessarily so: e.g. in the sentence, "That is a fine book, to my mind."--if the speaker stresses "my," he tends to create a temporal gap, like a rest in music, between "my" and "mind" and, in effect, divides a syntactic unit into two speech-phrases. In general, the number of syllables in a particular speaker's speech-phrases is probably determined less by syntax than by the man's organic breath-groupings--i.e. whether at the time he naturally talks and thinks in short units or long. Whatever

their origin, these syllabic groups can be easily perceived, if one listens for them, in any person's speech; they are, I think, what Williams was getting at in his "rhythmic unit." It may be briefly defined as: any number of syllables constituting a natural period, or time unit, in the cadence of speech.

By listening to the speech patterns of people in his daily environment--and by attending, of course, also to his own voice and to the unspoken rhythm of his thoughts--Dr. Williams sharpened his ear to learn to clearly distinguish the rhythmic unit which, when visually reproduced on the written page, became the major constructive principle of his prosody, a "new measure":

"....As a consequence of some of my work all I have to do is to transcribe the language when hot and feelingly spoken. For when it is charged with emotion it tends to be rhythmic, lowdown, inherent in the place where it is being used. And that is, to me, the origin of form, the origin of measure. The rhythmic beat of charged language."⁴⁰

The "variable foot," which has proved a critical enigma, is simply one of these natural temporal groupings of speech sounds--a rhythmic unit--lifted by the poet out of spoken language in his "local" across into the prosodic structure of a poem, or accurately transcribed, as a single line of poetry.

The example Williams himself usually gave to clarify what he meant by the term "variable foot" is the following, from Paterson II:

The descent beckons
 as the ascent beckoned.
 Memory is a kind
 of accomplishment,
 a sort of renewal
 even
 an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places
 inhabited by hordes
 heretofore unrealized,

of new kinds--
 since their movements
 are towards new objectives
 (even though formerly they were abandoned)
 (Paterson, p. 96)

The triadic progression of lines here simply accentuates the importance that the separate line, or variable foot, always had in Williams' verse; by visually emphasizing the line-break here, Williams attempts to make the reader recognize the metrical pause corresponding to natural pauses in the cadence of speech which the line-break, in Williams' poetry since 1913, was consistently meant to transcribe. On record,⁴¹ Dr. Williams is also careful to set off one variable foot from another--by delaying after nearly every line, in poems in which lines all begin at the left-hand margin as well as those in which the triadic progression is employed. Since the variable foot, or line, in this excerpt is an accurate visual transcription of the rhythmic unit basic to speech, if the reader respects the pause indicated by the line-break, the verse proceeds in phrases which command the reader's attention exactly as would a present person, speaking. By means of the variable foot, Williams often brings over into his poetry not only the elemental rhythmic form of spoken American, but also the spontaneity and directness of conversation--with the result that even when his verse is not otherwise much distinguished, it has often a compelling immediacy.

The variable foot is probably Dr. Williams' most "original" prosodic invention--certainly more so than his organic devices imitative of the music of events--though the principle of a phrasal unit in speech made into a line of verse was often employed, unnamed, by Eliot and Pound and is now operative in

the work of many contemporary poets. Yet Williams was among the very first modern poets to use the unit; further, he consciously seized upon it--named it, and founded a prosody upon it--thus through his partisanship, in a sense made it his own. However it is not a unit without some secondary metrical function in the tradition. Williams wrote in approximately 1947, that the cesura offered him "the greatest hope I have discovered so far for a study of the modern line."⁴² The connection is obvious: the cesura in traditional poetry marks a pause in the spoken line of verse, a pause which--if there is but one in the line--breaks the verse into two phrasal units--i.e. in Williams' language, into two variable feet. If we apply WCW's method of ending the line where the rhythmic unit ends to the speech pattern heard when four lines from Macbeth are read aloud, we get something which looks, prosodically, and reads, like a progression of variable feet:

Thou sure and firm-set earth,
 hear not my steps,
 which way they walk,
 for fear
 thy very stones
 prate of my whereabouts
 and take the present horror
 from the time
 (II, 1, 56-59)

Of course the point is not that an iambic pentameter line broken at the medial cesura equals two of Williams' variable feet--i.e. that Williams' invention is really a simple variation on the basic traditional line--but rather that both blank verse and Williams' line can be interpreted as based upon the rhythmic unit inherent in speech--though the rhythmic unit in Shakespeare's verse, at least according to most metrical theory, is always

subordinate to a mechanic metrical pattern. It is interesting to note in this connection that a traditional figure as apparently removed from Williams' practice as Alexander Pope valued the nice ear of a poet who could shift the position of the medial cesura in his verse--thus producing the same, if smaller, variation in the syllabic length of the rhythmic units heard valued by Williams.

In the above progression from Paterson, we should note, further, the curious equivalence established between variable feet differing considerably in number of syllables: e.g. between "even" of two syllables, and the seventeen-syllabled line which follows it. The visual sequence of lines across the page, I think, helps reinforce this equivalence, but does not essentially cause it. Rather the source of the measure is to be found in the nature of spoken American--in the natural relation existing among rhythmic units in the progression of speech--units in which spoken syllables arrange themselves much as notes do within a series of equivalent musical bars. Williams himself compares the line of verse to a musical bar:

"...A bar, definitely, since it is not related to grammar, but to time... The clause, the sentence....are ignored, and the progression goes over into the next bar as much as the musical necessity requires.... a sequence of musical bars arranged vertically on the page, and capable of infinite modulation."⁴³

Speech, to the ear, not only divides into rhythmic units; if emotionally charged, it often divides into balanced rhythmic units, which are heard as equivalent temporal periods despite their syllabic and accentual disparity--because, in the musical sequence of speech, each rhythmic unit takes up the same elapsed

time as the unit which preceeds and follows it. When there are few syllables in a rhythmic unit (e.g. "of new kinds"), the pace of the variable foot which graphs the spoken period is relatively slow--i.e. the line tends to be read aloud slowly, with a longer pause at the line-break or after the syllables pronounced, than normally; when there are relatively many syllables in a line (e.g. "an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places"), the pace of the line is quickened, so that in the end the two lines take about the same time to speak aloud. The result of this equivalence of elapsed time among lines of varying paces, syllabic composition, and accentual pattern, is the blend of order and surprise--felt formality and freedom--which seems so remarkable in the sequence of variable feet quoted above. Williams, in his progression of variable feet based on phrasal units in American speech, seems to have found the key to the prosodic realization of Pound's dictum: "Compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome."⁴⁴

Dr. Williams felt that his discovery of this principle of the approximate temporal equivalence of variable feet, as feet, within a given verse sequence amounted to the invention of "a new measure"--to supplant the ossified mechanical measure of the past.⁴⁵ Whereas most English verse is governed by a set number of syllables per line, or an arbitrary number and pattern of accents, or most often, by a combination of both--Dr. Williams' is a kind of quantitative verse, governed by duration. Yet it is not at all the same as classical quantitative verse or the warped English attempts at classical quantity, except insofar as all three emphasize time. Whereas classical quanti-

tative verse is based on the temporal relation 2:1 between "long" and "short" syllables--i.e. the relative time required to utter each--Williams' verse is based on the roughly equal quantity of time required to utter each variable foot in a sequence of variable feet--i.e. on a relation of temporal equivalence among groups of spoken syllables. Still the musical comparison is probably best: in the same way that music is composed of bars of equal time-quantity, Williams' "measure" is composed of variable feet (or musical phrases) of equal duration.

By usually calling his musical-quantitative unit of measure the variable foot--instead of the line (although he often called it that too)--Williams points out a parallelism which does exist between his prosody and the accentual-syllabic: the foot in both prosodies has meaning, or becomes a measure, only in relation to other feet. Except for the monometer, which has a negligible importance in traditional poetry, the accentual-syllabic line is always composed of more than one foot, and it is its inclusion in the line along with other feet which allows the foot to define itself, to anchor the verse. In Williams' verse, the prosodic element corresponding to the traditional line is what WCW (above) calls "the musical necessity"--i.e. the rhythmic progression of thought in which each variable foot figures as a stage on the way to the completed statement. This leads us to the last prosodic invention we must examine.

In addition to the variable foot (i.e. his basic line)--and the principle of the rough temporal equivalence of variable feet within a given verse sequence--Williams discovered yet a

third prosodic principle by means of his meticulous attention to speech in his environment: a device which may be called the verse paragraph. The verse paragraph, though an important part of WCW's organic prosody, is relatively easy to define and may be briefly treated here. In spoken language, certain rhythmic units tend to group together, logically, into those units which appear in prose as paragraphs. By ending his stanza at the end of a thought-unit inherent in the American language--usually indicated in spoken American by a pause of longer duration than that following last syllables within rhythmic units--Williams manages many organically-whole groupings of variable feet. For instance, in this short poem:

Ballad of Faith

No dignity without chromium
 No truth but a glossy finish
 If she purrs she's virtuous
 If she hits ninety she's pure

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!

Step on the gas brother
 (the horn sounds hoarsely)
 (CLP, p. 131)

The four lines linked in the first stanza impress the reader as a proper unit not so much because they form a quatrain, but because the thought expressed seems to fall naturally, logically, into that ordering of lines. When the quatrain form is not continued in the following stanza, we are not disturbed--nor do we then reject the first stanza and the poem as a whole as formless--because the second stanza, too, seems to belong in the paragraphal unit which we see on the page. The sense-distinction between the two stanzas is heard as a pause in the sound-progression of the verse distinctly longer than that between

any two rhythmic units, or lines, within either paragraph grouping. Dr. Williams often employed this verse paragraph, particularly in those poems included in his Collected Earlier Poems, to allow his variable feet to appear on the page in natural divisions not necessarily composed of any recurrent number of lines.

Conclusion

I have tried to show in this study not only that prosodic inventions imitative of the music of events and line and stanza groupings proceeding from American speech do exist in Williams' poetry--that these combine to form an organic prosody generally applicable to Williams' poems and greatly useful to the critic who would speak relevantly of the doctor as a poet, of his formal accomplishment--but also that prosody was of vital importance in Williams' philosophy of life.

Organic prosodic invention was WCW's primary means of discovering what was there in his world, of measuring it and so making it his, habitable--as well as his primary means of making it so refreshingly ours. Williams' prosody brings the things of his world before us, in the very form in which he cared for them; it brings the people he knew, in the sound of their speech; but most of all, it brings the immediate presence of the man himself, talking to us. Taken back, at first, perhaps, by the newness of it--is this poetry?--then learning its rules, we can't help but be pleased.

FOOTNOTES

¹Letters of Ezra Pound, ed. D.D. Paige (London, 1951), p. 191.

²i.e. William Carlos Williams. I use this expression here and occasionally below to vary my form of reference, and because Williams himself always desired that his name in full appear in print.

³(Middletown, Conn., 1964).

⁴William Carlos Williams, The Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams (New York, 1954), p. 281.

⁵see e.g.: John Malcolm Brinnin, William Carlos Williams (Minneapolis, 1963), p. 32f.

⁶The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams (New York, 1951).

⁷see e.g. the clear summary of modern metrical theory in: Pallister Barkas, A Critique of Modern English Prosody (Halle, 1934).

⁸George Saintsbury, A History of English Prosody (Cambridge, 1910).

⁹"On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," On Translation, ed. Brower (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), p. 238.

¹⁰"Thing Is the Form," The Nation, CLXXVIII (April 24, 1954), pp. 368-369.

¹¹(New York, 1961).

¹²see Williams, "Letter to Harriet Monroe," The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams, ed. John C. Thirlwall (New York, 1957), pp. 38-39.

¹³Selected Letters, p. 130.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Selected Essays, p. xvii.

¹⁶(Norfolk, Conn., 1951)--hereafter cited as CEP.

¹⁷(Norfolk, Conn., 1951).

¹⁸Invent (if you can) discover or
nothing is clear--will surmount
the drumming in your head. There will be
nothing clear, nothing clear.
(Paterson, II, p. 103)

¹⁹(Norfolk, Conn., 1925), p. 27f.

²⁰Poems and Prose, ed. Raine (Baltimore, 1957), p. 239.

²¹Williams had a habit, in his critical writings, of lumping the sonnet, Eliot, and traditional prosody together in one breath, thus dismissing all at once--although Eliot never published a sonnet and seldom consistently used iambic pentameter.

²²Paterson, III, p. 120.

²³"Experimental and Formal Verse: Some Hints Toward the Enjoyment of Modern Verse," Quarterly Review of Literature, VII, No. 3 (1953), p. 174.

²⁴"I live where I live and acknowledge no lack of opportunity because of that to be alert to facts, to the music of events, of words, of the speech of people about me."--WCW, "Letter to Kay Boyle," Selected Letters, p. 131.

²⁵see "The Visit," Collected Later Poems (Norfolk, Conn., 1963), pp. 234-235.--hereafter cited as CLP.

²⁶In an essay published in the germinal little magazine Origin in 1954, Dr. Williams bemoaned the absence of a "recognizable measure" in the non-traditional verse of that time, and continued: "There are a few exceptions but there is no one among us who is consciously aware of what he is doing. I have accordingly made a few experiments which will appear in a book shortly [The Desert Music and Other Poems]. What I want to emphasize is that I do not consider anything I have put down there as final. There will be other experiments but all will be directed toward the discovery of a new measure, I repeat, a new measure by which may be ordered our poems as well as our lives."--reprinted in Selected Essays, p. 340.

²⁷see WCW, I Wanted to Write a Poem, ed. Edith Heal (Boston, 1958), pp. 4-5.

²⁸"How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix," The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning (New York, 1934), p. 6.

²⁹The meter of these lines is open to a variety of interpretations, but the amphibrach (v-v) seems to me the basic foot. I hear a silent twelfth syllable--i.e. a pause at the end of each line equivalent in duration to the third, unstressed syllable in the amphibrach--which makes each line equal to a full four feet.

³⁰"An Approach to the Poem," English Institute Essays, 1947 (New York, 1948), p. 69.

³¹Elizabethan Lyrics, ed. Ault (New York, 1949), pp. 482-483.

³²e.g. "The Term," CEP, p. 409.

³³see: I Wanted to Write a Poem, pp. 71-74.

³⁴"A New Line Is a New Measure," The New Quarterly of Poetry, II, No. 2 (Winter 1947-48), p. 12.

³⁵"Experimental and Formal Verse," Quarterly Review of Literature, VII, No. 3 (1953), p. 174.

³⁶quoted in: Vivienne Koch, William Carlos Williams (Norfolk, Conn., 1950), p. 89.

³⁷see e.g.: "Letter to John Thirlwall," Selected Letters, pp. 334-335.

³⁸I Wanted to Write a Poem, p. 15.

³⁹William Carlos Williams (Minneapolis, 1963), pp. 32-33.

⁴⁰quoted in Koch, pp. 89-90.

⁴¹"William Carlos Williams Reads His Poetry" (recording), Caedmon (New York, 1958).

⁴²quoted in Wagner, p. 86.

⁴³"Preface," Quarterly Review of Literature, II, No. 4 (1944), p. 349.

⁴⁴Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, ed. T.S. Eliot (Norfolk, Conn., 1954), p. 3.

⁴⁵see "Letter to Richard Eberhart," Selected Letters, pp. 325-27.

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WILLIAMS

[Seneca/Emerson moralizing]

[Whitman/'science' catalogs
of info out there]

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

???

[work
energy]

Language is moving into a period of the intensification of its own
life.